3. STRIVING FOR WHAT? EXPLORING THE PURSUIT OF PRESTIGE

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INTRODUCTION

I-Want-To-Be-University (IWTBU) is a medium-sized public, primarily undergraduate teaching college in an urban setting in the Southeast. The institution started as a normal school for teachers and evolved over time to a more comprehensive curriculum. It recently changed its name from college to university after a wealthy donor made this a criterion for his donation. IWTBU is somewhat selective in its admissions and its efforts to recruit faculty. Significant executive administrative turnover in the last 5–10 years has fostered uncertainty and dialogue about institutional priorities.

Michael Vaughn, Director of Institutional Research, has worked at IWTBU for 30 years and has seen a lot of change. In particular, he has seen public support for higher education decrease and a smaller portion of the institutional budget subsidized by the state, making the institution more dependent on students who can pay full price. Concurrently, Vaughn has seen competition for students increase as for-profit competitors offer prospective IWTBU students degrees they can earn while never leaving their homes. Likewise, parents and student applicants are increasingly interested in how programs are ranked.

IWTBU has always kept on top of what their peers were doing. However, department chairs are now just as concerned when they hear about innovative programs at institutions below them.

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in national rankings as they are in what happens among aspirational peers. Most of the faculty hired 30 years ago were ABD and came to IWTBU for a secure teaching position. The most recent faculty hires come with research university Ph.Ds and seem more concerned with research and improving their departments’ national reputation. The competitive job market has allowed IWTBU to recruit some very research-oriented faculty, which they “stole” away from more prestigious institutions for larger salaries and/or better packages (e.g. release time, research monies, etc). A new president and provost are working with faculty on a strategic plan that they claim will move IWTBU up in USNWR rankings over the next five years.

While IWTBU is a fictitious institution offered to illustrate the many forces that give rise to striving, it could describe many institutions of higher education. Each year colleges and universities strive to increase their national standing in the academic hierarchy, and the behavior associated with this “striving” has taken many forms. Striving is defined here as the pursuit of prestige within the academic hierarchy. Striving behavior might include campuses amending their admissions process, reward structures, and resource allocation decisions (Aldersley, 1995; Dichev, 2001; Ehrenberg, 2003; Meredith, 2004; Morphew, 2002; Winston, 2000).

In recent years research has examined the nature of such “striving” to frame how it might be studied, and to examine how striving impacts various aspects of institutional functioning, including but not limited to admissions, pricing/cost, and educational quality (Aldersley, 1995; Ehrenberg, 2003; Massy & Zemsky, 1994; Meredith, 2004; Monks & Ehrenberg, 1999; Morphew, 2002; Morphew & Baker, 2004; Sarraf, Hayek, Kandiko, Padgett, & Harris, 2005; Sweitzer & Volkwein, 2006). Additionally, there is emerging attention to how striving influences faculty work-life (Dubrow, Moseley, & Dustin, 2006; Finnegan & Gamson, 1996; O’Meara & Bloomgarden, 2006; Wolf Wendel & Ward, 2005).

This Handbook chapter contributes to this growing area of research by synthesizing recent studies on striving in order to (a) recognize striving institutions (b) better understand the forces influencing striving (c) explore striving behaviors (d) examine possible consequences of institutional striving and (e) identify areas for future research.

It is important to study striving because campuses that engage in striving behavior are often making trade-offs without knowing what they are. Very little research has looked at the consequences of striving