The New York Times | http://nyti.ms/2ehdBy8

EDUCATION LIFE | PLIGHT OF THE PUBLIC U

How the University of Alabama Became a National Player

By LAURA PAPPANO NOV. 3, 2016

It's only fitting that the admissions tour for the University of Alabama starts in Bryant-Denny Stadium. On game days, the campus's iconic quad — a painterly expanse of lawn, majestic trees and bell tower — becomes a crimson and white tent city of numbered tailgating plots, some with electricity.

Coach Nick Saban is so revered that as rain threatened this year's sorority rush, prayers went out to "Lord Saban" for sunshine, which brings us to the second thing Bama is famous for: Greek life. Banners flew along Colonial Drive after the August rush. One, for Alpha Omicron Pi, descended over four white pillars boasting, with a pun on the house's floral symbol, of recruiting success: "We Rose Higher Than the Rest."

How then, you might ask, did Brianna Zavilowitz, a Staten Islander with 2120 SATs and a 4.0 grade-point average, daughter of a retired N.Y.P.D. detective and an air traffic controller, with zero interest in pledging and middling enthusiasm for football, wind up in Tuscaloosa for college?

This was not the capricious choice of a freckle-faced teenager, which she is. Rather, the reason she turned down the University of California, Berkeley, and canceled her Columbia University interview ("I figured I didn't want to waste his

time") reveals the new competitive ethos in public higher education: Think big and recruit.

Ms. Zavilowitz first noticed the university on Facebook. A few clicks and Bama was omnipresent. Pop-ups, emails and literature piqued her interest. She visited, took the bus tour, was tickled by the Southern hospitality. Her mother appreciated detailed parent information suggesting "a well-oiled machine." There was more: a full-tuition scholarship. "My mom kept telling me not to look at the money," said Ms. Zavilowitz, chatting in red Alabama footies. "But it definitely helped." Roll, Tide, roll.

With state funding now just 12.5 percent of the university's budget, campus leaders have mapped an offensive strategy to grow in size, prestige and, most important, revenue. The endgame is to become a national player known for more than championship football. Berkeley, the University of Michigan and University of Virginia are the schools "we compare ourselves against," said Kevin W. Whitaker, Alabama's interim provost,

Alabama has invested heavily to lure students like Ms. Zavilowitz, who does not qualify for federal financial aid. The university is spending $100.6 million in merit aid, up from $8.3 million a decade ago and more than twice what it allocates to students with financial need. It also has hired an army of recruiters to put Bama on college lists of full-paying students who, a few years ago, might not have looked its way.

The University of Alabama is the fastest-growing flagship in the country. Enrollment hit 37,665 this fall, nearly a 58 percent increase over 2006. As critical as the student body jump: the kind of student the university is attracting. The average G.P.A. of entering freshmen is 3.66, up from 3.4 a decade ago, and the top quarter scored at least a 31 on the ACT, up from 27.

Each year, about 18 percent of freshmen leave their home state for college in another. They tend to be the best prepared academically and most able to pay, said Thomas G. Mortenson, senior scholar at the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, who tracks this data. Achieving students are

likely to be bound for successful lives, enhancing their alma mater's status and, the hope is, filling its coffers with donations. Schools want them.

Merit aid given to achievers has a magnetic effect. "If we recruit five students from a high school, we will get 10 students the next year and they may not all be scholarship students," said Stuart R. Bell, president of the University of Alabama.

Instead of layoffs and cuts, some public universities facing budget challenges are following this blueprint for survival: higher charges to students, and more of them. Nowadays, the real money comes from tuition and fees. The average for four-year public colleges rose 81 percent in constant dollars between 2000 and 2014. At Alabama, tuition and fees have about doubled in the last decade, to $10,470 for residents and to $26,950 for nonresidents.

Even when it awards full-tuition scholarships, the university makes money — on dorm rooms and meal plans, books, football tickets, hoodies and school spirit items like the giant Bama banner Ms. Zavilowitz and her roommates bought for the blank wall in the suite's common area. All told, these extras and essentials brought in $173 million last year — on top of $633 million in tuition and fees, up from $135 million in 2005.

