Positioning for Prestige in American Higher Education:  
Case Studies of Strategies at Four Public 
Institutions Toward “Getting to the Next Level”

Summary Paper

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Introduction and Research Questions

Despite the impressive diversity of institution types, the relative autonomy of individual universities and colleges, and the vast differences in respective resources available to them, higher education institutions in the United States tend to arrive, independently, at what amounts to a common aspiration. They are eerily similar in vision, in fact, seemingly obsessed with “moving to the next level.” Institutions seek to become more like those directly above them on the prestige hierarchy recognized within American higher education.

They not only portray their ambitions using similar rhetoric, but also attempt to operationalize them through a rather generic set of strategies. Illustrating these strategic approaches at institutions that are even somewhat selective are initiatives toward attracting more accomplished students. Positive enrollment trends are particularly useful to the aspiring institution. Establishing satisfactory measurements of institutional progress is challenging, with institutions left with such simplistic metrics as the average test scores of incoming students, or retention and graduation rates. But annual increases in SAT or ACT scores are, at least, concrete – and they are commonly accepted as evidence of increases in institutional prestige. It is important for universities and colleges to indicate progress toward their aspirations to their various constituents, and enrollment numbers provide this. Institutions are also pursuing various other academic strategies, often demonstrating great creativity, including noteworthy faculty hires, as well as a variety of investments in “collegiate” infrastructure to better appeal to prospective students.

In a broader study, I explore both why and how American institutions of all types are employing various strategies to position for greater prestige, and what this means for individual universities and colleges and American higher education more generally. My research questions follow:

- What are the aspirations of universities and colleges of various types and how much similarity or difference is there in these?
  - Do these aspirations typically boil down to enhancing institutional prestige?
  - Are there outliers among institutions in what seems to be a universal desire in American higher education to increase status?
- Why do institutions arrive at a certain vision – a set of aspirations?
Is institutional theory and resource dependency theory useful in answering this question?

- What concrete strategies, both academic and "collegiate," do institutions across types employ?
  - Are these strategies essentially generic – common across institution types?
  - Do differences in available resources or existing prestige matter in implementing these strategies?

- What are the implications, both for institutions and for higher education more broadly, of institutions being so interested in enhancing prestige and employing the strategies they do in positioning themselves?

In this summary paper, I briefly address the first question, concluding that enhancing institutional prestige is essentially a generic aspiration for U.S. institutions, except for those completely focused on student convenience. I reserve discussion on the second question for other work, exploring more fully how institutional theory and resource dependency theory are instructive in addressing “why” institutions across types and situations define the same aspirations for themselves. Concentrating on four institutions representative of the major types in higher education – Georgia State University (research), Georgia Southern University (comprehensive), Georgia College and State University (liberal arts), and Georgia Perimeter College (community college) – I focus on the similar strategies institutions are exploring in positioning for greater prestige. Each of these is a public institution within the University System of Georgia. But 18 of the 38 institutions I examined are private, and I include illustrations from these, as well as from the other public institutions, in my discussion in the broader paper. The four institutions that I selected do not appear on lists of the top research universities or liberal arts colleges that capture institutions nationally with the most resources and greatest selectivity – and that capture the lion’s share of attention from those who write about higher education. Such universities and colleges are paid less attention in scholarly work on higher education. I do compare these, where applicable, to the leading institutions in the overall study, providing a point of reference for what the four institutions are aspiring toward. Finally, I conclude the summary paper here by discussing the implications of the aspirations and strategies that universities and colleges have defined, both for the institutions and for higher education more broadly.
In addressing the question of why universities and colleges are so obsessed with prestige, I draw on two broad theoretical perspectives: institutional theory and resource dependency theory. Institutions attempt to move to the next level – essentially replicating those with more prestige – to gain legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). They also respond to the demands of the external entities on which they rely for support, by attempting to minimize that dependency through increasing prestige, which they assume will result in more available resources and thus more autonomy (Pfeffer and Salanick, 1978; Pfeffer, 1982). I also summarize in the longer paper the research literature on strategy, drawing mostly from business. I explore, initially, the structure of the industry in which an organization operates and then competition and differentiation within that structure. I also examine integration, diversification, and expansion as strategies – and, ultimately, market selection and developing and maintaining brands.

