

# The Story of Association of American Universities (AAU): A Personal Perspective

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## Preamble

Since my last report about comparing Purdue, Georgia Tech and UCSD with UTD (<http://www.utdallas.edu/research/news040719.htm>), many of you asked me what AAU is. I took the opportunity to dig into this organization and here is my personal perspective.

Association of American Universities (<http://www.aau.edu>) was established in 1900. By now it is unquestionably the most “elite” academic club, a symbol of excellence, in the nation. It is probably not an exaggeration that a high percentage of leading intellectual and economic workforce for the United States emerged from AAU members. It is also not a surprising that many aspiring universities in the United States made it their mission to gain entry into the club. Currently there are 62 members in this club, of which 2 are from Canada (Toronto and McGill).

There were twelve founding members. Of the twelve, six were from the Ivy League (Columbia, Cornell, Harvard, Princeton, Pennsylvania and Yale), one from University of California system (Berkeley) and two from Big Ten (Michigan and Wisconsin). The remaining ones were independents: Johns Hopkins, Stanford and Chicago. Note that of the twelve, only three are public universities. It is quite remarkable that throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and even today, these twelve remain as the nation’s intellectual and economic powerhouses. If one were to create the top 100 universities in the world, one would be hard-pressed not to include these twelve!

## The Big Ten Presence

As an alumnus of Big Ten (Minnesota), I find it interesting, and am happy to see, that for the first 20 years of AAU existence, the Big Ten created a strong presence in the club. Indeed, from 1908 to 1917, Illinois, Minnesota, Indiana, Iowa, Ohio State and Northwestern, roared in. By the end of AAU’s 2<sup>nd</sup> decade, its membership included EIGHT Big Ten universities. The remaining THREE (*Big Ten actually has 11 universities with the entry of Penn State into the conference in the 80’s*) did not gain entry until 1958 when Purdue got in (although Penn State was also admitted in 1958, but

at that time it was not a Big Ten university). Michigan State University was the last to gain entry in 1964.

### **University of California System**

There is a great deal of discussion in Texas regarding UC System. Therefore it is worthwhile to examine the presence of this System in AAU a little closer.

I have to admit that it was a little surprising, for me at least, that UC Berkeley was a founding member. However, once I realized this fact, which prompted me to learn more about Berkeley's history, this wrong perception was quickly corrected!

Still, unlike the Big Ten, UC System remained dormant for a long time after the birth of AAU. In fact, it took much more than half a century, to be precise, 74 years, before the next UC University, UCLA, made it! UCLA's entry, followed by UC San Diego in 1984, and in the next two decades, the entry of three other UC universities in the mid-90's (UC Santa Barbara in 1995, UC Davis and UC Irvine in 1996) may have something to do with the emergence in the 60's of the profound California Higher Education Master-Plan.

It is also interesting to examine whether there is any correlation between UC Irvine's entry in 1996 and Fred Reines of its physics department receiving the Nobel prize in 1995.

Currently, there are 10 UC universities. The latest creation is UC-Merced, which is expected to be inaugurated in 2005. Conventional wisdom tells us that it would take sometime before UC-Merced becomes competitive with its fellow UC universities. Another one is UC San Francisco, which is, like the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas, a world class life/health university and therefore does not fit AAU's boundary conditions. Thus, UC Riverside and UC Santa Cruz are de facto the last two UC universities which are still outside of AAU. Does having SIX UC universities in AAU create incentive and/or pressure for these two universities to strive for AAU membership? If so, it would indeed be most interesting to see whether these two universities are ready to knock AAU's door any day soon!

Finally, with the entry of two world class private universities, Caltech in 1934 and University of Southern California in 1969, the State of California now dominates the AAU scene with 9 members!

### **Comparison of New York (7 members), Pennsylvania (4), Illinois (3 members) and Massachusetts (3 members)**

As I mentioned earlier, the entry of three UC universities in the mid 90's, California now has the largest number of members in AAU. This is followed closely New York, which

has 7. Behind New York are Pennsylvania (4), and Illinois and Massachusetts, each with 3.

The interesting and intriguing question would be: Which universities in New York, Pennsylvania Illinois and Massachusetts, could conceivably be the next AAU members?

In Pennsylvania, I would like to think that Drexel University, Temple University and Lehigh University could make it in the foreseeable future (for a personal reason, I would love to see Drexel makes it). In New York, SUNY at Albany comes to mind. None that is obvious comes to mind from Illinois, although conceivably Southern Illinois University may be a candidate. From Massachusetts, I am rather surprised that Boston University, Brandeis University, Northeastern University, Tufts University and University of Massachusetts are not already members.

