

New America Education Policy Program
Policy Brief

BUILDING A NEW AAU

**The Case for Redefining
Higher Education Excellence**

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June 2014

About the Author

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Acknowledgements

The data analysis used to model a New AAU in this report was performed by Takeshi Yanagiura and Nate Johnson of Postsecondary Analytics, LLC.

About New America

New America is a nonprofit, nonpartisan public policy institute that invests in new thinkers and new ideas to address the next generation of challenges facing the United States.

The New America Education Policy Program's work is made possible through generous grants from the Alliance for Early Success; the Annie E. Casey Foundation; the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation; the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund; the Grable Foundation; the Foundation for Child Development; the Joyce Foundation; the Kresge Foundation; Lumina Foundation; the Pritzker Children's Initiative; the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation; and the W. Clement and Jessie V. Stone Foundation.

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Introduction

The most influential higher education organization in America isn't part of the government. It doesn't regulate anyone or donate to political campaigns. It's just a private club with five dozen members, representing less than two percent of all the colleges and universities in America.

Yet this tiny cabal of venerable institutions has done more to shape and, increasingly, harm the cause of higher learning in America than any other group one could name. It's called the Association of American Universities.

The AAU was created at the end of the last Gilded Age and is actively contributing to the new era of accelerating inequality by imposing exclusionary values on the way Americans access, experience,

and pay for college. It does this through the time-honored mechanisms of influence, lobbying members of Congress for special favors on behalf of organizations that already enjoy unimaginable amounts of wealth and prestige.

But the most significant and problematic vector of AAU influence lies in the way it sets the de facto national standards of higher education excellence. Like all organizations defined by the hoarding of privilege, the AAU's power comes from the creation of an unattainable ideal tied to a rigged system of futile striving. The worst thing about them is not who they are or what they do. It's what they make everyone else want to be.

The time has come to create a new definition of greatness in higher learning, one that honors the importance of research and scholarship while rewarding institutions that advance the national interest of helping students from diverse backgrounds earn high-quality college degrees. This report explains why responsible higher education leaders should abandon the old group, and what the criteria for a New AAU should be.

““ The time has come to create a new definition of greatness in higher learning.

The Old Boys Club

The university as we know it was created in the late 19th century. At the end of the Civil War, American higher education consisted of a few hundred mostly religious institutions that used centuries-old teaching methods to instruct small classes of men in subjects like Ancient Greek. Only one American university (Yale) had ever awarded a PhD.

The next three decades saw a rapid and profound transformation. The Morrill Land-Grant Act catalyzed state investment in large public universities built to train the “industrial classes.” Meanwhile, American scholars began returning from Europe with stories of an amazing modern invention: the German research university. In these institutions, the credentialed scholar reigned supreme, independent and dedicated to the emerging principles of science and discovery.

In 1876, Johns Hopkins opened as the first American research university created in the German mold. Older universities quickly remade themselves, adopting standards and practices that remain with us today: the PhD as the pre-eminent professorial qualification, research as the foundation of professional status, and scholarly autonomy as the cardinal value around which all other decisions ultimately revolved.

At first, European institutions were reluctant to credit upstart competitors across the sea. Many American scholars continued to go abroad to study, not willing to risk getting a degree that wasn’t taken seriously within academe.¹ So the presidents of Harvard and the University of California convened a conference of the most well-known American research universities to establish uniform standards of graduate study.² The letter of invitation declared that assembled leaders would strive to:

- 1) Bring about “a greater uniformity of the conditions under which students may become candidates for higher degrees in different American universities, thereby solving the problem of migration;”
- 2) “Raise the opinion entertained abroad of our own Doctor’s degree;” and
- 3) “Raise the standard of our own weaker institutions.”³

In a two-day February 1900 meeting at the University of Chicago, 14 leading Ph.D.-granting institutions founded the AAU.⁴ They were:

- The Catholic University of America
- Clark University
- Columbia University
- Cornell University
- Harvard University
- The Johns Hopkins University
- Princeton University
- Stanford University
- University of California, Berkeley
- University of Chicago
- University of Michigan
- University of Pennsylvania
- University of Wisconsin-Madison
- Yale University⁵

The instant familiarity of this roster is a testament to the longevity of universities as institutions. Four years earlier, Charles Dow had created a list of similar size and purpose by identifying twelve leading industrial companies whose stock prices could be usefully averaged. General Electric remains on the list today. But the U.S. Leather, National Lead, Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad, Laclede Gas, and Distilling & Cattle Feeding Companies eventually joined all the other founding members of the Dow Jones Index in merger, dissolution, or obscurity. By contrast, every original member of the AAU still exists, 12 are still members, and those dozen represent, then as now, the heart of the American higher education aristocracy.