I also consider the entrepreneurial university in the longer paper. The various strategies that universities and colleges of all types employ toward positioning for increased prestige – and thus greater legitimacy – illustrates institutions acting in an entrepreneurial manner that has never been more characteristic of American higher education. Within the past several years, a set of major works have considered contemporary trends and issues in higher education – and the various strategies that institutions have adopted related to these (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004; Kirp, 2004; Bok, 2002; Ehrenberg, 2002; Geiger, 2004; Zemsky, Wegner, and Massy, 2005). The strategies these writers explore are essentially responses to the emergence of neo-liberal ethos within U.S. higher education in the 1980s, substituting more reliance on markets and drive for internal efficiency for the traditional support from the state. Higher education has increasingly become a commodity, its environment marked by intense competition and rampant consumerism, and its purposes ever more connected with individual gain rather than societal good (Marginson, 2006; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004; Bok, 2002). Within this context, higher education institutions, aside from those focused solely on students convenience and that eschew any pretence to selectivity, employ a rather predictable set of strategies intended to simultaneously enhance the resources available to them and to increase their prestige, both thought to be mutually reinforcing (Geiger, 2004; Kirp, 2003; Ehrenberg, 2002; Brewer, Gates, and Goldman, 2002). So, even modestly selective universities and colleges increasingly seek to attract ever more
accomplished students, typically employing pricing strategy (Geiger, 2004; Ehrenberg, 2002; McPherson and Schapiro, 1998).

Research Design

In order to identify the aspirations of various kinds of institutions and the strategies they are employing to realize these, I interviewed presidents, gathered documentary data, and observed campus life at 38 institutions across types connected with the Atlanta market. Atlanta is an ideal laboratory, with essentially all major institution types in American higher education represented, both public and private, including research universities (Auburn, Clemson, Emory, Georgia, Georgia Tech, Georgia State, and the Medical College of Georgia); comprehensive institutions (Armstrong Atlantic, Columbus State, Georgia Southern, Kennesaw State, Mercer, North Georgia, West Georgia, and Troy); specialized professional institutions (Columbia Theological Seminary, Savannah College of Art and Design, and Southern Poly); liberal arts colleges (Agnes Scott, Berry, Covenant, Davidson, Georgia College, LaGrange, Morehouse, Oglethorpe, Sewanee, and Spelman,); small, less selective institutions (Brenau, Fort Valley State, Piedmont, Savannah State, Toccoa Falls); and two-year colleges (some with four-year programs) (Dalton State, Gainesville State, Georgia Highlands, Georgia Perimeter, and Young Harris). These types roughly correspond to the four-part typology that Birnbaum (1988) offers in How Colleges Work, illustrating the differences, in areas such as faculty influence in governance, between and among collegial liberal arts colleges, hierarchical community colleges, political comprehensive institutions, and anarchical research universities. Also, within each broad category, the institutions I selected represent the range of institution types, such as larger and smaller comprehensive university and colleges and more and less selective liberal arts colleges.

I also draw on data from May, 2008 interviews with 7-10 senior administrators and faculty at four campuses representative of these major types: Georgia State, Georgia Southern, Georgia College, and Georgia Perimeter.¹ The discussion in this paper focuses here. All but one of the research universities that I visited is public, like Georgia State, which is consistent with national proportions. Similarly, most comprehensive institutions and community colleges are public, as in the Atlanta market. The difference in

¹ Teams of doctoral students from the Institute of Higher Education conducted these interviews, with both the teams and the participants listed in the appendix. I arranged their schedules and provided an
my study is in choosing a public liberal arts college, Georgia College, given that most liberal arts institutions, both selective and less selective, are private, including in the Atlanta market. I chose Georgia College because of its outlier status, and to supplement my discussion of it with illustrations from the 11 selective private liberal arts colleges that I visited. Using Georgia College also enables me to make comparisons across the USG.

