

Chasing Prestige in the Academy: How the System Undermines Itself

Written by Robert L. Oprisko

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ROBERT L. OPRISKO, APR 18 2015

I feel that writing about the state of academe is an important element for every professional in higher education. Every publication reveals some truths that come with the unique perspective of the author(s). These revelations illuminate not only the state of a discipline or an industry (I cringe at admitting higher education has become such) but of a very important and increasingly expensive swathe of life for many.

Today I will focus on an element of academe that is undermining the mission of higher education, which is the inter-institutional chasing of prestige. A liberal arts education is designed to facilitate the growth of students such that they are more adept and competitive on the open market. Public education launched out of the enlightenment and focused on strengthening individual skills and knowledge. Much as Beaumarchais' Figaro, education enabled the innate dignity of humanity to shine through and for social value to be predicated on merit rather than birth, which was the case in feudalism.

So how is the chasing of prestige disadvantageous for the entire higher education system, including all of the students? The answer is that prestige is almost always more easily associated with a group or institution than with a person and that prestige is easily accumulated into the identities of a few, which marks all others as non-prestigious, lowering their value not based upon who they are or what they can accomplish, but because of their association.

Prestige has manifested in many ways, but quite often in the form of ranking lists. For academicians, (those who teach and research) we are socialized to admire publications in "top" journals, often, due to ease, the top ten in a given discipline. This fixation is problematic for a number of reasons, all of which are interconnected:

- Regardless of how many journals a discipline has, there will only ever be ten in the top ten.
- The ten most prestigious journals will only ever be able to publish a tiny fraction (a statistically insignificant amount) of the articles published within the discipline.
- Publishing in a prestigious journal does not ensure that one's article is good, though many will assume so.
- Scholars who have published in prestigious journals are more likely to publish again in prestigious journals by not getting rejected during initial editorial review. The reverse is also true.
- Scholars who are institutionally affiliated (work) at a prestigious university are more likely to publish in prestigious journals by not rejected during initial editorial review. The reverse is also true.

Thus, scholarship is judged not necessarily by the strength of the argument, but by the location of publication. The scholar is also judged not by the strength of their scholarship, but by the location of publication. Finally, the human error in this system results in scholars from a very few institutions publishing the majority of articles in the elite journals.

There is a reinforcing effect where elite publications are controlled by scholars at elite universities. Both the university and the journal benefit from this symbiotic relationship, which is not available to almost every other university. The institution becomes seen as "better", its scholars are considered "smarter", and this affects the perception of the university's students.

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Student success is often determined by where one graduated. This has been shown across traditional graduate programs, law schools, and business schools. Undergraduate students are judged accordingly as well. It is commonly accepted to assume that an Ivy League graduate is “smart” or “bright”. This has implications for direct competition for jobs, graduate school placement, publications, awards, and memberships between students from elite schools vis-à-vis those from non-elite schools.

The problem worsens as one moves away from the United States and Western privilege. In the global rankings of universities, only one (of the top fifty) is from Australia, three from Canada, eight are from Asia, twelve are from Europe, and the remaining 26 are from the United States. Most of the Earth’s students find themselves losing the prestige battle based not on their potential or their individual merit, but on their geographical location. Escaping from the prestige trap requires sufficient money such that only the wealthiest or best connected (also associated with prestige) can afford or are positioned well enough to do so. Prejudice against community college and online education graduates exists as well.

Instead of education being a great social leveler, prestige seeking has reinforced the competitive advantage of the rich and powerful. This strategy is undermining the viability of many universities. By accepting one’s non-prestigious status, the value of graduates in the market erodes and, eventually, so will the number of students wishing to study there. The institution itself will fall not because their graduates weren’t talented or because they were inferior, but because they accepted their place in an inferior social position.

Every person is unique, irreplaceable, and priceless. Every student’s mind is worthy of investment. I hope that academe finds itself courageous enough to eliminate its fixation on prestige such that the vast majority of students and scholars find the world opened to them upon graduation rather than shut.

About the author:

Robert L. Oprisko is an Editor-at-large of E-International Relations and a Director of the website’s Editorial Board. He is a Research Associate at Indiana University’s Center for the Study of Global Change. His research focuses on contemporary political philosophy, international relations theory, and critical university studies. He has published *Honor: A Phenomenology* (Routledge 2012) and *Michael A. Weinstein: Action, Contemplation, Vitalism* (Routledge 2014), and is currently writing both *Existential Theory of International Politics* and *The United States’ Nobility: American Exceptionalism at Home and Abroad*. He earned his Ph.D. in political science from Purdue University. You can reach him via email.