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On university competition

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ABSTRACT

Universities are specific local entities, and as such are in competition with one another for resources and prestige. The general tone of the literature—which sees universities mainly as specific organizations—is quite negative, with competition leading to destructive market and political forces. The tone is surprising, given the extraordinary worldwide university expansion over the last seven or eight decades. This inconsistency is resolved with the perspective of neo-institutional theory: the university is a stunningly successful global institution from which specific cases derive their accredited standing and legitimacy. The enlarged and grand institutional canopy has supported thousands of expanded and rationalized organizations, which then suffer from competition. But in their struggles, the contending organizations produce further elaborations of the domain of the overall institution. The university grows, though the instances it flowers may sometimes suffer.

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Universities are at once local academic organizations and instances of a transcendent global institution that is rooted in quasi-religious claims asserting the existence of Truth and the ability of humans to discern it (Frank and Meyer 2023; Musselin 2021; Stichweh 2023). Any given professors or degree programs are local realities but also derive legitimated claims *sub specie aeternitatis* (Meyer et al. 2007). The university's wider meaning is assumed by the people involved and embedded in the culture and organizations of world society. Instances are reported globally and counted by UNESCO and other authoritative bodies. And this has a great impact on the rise, expansion, and character of local manifestations. Particular university organizations would make little sense without the overarching legitimating cultural frame.

Over the centuries and especially in recent decades, both aspects of the university have expanded dramatically.¹ On one side, local university organizations have spread by the thousands across economic, political, and sociocultural boundaries into local settings. They employ hundreds of thousands of professors to teach hundreds of millions of students. And they analyze the universalistic bases of innumerable general and local phenomena. The depth of saturation is staggering. University organizations together with their associated activities can now be found everywhere on Earth, and in select locations beyond (Frank and Meyer 2020).²

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Similarly, the institutionalized meaning and authority of the university have acquired aggrandized standing in wider society. They sit astride two religious-like cultural premises, concerning the comprehensibility of the universe and the comprehending capacities of humans within it. The scopes of both have broadened greatly over the contemporary era, leaving few corners of cultural space impervious to academic research and few humans unfit for university education. Even amidst contemporary contestations, the university is conceived to be relevant to everything and everyone; to nurture economic, political, and sociocultural progress; and to provide the root infrastructure for the success of both individual and collective actors (Baker 2014; Frank and Meyer 2020).

Expansions on both sides feed off each other reciprocally. Each real-world university organization, through its existence and functioning, modestly reinforces the transcendent institution. A new professor studying some new topic extends the great cultural canopy of knowledge, broadening the institution's universalizing and rationalizing framework and adding to its meaning. Institutional reinforcement, in turn, adds impetus to the rise of yet more local university organizations. The omniety of the university institution legitimates the reproduction of organizational arrangements found elsewhere, even in distant communities (Hannan and Freeman 1977; Lee and Strang 2006). For example, Germany and Bulgaria are different, sometimes hostile, countries, but as both occur under the authority of universal knowledge, it makes sense for universities in the latter to copy established organizations in the former (Pundeff 1968; Strang and Meyer 1993).

We here explore the dynamics of the institution-organization relationship. On one side, we expect institutional enlargement to expand the number and rationalization of local organizations. This intensifies inter-university competition (mitigated by boundary expansions and resource partitioning). On the other side, we expect organizational expansions in numbers and rationalization to enhance the university's legitimation in the wider environment, enriching resource supplies and spurring accreditation processes. Our primary contribution is to yoke these two sides together, building on the insights of sociological neo-institutionalism and world-society theory, which envision local organizations and their elaboration as derivative of wider cultural and institutional frameworks (Jepperson and Meyer 2021). Local organizations are in good part constructed by wider institutions: the university is an extreme case, resting on cultural postures and pretensions far beyond the ordinary.

Competition

Among concrete university organizations, an obvious implication of expansion is a rise in resource competition. More organizations mean more occasions on which a given university must vie with others for a range of resources: the best professors and students, donors with the deepest pockets, favor from the state, the highest rankings, and so on (Bloch, Mitterle, and Seidenschneur 2024). In the short term, there are some zero-sum qualities to such competitions, with clear winners and losers.