"I hate very much to use this analogy, but it's like running a business," Dr. Whitaker said.

The impact of this strategy is visible on campus, where pristine brick Greek Revival buildings seem like toy models slipped from boxes and set on green plots amid curvilinear streets of fresh black asphalt. In the past decade, the university has added 64 buildings, including an engineering research quad with labs for testing combustion engines and large-scale structures (a "shake table" simulates earthquakes).

"The university must have campus facilities that are competitive to meet student enrollment goals," according to the 2014-15 financial statement. Gleaming new labs await researchers, and there are plans to expand graduate programs and hire 300 to 400 new faculty members in the next five years. Around Tuscaloosa are

cranes, fenced-off construction zones and new apartments (8,270 additional beds since 2012). The parking lots are license-plate bingo heaven.

Ambition has its costs. As colleges adopt enrollment management strategies like aggressive recruiting and merit aid, the traditional role of public colleges is changing, said Stephen Burd, senior policy analyst at the think tank New America. This is leaving state residents and lower-income students with "no four-year schools where they can go in an affordable way," he said. "There is less aid for low-income students and there are fewer seats" as colleges favor those who already have an advantage.

Alabamians are now just 43 percent of the student body. On a campus bus tour crowded with out-of-state students and parents, a senior in a red dress, black heels and pearls (a guide uniform) offered that fact as a selling point.

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Public higher education is facing an identity crisis in mission and modus operandi. Nearly 30 years ago, legislative appropriations provided 59 percent of core revenues at public four-year colleges. In 2013, the latest year available, states covered 27 percent on average, according to Mr. Mortenson's calculations. Funding is on track to reach zero in less than 20 years in some states and as soon as six in Colorado and nine in Alaska.

"What happens when states stop funding higher education altogether?" he asked. Politicians have made college affordability a talking point, but education experts like Mr. Mortenson doubt that election-year proposals will reverse the trend, at least any time soon.

Overall enrollments have been dropping since 2010. That has all but the nation's top schools battling for students. Alabama may be a standout example, but across the country university flagships and even regional campuses once focused on serving nearby counties are extending their reach. Arizona State University , Oregon State University and Utah State University have amped up online programs (Starbucks reimburses employee tuition for A.S.U. Online degrees),

expanded their campuses, are building or buying satellite campuses and, in the process, significantly raising enrollments.

When states suffer budget woes, others feast. “Stress in California,” said Kent Hopkins, vice president of enrollment management at A.S.U., “is definitely an advantage as we talk to California students and their parents.” Enrollments from California are up 46 percent in six years. It might be ugly, but once-staid public universities “are doing what private colleges have done for a long time,” said Kevin W. Crockett, president of enrollment management at Ruffalo Noel Levitz, a higher education consulting firm. They are asking, “What is the appropriate price point for students to cross state lines?”

Miami University of Ohio got on board for fall 2010, announcing a scholarship “guarantee” with an ACT of 26 and a 3.7 G.P.A. The university had fallen “several hundred” short of the freshman goal, said Susan K. Schaurer, assistant vice president for enrollment management and director of admission. “Our mantra had been to accomplish, but do so humbly and quietly,” she said. “When you are thrust into an incredibly competitive higher education landscape, you have to shift that thinking.”

Over the next 18 months, Miami hired two national recruiters and bought contact information from the College Board and ACT for students around the country instead of tapping the usual feeder schools. With its classical arches, tranquil courtyards and liberal arts curriculum, it is often mistaken for a private college, which it is capitalizing on, reaching out to families “seeking that private school experience,” Ms. Schaurer said. Applications are up 62 percent since 2010; two-thirds now come from out of state. Last year, for example, 41 students applied from Greenwich High School in Connecticut and 33 from Mira Costa High School in California.

With its success in drawing more students, Miami has walked back on merit aid; there are still scholarships, but the guarantee is gone and, as of this fall, the qualifying ACT score is higher. These days, Ms. Schaurer said, “a student with a 26 ACT is really below average.” Miami now has seven recruiters.