The AAU was exclusive from the beginning. Like a country club or secret society, new members could apply only by invitation and with the assent of three-quarters of member institutions, a practice still in place today.⁶ Soon, the German universities began using AAU membership as a requisite for American graduate candidates seeking

“ Like a country club or secret society, new AAU members can apply only by invitation and with the assent of three-quarters of member institutions

to study abroad.⁷ Instead of expanding its membership, the AAU responded by creating an “Accepted List” of non-members whose students they deemed appropriate for graduate study at high-quality universities.⁸ Graduate deans from AAU member universities went on fact-finding missions to evaluate candidate institutions.⁹ In this way, the AAU didn’t just define what it meant to be elite. It expanded that concept of excellence with an umbrella that covered hundreds of other, “weaker” institutions.

By the late 1930s, with war brewing, the AAU became increasingly focused on its relationship with the federal government. In 1945, the director of the national Office of Scientific Research and Development, Vannevar Bush, sent a report to President Truman titled *Science, The Endless Frontier*. Bush had a doctorate in electrical engineering from MIT (AAU member, 1934), where he had served as a scientist and administrator. Science, Bush said, was a source of great good for humanity. Penicillin and other medical advances had saved countless lives. “In 1939 millions of people were employed in industries which did not even exist at the close of the last war—radio, air conditioning, rayon and other synthetic fibers, and plastics...But these things do not mark the end of progress—they are but the beginning if we make full use of our scientific resources.”¹⁰ Bush called for a huge new federal investment in science, through competitive grants administered by the National Institutes for Health and what would become the National Science Foundation.

Federal research money began flowing into universities, much of it to AAU members. Other universities, including those created by the Morrill Act, transformed themselves into research institutions built to attract federal dollars and reflect the ideas of excellence defined and controlled by the AAU. As the total number of American college students quadrupled from 1947 to 1972¹¹ and thousands of new institutions blossomed nationwide, the AAU slowly expanded its membership to 60 (plus two Canadian universities), where it remains today. To ensure that taxpayer dollars went to the right places, the AAU established a Washington, DC office in 1962.¹² With the passage of the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1996, the AAU became one of the first registered higher education lobbyists.¹³ By the organization’s centennial anniversary in 2000, AAU members received approximately 58 percent of all federal funds for academic R&D, reflecting their influence and disproportionate share of major graduate programs.





Vannevar Bush (third from right) wrote an influential report for President Truman, entitled "*Science, The Endless Frontier*". Here he is pictured with Ernest Lawrence, Karl Compton, James Conant, and Arthur Compton at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1940. Photo courtesy Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory.

The Modern Age

In lobbying for federal research funding, the AAU has done the nation (and its members) a service. When feckless politicians seek to cut public investment in the discoveries that will drive long-term prosperity, the AAU can be relied on to exercise its considerable influence. AAU institutions also produce many scholars in the humanities, helping to preserve and expand the intellectual and cultural heritage of the world.

But something else happened after World War II along with the expansion of university-based research: mass higher education. Here the influence of the AAU was much less benign. The great surge of students into college happened for many reasons. America was the first large nation to aspire to something like universal high school education, creating large numbers of potential college students. Civil rights opened the doors of college to women and minority students. The 1944 G.I. Bill marked the beginning of ever-expanding federal investment in college financial aid. The collapse of the industrial middle-class economy drove more students to college as well-paying jobs for people without college credentials disappeared. Systems of community colleges grew to enroll nearly half of all new undergraduate students.

The AAU's response to this historic shift toward openness was to fall back on its original mission of exclusivity. That tendency has grown worse over time. The club's most recent membership decisions illustrate this well.

In April 2011, the presidents of AAU members converged at Washington, DC's Four Seasons Hotel, a favored destination for visiting Hollywood celebrities and foreign dignitaries where rooms start at \$500 to \$1,000 per night. While the presidents enjoyed cocktails and private dinners, AAU leaders were busy engineering the ouster of the University of Nebraska, a respected land-grant university that had been a member in good standing since 1909.

In the eyes of the AAU, Nebraska's sins were twofold. First, a lot of its federal research money was for agriculture, which the AAU discounted in the numerical rankings it used to judge research prowess. Second, Nebraska's ratio of research funding to employed professors was lower than at research universities with smaller student bodies and more selective admissions.¹⁴

In other words, the University of Nebraska was ousted from the most prestigious club in higher education because it was doing what land-grant universities are supposed to: conduct research on practical matters, like feeding humanity, and educate substantial numbers of students, not all of whom were born into the ruling class.

