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

**IHELG Monograph**

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

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**Abstract**

I explore how universities and colleges across types are aggressively pursuing strategies, both academic and “collegiate,” to position themselves for greater prestige, examining also the implications for both individual institutions and U.S. higher education more broadly. I draw from interviews with presidents and documentary data from 38 institutions connected to the Atlanta market, capturing its full range and thus all institution types represented in American higher education. But I concentrate here on four of the institutions, one of each major type (research, comprehensive, liberal arts, community college), drawing also on data from interviews with senior administrators and faculty members. In considering the aspirations of these institutions and the strategies they are employing toward realizing them, I employ theory and research on institutionalism, corporate strategy, and the entrepreneurial university. I reach three primary conclusions. First, the aspirations of U.S. universities and colleges of various types typically boil down to enhancing institutional prestige. Second, the concrete strategies, both academic and “collegiate,” that universities and colleges across types are employing are also essentially generic, even with significant differences in available resources or existing prestige between and among institutions. Third, while there are legitimate concerns, the implication of institutions being so interested and active in enhancing prestige is that colleges and universities are working harder and U.S. higher education is becoming more dynamic.

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 that are even remotely selective 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 so clearly recognized across American higher education.

Universities and colleges, apart from those solely focused on student access, not only portray their ambitions using similar rhetoric, but also attempt to operationalize them through a rather generic set of strategies. Initiatives toward attracting more accomplished students are vital. At institutions where endowments and research funding are less developed, positive enrollment trends are really the only indicator of institutional prestige. Metrics such as the average test scores of incoming students or retention and graduation rates are simplistic indicators. But they are concrete and available – and thought to relate to institutional prestige, including by constituents that require indicators of progress toward aspirations. Institutions are pursuing various academic strategies toward driving these numbers upward, some demonstrating impressive creativity, such as in developing appealing degree programs. They are also investing in “collegiate” infrastructure, such as student residences, to better appeal to prospective students. At research universities, especially, the push to develop funded research has prompted spending, often relying upon endowed funds, to attract and retain “star” faculty. Some teaching institutions have moved toward the teacher-scholar approach associated with the elite sector among liberal arts colleges.

I thus explore both why and how selective U.S. 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. In doing so, I ask four research questions:

- What are the aspirations of the universities and colleges across a market and how similar or different are these?
- What theories suggest why seemingly different institutions arrive, independently, at a certain vision – a set of aspirations?

- What concrete strategies, both academic and “collegiate,” do institutions across types employ toward reaching their aspirations?
- 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?

I conclude that, across non-open access U.S. universities and colleges, aspirations boil down to enhancing institutional prestige, and institutional theory and resource dependency theory are useful in answering the question of why they do. In addition, the concrete strategies, both academic and “collegiate,” that universities and colleges of all kinds are employing are essentially generic, even with significant differences in available resources or existing prestige between and among institutions. Finally, while there are legitimate concerns, the implication of institutions being so interested and active in enhancing prestige is that colleges and universities are working harder and U.S. higher education is becoming more dynamic.

I concentrate here 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). These four public institutions, each within the University System of Georgia (USG) and thus under a common governing board, do not appear on lists of the top research universities or liberal arts colleges – those institutions nationally with the most resources and greatest selectivity. I compare the four, where applicable, with the other 34 institutions within the broader study, but especially with the Georgia Institute of Technology and the University of Georgia, which standard for prestige among selective public institutions in the state.

### **Theoretical Frameworks and Relevant Literature**

In addressing the question of why universities and colleges are so obsessed with prestige, I draw on institutionalism and related theory. Institutions attempt to move to the next level – essentially replicating those with more prestige – to gain legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). They also assume that with greater resources and more prestige will come increased autonomy, reducing their dependency upon the external entities on which they rely for support (Pfeffer and Salanick, 1978; Pfeffer, 1982). In

considering how institutions are attempting to position for greater prestige and the implications of doing so, I also draw on writing about corporate strategy. The key concept here is differentiation, as opposed to legitimacy. Finally, I consider writing on the entrepreneurial university, providing context for the discussion overall.

**Institutionalism and Related Theory.** DiMaggio and Powell argue that organizations are more interested in legitimizing themselves through reference to other organizations than seeking efficiency within themselves (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). In doing so, their access to resources is less likely to be disrupted, reducing turbulence and maintaining stability (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). So, institutions act to “increase their legitimacy and their survival prospects, independent of the immediate efficacy of the acquired practices and procedures” (Meyer and Rowan, 1977, p. 340). Accordingly, organizations across types become more homogenous over time, eventually adopting the innovations of leading organizations, as these become the prevailing wisdom. Such isomorphism is driven both by responding to markets (competitive isomorphism) and competition for political and organizational legitimacy (institutional isomorphism).

Institutional isomorphism, according to DiMaggio and Powell, (1983, 1991), is coercive, mimetic, or normative. Coercive pressures can come from those upon whom institutions depend for resources (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978; Pfeffer, 1982) or through formal regulation. In U.S. higher education, the need to secure annual state appropriations has a coercive effect on the actions of universities and colleges, including doing so in developing a vision and various strategies to implement it. Mimetic isomorphism, once again, is grounded in reducing uncertainty – and imitating market leaders providing reassurance, as there is less risk in universities or colleges not stepping out from the herd. Normative forces come from those within an organization having been, and continuing to be, acculturated as professionals as graduate students or within practitioner networks, thus acquiring a sense of what structures and processes are legitimate.<sup>1</sup>

Institutions tend not to directly announce their isomorphic tendencies, often behaving in ways other than what they purport or perhaps even want, developing “rationalized myths.” These are stories that sometimes have little connection with reality, but reinforce stated institutional purposes toward reassuring those within an organization, as well as others. For instance, a small college may frame itself

as a traditional liberal arts college both internally and externally, even when the bulk of its activities consist of teaching professional degree courses to part-time, adult students on a satellite campus (Kraatz and Zajac, 1996). Similarly, institutions rely upon ceremony to signal legitimacy, again both to themselves and outsiders (Jepperson, 1991). It is not necessary for the notions that these ceremonies represent to be proven effective, they only must be believed in (March and Olsen, 1989). Such rationalizations are thus influential in both setting ambitions and later pronouncements about having realized them. Universities and colleges, like other organizations, are not troubled about perceiving and announcing themselves as something other than they actually are.

Another driver toward generic strategies may be that organizational culture tends to limit the solutions that institutions view as legitimate, so they “satisfice,” limiting themselves to a few of many possible paths (Simon, 1947). Universities and colleges, as reasonably stable organizations over time, may be more inclined to “satisfice,” especially in the absence of shocks, such as severe budget cut mandates from the state. (Such disruptions lead institutions toward mimetic isomorphism, of course.) Defaulting to a set of aspirations focused on improving the reputation of an institution is thus a comfortable path and an “easy sell” to seemingly all constituents on a campus, however diverse they might be.

Finally, institutional culture – and not only formal power and influence – is influential in how universities and colleges arrive at aspirations and develop various strategies toward realizing them. Cultures evolve as those embedded within them engage in “sensemaking” (Weick, 1995), so presidents and others can move institutions toward ambitions, assuming they possess the desire and abilities to do so. It is also important to remember that organizations, especially those as complex as universities and colleges, are hardly singular in their responses. They are loosely coupled, with different parts often operating within different contexts, sometimes significantly so. As behavior is situational within organizations, it occurs as much within informal structures and processes as formal ones (Scott, 2001). The result is limited consistency and coordination within organizations, especially the most complex ones (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2003). Even the richest visions and sharpest strategies thus may be implemented differently – or not at all – within various parts of the organization, with outcomes potentially differing across areas.