Several conditions exacerbate the pressure. It rises first amidst broader cultural celebrations of competition, evident, for example, in the theories of Smith and Darwin and preeminent, for example, in the ideology of neo-liberalism. Nursed by a myth of universal progress, an 'ethos of competitiveness' now permeates global social life (Amable 2011, 3; Strang and Meyer 1993). Second, resource competition intensifies under globalized and decentralized market conditions, in which universities stand disconnected from the kinds of bureaucratic controls that limit inter-organizational competition with categorical demarcation (Altbach 2012; Meyer, Drori, and Hwang 2006).³ A global Ministry of Education would likely bring order and limits to the chaos we observe. Third, resource competition heats up as universities are infused with rationality and purpose—actorhood and decision-making (Hasse and Krücken 2013; Krücken and Meier 2006; Lee and Ramirez 2023). Universities today are goal-oriented organizations—a far cry from Flexner's 'administrative aggregations' (Flexner 1930, 179). They are assembled around the often-implausible conceits that they

can orchestrate their impacts on the world and compete with one another for advantage. Thus, strategic plans, mission statements, and brand management are now common (e.g. Cortés-Sánchez 2018; Drori, Delmestri, and Oberg 2013; Kosmützky 2016). A university with a mission statement may name its struggles ‘competition.’ In contrast, a university simply trying to be the local University of Someplace may face similar struggles without ever invoking competition.

A first-order consequence of competition among university organizations is thus a battle for resources: the pie is divided and pieces taken. But there is more to the story. Beyond the division of resources, inter-organizational competition generates two second-order responses that moderate the first. One is boundary expansion. Amidst competition, each university organization has incentives to find bells and whistles that distinguish itself from others. One might establish programs that cater to particular student interests (e.g. horseback riding) or subgroups (deaf students); build exceptional teaching and research facilities (laboratories, libraries); offer personal resources for faculty (childcare, housing); create unique facilities appealing to donors or funders (stadia, research centers); or feature distinctive locales (natural, urban).

Even organizations of limited means can cultivate distinctions (e.g. Meyer 2009). Such specializing claims extend the institutional domain, encompassing more kinds of people, subjects, activities, locations, etc., and offering new entrants (e.g. one-time business colleges) a foothold on the ladder toward university status. The resource pie expands accordingly. An ‘Old Guard’ may fend off change. But given extraordinary recent growth and the limited ability of state authorities to block global processes, the perhaps heretical expansion of the whole institution has been common.

Alongside boundary expansion, competition also spurs the rise of categorical distinctions that suppress university rivalries through resource partitioning (Carroll, Dobrev, and Swaminathan 2002). In centralized contexts, partitions derive from the state. But in organizationally decentralized contexts, such as the United States or current world society, formal distinctions are made not only by states (e.g. the California plan) but also by authoritative non-state bodies (e.g. UNESCO, the Carnegie Foundation, *U.S. News and World Report*).⁴ They abound informally: universities can be grouped by location, type (liberal arts, polytechnic), religious affiliation, focus on teaching or research, or support for distinctive categories of students (e.g. first-generation). Each category of university organizations is partially bounded from competition with others. They try to have and to develop their own resource pies.

Overall, both institutional expansion and the competition that results generate not only a greatly increased number of local organizations, but also the increased organizational rationalization and complexity of each one. The university as an organized actor has hugely expanded structures of administration across many different functions (Krücken and Meier 2006; Lee and Ramirez 2023; Ramirez 2020).

The cycle summarized above is understood to be the essence of university competition. It engenders starkly bifurcated normative responses. On the one hand, supporters celebrate its virtues—facilitating progress, fostering innovation, spurring adaptation, and mobilizing latent energies (e.g. Agasisti et al. 2020; Lehmann and Stockinger 2019). On the other hand, critics denigrate its vices—lowering standards, pandering to fashion, and sacrificing core academic values to administrative functions (e.g. Edwards and Roy 2017; Espeland and Sauder 2016; Münch 2014). Such oppositions have developed dramatically in the higher education arena amidst expansion and intensifying competition.

The literature tends to stop at this point, divided into normative judgments and fixed in the realist world of specific university organizations. Perhaps the fact that the higher education literature is produced by and mostly for participants in particular local organizations accounts for this narrow focus and inattention to the wider global institutional canopy. However as indicated above, the university’s organizational and institutional dimensions are inextricably bound. Expansion in scale and complexity on the concrete-organizational side spirals together with expansion on the transcendent-institutional side, and the latter fosters processes associated with legitimation and accreditation far beyond competition.