In the interviews with the presidents, I began each by asking about the aspirations for the institution he or she has defined and regularly articulates. I then explored how important it is for the institution to be perceived to be moving toward greater prestige; what are its points of reference relative to prestige; and how aware the presidents and campuses generally are of what is going on at their peer and aspirational institutions, as well as with their local competitors. I also questioned the presidents about what constitutes prestige at an institution such as theirs; what various constituents perceive that enhanced prestige brings to an institution; and how readily they can express their aspirations for the institution to various audiences, both internal and external. Having explored ambitions, I moved to strategies, asking what moves the institution has made on its academic side to enhance prestige, such as attracting notable faculty and more accomplished students, suggesting several more specific possibilities: (1) launching or enhancing honors programs, innovative or unusual academic programs, study abroad programs, and service learning efforts; (2) expanding graduate education and increasing research, including grants and contracts, and developing centers and institutes or moving into “cutting edge” academic fields, especially interdisciplinary ones; (3) investing in university presses, national conferences, international initiatives, and the like; (4) entering into consortia with other institutions. I also asked the presidents to discuss strategies they are employing on the “collegiate” side of the university or college, such as enhancing campus amenities like housing, dining, fitness, and shopping – and how athletics serves these strategic ends.

Finally, I shifted to broader insights, asking each president about what strategies his or her institution has had the most success with; how they measure such success and whether these measures interview protocol. All of the interviews – the presidents and the others – have been transcribed, with me doing the coding. Finally, I conducted the interviews with the presidents during Spring semester, 2008.

2 The primary variables in prestige rankings are typically: (1) an institution’s selectivity in enrolling its freshman class each year and its retention and graduation rates; (2) its fundraising strength, measured by annual totals and its endowment; and (3) its research funding, particularly federal grants.
are satisfying; whether their strategic approach has served to differentiate the institution from others, particularly competitors or aspirational institutions, or if their institution has become more like others; and what the risks are of positioning for prestige, including increased external control, need for funds, alienation for traditional constituencies, and, ultimately, overall expectations. I concluded by asking why he or she thinks positioning for prestige is such a necessity – an obsession, really – across much of American higher education; whether it is realistic to opt out, saying, in effect, “we are doing fine and should relax;” whether, if there are winners in the pursuit of prestige, must there be losers; and whether positioning for prestige is not only inevitable, but also advantageous, making U.S. higher education and individual institutions more dynamic.3

Findings

The four institutions on which I focus – Georgia State, Georgia Southern, Georgia College, and Georgia Perimeter – share a common aspiration: reaching the next level of the status hierarchy in American higher education. They also have a rather generic set of strategies toward getting there, especially attracting more accomplished students and (or, more accurately, through) enhancing campus amenities such as housing and fitness facilities, and using intercollegiate athletics more strategically.

Aspirations. For Georgia State, the goal is to evolve from a “commuter” institution established to serve Atlanta students into a destination for those seeking a residential collegiate experience within the downtown business district, a departure from the typical leafy, somewhat remote U.S. campus. Georgia State is also interested in continuing to advance as a research university, sharing that status in the University System of Georgia with the more established Georgia Tech and Georgia.

Georgia Southern, located in the small town of Statesboro, an hour by car from Savannah, the closest major city, is typical of larger U.S. comprehensive institutions. Georgia Southern has targeted growing in both size and stature, attracting more accomplished students, including those from the rich suburban Atlanta market. If State is offering students the chance to live in the midst of the city, Southern

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3 In their interviews on the four campuses, the doctoral students asked roughly the same questions. Also, the interview protocol evolved, though not markedly, from the beginning of the campus visits to the end – a roughly four-month period. Given I began analyzing the data as I was collecting it, the final interview protocol approximates the categories I use in organizing my findings. Finally, in analyzing the data, I employed the constant comparative approach to identify common themes and emerging patterns (Glazer and Strauss, 1967). I explored whether the categories and subcategories I generated were internally consistent (internal
is offering a small town experience. In addition, Southern is selectively adding graduate programs and research capacity, while maintaining its friendly, accessible character as an undergraduate-focused institution. Like Georgia State, it has taken advantage of the Georgia HOPE scholarship program to increase the average SAT for its entering students to around 1100.

In Milledgeville, a small, historic town near Macon, Georgia College and State University has reshaped itself from a small, non-selective, comprehensive institution into a public liberal arts college. It has retained some attributes of the former – the "state university" part of its somewhat cumbersome name – including professional programs offered both in Milledgeville and some satellite sites, some at the masters level. But Georgia College has focused on enhancing the other part of its identity – the intimate, residential experience and arts and sciences curriculum associated with liberal arts colleges. Like Georgia Southern and the other selective USG institutions, Georgia College has been aggressive in recruiting in suburban Atlanta, with its deep pool of accomplished prospective students.