**Corporate Strategy.** If institutional theory is about isomorphism and legitimacy, then strategy is about differentiation and synergies. In asking “what is strategy?” Porter (1996) explains that it is not mere operational effectiveness – performing similar activities better than rivals. Instead, strategy requires positioning: a firm outperforming rivals by establishing a difference that it can preserve, either pursuing different activities or similar activities in different ways. Different approaches to positioning include serving only: an aspect of an industry (such as oil changes within the automotive repair industry); a particular customer type (such as the entire home furnishing needs for younger, urban customers); or a given area (such as a chain of theatres concentrated in small towns) (Porter, 1996). Porter (1985) also developed the idea of generic strategies, suggesting that firms attempt to position for advantage over competitors in one of three ways: offering a standard product at a lower cost; marketing differentiated products that can attract a higher price (often luxury brands); or focusing on a targeted (or niche) market. Treacy and Wiersema (1993) term these value disciplines, framing them as: operational excellence (as a means to lower costs); product leadership (through cutting edge products); and customer intimacy (to meet their specific wants and needs). Positioning requires discipline, as with not straddling positions and engaging only in activities that reinforce one another (Porter, 1996).<sup>2</sup>

Different higher education institutions tend to position along these lines, concentrating on a given segment of the overall market. In exploring the structure of the higher education industry, Zemsky, Shaman, and Ianozzi (1997) argue that the market is a continuum. At one end are name brand, private institutions that provide a medallion for those traditional-aged residential students who graduate and thus can charge a premium and be quite selective. At the other are user-friendly institutions that stress convenience for those across ages who mix work and study, sometimes coupling this with being more competitive on cost. The niche into which an institution settles is shaped by the industry structure in higher education, which has numerous competitors constantly jockeying for position, including at the unit level. Barriers to entry, especially into more attractive segments, such as capital requirement are significant, as are fixed costs and both economies of scale and cost disadvantages independent of size. There are also pressures associated with the threat of substitute products, such as the emergence of the for-profit sector in higher education. Furthermore, products are perishable and real differentiation difficult, creating an environment in the industry in which limits maneuverability and expansion (Porter, 1979).

In such a challenging industry, competitive advantage comes either through increasing willingness to pay without significantly increasing costs (differentiation strategies), doing the opposite (low cost strategies), or doing both and producing superior products at lower cost (dual advantage). It also comes from aligning the activities of the organization to do something unique and valuable (Ghemawat and Rivkin, 1998). Collis and Montgomery (1998) ask whether a firm is more than the sum of its parts, concluding that corporate advantage results from creating value through developing an integrated whole – configuring and coordinating the activities of various units. Collins (2001) encourages organizations to concentrate on what they can be the best at, what drives their economic engine, and what they are passionate about. But there are also questions of integration, diversification, and expansion in strategy. The classic competitive strategy within firms is developing multiple units competing in different markets, creating value through configuration and coordinating across these activities (Piskorski, 2005), as with the primarily residential research university or small private college developing a satellite campus to teach non-traditional students. However, universities and colleges tend to be more vertical than horizontal, with the outputs of some units (upstream) as inputs for other units (downstream).

Branding reinforces such strategies. Brands are durable cultures, acquiring meaning and connotations that circulate in society, eventually becoming conventional and accepted as truths, and thus shaping how customers experience a product in a sensory manner (Holt, 2003). Holt (2003) contends that brands provide three types of tangible value for firms: reputation values through perceived product quality (reducing risk for customers) and relationship perceptions (the brand can be trusted in the future); experiential values through framing consumer experiences thus simplifying their choices; and symbolic values through expressing values and identities. Brand equity – the tangible value to a firm of a brand – includes advantages such as brand loyalty (which creates awareness and reassurance in customers), brand awareness (familiarity providing an anchor to which to attach other associations), perceived quality (new products being easier when attached to an established brand), and brand associations (that allow for differentiation with other brands) (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2000; Toma, Dubrow, and Hartley, 2005).

But Gourville (2003) offers the reminder – as do the descriptive strategy schools (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel, 2005) – that strategy is not simply structural, but also psychological. For instance, consumers irrationally over-benefit existing products even over ones that offer substantial

improvements, given high psychological switching costs (people overweigh or overvalue things they already have). In addition, the alignment at the core of most approaches to positioning may unrealistic at universities and colleges, given their loosely coupled nature and the pull of isomorphism away from distinctiveness. Finally, applying corporate models to higher education begs the questions of whether they are even relevant. Marginson (2004) argues that the social competition for status, both by individuals and institutions, within a competitive economic market, is more pervasive in higher education than traditional market competition, especially as exacerbated by the neo-liberal ideology. The pursuit of status (and human capital) thus can override other concerns for students, such as avoiding lackluster teaching and high prices. Institutions spend accordingly on efforts thought to enhance reputation and prestige.

**The Entrepreneurial University.** The various strategies that universities and colleges employ toward positioning for increased prestige – and thus greater legitimacy – illustrate them acting in an entrepreneurial manner that has never been more characteristic of American higher education. They are responding to the emergence of the neo-liberal ethos within U.S. higher education in the 1980s, emphasizing reliance on markets and attention to internal efficiency amidst reduced relative state funding. In framing their case for public support, universities and colleges no longer only indicate their contributions to advancing the public good, but also increasingly underscore their direct contributions to economic development (Zemsky, Wegner, and Massy, 2005). Higher education has increasingly become a commodity, its environment marked by intense competition and rampant consumerism, 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 that eschew any pretence to selectivity, employ a rather predictable set of strategies. They intend these efforts to enhance available resources while increasing prestige, these thought to be mutually reinforcing (Geiger, 2004; Kirp, 2003; Ehrenberg, 2002; Brewer, Gates, and Goldman, 2002). Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) address how institutions are intentionally transforming their purposes toward individual gain and away from societal benefit. Acting increasingly as capitalists, institutions are seeking resources in new markets and viewing knowledge as a commodity. They are doing so through expanding management capacity, restructuring

faculty work to lower instructional costs (primarily by shifting to temporary labor), subsidizing researchers (who themselves are increasingly focused upon individual gain), and aggressively recruiting accomplished students. Slaughter and Leslie (1997) consider the increasing influence of markets in higher education, including the impact of globalization – and how research funding became a critical marker of prestige. Zemsky, Wegner, and Massy (2005) note that administration and research have both expanded, the former spreading as on a lattice and the latter steadily ratcheting upward.

Focusing on how universities and colleges are increasingly marketing themselves, as to these accomplished students, Kirp (2003) describes institutions as ever more entrepreneurial. They are not only increasingly professional in framing messages for outsiders, better shaping and managing perceptions, but are also launching popular undergraduate majors, adding or augmenting graduate programs, encouraging faculty research, emphasizing honors programs, and enhancing study abroad opportunities (Kirp, 2003; Geiger, 2004). Institutions are meanwhile enhancing campus infrastructure, building impressive student residences, dining commons, fitness centers, and even shopping districts. Many universities are engaged in similar efforts in intercollegiate athletics, improving facilities and “upgrading” to Division I (Bok, 2002; Toma, 2003). As these various “arms races” have contributed to escalating discretionary spending, so has the non-discretionary budget increased, with institutions spending more for basic services such as health benefits, information technology, and deferred maintenance, as well as on items such as energy and building construction (Zusman, 2005; SCUP, 2005; Lee and Clery, 2004; Ehrenberg, 2002). (Dill, 2003; Ehrenberg, 2002).