Legitimation and accreditation

At the institutional level, the university's steady rise and recent surge involve a deepening of its religious-like premises and much-elevated standing in society. There is stunning growth over time in the perceived comprehensibility of the universe—illustrated, for example, by the historical annexation of cultural space associated with the natural sciences, then social sciences, then socio-sciences (e.g. engineering and agriculture) (Frank and Gabler 2006; Frank and Meyer 2020). Likewise, there is enormous growth in the comprehension capacities attributed to human beings—witnessed, most dramatically, by massification, and by the addition of research (discovery) to the university's teaching mission (dissemination) (Clark 2005).⁵ The university's legitimacy—its social significance and accepted justification for being—grows in kind, fueling a vast enrichment of available resources, elevating opportunities for specific instances to prosper, and sustaining much expansive organizational elaboration.

This means that broad cultural processes, bolstering epic but vague notions of truth and understanding, enhance the meaning and purpose of the university, even as competitive organizational pressures do the same. Together, they ratchet up the university's legitimacy in expanding social and taken-for-granted supra-social realities.⁶

The same processes leave open, however, practical questions of definition, including everyday accounting rules establishing what counts as a university and by what standards. The claims of the worldwide institution are highly legitimated, after all, but they provide little hands-on guidance.

This open space summons the influx of rules of accreditation, defined broadly to include recognition by a range of organizations and discourses. Accreditation is central to the definition of any specific entity as a proper instance of the ineffable institution of the university, bridging the existential divide separating the institutionally sublime from mundane local claimants.

Benchmarks articulated by official state-sanctioned accreditors, such as Thailand's Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment, are vital in this regard. They tend toward narrow foci on matters of teaching quality (e.g. percentage of graduates who can pass a language proficiency exam), research quality (e.g. percentage of faculty who publish in 'international' journals), and organizational viability (e.g. enough money to cover expenses for the year).

Unofficial accreditors swing more widely. For instance, one report posits six essential assets for a world-class university: academic, intellectual, physical, etc. It deems classrooms and laboratories as essential physical assets, and swimming pools and central air conditioning as desirable (Aithal and Aithal 2019).

Practically every resource on which a university depends is heavily contingent on the acknowledgement by influential sources that the entity in question is a proper instance of the institution. To aspiring university claimants, accreditation rules establish a legitimating order—facilitating organizational foundings with recipe-like ingredients, measurements, and instructions. They are, in this sense, resources unto themselves, and unlike many other resources, accreditation standards are little competitive and largely exempt from zero-sum distributions. They are gained by striving for recognized excellence rather than beating out others. One university's accreditation does not ordinarily jeopardize any other's (Simmel 2008), though reputation and rank have more threatening dimensions.

To existing universities, accreditation standards offer qualifications and certifications, important as such, and also as gateways to other resources—financial, reputational, and human. They thus enable competition by designating, or accrediting, the eligible competitors: a university cannot enter a university competition unless it is indeed a 'university' (Krücken 2021). Accreditation standards are thereby pivotal to building and sustaining particular entities, offering directions on how to make a new university or fortify an old one.

Thus, it is essential for organizations to be recognized and named on lists of universities: (1) official accrediting agencies (e.g. Universität Bielefeld is recognized by the Ministerium für Kultur und Wissenschaft des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen); (2) nongovernmental organizations (e.g. the

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile is a member of the International Association of Universities); (3) rankings agencies (e.g. Seoul National University topped Reuters's (2019) ranking of Asia Pacific's Most Innovative Universities); and (4) funding bodies (e.g. the U.S. Congress's debate over for-profit colleges). Such lists represent forms of membership (e.g. Hester and Eglin 1997), branding organizations as bona fide cases of the institution. Thus, the more lists on which a given university organization appears should predict its likelihood of survival and success.

