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The Prestige Game in American Higher Education

By Clifton F. Conrad and David J. Eagan

In early 1987, Vincent Van Gogh's painting "Sunflowers" sold at auction for nearly \$40 million. At the time, the art world considered \$40 million a staggering price for a single work of art. Just a few months later, another Van Gogh sold for a record \$53.9 million.

The irony of these sales is palpable. Imagine the impoverished Van Gogh, who took his own life at age 37, watching the world's wealthiest collectors battle for paintings that once couldn't be sold at any price. What has changed? Were these astronomical prices based on perceptions of quality, or was something else at stake?

A drama of similar irony and substance is occurring

throughout American higher education. In response to growing public concern about the quality of our nation's colleges and universities, many institutions have launched initiatives ostensibly aimed at improving quality. These initiatives include imposing stricter admissions standards and paying exorbitant salaries to recruit star faculty. Many of these institutional initiatives are really aimed — wittingly or unwittingly — at enhancing prestige rather than improving quality. And as the sale of the Van Gogh's suggests, this pursuit of prestige may supersede more basic concerns about quality and integrity, ending in unintended adverse circumstances.

This article examines the Prestige Game as currently played by

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many colleges and universities. We examine its major features and consider some likely consequences — both positive and negative — for institutional quality. We then reflect on the overall effects of institutional participation in the Prestige Game.

The Prestige Game is the aggregate of behaviors whose veiled objective is to maintain or enhance institutional status, reputation, and prestige. It is “played” by institutions who use widely recognized rules to their advantage to “win” a disproportionate share of the benefits and rewards associated with prestige. The Prestige Game is widely acknowledged in academe, but few scholars have examined prestige-seeking behavior.

The Prestige Game is not new. College and university leaders have long sought to enhance the status, fortify the reputations, and expand the influence of their institutions.¹ During the “Golden Age of Higher Education” in the 1960s, players of the Prestige Game often focused on broadening the scope and level of programs. They introduced, for example, popular new fields and specializations, and expanded graduate and professional degree programs. Today, we see the de-

sire for prestige in widespread efforts to build massive endowments, recruit highly-visible faculty, and attract outstanding students.

Our contemporary Prestige Game builds on similar efforts of the past. At the same time, contemporary political, economic, and demographic forces have brought about some changes and shifts in emphasis. College officials, for example, have almost always viewed prominent faculty as a valuable investment. Today, however, high salary offers for renowned faculty come with increased expectations for substantial economic payoffs for the institution.

The list of participants in the Prestige Game has also changed. The game once was mostly the province of elite and upwardly-mobile institutions. A broader range of colleges and universities now participates.

This increased participation can be attributed to an expectation of greater rewards. Prestigious institutions are demonstrably successful in the increasingly competitive marketplace for students, faculty, and resources. For many of us, in the fast-changing fortunes of contemporary higher education, prestige is everything.

We will limit our analysis to

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six behaviors that frequently characterize participation in the Prestige Game: recruiting star faculty, tightening admissions standards, raising tuition, reforming the curriculum, building partnerships with business and industry, and institutional imaging. In practice, of course, institutions play the game to varying degrees and not all of these behaviors are universally present.

Recruiting Star Faculty

Many well-endowed colleges and universities recruit star faculty aggressively. They often lure these stars from their home institutions with high salaries, low teaching loads, first-rate facilities, and even jobs for their spouses. Faculty raiding is on the increase across the country, observes Vice President Larry Palmer of Cornell University: "We're coming after their people, they're coming after our people...everyone is jockeying."² The president of George Mason University refers to high-stakes faculty recruitment as "selective development," a strategy that has netted his institution 35 top scholars in the past five years.³

Prominent scientists and scholars, especially in such leading-edge fields as superconductivity

and computer science, can virtually draft their own contracts by playing one suitor institution against another. Of course, Nobel laureates are among the most widely-sought candidates: through the aura of their prestige they themselves become a prize.⁴ And in an odd twist of history, minority faculty have lately become "stars" of another sort. Many colleges conduct an affirmative action scramble for the relatively few Black, Hispanic, and American Indian candidates on the market.

There are both positive and negative consequences for institutional quality associated with this star search. Outstanding scholars and researchers can invigorate and bring excitement to an academic community — especially at the graduate level. This excitement may result in renewed faculty and student commitment and productivity. In addition, faculty stars may attract other top faculty, able graduate students, and additional resources for research.