The University of South Carolina has 20. Since it hired someone to recruit in Massachusetts, applicants from that state have jumped, from 335 in 2010 to 881 last year, and enrollments have nearly tripled, from 57 to 156; Massachusetts now ranks eighth as a source of out-of-staters to the Columbia, S.C., campus. Over all, applications from out-of-state students are now double those of residents.

Recruiters are shaking up college conversations, said Paul C. Kaser, a counselor at the Bergen County Academies, a public magnet school in New Jersey where nearly half the seniors are National Merit Scholars, finalists, semifinalists or commended students, and parents and students meet counselors with Excel spreadsheets in hand. “There might be an old stereotype of public universities not caring and just looking at numbers,” he said, but their recruiters “come to our school to be on panels, to host luncheons.” They respond to emails within hours. As a result, students are now at universities that “were not even on our radar five years ago.” When he first mentioned Alabama four years ago, he recalled, “the parents said, ‘Alabama!?’ I said, ‘Hear me out.’”

One student starts a pipeline. Five graduates of the Academies are now there.

The University of Alabama has 45 recruiters — 36 outside of Alabama, including Dee McGraw-Hickey, a Tuscaloosa native living on Long Island. Last spring, she tweeted as her recruits committed. In August, she held a send-off lunch at her home with sweet tea, lemonade and a game of corn hole in the backyard. Her schedule includes 80 events between September and Thanksgiving. She loves to mention merit aid at them because so many from her region — New York City, Long Island and Connecticut — qualify, giving Alabama a competitive edge.

“Everybody wants the kids from the Northeast and California,” according to Mr. Burd of New America. “They are wealthy and they tend to be good students.”

In the past six years, in Ms. McGraw-Hickey’s region, applications to Alabama rose from 193 to 903. At Alabama, recruiting assignments go all the way to the top. Dr. Bell, the president, routinely travels to meet parents and students, recently telling a young man in Dallas not to visit campus without stopping by. “He came to my office on Friday with his dad,” Dr. Bell said.

Raising alumni money for academics, much as the Crimson Tide Foundation has cultivated athletic boosters, is on Dr. Bell's wish list. "That is an area we are going to grow," he said. "That is a culture shift."

It's one that more are making.

While most public universities have sat back as privates landed eye-popping donations, that's changing. As dusk settled over New York City, the Empire State Building was lit up in green and gold, the colors of the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Va. Uptown, over miniature Virginia ham sandwiches, the college thanked 400 local donors who helped to raise $52 million. A new $1 billion campaign has as a goal to secure donations from 40 percent of its alumni. This year, donor dollars covered 12.8 percent of William & Mary's budget; 11.8 percent came from the state. In 1980, state money provided nearly 43 percent of the budget.

It is no accident that states with among the largest drops in state allocations since 2008 — Arizona (down 56 percent), South Carolina (down 37 percent) and Alabama (down 36 percent), according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities — have entrepreneurial public campuses trained on growth. Those same states also had the greatest net gain in students: More entered the state to attend their four-year public institutions than left to study elsewhere, according to fall 2014 data, the most recent available.

New Jersey has long struggled to draw students. It had the second largest net loss in students, after Illinois. Rutgers officials noticed. An honors college, another popular recruiting tool, opened at the New Brunswick campus last year in a new building with stained glass windows, carpeted dorm rooms and light-filled social spaces, including a coffee bar with fireplace. Campus recruiting goals are modest — 7 percent more out-of-state students and 2 percent more international students for next fall — but officials certainly want to keep the likes of Daniel Ferioli from Hillsdale, N.J., with a 2300 SAT and 3.98 G.P.A., from leaving.

"We have been losing top academic talent to other states," said Matt Matsuda, academic dean for the honors college. Halting that "is something that from the president's office on down has been a priority." Mr. Ferioli turned down

Georgetown for Rutgers, reasoning that with plans for an M.B.A. from Harvard or Wharton the honors college offered a similar path at a better price. “It wouldn’t be worth paying all that money for Georgetown if I would end up in the same place.”

