Presidents Brief

Intelligence to Inform Your Institutional Strategy

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FOCUS:

Employers Follow the Shift in Institutional Prestige: How the New Talent Economy is Reshaping Winners and Losers in Higher Education

In the new talent economy, institutional prestige is being rewritten not by tradition, but by which campuses have become indispensable to employers and regional growth.

This brief traces how flagship and emerging public universities have leveraged technology, corporate partnerships, and experience-rich ecosystems to pull ahead. It argues that presidents can no longer rely on historical reputation alone.

They must intentionally build scalable talent pipelines, align programs with workforce demand, and position their institutions as preferred suppliers to the economies they serve.

Introduction

For generations, higher education operated under a relatively stable hierarchy.

A small number of elite private universities occupied the top tier. Strong private colleges held respected positions in their regions. Flagship public universities delivered affordable access to high-quality education. Regional institutions served local communities and workforce needs.

Employers largely mirrored these distinctions.

Students understood them.

Parents understood them.

And boards understood them.

While individual institutions rose and fell, the overall structure remained remarkably consistent. However, today that hierarchy looks very different. Many of America's strongest public universities have evolved from affordable regional options into globally recognized brands.

Institutions such as Michigan, Texas, Georgia Tech, Purdue, Florida, NC State, Arizona State, Clemson, Ohio State, UCF, and Texas A&M have dramatically expanded their influence, visibility, resources, research capacity, and employer relationships.

At the same time, many small, mid-sized, and even elite private institutions face a reality few anticipated ten years ago. The competitive gap has widened, not because these institutions have become weaker, but because they have not been able to keep up as flagship institutions have become dramatically stronger.

Over the last three decades, major public universities accumulated resources, exposure, athletic visibility, corporate partnerships, research investments, technology infrastructure, alumni influence, and national brand awareness at an unprecedented pace.

The market's perception of higher education value shifted. And employers followed.

How We Got Here

The change did not happen overnight.

It happened through a series of reinforcing moments that steadily widened the distance between institutional leaders and everyone else. The internet dramatically expanded visibility. Major athletic brands became national entertainment properties. Social media turned universities into consumer brands. Video content removed geographic barriers. Online rankings amplified awareness. Large research investments accelerated innovation. Technology transformed teaching, learning, and workforce preparation.

Then came the Experience Economy.

Students and their parents have always chosen schools based on brand and prestige, and today they increasingly choose institutions not only for elite academics but also for identity, community, belonging, outcomes, and exceptional experiences. Universities that could invest heavily in these experiences pulled even further ahead.

Today, a student in New Jersey can feel connected to Alabama football. A student in Virginia can closely follow life at Texas A&M. A family in New York can tour Arizona State on their smartphone. Institutional brands now travel nationally and internationally in ways that were impossible twenty years ago.

Meanwhile, flagship universities continue to invest billions in facilities, technology, research, athletics, student experiences, and employer partnerships.

The result was not simply increased visibility. It was increased prestige.

Where top students go, employers will follow.

When Top Students Move, Employers Move with Them

One of the least discussed consequences of this shift is how dramatically employer recruiting has changed. Historically, employers followed talent.

Today, like professional athletic scouts, employers follow the new talent ecosystems. That distinction matters because talent ecosystems are being built by a different set of institutions.

Era One: The Target School Era

Traditionally, on-campus recruiting by employers was largely driven by traditional prestige. A consulting firm might recruit at twenty schools. An investment bank might focus on fifteen. An engineering company might maintain deep relationships with a handful of flagship engineering institutions. If you attended a target school, opportunities found you.

Entire career paths often depended upon institutional proximity to recruiting pipelines. The model worked because employers could afford to be selective. Talent shortages were less severe. Technology was less sophisticated. And recruiting nationally was expensive.

The result was a relatively concentrated system where a small number of institutions enjoyed disproportionate access to employer attention.

Era Two: Talent Everywhere

Recently, employers learned something important: talent is everywhere.

As labor markets tightened and technology improved, employers expanded their search. Remote interviews became common. LinkedIn transformed discovery. Data improved candidate screening. Companies realized exceptional students were reachable far beyond historical recruiting lists.

Suddenly, institutions such as Arizona State, UCF, NC State, Iowa State, Cincinnati, and UNC Charlotte were producing graduates who competed successfully with graduates from traditional target schools.

Employers expanded.

Students benefited.

But another shift was quietly emerging.

🎯 **The institutions that most effectively scaled employer relationships during this period began to distinguish themselves from their competitors.**

Era Three: Rise of the Regional Talent Powerhouse

Today, the most successful recruiting organizations are not asking:

"What is the most prestigious school?"