Another impact of the quest for prestige is that the price of higher education is increasing, especially at more selective institutions, as recruiting students through tuition discounting, is expensive (Geiger, 2004; Ehrenberg, 2002; McPherson and Schapiro, 1998). There has been a shift in emphasis from need-based toward “merit” student aid at these universities and colleges. Clotfelter (1996) examines the rapid increases in spending at elite institutions, as for student services, financial aid, and facilities. Among research universities (or aspiring ones), in particular, there is also a robust market for faculty thought to be able to conduct research with significant funding or commercial potential (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004; Geiger, 2004; Kirp, 2003). Geiger (2004) focuses on finances, undergraduates, research, and industry ties at research universities that are increasingly less able to control their own

activities and do less public service and enjoy less government support. He argues that with the ascent of the market in higher education there is a marked and increasing inequality among institutions, with public universities disadvantaged. There are also increasing imbalances within institutions, as units compete with one another and some, like business schools, are better positioned in a market-centered environment (Ehrenberg, 2002).<sup>3</sup>

In response to these pressures, universities and colleges are increasingly relying on revenues generated at their more agile peripheries. Increasing in prominence are academic programs offered at satellite sites or virtual platforms and addressed to working students studying in professional fields (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004; Bok, 2002; Zemsky, Wegner, and Massy, 2005; Newman, Couturier, and Scurry, 2004). Institutions have entrepreneurial, as opposed to democratizing, purposes for these programs (Bok, 2002), with students within them primarily interested in credentialing (Collis, 2004; Newman, Couturier, and Scurry, 2004). Managers tend to shape these peripheral academic programs, which are typically staffed by temporary faculty or regular faculty on overload, causing traditional faculty influence to be less pronounced (Bousquet, 2008; Rhoades, 2005; Zemsky, Wegner, and Massy, 2005; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004). Institutions have attempted to contain costs (aside from engaging in various arms races) through outsourcing and otherwise seeking efficiencies – and other private sector management ideas have permeated the higher education (Zemsky, Wegner, and Massy, 2005; Kirp, 2003). They are particularly seeking lower expenses and greater agility through redirecting faculty staffing away from tenure significant positions toward temporary, part-time, and adjunct ones (Bousquet, 2008; Collis, 2004; Lee and Clery, 2004; Zusman, 2005; Gayle, Tewarie, and White, 2003).

Kirp argues that higher education is evolving into just another business, one where richer institutions (and units and individuals) get richer. Bok (2002), too, examines commercialism, focusing on athletics, scientific research, and academic programs, and lamenting what he argues is an obsession over meaningless measures, such as those associated with rankings. But obsessively pursuing and measuring prestige provides a useful surrogate for increasing shareholder value or bottom line profits as an outcome, consistent with a neo-liberal frame. One of several challenges is that it also exacerbates the mission inflation or academic drift that comes with institutions being naturally isomorphic, as with a regional comprehensive university seeking to assume the characteristics of a state flagship (Clark, 1983,

Aldersley, 1995; Meyer and Rowan, 1985; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). In addition, Collis (2004) cautions against mission creep, where “each succeeding tier of the periphery pursues new directions of its own accord” (p. 63), risking expanding everywhere into the periphery and failing to commit sufficient scarce resources to any one venture – the inability to prioritize, in other words. Nevertheless, even the most entrepreneurial institution still must consider measures such as retention. It has to satisfy various accreditation and accountability requirements, but also traditional values have hardly been abandoned, even as they are challenged within the neo-liberal university.

## **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.

These include:

- 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);
- two-year colleges (some with four-year programs) (Dalton State, Gainesville State, Georgia Highlands, Georgia Perimeter, and Young Harris).

The 38 campuses are roughly evenly split between public and private universities and colleges, and among them are several women's and historically black institutions, as well as religious colleges and specialty professional institutions such as the Savannah College of Art and Design and the Columbia

Theological Seminary. Several of the small, less selective institutions, such as Piedmont and Brenau, have both comprehensive and liberal arts college characteristics, and many of the two-year colleges, in developing bachelors programs, are blurring a once clear boundary.<sup>4</sup> These categories 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. Additionally, within each broad category, the universities and colleges I selected represent the range of institution types, such as larger and smaller comprehensive institutions and more and less selective liberal arts colleges.<sup>5</sup> The 38 institutions represent about one-half of the institutions I defined as being in the Atlanta market – campuses dependant heavily upon Atlanta for students and in fund raising.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> The discussion here focuses on these institutions. All but one of the research universities that I visited is public, like Georgia State, which is consistent with national proportions.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, most comprehensive institutions and community colleges are public, as in the Atlanta market. The difference in my study is in choosing a public liberal arts college, Georgia College, given that most liberal arts institutions are private, both selective and less selective, as in the Atlanta market. I chose Georgia College because it enables me to make comparisons across the USG, but also to the 11 selective private liberal arts colleges that I visited. I detail the questions I asked the 38 presidents in the appendix. The questions for the senior administrators at the four institutions parallel these.

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 convergence), but distinct from one another (external divergence) (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). I also searched throughout the analysis process for negative instances and for rival structures (Glazer and Strauss, 1967).

In examining a market representing the continuum of institutions in U.S. higher education, my approach is unusual. Discussions about prestige, as in how institutions compete for the most appealing students, typically focus only on elites. (In fact, most writing on American higher education focuses on

the most prominent universities and colleges). In exploring positioning systematically across institution types, I suggest that those with few claims to prestige in the sense of market leadership must still make a plausible set of assertions. In addition, my approach highlights the fact that most of American higher education operates in local markets, in which price and location tend to drive student choice and thus revenue. Finally, focusing on markets allows me to connect strategies with direct competition, examining how institutions really compete and how this differs by market segment.

## **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. Even with the differences associated with the access mission at Perimeter, each is ultimately approaching its ambitions through a rather generic set of strategies, concentrating especially on attracting more accomplished students. The experience at these four institutions is representative of the set of 38 universities and colleges across the Atlanta market that I explored.

**Aspirations.** For Georgia State, the ultimate goal is to evolve from a “commuter” institution established to serve Atlanta students into a “destination.” The university is attempting to appeal to students interested in a residential collegiate experience within the downtown business district, a setting different from the typical leafy, somewhat remote U.S. campus (of which there are several in the Atlanta market). 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 (and the Medical College of Georgia). GSU had just over \$50 million in research expenditures in 2007, compared to \$313 million for UGA and \$411 million at Tech. Its average SAT was 1090 in 2007, compared with the University of Georgia in the mid 1200s and Georgia Tech in the mid 1300s. To increase the academic profile of its students over the past decade, each institution has taken advantage of the free tuition Georgia residents receive through the HOPE scholarship program, if they earn a B average in high school. Unlike the other two research universities, Georgia State is likely to grow from its present 27,000 enrollment (about 20,000 undergraduates). GSU has some models in developing a residential, research

university in an urban setting, while still serving its traditional commuter population, including Portland State, Temple, Illinois-Chicago, and Virginia Commonwealth.

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. Southern enrolled 16,500 students in 2006, about 12 percent in graduate programs, including several at the masters level, and others working toward the doctorate in nursing practice (DNP), education (EdD), public health (DrPH), and psychology (PsychD). Georgia Southern is interested in expanding, consistent with a call from the state that the 35-institution, 270,000-student (225,000 full-time equivalent) University System of Georgia expand by over 100,000 students by 2020.<sup>9</sup> It has also targeted growing in stature, attracting more accomplished students, including those from the rich suburban Atlanta market. If Georgia State is offering students the chance to live in the midst of the city, Georgia Southern is offering a small town experience. In addition, Georgia Southern is selectively adding graduate programs and research capacity (current expenditures are around \$5 million), while attempting to maintain 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. Just as Georgia State needs to continue to accommodate part-time students, Georgia Southern must balance its traditional character, which is valued by many with influence over the institution, with moving toward its vision of becoming recognized as the one of the best comprehensive institutions in the country.