Jillian Mazon, too, had weighed college options carefully. When we met before classes began in August, she was still getting used to the South (“Everyone calls you ma’am”) and the serious sorority rush (35 parties in seven days; she’s in Delta Gamma). It was 96 degrees, and unbearably humid for a Burlington, Conn., native. She showed me her dorm room. Over the desk was a map of Connecticut made by one of her six best friends; arrows radiated from a heart with the distance to each one’s college. She has gone the farthest: 1,135.6 miles.

An organized person whose closet is arranged by color, Ms. Mazon started her college list in eighth grade and toured 26 campuses. Her mother liked Duke, but she was certain after two visits that Vanderbilt was her top choice — until the full-tuition scholarship and admission to the honors college came from Alabama. She didn’t apply elsewhere. “I would never want to be $70,000 a year in debt,” said Ms. Mazon, who plans a career in finance.

For Ms. Mazon, whose mother is a teacher and whose father heads maintenance at an assisted living complex, graduating nearly debt-free put Alabama alongside prestigious privates in her mind. “I don’t think I am at a disadvantage,” Ms. Mazon said, leaning against a crimson padded bench, green toenails slipped into flip-flops. “How many Alabama alumni are out there compared to Harvard? My freshman class is 8,000 kids,” she said. “That network is so extensive, it is insane.”

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To critics who say public universities are shirking their public service role, Dr. Bell counters that enrolling out-of-state students seeds the Alabama economy with talent. It’s not uncommon for students to settle in the state of their alma mater — “one of the biggest drivers of growth in our state,” he said.

But Natasha Levitin, daughter of computer programmers, is looking forward to “going home” for a job as an analyst at Wells Fargo in New York City after

graduation this spring. “I was just looking for the school that was the best bang for the buck,” she said.

When she matriculated, she had not grasped the culture of the campus. “I had never seen a Confederate flag until I came down here,” she said. Then there was the dominance of Greek life. She had known a sorority was not for her. But neither was she prepared for the protests and national attention after the student newspaper reported the exclusion of black women from sororities, partly because of pressure from the Machine, a secret society that controls Greek life, to block pledges based on skin color.

“Seeing it happen my freshman year that black girls are not allowed in sororities because they are black — it was embarrassing,” she said. “It was all over the news.” Suddenly, she had to defend her choice of Alabama to friends on social media.

The United States attorney’s office in Birmingham demanded an action plan, which the university released in July ahead of a new strategic plan. Plans call for hiring a campus diversity officer and a model to promote inclusion of minorities in Greek life (during this year’s sorority rush, 29 African-American women were admitted; in 2012, there were fewer than five).

The campus is now 11 percent African-American. It was 15 percent in 2000. The state is 27 percent black.

When I asked Ms. McGraw-Hickey how diversity concerns figured in her recruiting, she said it rarely comes up. “I feel like to me the campus is diverse in so many ways,” she said, adding, “You see so many students from all over the country, from different religions, different racial backgrounds.”

How a school with deep Southern history builds a modern national identity is an open question. To students from the urban North, the oft-evoked appeal to Bama “pride” and “tradition” may seem more like stubborn adherence to parochial views than something rich to rally behind. More than just ACT scores and G.P.A.’s, growth in stature is also about extending cultural boundaries.

Diluting ties to home states and communities, and filling classrooms with students from around the nation, can free ingrained perspectives.

On the other hand, it may transform these entrepreneurial public players — the pathway to better fortune for generations of state residents — into yet another national brand for those with resources. “It’s kind of like you can travel around the country and you see the same suburban stores everywhere you go, the same chains,” said Mr. Burd of New America. “You don’t diversify by only bringing in the most privileged people. You just get people who have pretty much the same values.”

Mr. Mortenson understands the pressures for revenue. “I don’t blame them,” he said. “But what kind of future are we building for the country?”

Laura Pappano is writer-in-residence at Wellesley Centers for Women at Wellesley College.

A version of this article appears in print on November 6, 2016, on page ED12 of Education Life with the headline: Plight of the Public U: Bama Wants You!.