But the potential drawbacks of this "free agent" approach to faculty recruitment are often overlooked. Salary inequities and privileged treatment can disrupt collegial attitudes and dispirit faculty. Teaching and service may

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effectively take a back seat to research. In turn, the needs of students and community become secondary.⁵

Institutions that compete for prominent faculty may also fail to allocate adequate resources to improve the quality of their current faculty. One observer notes a parallel between university officials and professional sports owners. Both groups may become so caught up in bidding for stars that they neglect creative alternatives for building the team as a whole.⁶

An emphasis on attracting and retaining superstar faculty may have other adverse effects. Students may think more narrowly of a college experience in which their association with a renowned professor becomes an overriding objective. In addition, diversion of revenues to recruit or retain star faculty is likely to affect the funding of lower priority programs. Such recruiting may also limit student access by driving up costs and inequities.

Tightening Admissions Standards

An increasing number of colleges and universities — not only the elite or near-elite institutions — have recently tightened admis-

sions standards. They now require higher SAT scores, ACT scores, and grade point averages. These institutions have also raised the number and mastery level of preparatory courses required for admission.

Some institutions with flagging enrollments have successfully tightened standards to enhance their desirability to prospective students. These institutions thereby became “choosier” in both perception and fact. Stricter standards are used to encourage the perception of selectivity that has always been a hallmark of prestigious institutions. “America’s Choosiest Colleges,” *USA Today’s* annual ranking, is based on student selectivity. This ranking reinforces the association between selectivity and prestige.

Tightening standards can have positive consequences. Highly qualified students are more likely to persist, perform more ably, and require less remedial attention than less-qualified students. Moreover, the presence of achievement-oriented students can clearly enhance the overall intellectual climate and ambience of a campus. Required subjects associated with greater selectivity may yield positive educational effects. The study of foreign languages, for example, may encour-

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age greater cultural tolerance and understanding among students. And college-bound secondary students, faced with tough entrance requirements, may take their pre-collegiate studies more seriously.

But strict admission standards can also reduce student diversity since students from affluent, opportunity-rich communities have long held the edge in test scores, grade-point-averages, and other predictors of academic success. Most admissions requirements place a premium on academic performance and place little emphasis on other measures of student achievement and potential. These requirements reflect the widespread tendency to equate inputs with quality. Strict standards tend to discriminate against students from academically weaker high schools, minorities, and late-bloomers who mature late in high school or after graduation. As a result, student quality becomes narrowly defined and institutions are denied the rich benefits of a more heterogeneous socioeconomic, cultural, racial, and ethnic mix of students.

Raising Tuition

College and university tuition costs, especially at independent institutions, have risen dramati-

cally — faster than inflation for nearly a decade. Many campuses planned tuition increases ranging from 5.5-10 percent for the 1988-89 year.⁷ Growing numbers of institutions are opting for markedly higher annual increases.

Many increases seem to be grounded in the conventional belief that if a college is expensive, it must be worth the investment. An independent four-year liberal arts college in Wisconsin, for example, recently saw its application rate jump in response to a larger-than-needed tuition hike. The increase was strategically imposed to attract more students. Michigan's Kalamazoo College adopted a similar strategy. This mind-set about college tuition, notes Kalamazoo President David Breneman, spread outward from the elite institutions. Higher education now finds itself in a position "where increasingly — rightly or wrongly — we are seeing price as a statement of who we are." Without price hikes to keep pace with peer schools, notes Breneman, a loss of competitive position in "both perception and reality" would result.⁸

Higher tuition can enhance institutional quality if it yields increased resources for programs and faculty, and provides a greater cushion against fiscal uncer-

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tainty. By reducing dependence on external funding, tuition increases may provide greater autonomy and flexibility — especially for many financially precarious independent institutions.

Tuition hikes, however, may adversely affect institutions, especially over the long term. Students are likely to be drawn from an increasingly narrow socioeconomic pool—primarily from well-to-do families.⁹ Student financial aid targeted at minority groups would only partially offset a reduction in student diversity. The likely exclusion of non-traditional students—part-time, women, single heads of households, and older adults—will lead to an erosion of affirmative action gains of the last decade.

In addition, higher tuition is likely to cause greater indebtedness as more students are forced to borrow large sums to attend college. In time, more independent colleges and even some public institutions may price themselves out of range for many academically qualified students.