Weeks later, Syracuse University met a similar fate. A member since 1966, Syracuse had spent the previous decade re-tooling itself to better serve the economically distressed communities of upstate New York. Research dollars increasingly came from regional manufacturers struggling to compete in the global economy and public school systems trying to help low-income students make the leap to college. Against the wishes of some faculty members and its own narrow financial interests, Syracuse was determined to make its undergraduate student body more economically diverse.¹⁵

The AAU checked its formulas, which value federal research and exclusive admissions. Syracuse was put on "review." Rather than follow Nebraska in defenestration, Syracuse resigned its AAU membership.

As always, what mattered most was the effect this had on the hundreds of colleges and universities that weren't in the AAU and never would be. In 2013, the New America Foundation published a report about public universities that are unusually successful in using

“ The AAU’s response to the shift toward openness was to fall back on its original mission of exclusivity.

resources efficiently while simultaneously increasing the number of students earning degrees.¹⁶ The universities used a variety of strategies to earn this distinction, including close ties with local community colleges and innovative deployment of information technology. But author interviews with faculty members revealed another, conflicting imperative: membership in the AAU.

Faculty at the University of California-Riverside bemoaned the fact that, unlike most UC campuses, their institution had been left out of the club. Arizona State University noted on multiple occasions that its federal research awards exceeded many existing AAU members, and that it was being denied membership solely due to insufficient selectivity in undergraduate admissions. Only one studied institution, the State University of New York at Buffalo, was already an AAU member. Its president noted with concern that Buffalo was in the “bottom half” of the AAU—too close, perhaps, to the University of Nebraska for comfort.

No other organization captures the imagination of aspiring college administrators like the AAU. It has no competitors in the realm of defining institutional prestige. Scholars rank their peers and self-worth based on their association, or lack thereof, with AAU institutions. The AAU’s definition of excellence, created long before the advent of mass higher education, is the only one that matters.

This extends far beyond the universe of institutions for which AAU membership is even a remote possibility. The AAU is no longer in the business of sending member deans to evaluate non-members for adherence to AAU values. It doesn’t have to be. Its concept of what constitutes a successful four-year university has been thoroughly extended, through public policy, professional mores, cultural consensus and institutional habit-building, to the far reaches of the academy.

Pick a public university at random—any will do—and ask its president, deans, and trustees about their strongest aspirations. The answer is always the same: more research programs and graduate students. More selective admissions criteria. All the federal research funding it can find.

To fuel these ambitions, colleges have been raising prices with abandon for three decades, jockeying to one-up the competition and have the “best” scholars and students. Flagship public research universities enjoy outsized influence in state legislatures, garnering far more public money per student than open-access community colleges and less selective four-year universities that educate diverse student groups. Even community colleges are getting in on the game, adding baccalaureate and graduate programs to begin the long climb up the slope of prestige on which AAU members sit at an Olympian remove.

These priorities are also notable for what they omit: a legitimate and systematic interest in student learning. Although universities like to pretend that their research and teaching missions are wholly compatible, even synergistic, the plain fact is that institutions built to serve the interests of autonomous scholars have by definition subordinated the interests of undergraduates. Observers from William James to Robert Maynard Hutchins to Jacques Barzun to Clark Kerr to anyone paying attention have noted how research universities all but require aspirant scholars to neglect their teaching in favor of research.

These 19th century values are in direct conflict with America’s 21st century educational priorities. The share of the population with a college degree in the United States has been growing significantly slower than competitor nations in recent years. America needs colleges and universities that are fully committed to helping as many people as possible get an affordable, high-quality education. That commitment can’t be imposed through regulatory fiat. The nation’s diverse, historically independent colleges and universities will ultimately act from their own self-interest. We can’t, and shouldn’t, stop them from trying to climb mountains. What they need is a different mountain to climb.

This New AAU should retain its traditional focus on research, which remains vital to the national interest. But it should take a very different approach to undergraduate education, rewarding institutions that are committed to keeping college accessible, affordable and focused on student success, instead of actively working against those critical goals.¹⁷ Under those criteria, the membership roster would look something like this:

Institution Key:

A Roster of 'New AAU' Members

Selected from institutions with 'high' or 'very high' levels of research activity; ranked using a composite index of commitment to research, scholarship, diversity, quality, and affordability.

