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### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0tp9x6cf>

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### Publication Date

2005-08-01

Research & Occasional Paper Series: CSHE.10.05



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY  
<http://cshe.berkeley.edu/>

## **SUPERSTARS AND ROOKIES OF THE YEAR: FACULTY HIRING PRACTICES IN THE POSTMODERN AGE<sup>1</sup>**

**August 2005**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Hiring new colleagues is a matter that engages individual faculty members intensely, for peer control of admission to the professoriate has been a highly successful source of academic quality in American higher education. "Super Stars and Rookies of the Year" analyzes the fixation on research acclaim as a negative version of academic hiring practices which has become embedded within the academic psyche. This fixation tends to be aroused by the rituals of recruitment and retention that take place on all campuses. But when recruitment becomes an exercise in what some economists have called "the-winner-take-all" mentality of our culture, departments, and programs can become unhealthy environments. When faculty and administrations insist on the extremely volatile criteria of early promise or current fame in choosing new colleagues, their efforts to build a community of scholars can become an exercise in professional pathology. When they neglect excellent current members of their departments to recruit outsiders at higher pay and richer benefits, they risk alienating their own excellent faculties. The antidote is a wise consideration of the total identity and mission of institutional departments in all recruitment efforts.

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Twenty years ago, when I first started thinking about the competitive games we play in recruiting faculty in higher education, I was struck by a television half-time spot in the University of Alabama's football game when the president of the university appeared balancing a football in one hand and a book in the other. Peering into the camera at the supporters of the Crimson Tide, he solemnly assured them that soon the book would rise as high as the football in Alabama's national rankings. I have not followed the University of Alabama's academic standing closely since then, but my general impression is that the book is still fighting with the football (and balls of other shapes and athletic uses) for parity in Tuscaloosa. What was significant to me then, and continues to be today, is the fact that the analogy between sports and academic success has absorbed the imaginations of presidents, provosts, deans, and chairs in imagining the nature of their

efforts to hire and support their faculty—and, on occasion, to conduct raids on other institutions in order to maintain a winning team in research and scholarship. More significantly, the language of sports competition has infiltrated the minds of faculty as well—many of whom may ask themselves after they've signed on, "Will I make the cut?"; "Did I make the A team?"; "Should I declare myself a free agent?"

In my earlier observations on the phenomenon, I had some fun with the language of sports, especially in terms of the seasons of competition for faculty in the academy and trophies in the outside world. There is usually a concentration on college athletics during March Madness; all kinds of schools can compete in basketball, whereas the competition for participation in post-season football contests have been limited both by the resource demands of a football program and by the big-school orientation of the Bowl Championship Series. Perhaps the excitement on campus when our team wins causes us academics to turn to the contests in our own domain with minds steeped in sporting metaphors.

If spring is the time for March madness, it is also the time for recruiting faculty. The rookies tend to be recruited during mid-winter; their wooing is keyed to the schedules of disciplinary meetings where job seekers congregate for interviews. The competition for them extends into spring, however, with acceptance deadlines set by most schools for mid March. Given the degradation of the academic job market in most basic disciplines, it is a wonder that there is so much fuss and bother about hiring a few assistant professors, but the intensity is high because the chances to hire are so rare. Graduate departments are always on edge as well, wondering whether their star students will land positions and thus uphold their reputations. And departmental standing in schools without graduate programs can be burnished by hiring a bright new candidate who would not have considered joining such a lesser league in earlier times. But spring is also time for recruiting full superstars—a far more wary and complicated process. Although there may have been nods and becks and wreathed smiles throughout the year, the deadline for a professor's telling a home institution about resignation is May 15, and so spring may be full of news about offers and counter offers. Both the winning and the losing departments wait with excitement.

Around the time of March Madness, it is also time in the academy for handing out trophies for achievements of the intellect. The earlier announcements of the Nobel Prizes were like the Winter Olympics—with a gradual loss of our interest as it became apparent that Team USA had not taken away most of the gold. Administrators in every school of the nation await the annual lists in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* to see what the home team players have won in the national research competitions staged by NSF, NEH, Guggenheim, ACLS, and MacArthur. Some schools even covet the "Teacher of the Year Award" sponsored by the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education.

If the results in such prestigious leagues are not satisfactory, there are consolation prizes. There are, for example, the various rankings of departments or programs (most of them either highly impressionistic or dated), the quotient of Rhodes Scholars or Marshall Scholarship winners among undergraduates, the rise of entering SAT or ACT student scores, or even the "best" lists that used to be the sole province of *US News & World Report* but have now spread in various guises to other publications. Canada's *MacLean's* has always ranked Canadian universities, and *Business Week* has ranked MBA programs, but such media outlets as *USA Today*, *The Princeton Review*,

*Kiplinger's*, and *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* are in the game as well. Campuses have to wait for mid-summer or fall for these to come out, but they can be savored throughout the year. And then there are other, smaller awards to celebrate. The current web page of the University of Alabama celebrates students who "claimed five of the 84 spots on this year's *USA Today* All-USA College Academic Team, the most of any school in the nation."<sup>2</sup>

The prevalence of the language of sporting competition in our talk about success in the academy could be seen as a harmless verbal game if it were not so imbued in real institutional impulses, often either unexamined or shrugged off as inevitable in today's market for talent. But just as the phenomenon of championship, record-breaking competition has gone bad in sports, it threatens the academy as well.