In Milledgeville, a small, historic town near Macon, Georgia College and State University has reshaped itself over the past decade 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 (Breneman, 1994). In 1995, the then-USG Chancellor first visited Georgia College and Milledgeville, connecting the preserved nineteenth century architecture of both campus and town with a liberal arts college ideal – and his desire to bring a public liberal arts college to Georgia. After the

system re-designated Georgia College accordingly, the institution rapidly made impressive gains in traditional markers of quality, with the middle 50 percent of first-year students now scoring between 1060 and 1180 on the SAT, placing it third behind Georgia Tech and Georgia among public institutions in the state. 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. In assuming its new mission, Georgia College reformed its curriculum and made investments in infrastructure, as with developing its student housing. In 2000, as the college continued its evolution, it applied for membership in the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC), overcoming concerns about its continuing professional programs and relatively large undergraduate enrollments (5,000 students, with another 1,000 graduate students) to become the 18th institution in the group the following year. GCSU thus has a clear peer group nationally to benchmark against, while competing with other selective institutions for students and resources primarily within the state.<sup>10</sup>

Georgia Perimeter is a large community college in suburban Atlanta, enrolling 21,000 students in two-year degree programs. Perimeter jettisoned its vocational programs in 1986, with adjacent DeKalb Technical College assuming them, and added three campuses across the eastern Atlanta suburbs. Like the nine other USG state colleges, GPC has an open access mission and lower price. Perimeter enrolls students from underrepresented groups in significant numbers – over 60 percent of its students are non-white and 37 percent are African-American, for instance. Georgia Perimeter students are often working students seeking professional training or personal development. Perimeter has also emphasized possibilities for transfer, formalizing relationships with several institutions, including leading public and private universities and colleges both in Georgia and nationally (Columbia and Pepperdine, for instance). After successfully beginning their undergraduate studies at GPC, students can be automatically eligible (without taking the SAT) for transfer admission to the institution they designate. Perimeter has opted to focus here – and on continuing to increase its enrollment – resisting adding four-year programs, a trend both nationally and across the state colleges in the Georgia system.<sup>11</sup> Perimeter instead emphasizes that it has almost 13,000 freshman students, more than Georgia Tech, Georgia, and Georgia State combined. Spotlighting its transfer programs, both the option to move to a leading institution and the record of achievement by GPC students once there, not only benefits student recruiting, it also provides Perimeter

with a means to enhance its regional and national profile – it is a compelling story. “Our students entering UGA, Georgia State, and Georgia Tech as a first semester junior actually earn a higher GPA on the average than the student who was there their first two years,” noted its president. Another source of prestige – and enrollments – is the high-achieving high school students in joint enrollment programs at GPC.

What constitutes prestige is thus relatively similar at the four institutions – and is determined in large part by enrolling accomplished students (or having them transfer to four year institutions at GPC, which is open admission). At more prestigious institutions, like Emory, Georgia Tech, and the University of Georgia, not just admissions and retention numbers influence national reputation, but also the sum of their endowment and funded research. But these four institutions have modest endowments, based on 2006 Council for the Aid of Education figures – Georgia State (\$89 million), Georgia Southern (\$31 million), Georgia College (\$17 million), Georgia Perimeter (under \$1 million) – compared to \$5 billion at Emory, \$1.3 billion at Tech and \$600 million at UGA. As with research, the distance to the “next level” is thus significant, although Georgia State and Georgia Southern remain 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 both peers and the “aspirational peers” that are already at the “next level.” Georgia State, Georgia Southern, and Georgia College each has increased its average SAT to around 1,100, enough to put each near the top of institutions of its type, whether urban public research universities, larger public comprehensives (like Central Michigan, Western Kentucky, or Wichita State), or public liberal arts colleges (like the College of New Jersey, the State University of New York at Geneseo, and Truman State University).<sup>12</sup> Such figures are also in the neighborhood of – or exceed – those at flagship universities in several states. These numbers are the main evidence the institutions can provide for their ascent from being much less selective and present position approaching UGA and Georgia Tech in selectivity. As these institutions attempt to enhance the legitimacy that is so important to organizations generally, especially in higher education, impressive SAT scores are particularly persuasive in substantiating their case. In effect, Georgia State, Georgia Southern, and Georgia College have leveraged the HOPE scholarship and population increases in the

state of Georgia, enrolling the students that Tech and UGA once did, as those institutions move into markets for even more accomplished students. Perimeter draws prestige not from the students it admits, but from its particular success in its students transferring to these and similar institutions (which is, ultimately, as an outcome and not an input, is a more meaningful measure).

The diversity of students enrolled also matters in prestige – and thus in aspirations among institutions – although less directly recognized than average SAT scores across higher education. Georgia College is attempting to enroll more students from underrepresented groups, even though it tends to slow its ascent in average SAT scores. Its president is emphatic that diversity is necessary to build a robust learning environment on the campus. But being deficient in minority enrollment is also a strategic vulnerability. The best universities and colleges in the U.S. tend to be those who can most readily enroll a class that is as diverse as they wish. As they are, ultimately, modeling their behavior on these institutions, such measures are also important at Georgia College (and Georgia Southern). The matter is different at Georgia Perimeter and Georgia State, which both have a large proportion of minority students – one-half of those at GSU (with one-third African-Americans) – a fact that both institutions trumpet.

Enrolling students from across the state – and out-of-state at more selective institutions such as UGA and Tech – is another marker of legitimacy. Again, the most prestigious institutions nationally tend to have significant geographic diversity. (At public institutions, it is also advantageous financially to enroll as many students paying higher non-resident tuition as possible.) It also has the advantage at Georgia Southern and Georgia College, both located in rural parts of the state, of opening the massive Atlanta market. But for lower endowment institutions, the relative difficulty in discounting tuition – providing scholarships to reducing the cost for students of attending – is a barrier, particularly in recruiting accomplished minority students. “We do not have the kind of scholarship packages we need to pick off a number of those students,” offered the Georgia College president, adding that scholarships “play to people’s pride – no good student wants to say I did not get a scholarship.” Because in-state students at selective USG institutions are typically on the HOPE scholarship, which covers tuition and fees, GCSU has experimented successfully with providing scholarships for two months of residence hall rent.

In addition to highlighting the profile of their students and their accomplishments, institutions generally note other measures of prestige, such as having an attractive campus, faculty achievements, and triumphs in intercollegiate athletics. Georgia College draws heavily on its picturesque historic campus in its recruiting. Georgia State and Georgia Southern have made significant investments in building impressive facilities, especially those like residences and fitness centers thought to appeal to prospective students. Georgia Perimeter highlights various awards, including the five Jack Kent Cooke scholarships won by students over the past six years (the most nationally), and various teaching excellence citations and participation in USG faculty development programs. Furthermore, Georgia Southern understands that its presence – and traditional success – in Division I-AA (Football Championship Subdivision) football appeals to students. In addition, size is an indicator of prestige at Georgia Perimeter, as it is generally at less selective institutions. The college highlights its increasing enrollment and serving more of the suburban Atlanta market is an important goal.<sup>13</sup>

Each institution thus attempts to differentiate itself, employing the means available. But higher education institutions must also represent they are similar to other institutions to enhance their legitimacy, particularly those they aspire to be more alike. At one level, the four Georgia institutions have a clear sense of their peer and “aspirational” institutions (as do the other 34 universities and colleges in the study). The ability to readily compare with similar institutions is an advantage in U.S. higher education. Nevertheless, benchmarks are never completely satisfying. Although Georgia State can compare itself to other “urban research universities,” there is no clear definition of what that category entails. Is there a comma between urban and research, meaning the institution is merely located in a city, or should the institution focus on urban issues in its research? (Georgia State has not committed to either direction.) Georgia Southern now has the advantage, which it uses extensively in marketing, of being designated a “doctoral research university” in the latest Carnegie Foundation classifications. But it is unclear what that really means. Unlike with research universities, there is no real definition of what a great comprehensive university is.

It is more certain that other institutions, particularly those “up a level” in prestige, provide a reference point in shaping aspirations. In communicating various institutional messages, Georgia Southern underscores its doctoral programs and research efforts and Georgia State reminds people of its

status as a research university with graduate professional schools and a research infrastructure. Georgia College “bundles” itself with Georgia Tech and the University of Georgia whenever it can, as with highlighting that it is third to them within the state system in admissions selectivity and that increasing numbers of students come to it as their first choice. Georgia State and Georgia Southern make similar arguments. Georgia College, like the others, also underscores its significant improvement over the past decade, as well as its ability to attract students that would otherwise be inclined toward private institutions, but instead choose the institution because of its lower price. Georgia Perimeter, through its transfer program, can contend that they offer, in effect, the first two years of what is, ultimately, an elite education.