 AAU Founder
 Current Member
 New Member

Institution	Total Score	Academy Members 2010	Admission Rate Fall 2011	Bachelor Degree 2010-11
University of Washington-Seattle Campus	14.1	102	58	7,590
University of Michigan-Ann Arbor	13.2	84	41	6,553
University of Florida	12.8	23	43	8,685
The University of Texas at Austin	12.7	67	47	9,054
University of California-Los Angeles	12.7	91	26	7,546
University of Wisconsin-Madison	12.6	71	66	6,650
University of California-Berkeley	12.4	226	21	7,466
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	12.4	59	68	7,342
Arizona State University	12.3	20	87	12,194
Texas A & M University-College Station	12.0	22	63	8,748
University of California-San Diego	11.9	110	38	6,336
The Ohio State University-Main Campus	11.6	27	63	10,291
University of Minnesota-Twin Cities	11.4	41	47	7,031
University of Arizona	10.8	27	75	6,195
University of California-Davis	10.3	36	46	6,511
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	10.2	30	34	4,654
University of Maryland-College Park	10.2	30	45	6,987
Harvard University	9.9	348	6	1,792
Michigan State University	9.8	7	73	8,018
Purdue University-Main Campus	9.2	24	68	7,049
University of California-Irvine	8.8	35	45	6,298
Georgia Institute of Technology-Main Campus	8.4	29	52	3,062
Rutgers University-New Brunswick	8.2	36	61	6,179
Stanford University	8.0	289	7	1,670
Florida State University	8.0	7	58	7,886
University of Colorado Boulder	8.0	29	87	5,628
University of Pennsylvania	7.7	102	12	2,891
North Carolina State University at Raleigh	7.6	18	54	5,182
University of Georgia	7.5	7	59	6,845
University of Utah	7.4	18	83	4,801
University of Iowa	7.0	22	80	4,543
Indiana University-Bloomington	6.9	10	72	7,155
University of South Florida-Main Campus	6.9	3	38	6,766
University of Illinois at Chicago	6.9	5	63	3,526
Columbia University in the City of New York	6.7	117	10	1,836
University of California-Santa Barbara	6.6	57	45	5,212
Johns Hopkins University	6.5	84	19	1,550
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University	6.3	13	67	5,705
University of New Mexico-Main Campus	6.1	4	66	3,350

Doctorates 2010	Faculty Awards 2010	Federal Re- search 2009	Minority Degree 2010-11	Low Income Students' Net Price 2010-11	Pell Recipients 2010-11	Postdocs 2009	Total Research 2009
703	40	619,353	1,160	6,128	7,406	1,024	778,046
799	50	636,216	1,055	4,778	4,436	1,047	1,007,198
771	22	232,737	3,074	3,778	9,857	597	592,082
857	30	309,125	2,517	7,220	10,236	259	506,369
748	37	467,505	1,854	8,572	9,417	1,141	889,995
716	35	507,898	650	6,363	4,921	786	952,119
891	36	262,069	1,510	8,051	8,798	1,361	652,474
763	35	288,013	1,211	7,432	6,437	506	563,710
490	9	134,598	3,086	6,673	21,444	202	281,588
578	17	261,491	1,732	4,010	8,434	324	630,655
444	33	511,428	996	8,715	10,910	1,135	879,357
757	21	339,820	1,193	11,683	11,854	552	716,461
701	34	390,602	775	7,929	8,090	853	740,980
471	12	287,889	1,741	8,297	9,679	322	565,292
480	19	295,924	1,154	8,701	10,207	692	681,618
513	32	431,837	1,233	4,101	3,775	746	646,011
604	23	277,378	1,588	6,283	5,302	325	496,781
625	66	385,704	859	1,297	1,092	5,594	462,193
505	15	164,198	913	5,569	9,250	422	373,184
618	13	175,302	593	6,980	7,183	334	453,799
365	27	177,098	1,111	8,191	8,051	408	325,493
416	21	322,452	498	-203	2,392	271	561,631
424	18	151,122	1,426	11,909	8,679	217	320,416
708	47	477,507	603	5,332	1,231	1,590	704,183
340	9	117,294	2,250	6,125	9,110	258	195,244
317	21	239,687	548	12,181	4,695	563	288,388
521	34	499,498	735	6,529	1,563	1,003	726,768
422	11	135,318	773	4,789	5,897	264	380,571
417	9	106,932	952	4,177	6,107	232	349,730
279	14	192,354	443	9,127	6,876	370	331,137
397	14	252,336	351	9,323	4,086	354	329,901
443	8	78,498	663	3,919	6,487	143	156,966
243	6	190,949	2,435	6,156	11,949	261	309,456
316	11	196,702	1,210	6,862	7,904	245	341,655
561	28	483,111	1,029	6,277	1,189	757	589,575
299	15	113,837	1,227	8,998	6,842	166	215,728
434	39	1,587,547	799	13,611	813	1,570	1,856,270
403	11	148,411	482	8,492	4,187	215	396,681
190	6	133,334	1,922	6,569	8,576	480	201,769