In this chapter, I want to define this threat in terms of my uneasiness about the academy's adherence to what has been called "the winner-take-all-society," for the economic and social damages of that paradigm of competition can be reflected in faculty careers as well as those of sports stars, business aces, and operatic divas. I also want to look at how such a system works against the recruitment of new faculty who will be able and willing to work for the overall good of their schools. Further, it is important to assess negative results among continuing faculty from the system as well. When schools depend upon achieving a national identity by luring superstars to their staffs, the results can be demoralization among long-term professors, erosion of loyalty, failure to collect on institutional experience, and, sometimes, really bad bargains. Most important, there is intrinsic damage done to institutions when the superstar syndrome becomes a mindset that overrides other values. Most critics decry the neglect of teaching and service in schools that stake their bets on "winning" through pursuit of research alone. My analysis suggests that when the academy believes that there are only a few stars, a few discoveries, and a zero sum game in wisdom and mastery of knowledge, the greatest damage is done to research itself.

i.

Ten years ago, two professorial economists, Robert H. Frank and Philip J. Cook, wrote an important book that described a growing trend in labor and wealth distribution that they labeled the "winner-take-all market." That market is best defined by a phenomenon that they called "reward by relative performance," a system unlike the classic one studied by most economists because it does not reward "absolute" performance itself, but rather performance in the context of comparisons with that of other workers.<sup>3</sup> Their book, *The Winner-Take-All Society: Why the Few at the Top Get So Much more Than the Rest of Us*, is slightly out of date now, but it has remained in print since 1995 because it has seemed ever more prophetic and relevant in the days of Tyco, Enron, unimaginable CEO pay, and baseball-on-steroids. Although in traditional economist fashion, Frank and Cook seek to find some benefits in the new market they describe, they inevitably concentrate on the negatives:

Winner-take-all markets have increased the disparity between rich and poor. They have lured some of our most talented citizens into socially unproductive, sometimes even destructive, tasks. In an economy that already invests too little for the future, they have fostered wasteful patterns of investment and consumption. They have led indirectly to greater concentration of our most

talented college students in a small set of elite institutions. They have made it more difficult for “late bloomers” to find a productive niche in life. And winner-take-all markets have molded our culture and discourse in ways many of us find deeply troubling.<sup>4</sup>

The market phenomenon that Frank and Cook describe inheres within the academy in a number of ways.

For one thing, the book’s chapter called “The Battle for Educational Prestige” details the effects of such a market mentality on students—their competition for narrowing opportunities for social and academic networks of elite schools that can promise excellent jobs and professional school access. Frank and Cook describe the familiar patterns that have led ambitious students around the country not only to pay Stanley Kaplan a lot of money but also to immerse themselves in sports and extra-curricular service activities that might look good to college admissions officers.

More significantly, with the narrowing of “winning” schools, the distribution of academic talent becomes skewed, to the detriment of the founding notion of American higher education as an instrument for spreading opportunity in many places. Frank and Cook comment: “Education’s growing role as gatekeeper has given rise to increasingly intense competition for admission into the nation’s leading colleges and universities. Whereas it was once common for the brightest high school students to attend state universities close to home, increasingly they matriculate at a small handful of the most selective private institutions of higher learning.”<sup>5</sup>

Frank and Cook are economists, and accordingly they look for the money, viewing student competition for elite schools as leading to higher tuitions everywhere. They argue that to keep in the race, universities must hire the research faculty who maintain the institutional prestige that filters down into the rankings that students watch so closely. I believe they are mistaken in linking tuition hikes with the competition for name faculty. Students have only vague notions about where a school’s reputation comes from, and high tuition rates are not necessarily fueled by faculty salaries, as research by the National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education has shown.<sup>6</sup> Faculty salaries have, in fact, remained relatively low in the aggregate, compared with salaries in other professions.<sup>7</sup> Rather, rises in tuition rates are caused by a number of other factors: loss of state and federal support, cost of tuition subsidies, technological upgrading, and sharp increases in managerial expenditures to meet increased bureaucratic demands. As the National Commission reported in 1998, faculty productivity may have increased rather than decreased in the current market: after all, a steep salary for a superstar can be accommodated under an all-too-prevalent formula for replacing permanent with temporary professors: universities can implement an equation that pays for a super salary by cashing in two or three lower-rank positions for one big hire. Such a budgetary move might even free up monies for part-timers to do the teaching. Once students have landed in a prestigious school, they will not actually know the difference.

Nevertheless, the competitive market in higher education may have some effect on tuition. The National Commission Report only suggests that possibility as one among others: “The simple truth is that no single factor can be identified to explain how and why college costs rise. The Commission suspects that part of the underlying dynamic is the search for academic prestige and the academic reward systems governing higher education. This institutional emphasis on academic status is reinforced by a system of

regional and specialized accreditation that often encourages increased expenditures by practically every institution.”<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that the Commission on College Costs emphasized that “practically every institution” is involved in the prestige game; thus students pay in smaller schools as well as research universities. And so when we think about the faculty winner-take-all market, we should extrapolate from the situation at elite research universities to the smaller schools that have entered that market through the irresistible temptation to imitate.

Putting the National Commission’s tentative conclusion in context, we may note that although super salaries can be derived from research grant overheads and philanthropic monies, the competition for such outside funding can generate high costs as well as high payoffs for institutions. Thus, although research funding may not draw from tuition dollars, it still has an impact on undergraduate students. For one thing, the search for outside funding has generated a large administrative substructure that has become ever more costly. For another, the intense competition for research dollars preoccupies not only administrators but faculty themselves. One of the criteria for a university’s entrance into the sacred ranks of the AAU (American Association of Universities) is, after all, the amount of research funding it generates. Thus everything must stop to meet an NSF deadline. And at the student level, letters of recommendation must give way to grant writing; managing a research team is more important than conducting a seminar; major researchers hired in the research market may never teach the classes undergraduates take. Therefore, no matter where funding for research comes from, students also pay a price.