The four institutions also are acutely aware of their local competitors, adopting strategies toward competing favorably for the students they desire. At a practical level, institutional research and decision support is important, as in analyzing data on admissions “overlaps” – the other institutions to which their prospective students are applying. Georgia Southern, for instance, has invested in building an infrastructure in the area. It has also devoted considerable resources to marketing in suburban Atlanta, including an elaborate display at the Lenox Mall, a premier shopping center in the area. Georgia State competes directly – and aggressively – somewhat with Georgia Southern, but also with Kennesaw State University, located in the Northeast suburbs, for both part-time and full-time students. Each institution focuses on its distinctiveness in recruiting – the key concept in theory and research on strategy. Georgia State emphasizes its location in downtown Atlanta and Georgia Southern does the same with its small town setting. Georgia College can also accentuate being in a small community, as well as having the smaller enrollment that is perceived to lead to greater personal attention. Georgia Perimeter markets its access and price, as well as its record in student success upon transferring to four-year institutions.

But these messages underscoring distinctiveness are always coupled with those stressing that the institutions conform to what people expect from universities and colleges – what is normal, and thus legitimate. Georgia State has the most significant burden here, given it is more European in style, spread across the downtown of a large city, as opposed to the garden-like campus that constitutes the popular conception of “college” (Gumprecht, 2007). Meanwhile, Georgia Southern may be too “country” for some urban and suburban students. But institutions do not need to appeal to all students, instead only having

to find and fill a niche. Georgia State and Georgia Southern have found that there are enough students, especially in a state as populous as Georgia, fitting the profile they are seeking. Both GSUs, like all institutions, are creative in their marketing, emphasizing points and images that they believe intended audiences will find attractive. Such representations need to be sufficiently realistic, as misled students would be soon disappointed and depart.

Like claiming a niche, another imperative is that any university or college be perceived as moving forward. Various constituents, both internal and external, can readily grasp the advantages thought to accompany advancing in the rankings, particularly the connection with increased resources. Aspirations, as articulated, typically make an implicit – and sometimes even explicit – resource dependency case: that increased status diminishes external influence on an institution, as with that associated with funding. But there also are psychological benefits associated with institutional ambitions. It is expected that any university or college president articulates his or her vision for the institution – what it is moving toward and why advancing is important. It is unlikely that any president (like any corporate CEO) would feel comfortable announcing: “we are fine as we are and should just maintain what we have built for a while.” A president considered to be devoid of vision would likely lose the confidence of important constituents ranging from the board to the faculty. Sustaining a positive institutional culture at a university or college is connected with the perception of advancement – absent turbulence, as during significant budget reductions, mere maintenance is unlikely to be sufficient (Toma, Dubrow, and Hartley, 2005). Especially in an environment increasingly dependent upon private giving, people want to know their efforts are building toward something more appealing. Faculty members, in particular, tend to embrace “aspirational” rhetoric, as they were likely acculturated at a more prominent institution than the one at which they are now employed and many tend to feel “displaced” in their current situation. It also fits neatly with the appeals to local pride that tend to characterize much fund raising, especially annual giving, and some degree of the lobbying that occurs by institutions in the state capitol.

Articulating aspirations requires some rhetorical agility, especially at public universities and colleges. At Georgia Southern, for instance, the institution needs to walk a line between the more prestigious institution it is becoming and the significant value that various constituents, both internal and external, place on being accessible and friendly. For instance, alumni tend to find appealing the

perceived increase in the value of their degree, but they also cherish memories of the university as it existed when they attended. At Georgia State, it remains important, even as it develops as a research university, to serve the part-time, local students it traditionally has. Georgia College and State University employs its unusual name here, noted its president: “We have struggled with how to describe ourselves, and we often use college – public liberal arts college – . . . with the undergraduates . . . and the state university [part] that is awkwardly in our name is another way in which a public institution can meet regional public and economic development needs.”<sup>14</sup>

Limits on how directly an institution can express aspirations to various audiences are the reality across public higher education. For Georgia State, like UGA and Tech, presidents and others need to articulate concurrent and potentially conflicting messages. Public institutions must be perceived as serving the local needs of the state that support them through annual appropriations, but efforts here are not necessarily what enhances their national reputation. Furthermore, whenever an institution increases its average SAT score, for example, there are questions of whom it is no longer admitting. Institutional aspirations open the possibility for political grandstanding by those asking why the state university is not educating enough students from rural or urban areas, who tend to be lower achieving, or why taxpayer funds are subsidizing students from other states. These are not new charges, but they require ever more finesse as aspirations lead institutions away from traditional conceptions and even missions. There is also the opposite challenge, exemplified by Georgia College's struggles in reminding policy makers in the state capitol “who do not know much about us, what [type of institution] we are supposed to be as a matter of public policy in the state of Georgia,” according to its president. She cited the budget process, in which those in Atlanta inappropriately compare GCSU with the comprehensive university sector, as with disregarding the higher instruction costs implicit in the public liberal arts model.

There is also the need to manage calibrating and expressing aspirations internally. Georgia Southern frames its paramount ambition as being the best comprehensive institution in the country. But it is unclear what is a great comprehensive, as those in Statesboro have realized. The institution, according to its president, thus “set the bar high, but not so high that it seemed out of reach . . . [finding] those institutions that were like us across the country and identifying . . . who they are, what they did, and what we needed to match up with” – and developing a strategic plan accordingly. In doing so, Georgia

Southern created its own peer and aspirational list, as it ramped up institutional research on the campus, supplementing the one provided by the university system. Having what it sees as appropriate benchmarks enabled Georgia Southern to combat internal misperceptions that initially hindered moving toward its aspirations, namely that increasing standards would destroy enrollments and thus the finances of the institution. At Georgia State, Georgia Southern, and Georgia College, the evolution of the institution also caused uncertainty among faculty members, especially as tenure and promotion standards changed and several older faculty never envisioned doing anything other than teaching in their careers. Georgia Perimeter has no such challenges. It is clear in its aspirations and messages about being open access, which is reinforced by its decision not to enter into the four-year market and that it is adding students, contributing to the USG goal of increasing enrollment across the system over the next decade.

At Georgia Southern, grounding aspirations in the traditional, cooperative culture of the institution proved useful, as in framing strategic planning. Georgia Southern recognized the strategic advantage in recruiting that its welcoming nature provided, especially in competing with Tech and UGA. It saw that such messages only increased in power when coupled with an enhanced profile in admissions and research. Such strategic planning proved important at each of the four institutions. At Georgia State, the facilities master plan served as a checklist over the past decade, with the last item soon to be completed; at Georgia Southern, the strategic plan allowed it to “monitor” its progress in moving up among comprehensives; at Georgia Perimeter, it gave expression to the purposes of the community. The Georgia State president also stresses the importance of having a “clear script,” meaning “phrases that people will probably repeat if you ask them, [such as] ‘being part of a community and not apart from it.’”

**Strategies.** Having defined a set of aspirations, the four institutions – like the other 34 in the Atlanta market generally – are making specific moves toward realizing them. An important strategy at leading research universities and liberal arts colleges is recruiting and retaining faculty thought to be able to attract resources. Georgia State and Georgia Southern have hired some endowed faculty, although to a lesser extent than Georgia Tech or the University of Georgia. Along with Georgia College, both have taken advantage of the prestige that attaches to where their newer faculty went to graduate school (to a modest degree). In other words, one way to capture the aura of Yale, Berkeley, or Wisconsin is to hire

their people – something increasingly possible in a market in which supply exceeds demand in many academic fields. (Institutions have been doing this since the nineteenth century, of course.)

In addition, just as the urban environment at Georgia State is appealing to many academics, the distinctive approach at Georgia College is useful to its president in “selling” the institution to prospective faculty: “it is the opportunity to be a part of something that is really special in the state; an institution that is on the move but on the move in a different way from most other institutions.” Moreover, “we work with people who care, at least as much about the mission of the institution as they care about that their discipline, [which] is unusual” at other types of institutions. At Georgia Southern, the “doctoral research university” designation is appealing to faculty the institution is recruiting, as is the general increase in academic reputation. However, having the lower endowment that generally comes with having the history of a teachers college or a commuter institution can inhibit the recruitment and retention of leading faculty. Compensation at public universities and colleges in Georgia tend to lag behind competitors, even in the Southeast. Without the ability to enrich packages, Georgia Southern and Georgia College both noted that they tend to lose some of their best people to institutions with more resources on which to draw.