Georgia Perimeter is a large community college in suburban Atlanta. Perimeter jettisoned its vocational programs in 1986, with adjacent DeKalb Technical College assuming these, and added three additional campuses around the eastern Atlanta perimeter, a highway that circles the city, connecting its inner ring of suburbs. Like the nine other USG state colleges, GPC has an open access mission and lower price, accommodating underrepresented students, such as those with lower incomes and those from minority groups, who are well represented on the campus – over 60 percent of Perimeter students are non-white and 37 percent are African-American. Perimeter has emphasized possibilities for transfer, formalizing relationships with several institutions, including leading public and private ones including nationally (Columbia and Pepperdine, for instance), for students to automatically be eligible for admission after successfully beginning their undergraduate work at GPC, taking advantage of its low price and high convenience. It has opted to focus here – and on continuing to increase its enrollment – and has resisted adding four-year programs, a trend both nationally and across the state colleges in the Georgia system.

So, what constitutes prestige is relatively similar at the four institutions – and is determined in large part by enrolling accomplished students (or graduating them to transfer to four year institutions at GPC, which is open admission). At more prestigious institutions, like Emory, Georgia Tech, and the

__convergence__, but distinct from one another (external divergence) (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). I also searched
University of Georgia, not just admissions and retention numbers influence national reputation, but also the sum of their endowment and sponsored research. But the four institutions have modest endowments. So, as with research, the distance to the “next level” is significant, although State and Southern are interested in enhancing their profile here. As measuring prestige necessarily involves comparisons with similar institutions, increasing average SAT scores is a more realistic benchmark against other universities and colleges, including those at the “next level” and beyond. Georgia State, Georgia Southern, and Georgia College each increased its average SAT to around 1,100, enough to put it near the top of institutions of its type.

In addition to highlighting the profile of their students and their accomplishments, institutions generally note other measures of prestige, having an attractive campus, faculty achievements, achievements in intercollegiate athletics, and the diversity of their student bodies. The institutions also understand their local competitors. They adopt strategies toward competing favorably for these students. So, the institutions use what they have available, as do each of the institutions in the broader study, employing strategy to accentuate where they do and can differentiate themselves. But higher education institutions must also represent they are similar to other institutions to enhance their legitimacy, particularly those they aspire to be more like. At one level, the institutions have a clear sense of their peer and “aspirational” institutions, which they are able to benchmark against, as with those mentioned above. Still, benchmarks are never completely satisfying. Although Georgia State can compare itself to other “urban research universities,” for instance, there is no clear definition of what that is.

Whatever their aspirations, it is necessary for any university or college to be perceived as moving forward. Aside from the advantage of advancing – moving up a level – being easily sold to various constituents, both internal and external, it is unlikely for any president, like any corporate CEO, to say “we are fine as we are and should just maintain what we have built for a while.” But these same presidents still need to articulate their vision for the institution and that it matters – what they are doing and why it is important. Implicit – and sometimes even explicit – in these arguments is a resource dependency case: that increased status diminishes external influence on institutions, including that associated with funding. But even making a case for greater institutional independence requires some rhetorical agility. In fact, throughout the analysis process for negative instances and for rival structures (Glazer and Strauss, 1967).
limits on how directly an institution can express aspirations to various audiences are the reality across public higher education. Public institutions must be perceived the local needs of the state that support them through annual appropriations, but work here is not necessarily what enhances their national reputation.

**Strategies.** Having defined a set of aspirations, institutions are making specific moves toward realizing them. An important strategy at leading research universities and liberal arts colleges is attracting notable faculty. Similarly, and once again, enrolling more accomplished students is critical as institutions position for prestige. Each of the four institutions has also taken advantage of upward drift in the state, settling into the role vacated by UGA and Tech as the composition of their students came to look like the leading flagships nationally. Each also has the goal of becoming more of a first option for entering students, as opposed where students attend when they are not admitted to Georgia Tech or the University of Georgia.