Institution	Total Score	Academy Members 2010	Admission Rate Fall 2011	Bachelor Degree 2010-11
Massachusetts Institute of Technology	5.9	265	10	1,161
University of Virginia-Main Campus	5.6	29	33	3,637
Cornell University	5.4	65	18	3,542
Washington State University	5.4	9	84	5,221
University of Kansas	5.3	8	93	4,047
University of California-Riverside	5.3	6	76	3,464
Virginia Commonwealth University	5.2	5	71	4,335
Iowa State University	5.0	9	81	4,540
University of Central Florida	5.0	1	45	10,646
Colorado State University-Fort Collins	5.0	5	76	4,341
University of Houston	4.9	9	63	5,128
University at Buffalo	4.9	7	51	4,369
The University of Tennessee	4.7	1	70	4,377
University of Hawaii at Manoa	4.7	8	71	2,957
Louisiana State University	4.7	2	72	4,440
University of Kentucky	4.6	3	69	3,712
Florida International University	4.6	2	51	6,637
Yale University	4.5	112	8	1,281
University of Missouri-Columbia	4.5	7	81	5,087
Wayne State University	4.3	3	76	2,642
University of Massachusetts Amherst	4.3	9	66	5,036
Stony Brook University	4.2	12	39	3,643
University of South Carolina-Columbia	4.2	2	70	4,462
Duke University	4.0	59	16	1,493
University of Cincinnati-Main Campus	4.0	10	65	4,147
University of California-Santa Cruz	3.6	9	64	3,701
Vanderbilt University	3.2	23	16	1,735
Indiana University-Purdue University-Indianapolis	3.0	7	69	3,492
Washington University in St Louis	2.7	43	17	1,539
University of Alabama at Birmingham	2.4	6	72	1,997
University of Chicago	2.2	58	16	1,270
University of North Texas	2.1	1	65	6,362
Emory University	2.1	25	29	1,641
The University of Texas at Arlington	2.0	1	69	4,994
University of Connecticut	2.0	1	47	4,747
University of Louisville	2.0	2	75	2,618
The University of Texas at San Antonio	1.9	0	83	4,138
Oregon State University	1.9	4	81	3,443
University of Nebraska-Lincoln	1.8	2	59	3,621
Texas Tech University	1.8	1	66	4,544
Oklahoma State University-Main Campus	1.7	3	82	3,655
SUNY at Albany	1.7	1	47	3,103
University of Oregon	1.7	8	79	3,831

Doctorates 2010	Faculty Awards 2010	Federal Research 2009	Minority Degree 2010-11	Low Income Students' Net Price 2010-11	Pell Recipients 2010-11	Postdocs 2009	Total Research 2009
583	30	532,618	372	5,672	856	1,193	736,102
347	11	218,499	720	3,543	1,956	400	261,604
499	18	238,022	587	8,244	2,362	281	468,835
177	11	95,824	546	9,810	6,651	161	285,595
298	12	127,449	437	10,906	4,482	253	225,856
195	12	53,971	1,307	8,195	9,966	227	130,187
280	12	97,433	1,337	10,424	6,430	233	150,989
301	10	96,483	291	8,636	5,741	246	224,311
231	4	65,042	3,154	6,822	15,264	74	113,433
203	7	211,890	477	8,501	5,584	227	304,397
231	4	40,020	2,311	8,103	11,614	185	99,262
279	14	152,146	582	10,096	5,971	275	338,283
397	9	91,706	691	6,670	6,264	156	194,258
184	7	203,453	610	6,635	4,108	207	290,707
300	2	86,546	703	2,456	4,696	183	285,699
265	8	145,483	393	7,048	4,768	305	373,364
114	11	53,647	6,577	9,834	17,869	43	91,278
382	43	378,914	365	6,025	753	1,195	509,452
322	7	118,998	476	11,864	5,374	178	245,058
180	5	116,682	1,082	8,176	10,274	128	251,854
281	8	80,163	549	8,863	5,694	209	156,216
283	7	107,396	794	6,498	5,774	168	258,098
249	12	107,504	951	9,417	5,238	116	186,996
288	26	438,767	437	8,049	906	765	805,021
219	6	229,324	669	14,816	6,113	268	356,752
151	13	76,085	811	9,431	5,956	154	144,052
269	20	336,405	459	5,578	1,008	579	431,673
48	5	119,060	606	8,596	7,807	264	283,849
244	28	414,045	373	7,947	527	637	628,328
129	2	300,130	752	11,105	3,729	253	431,732
368	20	301,159	446	10,228	929	531	377,652
185	4	9,045	2,133	1,730	10,181	46	19,552
255	17	295,831	591	14,612	1,575	644	449,419
131	5	24,290	1,999	8,136	9,836	88	51,673
249	14	51,887	754	7,238	3,619	96	130,663
161	6	72,770	502	6,539	4,708	117	146,874
59	4	26,393	2,567	4,250	11,299	51	43,818
179	7	118,252	302	12,633	6,496	69	209,061
282	9	83,702	273	9,028	4,046	143	235,492
216	3	24,184	984	6,071	7,121	122	80,011
211	3	39,517	591	7,747	5,619	61	120,445
196	7	96,910	619	8,260	4,638	103	340,259
161	8	61,464	379	9,930	4,977	72	75,869

