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Saving the Soul of Public Research Universities

By [Joseph C. Burke](#)

Competition among research universities for national ranking increasingly fuels a conflict between peer prestige and public purpose. Governors and legislators rail about public purpose, while professors and administrators rave about peer prestige. Can public research universities pursue both public purpose and peer prestige? (Can the University of Virginia meet the dual directive of its Board of Visitors to raise its proportion of economically disadvantaged students and its *U.S. News & World Report* ranking among national universities?) As currently defined, achieving both goals remain an impossible dream, for public purpose is not a byproduct produced automatically while pursuing peer prestige.

Peer prestige suggests high standing in academic circles. Public purpose means serving the collective good. Defining prestige and purpose for state universities is too important to be left either to academics or the public, for each is better at defining wants than determining needs. Universities deliver both ends and means. They represent ends when discovering enduring ideas and insights and means when these discoveries spur innovations and inventions that improve our lives. Academics and the public must agree on an agenda that embraces both educational and societal needs.

Some leaders of government and business, and increasingly even presidents and professors, would leave prestige and purpose to the market. But market demands and the public good are not synonymous. Market demands are often short term and respond to individual wants, but public goods are usually long term and reflect collective needs. For example, markets — through the salaries they generate — favor physicians in the latest medical specialties, though society needs more primary care doctors and nurses. Markets encourage MBA research scientists, while society desperately needs science and math teachers. Rising markets often mark momentary fads, but public universities must continue critical programs that society needs. The nature of markets is to abandon the old in favor of the new, but higher education while discovering the new, should look for the lasting things in life.

Peer prestige represents the resource and reputation model of excellence, with its trinity of student selectivity, rich resources, and faculty reputations. That model relies mostly on inputs of students,

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resources, and professors and says little about the public purpose of the quality and quantity of graduates or the contribution of research and services to states and society. It depends more on the resources received than the results achieved and treats campuses like computers as mostly matters of good in, good out.

The resource and reputation model dominates the national rankings of colleges and universities. *U.S. News & World Report* devotes three quarters of its rating for national universities to this model: peer assessment (25 percent), faculty resources (20 percent), student selectivity (15 percent), spending per student (10 percent), and alumni giving (5 percent). A measure called retention does allocate 20 percent of the total score. Unfortunately, on many campuses, retention results reflect admission standards more than improved performance. A criterion on graduation rate performance does control for student preparation and institutional resources, but it receives just 5 percent of the total score.

Public purpose is the defining characteristic of all public universities, but what does it entail? A review of the external demands on state universities reveals a long and daunting list. They must become more accessible to economically and educationally disadvantaged students and enroll a racially diverse student body without setting targets. Their tuition must remain affordable despite declines in state support and inadequate need-based financial aid. They should graduate the great majority of their students — most of them in four years — and demonstrate their growth in knowledge and skills from entry to exit. Public universities should actively assist the reform of public schools and produce graduates in critical fields who are prepared mentally and ethically for work and citizenship. Their research and public service should spur the economic growth and civic development of their states and communities.

The answer to the current conflict is not to abandon either peer prestige or public purpose but to broaden the first to cover the public mandate of state universities and to narrow the second to public needs, not wants. State universities should stop competing with private universities on student selectivity. Private universities can become as selective as their markets allow. The mandate of accessibility denies that choice to public universities. State universities should admit a range of undergraduates that past experience shows can succeed on their campuses. Provider-driven institutions will use all of the admission spots to raise their SAT or ACT scores, but public research universities should use some of those places to correct poor preparation that stems from economic disadvantage. Our nation has a growing gap between the prosperous and poor. Great public universities should close rather than reinforce that undemocratic divide. Is the price of a few points on entrance scores at public universities worth the social cost to American society? Can public research universities remain relevant while leaving the issue of equality and accessibility to community colleges and regional universities? Public research universities should also expand the criteria of prestige by assessing the value added of the knowledge and skills acquired by graduates and the impact of research and service on states and society. Surely, greatness for universities should depend more on what they produce than on what they receive.

All great universities must have a global reach, but public research universities, such as Berkeley, Michigan, and Virginia should also address state and regional problems. They must act locally as well as reach globally. Distance enhances peer prestige, but public purpose requires regional impact.

The time has come for state universities to break the hold of private universities on the hallmark of prestige. Something is radically wrong with college ratings — such as *U.S. News* — that rank 20 private schools before getting to Berkeley. The answer is not for Berkeley to become more like Harvard, but to be an even better Berkeley in fulfilling its public purpose. State university leaders publicly complain about the criteria of the rankings, but privately submit to its measures to raise their ratings.

The National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges should appoint a Commission

to develop criteria that reflect both academic quality and public purpose. Its membership should include business, civic, public school, and government leaders, as well as those from higher education. The areas for assessment should adopt those used by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education in its biennial report, *Measuring UP*. That Report grades higher education in each state by measures in the categories of preparation, participation, affordability, completion, benefits, and learning. The national Commission should develop appropriate measures with trends over time in each of these categories for public research universities. Other groups should propose similar indicators for comprehensive universities and community colleges.

The category of preparation might include a measure on the percent of first year students with rigorous college preparatory courses in high school. Such a measure would stimulate school reform rather than stress student selectivity. Another indicator could include the number and quality of teachers graduated, especially in critical fields, such as science, math, and English as a second language. Participation should include the percent of college age students in the state enrolled by race, gender, and income. Trends in transfers from community colleges could check on their transition to baccalaureate degrees at the best public universities. Affordability might include a measure showing tuition and fees, minus financial aid, as a percent of state median family income. Completion should compare actual with predicted graduation rates based on student preparation and aptitude. Benefits might cover degrees granted in critical fields, as well the usual sponsored research and faculty publications. Student learning represents a challenging area. As a start, it might include evidence from surveys such as the National Survey on Student Engagement and alumni surveys that probe the value added in student learning. The categories proposed above are critical; the measures, merely examples.

The soul of state universities is surely worth saving. The current conflict pits peer prestige against public purpose. The time has come to design a new rating system for public research universities. That rating should rely less on what they receive in resources and more on their results in creating assessable universities as great in undergraduate education and public engagement as they are in faculty research. Saving the soul of public universities means raising their prestige to a higher standard—one that includes their public purpose.

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