Enrolling more accomplished students is similarly 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. Over the past decade or so, both Georgia State and Georgia Southern, as did UGA earlier, jettisoned remedial education programs in anticipation of increasing in stature, moving from under 1,000 in SAT scores to over 1,100 (and approaching 1,200), and with most of their students eligible for the HOPE scholarship. 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.

Georgia State and Georgia Southern are also interested in increasing enrollments, which advances the mandate from the University System of Georgia to expand participation in the state, but also enables them to better justify adding academic programs, especially those that enhance prestige. (Tech and UGA are likely to maintain current enrollments.) Although working to increase enrollment, Perimeter has not engaged in upward drift, forgoing the possibility of adding four-year programs, which is increasingly popular in Georgia and nationally. Because strategy at any community college needs to be

linked with community needs, the GPC president argued that institutions such as his must be certain they are not adding four year programs to satisfy psychological desires to enhance prestige. He added that national prestige for a community college matters considerably less than “adding value” locally. Indeed, the college leverages local support for various initiatives, as through fund raising and other local private contributions recently in building a new campus in Newton County.

In advance of becoming more selective, Georgia State, Georgia Southern, and Georgia College professionalized and expanded student recruiting as an initial matter. Georgia Perimeter expanded recruiting significantly in response to losing enrollment with the spin off of Georgia Gwinnett College, a four-year institution. The president of Georgia Southern describes at the beginning of his tenure being "put to sleep" by a presentation in a darkened room consisting of a few slides on an overhead projector, vowing to make admission more dynamic. In doing so, Georgia Southern added a small honors program, a strategy also adopted by more selective institutions in the system. These honors students are critical in increasing the academic profile of the institution, providing it with the particularly accomplished students who can compete nationally for awards and fellowships (including, at UGA, for the Rhodes Scholarship). They also raise figures such as average SAT that are so important in generating everything from national rankings to compelling stories in the alumni magazine. In extending recruiting, the institutions have also spread their geographic reach. Georgia Southern, for instance, has increased its presence in Tampa, given there is no institution like it in Florida, focusing on students who want to go away to college and find a small town environment appealing.

Other common strategies toward attracting (and retaining) students are launching innovative or unusual academic programs, study abroad programs, and service learning efforts. Georgia College has emphasized learning communities in the residence halls, as have many institutions in Georgia and nationally. Such efforts cluster students from within a residence hall in a given set of classes and sections, and often have themes such as ecology, women in science, or a foreign language. GCSU has also worked to increase the number of students living on campus, connecting this with realizing its liberal arts college curriculum. It is also interested, as are all institutions, in generating revenue from housing, which tends in the U.S. to operate as an auxiliary, thus being expected to do better than breaking even.

Georgia Southern has focused on another generic strategy, expanding graduate education and increasing funded research. Particularly toward the latter, it is developing centers and institutes and moving into “cutting edge” academic fields, especially interdisciplinary ones. Adding the first public health program in the state has been a boon to Georgia Southern, for instance. Georgia State has built a research park in suburban Alpharetta.<sup>15</sup> Adding doctoral programs is central to aspirations at Georgia Southern, having set as a goal increasing its graduate enrollment to 20 percent from the current 13 percent. In doing so – and through enhancing sponsored research – the institution can make a case for being moved up to research university status within the USG, joining UGA, Tech, State, and the Medical College of Georgia. It also employs the argument that the two-thirds of the state physically located south of Atlanta should have a research university.

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 gymnasias have become amenities – luxury apartments, upscale food courts, and deluxe fitness centers. Universities and colleges nationally are in a construction “arms race,” competing with one another. Although an “arms race” is the classic case of institutional isomorphism, the competition among universities and colleges in developing collegiate infrastructure is prompting some creativity in leveraging local advantages and overcoming weaknesses.

Each institution has invested significantly in its physical environment. Georgia College is “greening the campus,” improving its landscaping, again to better capture the look and feel of a liberal arts college. It has also accentuated the core of its campus, which is within a historic district, moving academic functions previously scattered around town back to the central campus. Doing so enables faculty to more readily interact, as will the faculty common room that the institution is building that will also have guest rooms for visiting faculty. Also toward increasing the liberal arts college feel of the campus, GCSU is renovating a historic building to house admissions, a common practice in American higher education. Admissions offices are the front door of the institution for visiting prospective students and their parents and most are, accordingly, quartered in premium space on campus.

The Georgia Southern president linked greater selectivity in admissions with the need for improvement in the quality of teaching and facilities, both residences and academic buildings. Georgia Southern has spent \$200 over the past decade on residences, and has built a new library and several facilities for academics. The thought is that such investments are circular – better students demand better facilities, which attract even better students. At Georgia State, the president, an urban planner, focused on campus construction from the start of his term nearly over 15 years ago, contending it was necessary to realize his charge of taking the institution “to the next level:” “how can you recruit students and faculty if you don’t have facilities to put them in?” He argues that improvements in facilities enabled Georgia State to “increase our academic standards, recruit faculty, do more research . . . – [and] transform the institution.”

The facilities constructed, most recently the 2,000 bed residence and a new fitness center, helped combat the perception, especially among students, that Georgia State was not a “real” university, meaning a traditional campus like neighboring Georgia Tech. The university is also building houses for sororities, which are popular at traditionally residential institutions like UGA, and is planning to add housing for 500 students each year for the next ten years. These efforts toward enhancing the collegiate aspects of the campus are also a response to what institutions perceive are the expectations of their students. Fewer students have experienced sharing a bedroom or even a bathroom while growing up, and they are increasingly fitness conscious. Institutions are thus justifying building new facilities as responsive to a combination of changing demographics and keeping pace with competitors in an increasingly robust market for accomplished students.

The Georgia Perimeter president views amenities differently, focusing more on initiatives such as equipping classrooms with technology, which he did through fund raising. Indeed, institutions across the Atlanta market are also constructing academic buildings, including those that are also “amenities” for those in the community. Georgia College is renovating a downtown building to serve as a theatre, bookstore, and museum. Liberal arts colleges across Georgia all seem to have recently constructed or be in the midst of planning a science building. Georgia Southern and Georgia State have both enhanced their libraries and several academic buildings. Unlike as in building residences and other student amenities, which have a revenue stream attached to them, fund raising is crucial in such efforts. But fund

raising is challenging, particularly for institutions that have yet to build an infrastructure for doing it and that do not have an established base of prospective donors. In Georgia, the state funds six or so major academic buildings across the USG campus each year, but other construction projects (and even portions of the state funded ones) must generate private funds.

As they position themselves for greater prestige, universities and colleges nationally are engaged in similar efforts in intercollegiate athletics, improving facilities, “upgrading” to Division I, and seeking entry into better conferences (Toma, 2003). Georgia State students 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), indicating demand for what the university has framed as a critical marker of a “real” American university. (They also voted for a fee increase to fund a library renovation.) It took a decade for the institution to position itself to begin the program. It needed to improve its other sports, especially men’s basketball, in order to attract an appropriate conference. Having done so, joining the Colonial Athletic Association, the institution is now affiliated with recognized institutions such as William and Mary, Delaware, and George Mason – and can take advantage of these “affiliational” benefits in leveraging prestige.

Georgia State is entering college football as several other Southeastern urban universities are doing the same for similar reasons, including UNC-Charlotte, Texas-San Antonio, and South Alabama. Neighboring Kennesaw State is also considering adding football, balancing the expense with maintaining a program with the intangible benefits thought to accompany it. Toma (2003) suggests that football contributes to advancing the campus community and collegiate atmosphere that is expected of all institutions, including the largest universities; provides institutions that are essentially local in their reach with what amounts to a national brand, adding distinctiveness and importance to campuses with few other areas of real national prominence; and establishes the environment for successful fund raising (and legislative relations) in higher education, advancing identification among external constituents. Football allows a broader community to relate to something that they perceive to be distinctive, central, and enduring, causing them to want to deepen and announce their affiliation (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail, 1994). It is thus useful, albeit mostly indirectly, in advancing the resource acquisition that serves various broader institutional agendas, including purely academic ones.