An additional feature of this competitiveness is that some state schools engage in competition with privates for superior students by mounting honors colleges and programs to tempt them to stay at home. But even within that student-centered motive there lurks an element of the faculty competition; as schools promise honors students access to star professors, they also promise superstars the prospect of teaching only the most gifted students on the campus. When one of these elaborate super student efforts—complete with special dorms, special courses with special teachers, special lecture series, textbook grants, and a junior year abroad—was suggested for my own state university some years ago, members of the Board were appalled that faculty members resisted. One of them said to me, “Don’t you see, Mary? We just want to recruit good students with the same deal we provide for the football and basketball team.” I told him that I thought the student athletes should be treated like the other students, and so should the honors students—some special programs, yes, but not whole enclaves for them, isolated from the rest of the campus.

In recruiting students, institutions should admire the energy and idealism of youth, but they should also be aware that the result of their participation in the admissions competition may lead less to inner satisfaction than a spring season of tense waiting for bids. And the dismal result of their striving is that even though most good students will get into good schools, many of them will feel like failures when the one they really wanted turns them down.

In the end, however, the most significant feature of tuition increases in the context of faculty bidding wars is the impression they leave. That impression holds that the academy’s fascination with superstars drives up tuition by bringing in overpaid faculty who never teach. No matter how faulty in detail, the scenario is not only widely accepted

(in state and federal legislatures, for example), but it continues to undermine the reputation of higher education in general.

Leaving behind the question of the winner-take-all market on students, however, it is important to analyze the workings of such a market for faculty. I believe that the market for faculty is driven by the same kinds of forces that Frank and Cook talk about when they discuss competition in “the cultural arena.” This arena—the aspect of national life that is most affected by media exposure—has given rise to many intensely competitive and wasteful markets. There are several reasons. For one thing, the focus on singular talent in the cultural markets—music, film, publication, TV, and now higher education—has always been present, but the possession of such talents has been accentuated in our time by the easy accessibility to them through the media and other instruments of mass reproduction. The wide distribution of the performance of a great talent tends to make it seem unique and so to drive out also-ran performances; Frank and Cook note that the differences between first and second in this kind of market may be extremely slight, but they mean fame for the winner and obscurity for the loser: “One characteristic of such competitive markets is that they translate small differences in performance into large differences in economic reward.”<sup>9</sup> In turn, the rewards for extraordinary performance become more alluring when they are magnified by the acclaim of a media that is ever more insistent on finding success stories. Whereas in other days, for example, a good musician could make a career performing in good orchestras for the enjoyment of live audiences within a limited geographical reach, now spectacular players can be reproduced everywhere in the world. The result is that there is not enough work to let the merely good players support themselves in musical careers. In higher education, there has been a similar effect from a crowded job market. But because students need individual assistance in basic courses, teachers are not totally replaceable by recordings or discs; the result has been the rise in the ranks of non-tenure track faculty.

The limiting effects of mass reproduction on “good” work and the riches it brings to “outstanding” work is further intensified because of each individual’s tendency to compete no matter how narrow the market has become. Everyone wants to be a winner, and research shows that most people think of themselves as either above the ordinary or capable of beating the odds. That is why the competitions of so many “reality” TV shows so nearly approximate the excitement and pathos of the academic labor market—and in so many ways. After a period of arduous testing, the final decision will be arbitrary. I remember one graduate student confidently telling me that he had taken a non-tenure track appointment with the expectation that “I’ll write my way out of it” and into a permanent position. The multiplication of contestants in a winner-take-all market does not expand opportunity, however, but may instead intensify the “take-all” effect.

One important question for higher education is how contestants for academic jobs should have found themselves in such a market at all. One answer may very well be that *all* markets these days are winner-take-all markets. Another is that the both the reach of higher education and the number of its past, present, and potentially future members are far greater than they have ever been.

Be that as it may, the academic job market has become susceptible to the effects of the excited public exposure that marks cultural worlds like show business. There have been famous academics in the past, but since the sixties, they have tended to be idolized in more public venues than scholarly journals and highbrow publications. *The New York*

*Review of Books*, founded in 1963, became a new kind of media vehicle for academic criticism, for example. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* began as a relatively staid journal for administrators in 1966, but its success was exponential, and it also became a major publication that circulated news of the styles and fads in various disciplines and institutions. In the mid eighties, *Lingua Franca*, a somewhat more gossipy publication, became a kind of fanzine for star ideas and star performers in higher education; the reason for its ceasing publication in 2001 is unclear, but it may be that when the excitement drained out of the humanities job market, so did the glamour of new intellectual movements and figures. In any case, *University Business*, the second magazine founded by *Lingua Franca*'s founder, Jeffrey Kittay, is now flourishing.

It is within the general national media, however, that attention to faculty projects and fortunes has received more play and possibly affected the market. I have already talked about the heroes and villains in the public conflicts between such conservatives as Lynne Cheney and her antagonists in the academy. In the light of such continuing controversy, the popular press is more likely to give one or another faculty member the full treatment. *The New York Times* has a special tradition of trolling the annual meeting of the MLA to discover what's hot and what's bizarre. In these days of decline in the humanities, its MLA story is likely to be condescending, but in other days, it has lionized the humanities stars—even reporting on their clothing choices. It still takes news of the academy and its leading lights very seriously, however. Most recently, it featured a full article on a young black economist at Harvard, designated a “baby star,” by one of his colleagues.<sup>10</sup>

The multiplications and magnifications of success in a winner-take-all market can become so confusing, however, that rational or philosophical choices about value are either overwhelmed or formed by the market's own, self-generated hype. The result of this formation leads to some qualms, even among market economists, about the adequacy of their traditional conviction that there can be a free market open to free individual choices that allocate goods and services efficiently and therefore equitably. At this level of their analysis, Frank and Cook sound a little like French sociologists:

...although Adam Smith's invisible hand assures that markets do a speedy and efficient job of delivering the goods and services people desire it tells us nothing about where people's desires come from in the first place. If tastes were fixed at birth, this would pose no problem. But if culture shapes tastes, and if market forces shape culture, then the invisible hand is untethered. Free marketers have little to cheer about if all they can claim is that the market is efficient at filling desires that the market itself creates.<sup>11</sup>

The application of such thinking to the market for faculty seems to me obvious, or at least it should be, since so much of the theorizing in the humanities and social sciences in the past twenty years has been about the social construction of value systems. Nevertheless, as David Lodge has illustrated so trenchantly in the satirical competition for an international chair in literary theory that runs the plot of his novel, *Small World*, a few winners maneuver for the UNESCO chair—openly or subtly—as watched by hordes of fascinated secondary contenders. These populate the conferences that are held at various places around the world, and are summoned all together to a marvelously drawn version of an MLA meeting that concludes the novel. It is typical of Lodge's comic plotting that the UNESCO Chair finally goes to a professor who has looked like an also-ran, so that in fiction at least, modesty gets rewarded.



We should pause to consider the nature of “winning” in the realm of ideas. It is clear that in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, especially in the sciences, there are talented individuals who manage to sweep the competition by contributing some new discovery or interpretive theory. According to Thomas Kuhn, such new “paradigms” are rare, and should be honored. But in physics or biology, breakthrough discoveries frequently proceed upon the foundations of “normal science.”<sup>12</sup> And so it follows that if competition to be a paradigm shifter clears out the ordinary work of scientists, the result will be a dissipation of daily, necessary maintenance work in strenuous efforts to reproduce and test and refine, and even refute, some bit of the winning discovery.

One of the important questions for science is finding support for lines of research that do not seem promising for awards. The “disease *du jour*” effect in national science policy is one manifestation of this problem. Another is the spectacle of scientists engaging in unseemly races to crack open a problem that has become ripe for solution because of the work of many different researchers. I am not enough of a scientist to follow this line of thought too far into fields like molecular biology, but I have read enough to think that the reason Rosalind Franklin did not get a share of the Nobel for unraveling the DNA structure was that as a woman, she had been automatically relegated to the ranks of the also-ran workers. She did the painstaking, “secondary” work of science that does not win trophies but “merely” enables the successful competition for them. James Watson’s account of his and Francis Crick’s race to win the Nobel in *The Double Helix* is a fascinating chronicle of the way great ambition and a little duplicity can combine to sweep the boards in winner-take-all markets.<sup>13</sup>

In my own field, like many others in the humanities and social sciences, interpretive theoretical breakthroughs have focused much scholarly energy on attempts to reproduce one or another paradigm in ever new elaborations and applications. Indeed both the quantity and quality of publication of such efforts in every disciplinary field have become an economic drain of crisis proportions. Competition in the publishing industry has insured the monopoly on publications by such global conglomerates as Peter Elsevier, an international conglomerate that feeds on the need for ambitious researchers to cut up their findings into as many articles as possible and to create new journals in small specialties. Universities have been all too willing to support such ventures in order to gain whatever scholarly recognition they bring. More significantly, tenure and promotion committees have come to depend on the editorial decisions of such journals to confirm the quality of faculty candidates for advancement. And thus in scholarly publication as well as in the popular media, the values of the status market prevail.<sup>14</sup>

Another form of currency in the academic market is status achieved through systems of ranking or institutional classification. The competition for a place in one or another of these suns is perhaps the most effective driver of the academic market for faculty. The *US News & World Report* annual rankings of colleges are criticized, but they have not impeded bragging by any college or university that gets in the top ten—of the country, the region, the state, or the category. There have been efforts to maneuver higher education out of the ratings game, as happened when the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching revised its classification system in 2000. But the rankings creep back in one way or another, and institutions seem always ready to position themselves on the best possible perch for them. Thus the University of Richmond, a school that has announced its ambitions publicly since it inaugurated a new president, William E. Cooper, in 1998, sought to change its Carnegie Ranking in 2004 so that it

could compete more successfully in the *US News & World Report* rankings, which adapted the Carnegie classifications to categorize colleges and universities.<sup>15</sup>

The fact is that most rankings of colleges and universities tend to be subjective—a sample of group opinion about institutional reputations. Further, the rankings at the very top rarely change though there are some minuets among them. There have been some additions in the middle, especially as research universities in the South and Southwest have come into their own, but the large institutions tend to remain safely in the top ten or twenty. Indeed, both to establish that point and at the same time give more substance to the internal assessments of research universities, John Lombardi, now Provost at the University of Massachusetts, launched a research center, “TheCenter,” at the University of Florida in 2000. Lombardi’s institute was designed to define and provide both hard data and nuance to enable institutional classifications that would be helpful in defining institutional missions rather than abstract successes or failures.<sup>16</sup> Lombardi’s own effort to measure universities in order to improve them—especially the University of Florida, which he headed as president from 1990 to 2000—evolved into his center’s eventual creation of a new list of the “Top 25.”

In a refreshing departure from the usual rhetoric about “excellence” and “greatness,” Lombardi and his research team chose measurable variables that had a simple clarity. He argued that no matter what the other admirable features of a particular school might be, determinative benchmarks in all areas of their excellence would be size and money. Other measures, the quality of students, the distinguished nature of the faculty, for example, ultimately derived from these variables. Once the money and size parameters are settled, according to Lombardi, more nuanced judgments can be made about improvements, but these cannot be made without establishing other simple-enough criteria for reward. His is a hard nosed view, but Lombardi’s toughness does assert some limits to the overheated efforts always to be in the finals—the “dance,” the “sweet sixteen,” the “elite eight,” and the “final four.”