Curricular Reform

Curricular reform efforts, especially the recent push for outcomes assessment, are ostensibly aimed at improving educational

quality.¹⁰ Many institutions seek curriculum reform by revising general education requirements, introducing innovative programs, merging departments, realigning faculty affiliations, and establishing “centers of excellence.” These reforms permit colleges and universities at least to appear to be moving and changing, under the rubric of improvement, to evince the perception of having quality and being “leading edge,” and often to show concern about teaching and student learning.

Ostensibly intended to serve educational ends, curricular modifications often reflect an institutional response to public criticism, mainly to appease various constituencies or to serve political functions. Colleges frequently deal with controversial issues through curricular reform that enhances their institutional standing in the eyes of internal and external stakeholders. Some institutions, for example, have responded to recent racially motivated disturbances with new courses and program initiatives that call for greater cultural awareness.¹¹

By revitalizing the academic program, curricular reform efforts can positively affect educational quality. Genuine attention to academic program improve-

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ment can increase faculty morale and commitment. Reforms that enjoy faculty and student support are likely to generate considerable excitement. This excitement enhances the vitality of the academic environment — including the quality of the exchange between students and faculty.

The quest for prestige may improve educational opportunities for students, but it also may push many colleges into predictable curricular responses. Institutional uniqueness is often sacrificed on the altar of conformity. Many curricular reforms are little more than half-hearted efforts to impose fashionable curricular models. They are not concerted attempts to build upon institutional needs and strengths.

The political terrain of many colleges and universities also militates against lasting change and innovation. Deeply rooted vested interests often ensure that reforms are halting and piecemeal. William Arrowsmith lambastes the usual process of reform within academic departments, whose “final illusion is that of a taut little ship, a sound professional hand on the tiller, sprucely sailing along with the favoring trade winds currently blowing from whatever fashionable quarter, making briskly for nowhere.”¹²

Business and Industry Partnerships

Citing increased financial needs and shifting priorities, a growing number of colleges and universities are rapidly establishing partnerships, consortia, and other contractual arrangements with private enterprise.¹³ Between 1980 and 1984, industrial funding for research and development increased 93 percent, from \$237,025,000 to \$457,227,000, while federal funding rose only 31 percent.¹⁴

The application of the fruits of research and development to contemporary problems and economically profitable enterprises expands the influence and prominence of the higher education institutions that sponsor the research. Partnerships with business and industry stimulate this development and contribute to the perception that colleges and universities are at the forefront of technological progress. This results in the rise of an “expert class” of university faculty members. These professors are highly regarded and sought-after, for both their personal expertise and institutional affiliation.

Alliances with private enterprise may lead to an infusion of dollars that can purchase comput-

Donors may dictate research agendas and require that findings be kept secret until the sponsor can determine market potential.

er systems and other technical and educational equipment, as well as provide support for skilled personnel. Industrial research projects can provide practical training and experience that enriches the academic program for some students. Moreover, partnerships may improve articulation between higher education and the outside world and help to maintain or enhance institutional credibility in the public eye.

There are dangers, however, in such alliances. Most important, academic freedom and purpose may be jeopardized. Harvard University President Derek Bok notes that "the nature and direction of academic science could be transmuted into something quite unlike the disinterested search for knowledge."¹⁵ Private sector donors may dictate research agendas and require that findings be kept secret, at least until the sponsor can determine market potential. "Big science" may subvert academic science, displace its priorities, and reward foremost the entrepreneurial talents of faculty.¹⁶ Commercial priorities may adversely affect students — especially at the graduate level — by deflecting them away from the pursuit of knowledge and toward profit-seeking and narrow career preparation.

Institutional Imaging

The greater competition for students, faculty, and research funds has forced many institutions to improve the public perception of their academic and economic value. A growing number of higher education institutions have quietly invested in media relations. They often place highly paid and experienced "image managers" on staff.

For all public and many independent institutions, carefully orchestrated relationships with government decision-makers are also a priority. College and university administrators must often demonstrate, through symbolic leadership, the quality and integrity of their institutions.

A recent leadership transfer at a major midwestern public research university illustrates successful imaging. Months before taking over the job, the chancellor-designate had become a familiar face. She appeared almost daily in the news with carefully prepared comments about her plans to enhance the quality of the university. "She didn't exactly sneak into town," noted one senior administrator. Bringing favorable attention to one's institution has always been important, but current efforts often

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seem to dwarf all precedents.