They are asking:

"Where can we reliably find talent at scale?"

That subtle difference is transforming higher education, shifting power toward institutions that can systematically connect students and employers at scale.

Leading regional universities, flagships and aspiring flagships, have become strategic workforce infrastructure. Charlotte's financial sector recruits heavily from nearby talent producers, such as UNC Charlotte. Atlanta corporations increasingly build pipelines through Georgia Tech and UGA. Texas employers recruit aggressively from Texas A&M and UT Austin. Midwestern manufacturers rely on Purdue, Ohio State, and Iowa State.

The institutions winning are often not those with the oldest reputations.

They are the institutions that have the strongest alignment with economic growth.

Corporate Partnerships: The New Strategic Infrastructure

This shift to aligning with economic growth created a second race— one for employer alignment.

Twenty years ago, many universities viewed corporate partnerships as advancement opportunities. Today, they are strategic necessities for quality enrollment pipelines.

The most successful institutions now build deep, integrated relationships with employers that influence curriculum, research, facilities, internships, co-ops, and workforce development.

Corporate partnerships have shifted from transactional support to structural investment, with companies building facilities near campuses to create a direct pipeline to student talent. The strongest examples increasingly resemble economic development strategies more than traditional academic relationships.

When Samsung announces semiconductor investments in Texas, universities benefit. When Microsoft invests in AI talent development, universities benefit. When Disney expands partnerships with UCF, universities benefit.

When healthcare systems partner with universities to address workforce shortages, universities benefit[1].

Students notice.

Families notice.

Employers notice.

[1]*List of examples in Appendix A.*

Technology and Talent: The New Arms Race

Every major era creates a competitive race. The railroad era. The manufacturing era. The internet era. The AI era. Higher education has entered a technology and talent arms race.

Universities across the country are investing hundreds of millions—and in some cases billions—of dollars into engineering, computing, AI, semiconductors, advanced manufacturing, health sciences, and workforce development initiatives to maintain high competitiveness for dollars and top student enrollment.

Universities are not suddenly realizing that technology is important. They are making these investments because employers are demanding talent. And institutions that supply talent are capturing employer investment.

The cycle is self-reinforcing.

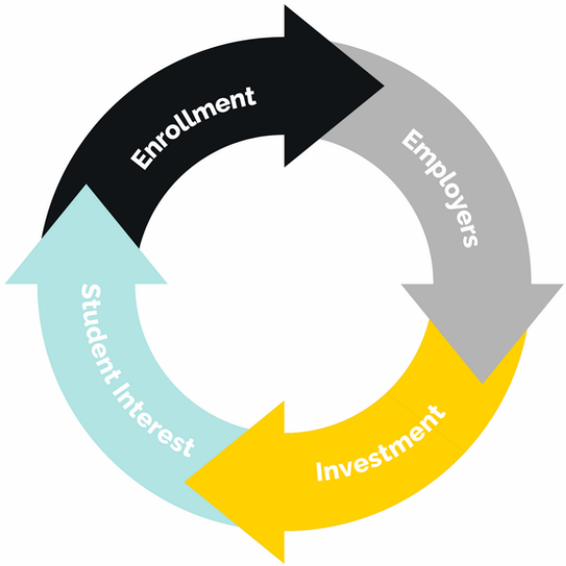
> Employer demand drives investment.

> Investment drives student interest.

> Student interest drives enrollment.

> Enrollment attracts additional employer investment[2].

The flywheel accelerates.



[2]*List of examples in Appendix B.*

Closing Perspective for Presidents

The question is not whether every institution can be at the top of the new prestige ladder.

The question is whether every institution can become indispensable.

1. Be known for something.
Distinctiveness increasingly beats generalization.

2. Build employer pipelines.
Invest in employer relationships as intentionally as student recruitment.

3. Align programs to employer demand.
Let workforce needs inform academic growth.

4. Build a corporate development function.
Create dedicated capacity to cultivate strategic employer partnerships.

5. Become a preferred talent supplier.
Own a market, industry, or workforce niche.

6. Invest in areas of economic growth relevant to your offerings and region.
Follow the industries attracting jobs, talent, and capital.

Institutions that accomplish these goals can build relevance regardless of size.

Final Thought

For decades, prestige drove employer behavior.

Today, employers increasingly influence prestige.

The institutions producing talent, building partnerships, and solving workforce challenges are gaining attention.

The institutions gaining attention are attracting investment.

And the institutions attracting investment are reshaping the competitive landscape.

The winners of the next decade will not be the institutions with longevity or a history of being “the first.”

They may be the institutions that become most valuable to the economies they serve.

That is a very different competition.

And it is already underway.