But even when the clarity of a clear-eyed administrator<sup>17</sup> is cast upon the rankings, their intrinsic flaws as markers of educational value are not dissolved. My concern is that the competition that marks only a few as winners—ten? twenty-five? fifty? a hundred?—can actually distort the nature of winning itself. The system and rhetoric of cultivating winners not only diminishes the morale of fine institutions, but more importantly, it also hijacks the values we expect from higher education. As Frank and Cook remark, “winner-take-all markets have molded our culture and discourse in ways many of us find deeply troubling.”<sup>18</sup>

ii.

What are the effects of this extreme structure of competition in building the faculty for colleges and universities? The first place to find them is, of course, in the system for bringing in the new faculty—those “rookies” upon whom the burden of the future work and reputation of the institution and the profession will rest. The agonies of finding and keeping academic jobs, the “real” jobs marked by the promise of tenure, have become very well known over the years. There have always been tales of those caught in the “publish or perish” trap, but now the emphasis is on getting a probationary job in the first place—given the armies of unemployed PhD’s. The academic labor market has been decimated by outsourcing. Efforts to retrench in the eighties and nineties by offering

golden parachutes for those who would take early retirements have backfired, since junior replacements were rarely recruited to replace retirees. Instead, faculty retirement schemes tend to be opportunities for downsizing—capturing freed salary money to use elsewhere. There was once a worry that faculty with tenure simply would never retire once the cap on retirements at 65 was lifted. Although there may have been some problems with those who insisted on hanging on forever, more often than not, when faculty could afford to retire, they did. Academic job scarcity has not resulted from retirements but from the decisions of institutions to hire only sure winners—putting temporary stand-in faculty in place until the phenom comes along.

At the very first stage of the recruitment process, then, the faculty job market is narrowed by the tendency of administrations to meet budgetary stresses by putting a freeze on hiring new candidates for the professoriate. One growing alternative is to take new PhD's on spec, possibly as post-docs, to see how they might turn out before committing a tenure line to them. The expansion of post-doc positions from the sciences into the humanities in recent years indicates this current tendency to make all new personnel decisions provisional.<sup>19</sup> When departments finally get permission to hire a junior colleague, the stakes are therefore very high. And the process can become toxic.

The psychological health of search committees can disintegrate as the hiring season intensifies. A feeding frenzy may ensue after years of starvation. Intergenerational pathologies reveal themselves unexpectedly. Faculty members who joined the department in days before the emphasis on research can become defensive and extremely fierce about whether new colleagues will meet stringent new standards for teaching, for the same deans who ask for ever more research productivity also look at the market and ask, "Why can't we have it all—research *and* teaching?" Publication in a respectable though slightly stodgy press can suddenly become a sign of mediocrity among those who track the latest venues for the latest ideas. And then intermediate faculty members who have already leaped very high hurdles to get tenure may demand radical originality from new colleagues. The re-tracking of a familiar argument can seem a mortal flaw, even though that is what most dissertations end up doing. Failure to make sweeping claims can be a sign of academic timidity. Skirmishes can break out among theoretical factions, so that number-crunchers become adamantly opposed to hiring ethnologists, and vice versa. And, of course, academic pedigree can come to seem more important than the record itself: status satisfaction tempts department to hire a novice from one of the costal elites rather than fastening upon the greater experience of applicants who've become all-round candidates through their "post-graduate" work in a variety of institutions. Despite the difficulty candidates have in finding academic positions immediately out of graduate school, search committees can be turned off by their experience elsewhere; "experience" may carry the aura of "used."

Unless the institution works on a tradition of fostering and cultivating new professors, then, risks for the department in hiring at the entry level tend to rest on short rather than long term considerations. The conundrum, however, is that short term achievements do not always predict life-long productivity. Comets soar in a blaze and then go out in darkness. So also a one-note researcher may make a genuine mark in the first six years, but fizzle in the second or third decade if she is unable or unwilling to move to other tasks when her project has played out or emphasis has drifted to other fields or methods. Since the long term capacities of new professors must be somewhat unclear, it is good to search for academic talent that promises a variety and malleability of focus. Wise recruiters know that the ongoing work of the faculty is likely to demand a spectrum

of abilities, and hiring upon very narrow grounds may fail to keep all the needs of the institution in view. Squeezing talent at the entry level of faculty recruitment can eventually weaken collegiality, governance, and faculty participation in the administration of the institution.

Despite the obvious recommendations of common sense, however, the recruitment of new faculty in today's academic market frequently tempts hiring departments or schools into foolish tenure practices. We have already discussed narrowing the criteria for professional success; there is also the ratcheting up of standards for granting tenure. Some departments only hire candidates for whom tenure seems likely, and they work hard to make that likelihood a reality. Other departments hire with the intention of testing new faculty ruthlessly, turning the tenure probationary period into a survival test. In such cases some unannounced consensus may conspire to isolate those hires who look to be in peril after a year or two. Unsure of what of reasonable standards should be, departments impose tenure requirements that many of the current faculty could not have met. Such a system leads to a penetrating odor of bad faith in a department, and the faculty members who survive the system are likely to seek revenge.

There are, of course, some departments and some very elite schools that make no pretense of any intention to lead new faculty to tenure. They assure themselves that their past practices make that intention clear, and that the privilege of taking a junior appointment within their precincts is such a stamp of excellence that there will be no trouble for in moving on to good schools when the time is up. Such departments forget the likelihood that their untenured faculty may hope against hope—and against history. During the first five years, for example, roots go down, the work goes well, the school's address opens doors, and colleagues are pleasant. Who wouldn't dream of being the exception that stays on, or wake up embittered when nothing they've done really counts at the end. By then, of course, other hiring departments are usually not in the market for hiring Associate Professors.