Colleges and universities also bolster their image through institutional and program rankings.¹⁷ Widely read annual rankings by *U.S. News and World Report*, *USA Today*, *Changing Times*, and others — despite credibility challenges — allow top-ranked schools to capitalize on the considerable publicity that ensues. For many institutions, winning the “Rankings Game” leads to slick new brochures that trumpet their standing.¹⁸

Through collegiate athletics, success on the playing field is parlayed into image-building. Fueled by the media, many colleges link athletic accomplishments with institutional quality.¹⁹ Salaries for prominent coaches now parallel those of star faculty. This practice further legitimizes the link between winning and prestige. This institutional prestige enhances fundraising,²⁰ making successful athletic performance an important attraction for private support.

Increased and effective use of media resources and public relations may not directly improve educational quality. But these tools can help let prospective students and the outside world know about institutional successes and strengths that may have

gone unnoticed in the past. Public relations may also create a stronger sense of community and pride within an institution, thereby enhancing the dedication of faculty and students.

But in the highly competitive environment of higher education — where students and resources are in great demand — there are the dangers of factual misrepresentation, diversion of attention away from trouble spots, and potentially unethical behavior. Selective public relations efforts that advertise curriculum reforms, new admissions standards, rankings, and other touchstones of institutional pride — primarily to boost reputation and prestige — may be a disservice if the public uncritically equates these initiatives with educational quality.

Finally, an overriding concern with institutional appearances may foster a reactionary environment. In such an environment, maintaining a favorable image takes precedence over defending principles that are central to institutional quality and integrity.

The Prestige Game is here to stay. That much is clear. But we can continually re-assess how the game operates and monitor its impact. An admixture of both positive and negative conse-

The traditional cluster of elites still commands a disproportionate share of rewards associated with prestige.

quences is likely to result from participation in the Prestige Game. The precise mix will depend on the type of institution, clientele served, institutional purposes, and a host of other factors. With so many variables to consider, and with the concept of quality so highly subjective, interpretations of these consequences will vary greatly among institutions. With this caveat, let us review some likely effects, to the credit and discredit of the Game.

Positive consequences may include a strengthened faculty, an abler student body, and enhanced resources. Upgraded human and technical resources and a mixture of old and new blood and ideas can generate excitement and stimulate hybrid vigor. Increases in faculty productivity, enhancement of the intellectual environment, and strengthening of the curriculum — all measures of quality — may be linked to participation in the Game. The major research universities and elite private liberal arts colleges, where prestige traditionally yields its greatest returns, will likely continue to derive the greatest positive effects. Prestigious institutions attract top scholars and students, ample endowments and research funds, and favorable

public opinion. Though more institutions are involved in the Game today, the traditional cluster of elites still commands a disproportionately larger share of the rewards associated with prestige.

But the Prestige Game also threatens institutional quality — especially the quality of undergraduate education. Current faculty members may lose spirit as efforts to attract prominent faculty result in inequities in salaries and privilege. Undergraduate teaching may be ignored in the clamor for research and outside funding. Rising tuition and admissions standards are likely to homogenize the student body. Curriculum reforms may not fundamentally alter relations between students and faculty. Most important, the quest for prestige may homogenize entire colleges. Institutional uniqueness would be sacrificed and diversity — perhaps the greatest strength of American higher education — could be undermined.

The Prestige Game may seriously harm those institutions that have traditionally been ranked below the top schools, but who “play” to overcome limitations in resources and reputation. Typically, the unidimensional vision of quality held by these institutions

is based largely on such traditional indices as research productivity and high student entrance examination scores. Since the Prestige Game rewards conformity, non-elite schools may lose identity, purpose, and morale as they struggle to catch up to elite institutions — a likely Sisyphean quest that may only succeed at the expense of quality.

Many institutions have failed to reflect on the potential consequences of participation in the Prestige Game. A posture of indifference or worse, hubris, has prevented institutions from recognizing that their prestige-seeking

behavior may not improve quality and, in some instances, may even militate against it. Ironically, the most successful players may be the most blind and indifferent to adverse consequences, owing to their public acclaim and recognition. The relationship between prestige and quality is always highly problematic — and bears continuous scrutiny.

Each institution needs to openly and honestly consider the implications of participation in the Prestige Game, so that its involvement contributes to — rather than undermines — institutional quality and integrity. ■

Notes

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