The value of being counted as a university is substantial for mainstream organizations, but it may be even greater for marginal ones. The difference between a high spot and a not-so-high spot is not nearly as significant as the difference between a low spot and no spot. 'Simply participating in a highly competitive race is a mark of seriousness and prestige for a university' (Yudkevich, Altbach, and Rumbley 2015, 4145).⁷

Beyond its role in establishing accreditation-based resource-distribution channels, the growing legitimization of the institution also lays direct claim to enriched resource flows from wider society. Expanded legitimacy, after all, means enhanced being and purpose. And all sorts of resource claims arise as the institution grew historically to encompass not only theology but also biology and sociology, to welcome not only men but also women and nonbinary people, to prepare graduates to work not only in law but also engineering and social work, to cultivate understandings of not only the galaxy but also the human mind.

Consider Stanford University's Vision Themes, such as 'Sustaining Life on Earth' and 'Accelerating Solutions for Humanity.' Or the University of Waterloo's plan to 'develop talent for a complex future.'⁸ Other universities make similar gambols, with equal gusto and hyperbole. And they use them to justify stupendous demands for budget and personnel.

Institutional legitimization enlarges the available resource pie. Each dramatic claim about what the university is and does extend bases for internal organizational expansion and external support. Thus, space exploration opens boundless horizons into which universities can fly—astrobiology and even astrosociology, for instance—with all manner of faculty lines, degree programs, course offerings, research institutes, and so on, each of which, in turn, may instigate resource competitions.

Conclusions: empirical implications and illustrations

Perspectives that consider the university's organizational units as independent from their institutional context are commonplace in a predominantly case-study literature, but they tell only one side of the story. They understand the point that expansion entails increasing competition, but they miss the accompanying points that expansion also entails increasing legitimization and accreditation (cf. Hannan and Freeman 1977). Our perspective highlights both processes simultaneously. As the university changes, so does its relationship to wider society, and so does society itself. Expansion in the university sector thus involves both organizational and cultural-institutional changes, which together generate not only more competitors but also more contests, higher stakes, richer prizes, and more clearly articulated benchmarks of eligibility and rules of play. A central consequence has been the much-discussed greatly elaborated and rationalized organizational structures (Ramirez 2020).

Beyond the common push of expansion, there is further interplay between the two sides. More competition leads to more legitimization, for example through boundary expansion, which establishes new purposes for the university and new arenas in which universities compete. More legitimization leads to more competition, for example through accreditation, as the latter sets standards defining what a university is and therefore which entities may compete. The interplay sets in motion an organizational-institutional spiral.

Our perspective has a range of empirical implications. First, the resource pie grows even as the slices are distributed. In the rankings game, for example, an initial distribution of world-class-university claimant positions is associated with the subsequent proliferation of such positions. Thus, the number of world-class universities doubled in the Shanghai/Academic Ranking of World Universities

(from 500 in 2003 to 1000 in 2018) and rose by more than a factor of eight in both the QS and Times Higher Education World University Rankings (from 200 to 1500). As with Jesus' Miracle of the Fish and Loaves, filling slots does not deplete the number available—quite the contrary.⁹ By the same token, in the German Excellence Initiative, the distribution of money in round 1 (€1.9bn) is associated with the expansion of the overall budget in round 2 (to €2.7bn).¹⁰ The same global conditions that define higher education as critical to progress, and thus fuel much worldwide competition, also expand available resources. But as we discuss above, the competition itself intensifies this process, creating possibilities for further expansion, analogous to a bubble or craze.

Second, the organizational-institutional spiral implies that it is unlikely over time for competitive processes to yield winner-take-all results, given that competition occurs hand in hand with—and even promotes—institutional legitimation and organizational accreditation. Accreditation establishes standardizing rubrics that make it easier for university organizations (and their subunits) to persist and also to collaborate, conjoin, and combine—with winner-winner results. Some of these take the form of direct organizational mergers. For example in France, Sorbonne Université was born in 2018 by the merger of Université Paris-Sorbonne and Université Pierre et Marie Curie.¹¹ Others take the form of partnerships and consortia, such as the Worldwide University Network, founded in 2000 to strengthen its research-intensive members across six continents (see <https://wun.ac.uk/about/>). Still, others take the form of collaborative projects, helping produce the well-known dramatic expansion in research co-authorships and cross-national teaching ventures (cf. Kosmützky and Krücken 2023).

The construction of a global field of competition facilitates the expansion and rationalization of particular universities, so that it is possible to have a hundred thousand students.¹² It facilitates the creation of new universities and the organizational complexity of extant ones. And it facilitates collaboration—between countries, universities, programs, and researchers. Students, too, flow more easily through the whole system.