Although Georgia Southern has been among the most successful football programs nationally in the FCS, there is pressure to follow other comprehensive institutions such as Western Kentucky, Marshall, and Troy that have moved to Division I-A (the Football Bowl Subdivision), which is a mix of flagship state universities and several comprehensives like Central Michigan or Fresno State. Rarely do these comprehensives break through to challenge the traditional powers in Division I-A, but there are examples of it having happened, as with Boise State reaching to top of the national polls. Investments here are akin to playing the lottery, with even a remote chance to "hitting it big" having real appeal. Even without exceptional success, the FCS teams and the second-tier FBS institutions do occasionally get to play the leading programs, as Georgia Southern recently opened the football season at Georgia and will soon play Georgia Tech. There is also always the possibility of an upset in the annual NCAA men's basketball tournament, which has smaller programs as about one-third of its field. Although they are studying moving up, Georgia Southern appears to be inclined to be a leader in the FCS, as opposed to, as their athletic director put it, being fodder for the powers in the FBS. Also, the Georgia Southern president has tied any move to Division I with the ability of the institution to generate private funds to cover costs, which is a daunting prospect.

At Georgia College, the president framed the strategic challenge in athletics as participating in NCAA Division III, which tends to be home to the selective liberal arts colleges, being a better fit for the institution, allowing it to compete against like (and aspirational) institutions. But Division II, where it is now, is appealing to those in the community, including alumni. These constituents are more interested in squaring off against regional athletics powers, even if it means affiliating with institutions with which Georgia College does not compete for prospective students and academic reputation. At Perimeter, there is a modest athletics program, but no real discussion of enhancing it to be more like high profile college sports, which is the case in some parts of the country where there is a transfer function to larger athletics programs that parallels transfer generally at community colleges.

Finally, institutions across the Atlanta market are also becoming increasingly professional in framing messages for outsiders, working to better shape and manage perceptions of their institutions. The challenge with identifying Georgia College is an example. It is common in U.S. higher education for colleges to change their names to "university" when they achieve a certain level of complexity – or simply

desire to be thought of in that way, in the case of less selective private institutions. There is a prestige that accompanies the university brand. But the reverse is also true, as “college” represents the liberal arts institutions that demands a premium price, presumably for the additional attention they provide to students. The USG chancellor who designated the institution as the public liberal arts college in Georgia decided that GCSU needed to keep the “state university” part of its name (as have several other public liberal arts colleges). But Georgia College has emphasized the “college” part of its name, as in its logo, which puts “and state university” in smaller print. “Georgia College” also has the benefit of being the traditional name of the institution, which was the state’s women’s college, pleasing the older alumni who can also be older donors.

Messaging is a critical component among the various strategies intended to advance institutional aspirations. Both Georgia State and Georgia Southern have needed to overcome the time it takes for reputation to catch up with the reality of an improving institution. “The real struggle for Georgia State is to get people to understand that we are truly high quality institution,” asserted its president. It is perceived as only an Atlanta institution, but has students from each Georgia county and almost every country. There is also the challenge, as at Georgia College, of having the system grant it a distinctive mission and then not understand that it must fund the institution to have the low student-faculty ratio that is essential in realizing it, for instance. “They compare us this year with the comprehensive university sector, and, oh gosh, we are higher in instruction,” noted the president. Perhaps stating the challenge most clearly: “[When] I heard Georgia Perimeter College is the best kept secret in Atlanta,” noted their president, “it would be my job to eliminate that secret.” He attempts to do so by “find[ing] those indicators that resonate with people.” One is the impact of the institution on local economic development – and simply that graduates are in good jobs in and around Atlanta. An institution can be “excellent without even being excellent” sometimes when it has an established name brand, the Georgia Perimeter president suggested, noting that his institution does not always have such advantages: “I work at the best institution in the state and nobody realized it.”

## **Conclusions and Implications**

Achieving institutional legitimacy and autonomy through enhancing prestige is thus not only a common end in U.S. higher education, as exemplified by the Atlanta market. It also involves similar means, as institutions of different types are using roughly parallel strategies in positioning for prestige. Their respective approaches are variations on a common theme, differing less in type than in scale, the latter based on the relative stature of institutions and thus resources to them. 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. Even modestly selective institutions are purposely and aggressively recruiting students who represent indicators of institutional prestige such as average standardized test scores. 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. They similarly may rely on their connections with prestigious institutions, as through transfer agreements. Toward reaching more accomplished students, institutions are enhancing their collegiate nature, improving campus infrastructure, particularly residences and other facilities that are sufficiently deluxe that they can be reasonably called “amenities.”

Why is positioning for prestige such a necessity – an obsession, really – across much of American higher education, as at Georgia State, Georgia Southern, Georgia College, and Georgia Perimeter? The clear perception within higher education is that prestige and resources are linked. The same is true of the notion that better students demand more attractive facilities. Once again, the institutions in the U.S. with the highest status are usually the wealthiest – and, accordingly, the most independent of external control, as resource dependency theory suggests. They have more leverage with those allocating state appropriations, students choosing a college, parents paying tuition, and donors (both annual and major)? Tech and UGA can thus more readily challenge the direction set from Atlanta, and are more likely to have parents and students (and even donors) compete to affiliate with the institution. Similarly, the four institutions here have more latitude than smaller public institutions.

Positioning for prestige may also be such a prominent strategy because there neither is a set status hierarchy in American higher education nor formal structural barriers. There is always the hope of moving up – winning the lottery, in effect (as in athletics). Each of the four institutions illustrates, to a degree, having done just this. Each has grown in stature, whether as measured by the profile of their entering students or less tangible indicators of prestige, such as campus infrastructure. It may simply be that everyone in U.S. higher education is moving up, so the relative positions of institution are essentially unchanged. But if that means that institutions across the board are working harder – albeit not always necessarily smarter – perhaps this is a good thing, provided there are not unfilled gaps in access. Questions of access cannot be overlooked, however. The defining feature and paramount advantage of the U.S. system of higher education is its institutional diversity, with a university or college that fits the needs of a given students likely being accessible to him or her. Are these strategic approaches toward enhancing prestige, while supporting the premise of institutionalism, also destroying the institutional diversity that is so critical?

Meanwhile, institutions are perfecting representing themselves as different – Georgia State is cosmopolitan; Georgia Southern is inviting; Georgia College is intimate; Georgia Perimeter is a springboard. But it is difficult to argue that strategic decisions are causing them to really differentiate from one another. Is what makes Georgia State, Georgia Southern, and Georgia College distinctive more at the surface than within the core? Are their curricula – the essence of any institution – all that different, for instance? Differentiation is the key concept in theory on strategy. But institutions 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. (Of course, when the others were more open access, these missions were more similar.) The standard strategies that universities and colleges are pursuing connected with their aspirations are making them, ultimately, more similar to competitors or aspirational institutions. (They are also confronting the dictates of the entrepreneurial university similarly, accepting the neo-liberal idea of individual gain; becoming increasingly managed, even in their academic programs; aggressively marketing to students; seeking revenues on the periphery and lowering instructional costs as they can; etc.) 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. The establishment of Georgia State in Atlanta was for just such reasons.

Perhaps the question here is that 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? Is it realistic to opt out, saying, in effect, once again, “we are doing fine and should relax.” Few organizations – or their leaders – adopt such a posture, at least rhetorically. There is something about people affiliating with organizations that causes them to want them to improve, as Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail (1994) so persuasively contend. When the prestige of an institution and the self-image of those connected with it are linked, it is difficult to envision an approach other than what is now present in U.S. higher education. There are also practical reasons for universities and colleges to pursue prestige. It is one item upon which everyone on campus conceivably can agree, as with faculty members likely trained at more prestigious institutions.

