

SCIENCE AND SOCIETY

On The Road to Academic Greatness—A Parable

Daniel S. Greenberg

The swift ascent of the University of Avarice from obscurity to prominence was a seminal event of higher education in the second decade of this century. The transformation was the work of an innovative leader in university affairs, Dr. Grant Swinger. As provost of a leading university, Swinger had long been prized by academic headhunters. Offered the Avarice presidency, he promptly accepted and received marching orders to achieve national recognition for the little-known institution.

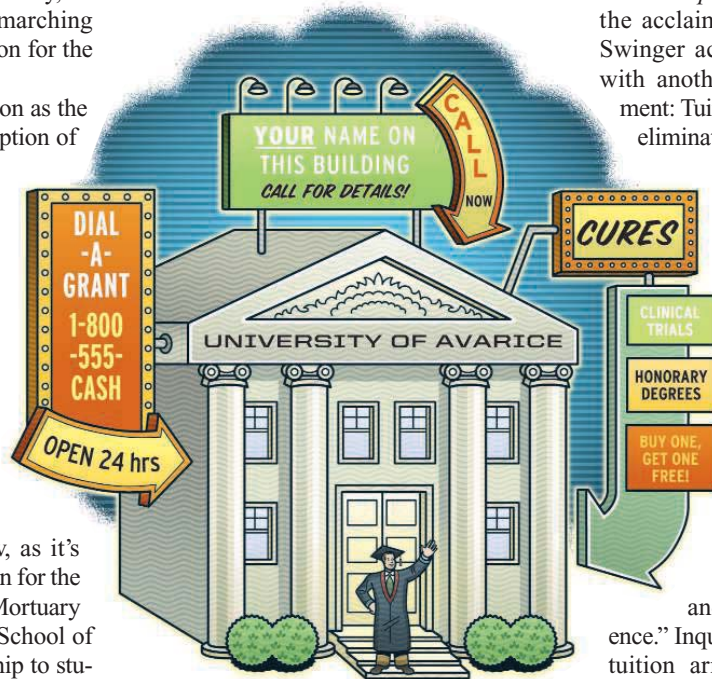
Renowned in his previous position as the founder of the Center for the Absorption of Federal Funds, Swinger brought to the challenge boldness, acumen, and energy. Confident and decisive, he inspired trust through his leadership abilities and scholarly attainments. Early in his career, he was the recipient of the prestigious Ripov Prize, annually awarded to the principal investigator holding the most concurrent grants. Other honors established him as a high achiever in the linkage of science and academe.

Before Swinger's arrival, U Av, as it's known, had briefly attracted attention for the body parts scandal at its School of Mortuary Science, which partnered with the School of Business in teaching entrepreneurship to students and faculty. The episode was settled out of court in an agreement that provided unspecified payments to bereaved relatives. (By agreement of the parties, court records were sealed, but this did not prevent a supermarket tabloid from reporting the case in an article titled "On the Trail of Granny's Femur.") Otherwise, U Av existed in an academic nether zone, along with numerous institutions that never register on the popular charts of university rankings.

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Barely settled into office, Swinger made national headlines by announcing a record-breaking fund-raising goal, an astonishing \$10 billion. The figure was more than double the previous high mark, set by Stanford, a renowned magnet for donations. Swinger told a press conference that the money would be "invested in excellence to meet the chal-



lenges that confront our nation and the world." Appointment of "distinguished faculty and concentration on urgent national problems" would have priority. He also disclosed that U Av would terminate employment of adjunct teaching staff "because of the financial and professional insecurity of their positions." Replacements would come from the graduate students' ranks, "thus providing the next generation of academics with valuable teaching experience."

The *New York Times* reported Swinger's announcements in an article headlined "Upstart U Reaches for the Stars—and the Big Bucks." Inquiries about the progress of the fund-raising drive were declined by U Av's rapidly expanding Office of Public Affairs as "premature, incompatible with privacy regulations, and potentially harmful to promising

Don't underestimate the power of greed in the halls of science.

discussions with prospective donors."

U Av next came to public attention with an announcement of record-breaking tuition and fees—\$100,000 per academic year, surpassing the prices of the brand-name schools. Applications for admission soared, earning the heretofore obscure institution its first notice in the coveted rating of *U.S. News & World Report*. "Hot newcomer" reported the acclaimed bible of academic rankings. Swinger accompanied the tuition increase with another headline-winning announcement: Tuition would not only be reduced or eliminated for students from families with modest incomes, but for the seriously impoverished, the university would provide payments to the students' families to compensate for earnings they might have provided. "We must be cognizant of today's economic realities," Swinger explained. NBC [the National Broadcasting Corporation] hailed Swinger as "the bold leader of a new generation of academic statesmen, visionary in outlook, sensitive to individual and national needs, and determined to make a difference." Inquiries about implementation of the tuition arrangements were dismissed as potential violation of privacy regulations.

The second year of the Swinger presidency brought another innovation to U Av—the founding of a major research facility, the Hugo First Institute for Human Experimentation, designed, Swinger explained at a ground-breaking ceremony, "to focus on 'translational research,' the formidable gap between basic science and bedside treatment." Noting that NIH had assigned a high priority and significant support for this type of research, Swinger vowed that the new institute would be "a leader in assuring the efficacy and safety of new treatments for the American people." Referring to Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), Swinger observed that "as often as they protect patients, they also get in the way of medical progress and constructive relations between academic institutions and industrial organizations. At U

Av,” he said with a flourish, “IRB stands for something else: Here, it means ‘Industrial Research Buddy.’” Buttons and T-shirts bearing those words were distributed to all laboratory staff, and a similarly inscribed banner was hung on the biochemistry building. The *Wall Street Journal* editorialized that “the refreshingly straight-talking Dr. Swinger looks like a good prospect for taking the helm of the benighted FDA [U.S. Food and Drug Administration] and steering it into the oblivion that it so richly deserves.”