In advance of becoming more selective, Georgia State, Georgia Southern, and Georgia College professionalized and expanded student recruiting as an initial matter – and Georgia Perimeter expanded recruiting significantly in response to losing enrollment with the spin off of its Gwinnett campus. Other common strategies toward attracting (and retaining) students are launching innovative or unusual academic programs, study abroad programs, and service learning efforts. Another set of strategies relates to the collegiate aspects of institutional life. Like institutions nationally, Georgia State, Georgia Southern, and Georgia College are seeking advantage in attracting the students, faculty, and administrators they desire by updating the infrastructure devoted to collegiate life. Necessities such as dormitories, dining halls, and gymnasium have become amenities – luxury apartments, upscale food courts, and deluxe fitness centers. Universities and colleges are in a construction “arms race,” competing with one another. The Georgia Perimeter president viewed amenities differently, focusing more on initiatives such as equipping classrooms with technology, which he did through fund raising.

Indeed, institutions are also constructing academic buildings, including those that are also “amenities” for those in the community. Universities and colleges are engaged in similar efforts in intercollegiate athletics, improving facilities, “upgrading” to Division I, and seeking entry into better conferences as they position themselves for greater prestige (Toma, 2003). Georgia State, responding to
student demand for a critical marker of a “real” American university, voted to tax themselves $85 per semester to launch a football team to compete at the Division I-AA level (now called the Football Championship Subdivision). (They also voted for a fee increase to fund a library renovation

Conclusions and Implications

So, achieving institutional legitimacy and autonomy through enhancing prestige is not only an end, but also appears to involve similar means – institutions of different types are using roughly parallel strategies in positioning for prestige. Along the continuum of higher education institutions, universities and colleges with very different missions professed, markets served, and resources available, may be more similar than the common assumption that they are different. Enrollment strategy is central to this positioning for prestige. More selective institutions are purposely and aggressively recruiting students who represent indicators of institutional prestige such as average standardized test scores, and an ideally diverse student body. Even those non-selective institutions focused solely on student convenience still employ strategies akin to those at selective universities, finding surrogates for prestige, such as substituting quantity for selectivity. The other key set of strategies is to enhance the collegiate nature of institutions, improving campus infrastructure, particularly residences and other facilities that are sufficiently deluxe that they can be reasonably called “amenities.”

Why is positioning for prestige is such a necessity – an obsession, really – across much of American higher education. Is positioning for prestige a response to external demands from those on whose resources the institution depends – state appropriations, students choosing a college, parents paying tuition, donors (both annual and major)? The perception that better students demand more attractive facilities is clear. The same is true of the notion that prestige and resources are linked. The institutions in the U.S. with the highest status are usually the wealthiest – and, accordingly, the most independent of external control. Positioning for prestige may also be such a prominent strategy because there is neither a set status hierarchy in American higher education nor formal structural barriers, so there is always the hope of moving up – winning the lottery, in effect.

Nevertheless, while institutions are perfecting representing themselves as different – Georgia State is cosmopolitan; Georgia Southern is inviting; Georgia College is intimate; Georgia Perimeter is a springboard – it is difficult to argue that strategic decisions are causing institutions to really differentiate
from one another. They are all chasing the same goal in roughly the same manner, with the exception, to some degree, of Perimeter, which is a fundamentally different mission than the others. The standard strategies they are pursuing are making them more similar to competitors or aspirational institutions. Differentiation is not only traditional within U.S. higher education, it is also productive, with new types of institutions emerging in underserved regions to address underserved populations. While it is probably not realistic for certain, or even most, institutions to fully step away from positioning for prestige, are there ways to set a different course?

Explaining positioning also may be as simple as asking whether it is realistic to opt out, saying, in effect, “we are doing fine and should relax.” Few organizations – or their leaders – adopt such a posture, at least rhetorically. What is less clear is what positioning for greater prestige may risk. There is the potential, as at Georgia State, Georgia Southern, and Georgia College of traditional constituencies becoming alienated, such as teaching-focused faculty, part-time students, or parents whose children can no longer get in to an institution their taxes have supported. Finally, if there are winners in the pursuit of prestige, must there be losers – when an institution gains in prestige must another slip? In other words, is positioning for prestige necessarily a zero sum game? It might be that everyone is a winner, with positioning making institutions across the board, and thus American higher education, more dynamic and ultimately more interesting as they take advantage of the different opportunities before them (albeit in similar ways). Positioning for prestige may not only be inevitable, but also adventitious.

Bibliography


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