The malaise among probationary faculty in highly demanding departments may be intensified by another problem in the recruitment process—the offering of promises that are not honored in the long run. Obviously, no institution can recruit good faculty without painting a rosy view of his or her future in its arms. But the glow can fade when research leave times are cut, money for conferences becomes unavailable, and the promised lab lacks vital equipment. More significantly, optimistic talk about standards for tenure may change in the middle of the probationary period. A new dean or chair may come in to “shake things up,” and her new interpretation of old standards leaves no time to try to measure up in the candidate's fourth or fifth year. Assistant Professors often get stuck in the fault lines of those administrative transitions that are designed to accelerate the school's competition for higher rankings.

But perhaps the most pernicious institutional failure *vis-à-vis* its junior faculty is failing to take care of last season's baby star while recruiting the current “rookie of the year.” The salary offers for new faculty tend to rise faster than the rate for others, and so intermediate colleagues find new ones nipping at their heels financially. The new grass must be fertilized as well, but given resource scarcity, “late bloomers” may find themselves bereft of support and even recognition. This is especially true if their careers come to a pause after they have achieved tenure—what is known in the trade as the “Associate Professor slump.”

Some seasoned observers of the academy have commented on the “missing middle” in its departments and schools. They point to the total absence of Associate Professors or the demoralization of those who hold that rank for more than a few years. Frequently such faculty have come to some impasse in research and need time to change direction. For one thing, their achievement of tenure has given them breathing room to look around the institution and find what other opportunities it might offer. For another, the long struggle may have left them gasping for new air and a respite from anxiety about striving for the nearest prize. And, not coincidentally, many Associate Professors can only think of having, or caring for, families after tenure. Their position in such a stage in their life cycles may also convince them that they should spend some time on public advocacy or service. The achievement of tenure and promotion should not mean the reinstitution of one more hurdle to jump, but rather a respite for regaining breath, strength, and purpose. Meanwhile, there are important programs to run, teaching skills to consolidate, and advances in their fields to master beyond that last research project. In point of fact, every department needs a phalanx of faculty members who have the security of tenure and some space to turn their attention to matters other than research.

In past times, the rank of Associate Professor has provided individuals who could fulfill such functions. But in the winner-take-all market, Associate Professors' contributions are never enough. There are many reasons for a department to be lacking in Associate Professors, but when the main one is unrelenting competition for rookie stars, the institution is probably in for trouble. It may find itself with no one left to do the work—the advising, committee staffing, participation in faculty governance, teaching of undergraduates, and even teaching of graduate students. One of the most misguided moves in many departments under the rookie hiring impulse is to promise graduate courses to the new hires, relegating lower level courses to regular faculty. The rationale is that the new stars are up on the latest discoveries and theories. What does such a rationale say about the continuing faculty? And how wise is it to foster a system of forced maturity on novices while letting the initiates off the hook for keeping up? Finally, such a system deprives new ideas, and new faculty, of the mature critique they may need to become something more than the latest faddist.

### iii.

Although hiring new faculty can become a questionable contest, the trickiest feature of winner-take-all competition in the academy is the hiring and cultivation of senior faculty. I have called institutional fixations with this process “the Superstar Syndrome” because I believe that a fixation on hiring and retaining only a few high achievers is often counter-productive, especially for “wanna-be” schools that shop for stars indiscriminately—ignoring their missions, the constraints of their budgets, and the continuing faculty who have managed to give the institution whatever distinction it already has.

The superstar syndrome is usually marked by one of two group obsessions. The first, evident in competition at the entry level as well, is an avid desire to climb onto a higher rung in the rankings. The other, less recognized because it is internalized and usually less conscious, is the fear of falling into the academic abyss—stepping down a rung or even falling off the ladder altogether. Under such a fear, each new achievement carries with it the seeds of possible decline. Success is never at ease with itself; it always hears the competition coming up behind. And even at the highest level—like at Harvard—its anxieties can lead to a vulgar dependence on the opinions of others rather than the

security of relying on its own judgment. Harvard has a practice of circulating names of scholars it may want to hire with scholars elsewhere, asking for rankings “both in absolute terms and relative to one another.” The result can be exasperation and disdain from the reviewers as well as grave doubts about the independence of the institution. When asked to make such rankings, Leon Fink, professor of history at the University of Chicago, has rightly observed, “Rather than rely on reputation, as defined by outsider rankings, better to trust to close readings of the candidate’s work, as well as the direct encounter afforded by the job interview. Be satisfied when you have found an outstanding scholar-teacher and don’t worry whether she is at the very top of anyone else’s list.”<sup>20</sup>

The fear of falling behind in the academy ignores the natural cycles of achievement and rest before renewal; it is attuned instead to the sounds of other institutions following their own bent. It is true that an institution’s process of comparing its standings with that of peers is a powerful lever for extracting resources from deans, members of boards, philanthropists, and legislatures. A healthy concern about quality is incumbent upon good administrators, and poetic license in proclaiming impending doom without adequate resources is a respectable ploy among the truly talented leaders of first-rate departments. The problem arises when such rhetoric becomes internalized. Then the fear of falling behind in the future denigrates the achievements of the present, and a department, a school, or a whole institution can become very sick at heart.