In recent decades, institutions competed primarily for students. Today, they compete simultaneously for students, employers, partners, technology investment, and workforce relevance.

Appendix A: Workforce Development & Talent Pipeline Partnerships

University	Corporate Partner	Strategic Focus	Scale / Impact
University of Central Florida	Disney	Hospitality, operations, internships	Tens of thousands of students have participated in Disney internships and employment programs
Arizona State University	Starbucks	Employee education	More than 50,000 Starbucks employees have participated in the ASU education program
University of Cincinnati	Procter & Gamble	Co-op education	One of the oldest and largest university-employer co-op ecosystems in the U.S.
Clemson University	BMW Group	Automotive engineering	Helped establish Clemson as a national leader in automotive engineering and manufacturing talent
University of South Carolina	Boeing	Aerospace workforce	Supports Boeing's South Carolina talent pipeline
University of Alabama	Mercedes-Benz Group	Advanced manufacturing	Direct talent pipeline supporting Alabama's automotive sector
Georgia Tech	Delta Airlines	Aviation, analytics, engineering	Deep recruiting and workforce partnership tied to Delta's Atlanta headquarters
N.C. State University	IBM	Technology workforce	Long-term talent and technology partnership supporting Research Triangle employers
UNC Charlotte	Bank of America	Finance, analytics	Major regional talent pipeline for Charlotte's banking industry
Texas A&M University	ExxonMobil	Engineering, energy	One of the strongest university-energy workforce relationships in the country

Source: OpenAI. (2026). *ChatGPT* [Large Language Model]. https://chat.openai.com

Appendix B: Academic & Technology Investment Partnerships

University	Corporate Partner	Academic Focus	Scale / Impact
University of Central Florida	Universal Destinations and Experiences	Hospitality, simulation, themed entertainment education	Hundreds of millions of dollars invested across Central Florida's tourism workforce ecosystem
University of Texas at Austin	Dell Technologies	Computing, artificial intelligence, entrepreneurship, research infrastructure	Part of a broader multi-billion-dollar Austin technology ecosystem
Texas A&M University	Samsung Electronics	Semiconductor workforce development	Samsung's Texas investments exceed $40 billion and are driving major engineering talent demand
Purdue University	Rolls-Royce	Aerospace engineering, advanced propulsion research	More than two decades of joint research and workforce development
Georgia Tech	Microsoft	AI, cloud computing, cybersecurity	Significant AI and computing research initiatives
Virginia Tech	Amazon Web Services	Cloud computing, cybersecurity, data science	Supports Virginia's growing technology corridor
Carnegie Mellon University	Google	AI, robots, machine learning	One of the most significant university-AI talent ecosystems in the world
University of Michigan	Ford Motor Company	Autonomous vehicles, mobility, battery technology	Hundreds of millions of dollars invested across mobility innovation initiatives
Arizona State University	Intel Corporation	Semiconductor engineering and workforce development	Supports Arizon's semiconductor expansion exceeding $100 billion in investments
Ohio State University	Intel Corporation	Semiconductor engineering and workforce development	Intel's Ohio project represents approximately $28 billion in initial investment
University at Albany	IBM	Semiconductors, nanotechnology, advanced manufacturing	Billions of dollars invested through the Albany NanoTech ecosystem
University of Florida	NVIDIA Corporation	AI supercomputing and curriculum development	One of the largest AI-focused academic computing investments in higher education

Source: OpenAI. (2026). *ChatGPT* [Large Language Model]. https://chat.openai.com

3E Intelligence Team

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With three decades of experience in modern marketing strategy and execution, Jim leads 3 Enrollment Marketing with a forward-thinking approach. He has a unique ability to anticipate industry shifts, integrating emerging technologies while staying grounded in core strategy. Passionate about the transformative power of higher education, Jim is committed to helping institutions harness the power of modern marketing to drive student success and institutional growth.

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3 Enrollment Marketing

With 25 years of experience in enrollment management, Patricia has seen firsthand the transformational impact of higher education on individuals, communities, and society. As an on-campus enrollment practitioner, an enrollment marketing consultant to more than 60 institutions, and a creator of innovative enrollment solutions, Patricia has built a career dedicated to helping institutions navigate the growing complexities of student recruitment. She co-founded 3 Enrollment Marketing to provide a smarter, more effective approach for enrollment leaders facing today's challenges.

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A leader in strategic planning, enrollment management, and marketing, Mary drives transformative change in higher education. With decades of experience conducting institutional audits and market analyses, she helps senior leaders identify and strengthen their competitive positioning. Mary specializes in crafting modern strategic plans that align with each institution's unique challenges and opportunities, ensuring long-term success in a rapidly evolving higher education landscape.