Building a New AAU

To create this list, we began with 203 public and private universities that have been classified by the non-profit Carnegie Foundation as having “High” or “Very High” levels of research activity.¹⁸ We then ranked the institutions using measures designed to gauge their commitment to research, scholarship and furthering the public interest of helping substantial numbers of diverse students earn quality degrees.

For research, we used:

- The number of faculty who are members of National Academies
- The number of faculty who have earned various awards of scholarly distinction
- The number of postdoctoral fellowships
- Total research funding
- Total federal research funding
- The number of doctorates awarded

For undergraduate education, we focused on:

- The number of bachelor's degrees awarded
- The undergraduate admissions rate, with colleges penalized for rejecting large numbers of students
- The number of bachelor's degrees awarded to minority students
- The number of students receiving Pell Grants
- The net price for low-income students

(A more detailed explanation of how these variables were calculated will be available at edcentral.org/newaaau.)

After ranking all 203 institutions, we identified every university that satisfied two criteria: First, they had to rank higher than the lowest ranking public university that is currently a member of the AAU (the University of Colorado – Boulder). Second, they had to have a net price for low-income students (defined by the federal government as having an annual family income between \$0 and \$30,000) of less than \$15,000 per year. Net price is what colleges charge students out of pocket after subtracting scholarships and grants. A university can't credibly claim to be advancing the cause of social mobility if it forces the poorest families to pay an amount often equal to or great than their entire annual income to send a single child to college.

The resulting list of 82 institutions includes a mix of universities that are part of the existing AAU and some who have been historically excluded from the club.¹⁹

Universities joining the New AAU include the likes of Arizona State University, the University of Central Florida, North Carolina State University, and the University of New Mexico. These are all large, well-respected research universities. Their absence from the Old AAU is entirely a function of their commitment to enrolling and graduating large numbers of students from varied backgrounds.

Arizona State, for example, already garners more research funding than the University of Virginia (member, 1904) and produces more annual PhDs.²⁰ The main difference between them is that ASU has a larger undergraduate class and admits roughly 90 percent of applicants, compared to 30 percent at UVA. Arizona State enrolls more students with Pell Grants in a given year than Virginia enrolls in ten years. The Old AAU's antagonism to diversity is striking. As one member president said in rejecting the idea of expanding membership to as many as 100 universities, “The advantage of this association, compared to others in higher [education], is that we're all supposed to be alike.”²¹

Excluding universities that charge the lowest-income families more than half their annual income in tuition removes two public universities, the University of Pittsburgh and Penn State, from the list. This underscores how much public support for higher education varies among states, and how lawmakers and university officials in Pennsylvania have abdicated their responsibility to help first-generation and economically disadvantaged students grab the ladder of opportunity at their state's most prestigious research universities.

There are also regional patterns among the two lists. Many New AAU members are located in southern and western states, reflecting the growth of the nation's population over the last 114 years. Even today, the Old AAU retains vestiges of America's late 19th century center of gravity in the northeast and near west.

The roster of 82 New AAU institutions includes 69 public universities and 13 private universities. This stands in contrast to the Old AAU mix of 34 public and 26 private universities in the United States. But the New AAU is not inherently biased against private institutions. Public universities educate a much larger proportion of students than they did a century ago. And private universities including Harvard, Stanford, Columbia, Yale, Duke, and MIT would be part of the New AAU.

““ The New AAU would provide a much-improved incentive structure for aspiring universities

Others fall short. New York University, for example, has built an impressive cadre of researchers and scholars over the last two decades. Unfortunately, this growth has been financed largely by undergraduate students and their parents, many of whom have taken out large loans to pay tuition. NYU charges the poorest students over \$25,000 in annual tuition, more than most of those families earn, in total, in a year. By contrast, Harvard charges around \$1,300; Stanford just over \$5,000. This is surely because the latter universities have much larger endowments than NYU – but from a student’s standpoint, that doesn’t matter. They’re the ones left with huge bills and, very likely, debt. The prices universities charge low-income students reflect their priorities. Those that don’t care enough about affordability should not enjoy the status of the New AAU.