What is less clear than its seeming inevitability is what positioning for greater prestige may risk. There is the potential 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. The need for private funds (and perhaps higher tuition) to realize the initiatives that advance institutions toward aspirations may increase external control by donors or lenders, turning resource dependency theory on its head. The same may be true of the increased expectations that come with advancing prestige, whether from students, parents, or donors. Additionally, are institutions getting appropriate value for money from the facilities they are constructing or the star faculty they are recruiting? It is difficult to assess whether or not these strategies are successful, given that measurement is so difficult in higher education, there being nothing akin to return on shareholder value in the corporate section.

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, even with its significant potential downsides.

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## Appendix

In the interviews with the presidents, I began each by asking about the aspirations he or she has defined for the institution 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 it is that various constituents perceive 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,<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, I shifted to broader insights, asking each president about: (1) what strategies his or her institution has had the most success with; (2) how he or she measures such success and whether these measures are satisfying; (3) whether its strategic approach has served to differentiate the institution from others, particularly competitors or aspirational institutions, or if the institution has become more like others; and (4) 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 presidents: (1) why he or she thinks positioning for prestige is such a necessity – an obsession, really – across much of American higher education; (2) whether it is realistic to opt out, saying, in effect, “we are doing fine and should relax;” (3) whether, if there are winners in the pursuit of prestige, must

there be losers; and (4) whether positioning for prestige is not only inevitable, but also advantageous, making U.S. higher education and individual institutions more dynamic.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Organizational institutionalism is the dominant theory in organizations and management, with citations to Meyer and Rowen (1977), DiMaggio and Powell (1983), and Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) related to institutional theory and resource dependency only increasing over the past decade (Greenwood, et al, 2008). Subsequent research has only made institutionalism more complex and applicable as a theory, as with expanding consideration of questions of isomorphism and legitimacy into areas such as institutional entrepreneurship (active change within organizations) and institutional logics (influence of broader belief systems, such as capitalism) (Leca, Battilana, and Boxenbaum, 2006; Friedland and Alford, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> In summarizing the criticisms of Porter's positioning approach, Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel (2005) suggest it can be overly deliberate, narrow, and formulaic, as well as too divorced from organizational learning. It is too much about staying home and calculating and not enough about getting out there and learning, as the authors put it. They offer a typology of the various schools in strategy, including prescriptive schools, such as the design school (SWOT analysis); planning school (strategy is planning); and positioning school (Porter). There are also descriptive schools (cognitive, learning, power, cultural, environmental, entrepreneurial), as well as their preferred configuration approach, which combines several of these. Each of these schools has advantages and weaknesses, according to Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to the standard works on the neo-liberal university, there is a robust literature critical of contemporary higher education. In just the past few years, Lewis (2006) writes of the lack of coherence in the curriculum, faculty disconnectedness from students, and coddled and infantilized students at Harvard; Bok (2007) and Kronman (2007) discuss what students are not learning (including the meaning of life, the latter argues); Giroux (2007) and Newfield (2008) focus on the influence of conservatives in, respectively, chilling critical thought and suppressing democratizing impulses in higher education; Golden (2007) and Schmidt (2007) consider the advantages affluent applicants have in elite admissions; Rhode (2006) addresses the negative impact of the pursuit of status on the pursuit of knowledge (as do, more generally, Hersh and Merrow (2006)); Washburn (2006) discusses negative corporate influences; and Bousquet (2008) explores faculty as disposable workers within the low-wage sphere of the service economy. Finally, Burgan (2006) writes of decline of faculty influence and its impact.

<sup>4</sup> I did not include for-profit institutions, such as the Atlanta branches of the University of Phoenix or various local providers, among my cases, finding them unwilling to cooperate with the study and, more importantly, not engaged in selling themselves based on prestige but instead solely on student convenience. Clark Atlanta, which would have been a second private comprehensive institution, denied my requests for access.

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<sup>5</sup> The 38 institutions are dispersed rather evenly along the market taxonomy that Zemsky, Shaman, and Iannozzi (1997) propose, which clusters universities and colleges into three categories. Name brand institutions are the most selective, with the most prominent (captured in segments 1 and 2) providing a “medallion” for graduates that is highly valued in the market, such as Emory), and segment 3 capturing selective universities and colleges such as the major state flagships, such as Georgia Tech. The typical institution in the second category, the core, serves a local market and can lean toward the name brand segment (segment 4), like Kennesaw, or more toward the convenience segment (segment 5), like Armstrong Atlantic. Convenience or user friendly institutions have mostly large numbers of part-time and intermittent students who may or may not be seeking a degree, as at Georgia Perimeter.

<sup>6</sup> Davidson and Sewanee are exceptions here, somewhat. I chose them so as to have two elite liberal arts colleges among the case, one in the top ten and another in the top 40 or so. They are sufficiently geographically proximate to Atlanta to draw a meaningful number of students and donors from there.

<sup>7</sup> Teams of doctoral students from the Institute of Higher Education conducted these interviews in May, 2008. I arranged their schedules and provided an interview protocol. All of the interviews – the presidents and the others – have been transcribed, with me doing the coding. I conducted the interviews with the 38 presidents during Spring, 2008. [Insert names of students and thank you in final manuscript.]

<sup>8</sup> Looking outside of the Atlanta market, within the band of states from the District of Columbia to Texas – the Southeast U.S. – the proportion is roughly similar, for instance. Among privates, Duke, Vanderbilt, Miami, Tulane, and Wake Forest are generally considered research universities (the line between these and comprehensives not always clear), compared with four public research institutions in Virginia (Virginia Tech, Virginia, George Mason, and Virginia Commonwealth), three in North Carolina (Chapel Hill, NC State, and UNC Charlotte), and three in Mississippi (Ole Miss, Jackson State, and Mississippi State). In the Northeast, there are a greater proportion of private universities generally, including research universities.

<sup>9</sup> The University System of Georgia rewards increasing enrollments by allocating funds via an enrollment-driven funding formula (Richardson, Bracco, Callan, and Finney, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Although within the system, Georgia College is an outlier, generally – and they would argue inappropriately – lumped with the “state universities” in the system, institutions similar to what they once were but that are now of a different character. The USG designates four universities as research universities, including the Medical College of Georgia in Augusta; has another “regional university” in addition to Southern, Valdosta State; has 13 “state universities” averaging 3,100 students in size, but including institutions as large as Kennesaw State at around 20,000 students; and nine “state colleges,” which have two-year programs, some with a selection of four-year programs also. After Perimeter, the next two largest state colleges are Darton with fewer than 5,000 students and Coastal Georgia, with under 3,000. There is also a system of technical colleges within the state, not governed by the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia.

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<sup>11</sup> Perimeter lost its Lawrenceville campus, which accounted for one-third of its enrollment, when the system established the four-year Georgia Gwinnett College there in 2006. It responded by increasing its recruitment, especially Hispanic and Asian and Asian-American students, making up for the loss and continuing its status as one of the fastest growing institutions nationally.

<sup>12</sup> Some of which, like TCNJ, have some professional programs, as does Georgia College, and some masters degree programs.

<sup>13</sup> Georgia Perimeter struggles against other ambitious state institutions to spread further around the Atlanta perimeter from its base in the East to the Northwest, the president arguing for the economies of scale that justify large community colleges in places like Phoenix.

<sup>14</sup> She added that a name change to something more descriptive of a liberal arts college would have “use[d] up too much political capital” in Atlanta, the state capital. Instead, GCSU emphasizes the “Georgia College” part of its name graphically, putting “and State University” in smaller print. That name evokes private liberal arts colleges, such as Connecticut College.

<sup>15</sup> Related strategies include investing in university presses, national conferences, international initiatives, and the like, as well as entering into consortia with other institutions.

<sup>16</sup> 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.

<sup>17</sup> The 38 institutions also represent the range of types of participation in intercollegiate athletics in the United States. Georgia competes at the very highest level, generating and spending upwards of \$70 million annually (the budget of the institution is about \$1.2 million per year.); several other institutions are at the more modest end of Division I, such as Troy and Georgia Southern; and Division II and Division III, which require even less of an annual investment are also well represented among the institutions.

<sup>18</sup> 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.