The most important effect of such anxiety is its instigation of resentment among the continuing faculty—those upon whom the reputation of the institution has been built. The hiring of a superstar off the prevailing salary scale can deliver a tangible message that what they have spent their whole careers achieving doesn’t quite measure up. Further, such hiring may awaken an impulse among continuing faculty to test the waters elsewhere themselves. And thus a bidding war can erupt between the inside and the outside stars that leads to higher demands on every side. Such inflationary wars are involved in the academic process known as “meeting outside offers.” Trying to harness this process, an institution may set aside funds to meet offers, even if that means setting aside salary scales to keep a superstar from leaving. It can be devastating for a school to lose one of its native “greats,” even in times of budgetary stringency. There is some argument, also, that counter offers are helpful to continuing faculty in the long run because a rising tide lifts all boats. But such maneuvers can backfire. In some schools the legend is that the only way to get a good raise is to get an offer from some other school. I have known deans and chairs who have actively encouraged their faculty to seek outside offers, so as to provide leverage for bringing new money into the salary pool. Administrators may guard against this by stipulating that outside offers must be from peer schools, or better, if they are to be met. There is one school, MIT, that prides itself on a flat policy against meeting outside offers. But the fact of the matter is that when distinguished faculty shop around, they may find an offer that they can’t refuse.

In the recruitment of outside superstars, there are also dangers. The most frequent downside is that institutions fail to assure themselves of receiving real value for their investment. Many senior faculty members move to new positions with the best of intentions, and fulfill all the promises they seem to offer, but some are prima donnas who require extraordinary care. If the reason for hiring at the senior level is to expand a program or start an extraordinary initiative, the faculty member brought in to lead must be at once forceful and generous to his or her colleagues. One way of showing such collegiality is to shoulder a fair share of work; another is to be publicly active on campus.

Permitting a star to hide away from the rest of the campus, and especially from students, is always counterproductive. When an especially expensive hire is made on any campus, the spotlight automatically turns onto the beneficiary. If there are any irregularities in the hire or the performance of the new faculty member, the results can be devastating. Many years ago, the faculty rebelled when the University of South Carolina sought to raise its profile by hiring non-academic celebrities and there was a great deal of scandal as well. And the “tenure wars” at the University of Minnesota in the mid 1990’s began with the fiscal misconduct of one superstar in the medical school. Interestingly enough, the response of the Board in the Minnesota case was to try to renegotiate tenure rather than to seek out the root problems through better oversight of special allowances for special faculty. It was a form of poetic justice that the general public sided with the continuing faculty in the resulting controversy; the local press editorialized about the danger of losing their collective contributions to the general health of “the U” under the new scheme.<sup>21</sup>

The effects on institutions when star hiring becomes the single implement for advancing in quality and reputation can reverberate widely throughout the institution. There can be a fostering of intramural competition, for example. One department can try to outwit and outplay other departments. All will be tempted, of course, to exaggerate their needs and falsify their possibilities, in order to get a super line. Indeed, some departments paint grandiose visions on the basis of a single hire, only to discover that one super hire is usually not enough. And so superstar programs can become constant drains. Or they can be left high and dry—the creations of the ambitions of a single individual and never integrated into the cognate areas of study that might help it survive.

There is also “mission creep,” the tendency of ambitious schools to leave their real work behind as they try to imitate the activities of those in higher echelons. Once a faculty member guiding me on a tour of a school I was visiting commented, “We used to be a teaching college, but now we’re not. We’re a university.” “Isn’t that a shame?” I replied. I knew that when it was a normal school this institution turned out generations of effective elementary and high school faculty for the region; it had good faculty whose expertise was carried into classrooms around the state. As a “university,” however, it lost its local ties, becoming only one aspiring school among many. Further, since research was the coin of its institutional self-regard, it now found itself burdened with many faculty members who were not inclined to do the kind of teaching and service that its earlier mission required. Meanwhile, an extremely wise chair in one of its departments had accepted his unit’s role as a farm team and used it unapologetically to build his faculty. He hired excellent people who could not get a nibble from the fast-track job market, but whose potential he was shrewd enough to recognize. He brought them to the school for the several years or more it would take for them to become prepared to move on. Some left, some stayed, and so he gained not only a talented and energetic staff, but the gratitude of many young faculty elsewhere whom he helped to move along in their careers. His institution became known by them and respected.

#### iv.

Hiring new faculty—either at the junior or senior level—is one of the most important activities of any educational institution. It is also an activity that can bring departments and administrations together in planning for the future and in agreeing on mutual aims. It promises new life, new approaches, new ideas for institutions. And good hiring practices

enhance its reputation among faculty at home and in other institutions—graduate programs or departments—from which new hires come. There are rankings that never reach the pages of *US News & World Report*, that are instead reflected in the consensus among most faculty of which schools are good places to be in.

Although it is clear that I am extremely skeptical about the benefits of unbridled competition, I do not scorn ambition, and I realize that the desire to excel is fueled in positive ways by comparisons with models of genuine achievement. Further, I know that in some fields, in the sciences especially, truly impressive advances in research require more than one distinguished figure—that there is such a thing as a critical mass, not only of equipment and technology, but of gifted people. Finally, it is also clear that departments and universities cannot and should not prefer a complacent stability over dynamic change. One way to avoid this is to bring in not only good new people at the rookie level but also the occasional senior person who has the authority to challenge the work as well as to change the aura of a program. Departments and programs may not always be able to fill important slots by promotion from within, and while the contributions of ongoing faculty are important, they probably need a jolt from time to time. There is also a natural and necessary migration of scholars from one school to another for many good reasons—the development of new institutional initiatives that suit their special talents and aims, the presence of research supports that smaller schools cannot offer, the opportunities for the kind of collaboration that cannot be carried on at a distance. Individuals may grow stale in one place and need either to change places or be challenged by new colleagues. And family situations may shift so that moves are necessary.

The question is how to manage such healthy growth and development reasonably and within the parameters of a specific school's mission and resources. The question is also how to avoid the excesses that over-stress the talents of new faculty, embitter the work of those in the middle, and fail to assure the institution's realization of full value, in generosity, collegiality, and loyalty from newly installed stars.