The New AAU would recognize already-great institutions that are balancing their obligations to scholarship and undergraduate education. The University of Missouri recently announced plans to divert two percent of all university funds, including the humanities and agriculture, toward the explicit goal of juicing scientific research numbers in the short term—not because this would be good for science, or students, or anything scholarly, but because, in the words of a senior administrator, “The AAU is very serious about its members’ productivity; the AAU is not static. Thus, MU needs to raise our numbers in each of these measures, and we need to do so in short order.”²² This kind of behavior is corrosive and serves no interests other than those of a self-perpetuating elite.

Similarly, Florida State University has spent the last decade prioritizing the chimerical goal of AAU membership over its historical mission of enrolling and educating low-income and minority students. When FSU President T.K. Wetherell first outlined this agenda in 2005,²³ he posed the question directly: “Why do we care so much? Why is selection into the AAU so important to the University?”

Tellingly, his answers had little or nothing to do with helping diverse Florida students earn bachelor’s degrees. Instead, he said, “AAU membership will allow us to attract even stronger faculty and graduate students.” FSU would “stand to benefit by improving the things that AAU considers most important – grant awards, faculty recognitions such as academy memberships, citations and nationally ranked programs.” Wetherell noted with

approval the pure status competition inherent to his quest. Other states had multiple AAU institutions, and “It’s time for the Sunshine State to have another.” “We face stiff competition” from other aspirant research universities, he observed, and “It’s going to take hard work to move ahead of them.”

What kind of work would that be? “Competition for recognition in research is a highly competitive business,” Wetherell said, “and full of extremely strong institutions and people...sometimes it will be better to focus efforts, to assign more teaching or research depending on a faculty member’s strength.” This is administrative code language for diverting the most credentialed, highly-paid professors away from their teaching duties and replacing them in the classroom with low-paid graduate students and adjunct professors.

In a time when more Florida students than ever before need an affordable, high quality college education, Wetherell proclaimed that “AAU membership is our number one goal.” Nine year and millions of dollars later, it remains unmet.

The New AAU would provide a much-improved incentive structure for aspiring universities that seek the recognition AAU membership brings. Institutions with national ambitions would no longer be forced to adopt the policies of exclusion when it comes to admissions. Or, should they be tempted by the prestige of exclusivity, they would no longer be able to abandon their obligations to the public interest by serving only the interests of the elite.

The definition of the New AAU embodied in this list should not be seen as definitive. In the future, member institutions should explore methods of more broadly defining research activity to encompass non-traditional revenue sources focused on community and public interests. It should also invest in better measures of student learning and post-graduation success, to ensure that universities graduating large numbers of students are not watering down academic standards.

But the broad principles undergirding the New AAU are clear enough. It is time for responsible higher education leaders to reject the antiquated, exclusionary values of the Old AAU and create a new definition of higher education excellence that truly serves the needs of our times.

Notes

- 1 Ann Leigh Speicher, "The Association of American Universities: A Century of Service to Higher Education, 1900-2000," Association of American Universities, <http://www.aau.edu/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=1090>
- 2 Laurence Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 175.
- 3 Audrey N. Slate, *AGS: A History* (Austin, TX: The Association of Graduate Schools in the Association of American Universities, 1994), 3-6.
- 4 Speicher, "The Association of American Universities: A Century of Service."
- 5 Speicher, "The Association of American Universities: A Century of Service."
- 6 Speicher, "The Association of American Universities: A Century of Service."
- 7 Speicher, "The Association of American Universities: A Century of Service."
- 8 Speicher, "The Association of American Universities: A Century of Service."
- 9 Speicher, "The Association of American Universities: A Century of Service."
- 10 <https://www.nsf.gov/od/lpa/nsf50/vbush1945.htm>
- 11 http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d12/tables/dt12_221.asp
- 12 Speicher, "The Association of American Universities: A Century of Service."
- 13 Cook, *Lobbying for Higher Education*, 143.
- 14 <https://chronicle.com/article/Ouster-Opens-a-Painful-Debate/127364/>
- 15 <https://chronicle.com/article/Syracuse-U-Facing-a-Forced/127363/>
- 16 http://education.newamerica.net/sites/newamerica.net/files/policydocs/Next_Generation_University_FINAL_FOR_RELEASE.pdf
- 17 The case for a new prestige organization in higher education has been cogently made by Jeffrey Selingo, see for example "American Higher Education Needs a New Club," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2012, <http://chronicle.com/blogs/next/2012/11/05/american-higher-education-needs-a-new-club/>
- 18 <http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org/methodology/basic.php>
- 19 Because of data limitations, this list omits the two Canadian members of the AAU, McGill University and the University of Toronto, both of which were admitted in 1926. The analysis does not speak to their ranking on the proposed criteria.
- 20 Arizona State University is a partner with the New America Foundation and Slate Magazine in the financing and promotion of *Future Tense*, an online media project that is financially and administratively separate from the New America Education Policy Program. ASU played no role in the financing or creation of this report.
- 21 <https://chronicle.com/article/Ouster-Opens-a-Painful-Debate/127364/>
- 22 http://www.columbiatribune.com/business/saturday_business/hank-foley-university-of-missouri/article_ed7875e-b6cf-11e3-a2f3-10604b9f7e7c.html
- 23 <http://president.fsu.edu/State-of-the-University-Address/September-2005>