Much organizational change follows from the successful great institution of the university. Specific cases are often lionized as playing causal roles, but they are better seen as organizational fleas on the back of the institutional elephant.

Were this institution to weaken in a global society—a clear possibility in a potentially post-liberal world—a much expanded organizational structure would weaken, too, along with competition. The contemporary anxieties about competition are mainly indicators of the university's expansion and cultural centrality. A world in which universities were starving would not be one full of struggles for world-class status.

Notes

1. Growth may be slowing now. The 9/11 attacks in 2001 and the financial meltdown in 2007 and 2008 punctured the liberal balloon that lifted higher education after World War II and popped the neoliberal bubble that skyrocketed higher education after the Cold War. The present is variously characterized as a period of contestation (Börzel and Zürn 2021) or post-liberalism (Jepperson and Meyer 2021), and its implications for higher education are generally seen as negative (e.g., Schofer, Lerch, and Meyer 2022; Lerch, Frank, and Schofer 2024).
2. As of 2024, all twelve people who have walked on the moon have had bachelor's degrees (seven from universities, five from military academies). Seven also have master's and/or doctoral degrees. Educational certification, it seems, is mandatory for access to the heavens.
3. While states often limit inter-organizational competition, they sometimes – perhaps increasingly – sponsor competitions, as in the German Excellence Initiative. Certainly, states compete for university excellence (e.g., Kehm 2012; Kosmützky and Krücken 2023).
4. When the *U.S. News and World Report* ranking began in 1983, it consisted of just one list of 57 national universities. Two years later, it introduced a second list, of national liberal arts colleges. Later, it added rankings of graduate schools, regional universities, and regional colleges. In 2014, it introduced a global ranking. Today, *U.S. News* publishes dozens of university rankings: of service learning, study abroad, ethnic diversity, least debt, most international students, and so on. Needless to say, the *U.S. News* retains an air of sobriety. One must look elsewhere (though not far) to find the top universities to party, smoke weed, have sex, or go surfing.

5. A comparison of “university” definitions over time suggests key changes.

Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* 1768:

A school, where all the arts and faculties are taught and studied.

Webster’s *Revised Unabridged Dictionary* 1899:

An institution organized and incorporated for the purpose of imparting instruction, examining students, and otherwise promoting education in the higher branches of literature, science, art, etc., empowered to confer degrees in the several arts and faculties ...

Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary online 2024:

An institution of higher learning providing facilities for teaching and research and authorized to grant academic degrees; *specifically*: one ... which may confer master’s degrees and doctorates.

6. The purposes of the university include a huge variety of individual and collective outcomes: e.g., jobs, earnings, health, democracy, human rights, and environmental protection (McMahon 2009; Schofer, Ramirez, and Meyer 2021).
7. For example, the Islamic World Science & Technology Monitoring and Citation Institute stressed that ten Iranian universities appeared in the 2023 Academic Ranking of the World’s Universities, up from one in 2009. Furthermore,

University of Tehran ranked in the range of 401–500 among the top 500 universities in the world and took the first place among Iranian universities (see <https://isc.ac/en/news/2093/shanghai-s-2023-academic-ranking-of-world-universities-published>, last accessed July 2024).

Likewise in the U.S., Brown University makes little of its high global ranking, whereas nearby Bryant proclaims it is “6th in the Northeast” (see <https://news.bryant.edu/bryant-climbs-us-news-rankings-6th-northeast-named-top-college-outcomes>, last accessed July 2024).

8. See <https://ourvision.stanford.edu> and <https://uwaterloo.ca/strategic-plan/>, last accessed July 2024.
9. With God’s blessing, Jesus fed a multitude of 5,000 with five loaves and two fishes. Distribution brought not depletion but the enrichment of supplies.
10. In the German case, even universities that lose out in the excellence competitions accrue more funding over time (Mergele and Winkelmayer 2022).
11. The process is now so routine that an entire Wikipedia page lists “Universities and colleges formed by merger in France.” See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Universities_and_colleges_formed_by_merger_in_France, last accessed July 2024.
12. Presently, Wikipedia lists 75 universities with 100,000 or more students (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_largest_universities_and_university_networks_by_enrollment, last accessed July 2024). By contrast in 1895, the world’s largest universities had about 10,000 students, according to the *Minerva Jahrbuch*.

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