Remedies for violations of common sense in recruiting and hiring are hard to come by, given the realities of inevitable competition. Frank and Cook quote a useful admission of the problem from James Tobin: "The most difficult issues of political economy are those where goals of efficiency, freedom of choice, and equality conflict. It is hard enough to propose an intellectually defensible compromise among them, even harder to find a politically viable compromise."<sup>22</sup> In the midst of such conflicts in academe, however, the faculty must make choices.

It is the faculty that has been charged by the logic of its expertise to make wise judgments in hiring and granting tenure to colleagues. In the past, the assurances of equity in these processes have been embedded in the culture of the professoriate; in the "winner-take-all" context now, it is up to the faculty to preserve their institutions from the unbounded competition that may override their own best judgments. How can they do this? First, they must defend the independence of their programs by refusing hires that do not fit the best interests of their departments. A dean or provost might tempt them to go for a star in one area when they really need a couple of new faculty elsewhere; they should stick to their own priorities through reasoning, presenting alternatives, and just saying no. They must also refuse shortcuts in judging candidates for positions; this means that although they read letters of reference with respect, they must make sure that the final offer will arise from their own study of the dossier, interviewing, and group



discussions. Like Professor Fink from Chicago, they will refuse requests for ranking even as they take the time to write letters of recommendation that are both accurate and generous about candidates for academic positions. Given that a tenure-track position is precious, they should invest it wisely, knowing that the wisdom of their choice is the basis for the institution's trust in them. This kind of trust is most at risk in the current winner-take-all market, and so it is a great irony that tenure, with its aim of opening the professoriate to faculty of promise, now threatens to become simply another superstar perk.

Finally, of course, in their collective meditations upon their status as teachers, scholars, and servants to the profession, faculty members must realize that excellence is always admirable, but that admiration is not always envy.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This essay derives in part from essays that have appeared in publications of the Modern Language Association, the Association of Departments of English, and the American Association of University Professors. It will be a chapter in a book entitled *Whatever Happened to the Faculty?: Who Chooses in Higher Education*, forthcoming from The Johns Hopkins University Press in 2006.

<sup>2</sup> The University of Alabama, 2005, <http://www.ua.edu/>. The criteria for the *USA Today* contest center on students' abilities to describe their contributions; see [http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2004-08-12-2005-college-team\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2004-08-12-2005-college-team_x.htm). Their status seems to have been set through their inclusion of students from higher status competitor schools like Princeton.

<sup>3</sup> Robert H. Frank and Philip J. Cook, *The Winner-Take-All Society: Why the Few at the Top Get So Much More Than the Rest of Us* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 24.

<sup>4</sup> Frank and Cook, *The Winner-Take-All Society*, 4-5.

<sup>5</sup> Frank and Cook, *The Winner-Take-All Society*, 148.

<sup>6</sup> The National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education, "Straight Talk About College Costs and Prices" (William E. Troutt, Chairman, approved January 21, 1998), <http://www.nyu.edu/classes/jepsen/costreport.html>.

<sup>7</sup> See the annual salary reports issued by the American Association of University Professors in *Academe's* March/April issues.

<sup>8</sup> The National Commission Report, 24.

<sup>9</sup> Frank and Cook, *The Winner-Take-All Society*, 121.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen J. Dubner, "Toward a Unified Theory of Black America," *The New York Times Magazine* (March 20, 2005), 54-50.

<sup>11</sup> Frank and Cook, *The Winner-Take-All Society*, 201.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

<sup>13</sup> See Brenda Maddox, "The Double Helix and the 'Wronged Heroine'," *Nature* 421 (January 23, 2003): 407-408.

<sup>14</sup> The Center for Studies in Higher Education at the University of California, Berkeley has launched a special project on scholarly communication that has generated excellent discussions of the issue of the economic crisis in scholarly publication for schools, libraries, and faculty. Behind the discussions that I have attended, there lurks the question of the faculty market in terms of the use of journals to "credential" the work of faculty. When this process spawns expensive publication, owned by a global conglomerate, many experts advise organized resistance from disciplinary groups and universities, though none has advised unilateral disarmament in the scholarly race. See <http://cshe.berkeley.edu/projects/scholarlycomm/index.html>.

<sup>15</sup> "Carnegie Foundation changes Richmond's classification," *Richmond Matters* 7, issue 8 (December 1, 2004), <http://swan.richmond.edu/news/ricmat/volume7/708a.html>.

<sup>16</sup> See John V. Lombardi, "How Classifications Can Help Colleges," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (August 8, 2000), B24, <http://jvlone.com/chron090800.html>.

<sup>17</sup> I use this term advisedly for John Lombardi, who has had a successful administrative career in higher education, with some controversy along the way. I first knew him as a faculty colleague, and he was my dean when I was department chair at Indiana. Then I found his clear views and methods refreshing and fair.

<sup>18</sup> Frank and Cook, *The Winner-Take-All Society*, 4-5.

<sup>19</sup> See John Gravois, "Holding Pattern in the Humanities," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (March 11, 2005), A10-12.

<sup>20</sup> Leon Fink, "The Unbearable Heaviness of Being Harvard," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (April 1, 2005), B5.

<sup>21</sup> The Minnesota saga is best told in an unpublished manuscript by Gary Engstrand, staff person for the Academic Senate during the time of troubles, entitled "It Is from Small Missteps that Great Tragedies Grow: Tenure and the Drive for Collective Bargaining at the University of Minnesota—Events, Commentaries, and Lessons" (University of Minnesota, n.d.).

<sup>22</sup> Frank and Cook, *The Winner-Take-All Society*, 211-12.