Methodology

The initial candidates for NAAU institutions included the 203 public and private universities located in US with the 2010 Carnegie Classification of either “very high research” or “high research.” Canadian institutions and research institutions without undergraduate programs

were excluded from the initial list. The remaining institutions were ranked according to a total point accrued from the combined performance of the eleven variables. The table below shows these variables, along with their definition, year, and source.

#	Variable	Variable Year	Definition	Source
1	Total Research Expenditures	2009	Total Research Expenditures as reported to the National Science Foundation (NSF)'s Survey of R&D Expenditures at Universities and Colleges.	The Center for Measuring University Performance (MUP Center), NSF
2	Federal Research Expenditures	2009	Federally-funded Research Expenditures as reported to NSF's Survey of R&D Expenditures at Universities and Colleges.	MUP Center, NSF
3	Faculty Awards in the Arts, Humanities, Science, Engineering, and Health	2010	The following awards are considered faculty awards: American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) Fellows, Beckman Young Investigators, Burroughs Wellcome Fund Career Awards, Cottrell Scholars, Fulbright American Scholars, Getty Scholars in Residence, Guggenheim Fellows, Howard Hughes Medical Institute Investigators, Lasker Medical Research Awards, MacArthur Foundation Fellows, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Distinguished Achievement Awards, National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Fellows, National Humanities Center Fellows, National Institutes of Health (NIH) MERIT (R37), National Medal of Science and National Medal of Technology, NSF CAREER awards (excluding those who are also PECASE winners), Newberry Library Long-term Fellows, Pew Scholars in Biomedicine, Presidential Early Career Awards for Scientists and Engineers (PECASE), Robert Wood Johnson Policy Fellows, Searle Scholars, Sloan Research Fellows, US Secretary of Agriculture Honor Awards, or Woodrow Wilson Fellows.	MUP Center
4	National Academy Members	2010	Membership in the following academies is considered national academy members: the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), the National Academy of Engineering (NAE), or the Institute of Medicine (IOM)	MUP Center
5	Doctoral Degrees Awarded	2010	Number of doctoral degrees awarded as reported to IPEDS.	MUP Center, IPEDS
6	Postdoctoral Employees	2009	The number of postdoctoral employees as reported to NSF's Survey of Graduate Students and Postdoctorates in Science and Engineering. In the NSF's survey, postdoctorates are defined as individuals with PhD, MD, DDS or DVM in science and engineering fields.	MUP Center, NSF

#	Variable	Variable Year	Definition	Source
7	Pell Grant Recipients	2010-11	Number of undergraduate students who received Pell Grant.	Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Systems (IPEDS)
8	Bachelor's Degrees Awarded	2010-11	The number of bachelor's degrees awarded (first major only).	IPEDS
9	Postsecondary Degrees Awarded to Ethnic Minority Students	2010-11	Postsecondary degrees include Associate degrees and above (first major only), but excludes certificates. Ethnic Minority includes students with Black, African-American, American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, Other Pacific Islander, or Hispanic origin.	IPEDS
10	Net Price for Low-income Undergraduate Students	2010-11	Average out-of-pocket price charged for degree-seeking, full-time, first-time freshmen with their family income of \$30,000 or less who received Title IV federal financial aid during 2010-11. Net price also includes expenses for books, supplies, and room & boards. Missing data were substituted by the data for the most recent year available.	IPEDS
11	Admission Rate	Fall 2011	Defined as admitted students as a percentage of total applicants.	IPEDS

All variables but net price and admission rate were first converted through logarithmic transformation with the base number of 10 to reduce the skew in distribution. This transformation was not necessary for net price and admission rate, as both were already near-normally

distributed. We then re-scaled the converted values into z-scores for each variable. The total point is a sum of the z-scores of all 11 variables. NAAU institutions are those with the total score higher than the lowest ranked AAU public institution, which is the University of Oregon.