U Av’s growing prominence took a still greater leap forward with an agreement with a major pharmaceutical firm that provided for company support of research in U Av’s laboratories, clinical testing of the firm’s products at the Hugo First Institute, and patent sharing of promising developments. Financial and other details were withheld from public disclosure, the partners explained, “in compliance with privacy regulations and the need to protect proprietary information in joint pursuit of therapeutic benefits for the American people.” As was later revealed, Swinger became a paid consultant for the company and, along with several members of the institute, received stock options in the firm. For strengthening the linkage between research and commercialization, senior members of U Av’s technology transfer office were given tenured professorships. Initially, U Av’s pharmaceutical partnership went smoothly, resulting in several promising patents and spin-offs.

But then, from the teeming ranks of perpetually malcontent graduate students, post-doctoral fellows, idle former adjuncts, and other ingrates, several went public with a variety of grievances. Shielded by protections for so-called whistle-blowers, they risked nothing. The most damaging allegations contended that the Hugo First Institute routinely fabricated reports of clinical trials based on nonexistent experimental subjects; that, in rare cases when trials were conducted, “results” were written up before experimental drugs were administered; and that research papers reporting the fraudulent trial results were routinely prepared by the sponsoring firms and published under the names of U Av researchers. The complainants told tales of eradication of disappointing data and drug sales pitches at continuing medical education programs by U Av faculty on the company payroll.

Promptly pledging “full and complete transparency,” Swinger announced creation of a “blue-ribbon, independent inquiry.” Following several closed-door meetings, the inquiry concluded that the allegations were

“wholly without merit.” Data corroborating the finding would not be made public, Swinger explained, in conformity with privacy regulations and the need to protect proprietary information. To soothe feelings on campus, Swinger called for “an intergenerational dialogue concerning the new world of science,” a move that won plaudits for leadership.

As controversies over the Hugo First Institute receded, a new difficulty arose. A student on work-study assignment in the U Av development office during the staff’s lunch break answered a telephone inquiry from a reporter concerning progress toward the \$10 billion fund-raising goal. The student, untoured in dealing with the press, helpfully explained, “They haven’t gotten anything yet. They’re complaining all the time”—comments that were published, with insinuations of setbacks in U Av’s progress toward national standing. Calling a press conference, Swinger earnestly pointed out that “major fund-raising is not an overnight process, and is not amenable to penny-by-penny counting.” Attempts to contact the student who had spoken injudiciously brought the response that she was “no longer on campus,” while reporters were discreetly advised that further information might be obtained from the university’s mental-health clinic.

Though the Swinger administration was deeply troubled by these adversities, the glow of success remained undiminished, leading the various published rankings of academic quality to post even higher rating for U Av. “Look out, Ivies,” *U.S. News & World Report* declared. Grant Swinger had not achieved success by ignoring reality. U Av was taking on water, and he alone knew it. Thus, when a distinguished search committee approached him as a possible candidate for heading the new permanent National Commission on Scientific Integrity, Swinger didn’t say no. Instead, citing the inviolability of his vow to shepherd U Av to national greatness, he expressed appreciation for the proffered position. When urged to consider the needs of the nation, he modestly noted his relatively brief tenure at U Av, telling the aroused recruiters, perhaps at another time. Now ecstatic about the man in their sights, the committee overcame his resistance. Expressing deep regret, Swinger informed the U Av trustees that “my sense of responsibility to the nation’s scientific enterprise compels me to accept the challenge that has been thrust upon me.”

Meanwhile, U Av’s jilted trustees wondered: When all was going so well, why would their prize president jump ship? As a first step, they ordered an audit in expecta-

tion of finding a solid financial base that would help attract the next leader for the climb to national prominence. Alas, the auditors’ report was bleak: the \$10 billion campaign had not yet covered its expenses; applications for admission had indeed risen, but in the absence of funds for financial aid, enrollments were down.

Other difficulties emerged. Carrying their allegations to Washington, the aggrieved graduate students and others received a warm reception on Capitol Hill, leading to an investigation of the Hugo First Institute. Pending the outcome, NIH prudently froze all grants at the institute. At the same time, the firm collaborating with the institute, fearing for its reputation in the drug marketplace, invoked its contractual right to withdraw from the relationship, taking with it all intellectual property and several items of costly scientific apparatus. The firm’s general counsel reminded his U Av counterpart that all dealings between the two organizations were protected by nondisclosure provisions.

Though busy at his new position, Swinger maintained a careful watch on events at U Av. Thus, he was not surprised by an urgent request to meet with the chairman of the commission’s board of trustees. The meeting was brief and ended with the understanding that Swinger would be able to review the press release announcing his resignation.

At U Av, following a series of interviews, the trustees were particularly impressed by the professional credentials and demeanor of one candidate. In contrast to Grant Swinger’s take-charge persona, she projected a calm self-assurance. Still recovering from the Grant Swinger experience, the trustees were especially reassured when, asked for her philosophy of governance, she thoughtfully reflected for a moment, and then replied: “Don’t underestimate the power of greed in the halls of science or the wholesome presence of altruism and self-respect. And don’t overlook shame and embarrassment as forces for good behavior in scientific affairs” (1).

The trustees reacted favorably to this sage formulation, though one of them fleetingly thought he had previously encountered those words, perhaps in a recent book. But he joined with his colleagues in offering the presidency to this outstanding candidate, who promptly and graciously accepted.

Reference

1. D. S. Greenberg, *Science for Sale: The Perils, Rewards, and Delusions of Campus Capitalism* (Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago, in press).

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