### **Texas**

For nearly its first three decades, Texas had no presence in AAU. In 1929, UT Austin made its debut. Then it was not until more than half a century later, in 1984, that Rice University was inducted. The other powerhouse of Texas, Texas A and M University, did not enter AAU until the new millennium in 2001.

Now that the “usual suspects” in Texas are all in AAU, a truly challenging question for research universities in Texas would be which of the following eight will be **next** in line. Even more intriguing is when will that happen? Are we talking about one decade or two decades, or longer?

The eight are

- **The University of Texas at Arlington**
- **The University of Texas at Dallas**
- **The University of Texas at El Paso**
- **The University of Texas at San Antonio**
- **University of Houston**
- **Texas Tech University**
- **Southern Methodist University**
- **University of North Texas**

I suspect that all eight universities currently have significant challenges to overcome, although the challenges differ from university to university. For example, it is likely that UTD faces the challenge of increasing student size, driven in some sense by “formula funding”. How to do this without compromising, and in fact increasing, the quality, would be a steep hill to climb. Second, it is also possible that UTD’s faculty size, and thus the over all students-faculty ratio, will need to be much bigger so that it can become more in line with outstanding universities’ average. Again, how to, from where UTD can, and in what areas should UTD, recruit such faculty members. Recruiting is never easy since every faculty recruited must be highest quality intellectually on the one hand,

and highly motivated on the other? This requirement will put UTD in competition not only with Texas universities, but all outstanding universities in the Nation. In its growing effort, UTD, as in any aspiring university, needs to identify “nonlinear” factors pertinent to its own boundary conditions so that it can become one of the best in the nation.

So, it would be truly exciting to watch which one of this group of eight will be the first to reach and cross the AAU threshold!

## **Epilogue**

This note about AAU would not be “complete” if I did not place a cautionary note about academic excellence here.

First, AAU membership is like “tenure” in a university. Once a university is voted in, I am not aware that it will be “re-evaluated”. As in individual faculty member, as time goes on a university in AAU could also drop in quality. So it would not surprise me that not all 62 members today would have the same outstanding quality as the day they were inducted.

Second, it should be noted that of the top 50 ranked doctoral universities by 2004 US News and World Report, 13 are not AAU members. Of course, the selection criteria for AAU and the US News and World Report are not isomorphic and so it should not be very surprising that there are differences between the two groups. Still, it is interesting to see that Dartmouth, University of Notre Dame, Georgetown University, Tufts University, Wake Forest University, College of William and Mary, Brandeis University, Georgia Tech, Lehigh University, Boston College, Yeshiva University, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and Pepperdine University, are not in AAU listing. I have no doubt that some of these universities could fulfill the entry requirements of AAU.

However, there is no doubt that AAU symbolizes excellence. As long as this perception, which is coupled with high degree of reality, is deeply ingrained in the US society, I would expect that entry into AAU will remain a goal for aspiring universities to aim at!

## **Appendix**

### **Member Institutions and Years of Admission**

<a href="#"><u>Columbia University (1900)</u></a>	(IVY)
<a href="#"><u>Cornell University (1900)</u></a>	(IVY)
<a href="#"><u>Harvard University (1900)</u></a>	(IVY)

[The Johns Hopkins University \(1900\)](#)  
[Princeton University \(1900\)](#) (IVY)  
[Stanford University \(1900\)](#)  
[University of California, Berkeley \(1900\)](#) (UC System)  
[The University of Chicago \(1900\)](#)  
[University of Michigan \(1900\)](#) (Big Ten)  
[University of Pennsylvania \(1900\)](#) (IVY)  
[The University of Wisconsin-Madison \(1900\)](#) (Big Ten)  
[Yale University \(1900\)](#) (IVY)

[University of Virginia \(1904\)](#)

[University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign \(1908\)](#) (Big Ten)  
[University of Minnesota, Twin Cities \(1908\)](#) (Big Ten)  
[University of Missouri-Columbia \(1908\)](#) (Big Eight)

[Indiana University \(1909\)](#) (Big Ten)  
[The University of Iowa \(1909\)](#) (Big Ten)  
[The University of Kansas \(1909\)](#) (Big Eight)  
[University of Nebraska-Lincoln \(1909\)](#) (Big Eight)

[The Ohio State University \(1916\)](#) (Big Ten)

[Northwestern University \(1917\)](#) (Big Ten)

[The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill \(1922\)](#)

[Washington University in St. Louis \(1923\)](#)

[McGill University \(1926\)](#)  
[University of Toronto \(1926\)](#)

**[The University of Texas at Austin \(1929\)](#)**

[Brown University \(1933\)](#)

[California Institute of Technology \(1934\)](#)  
[Massachusetts Institute of Technology \(1934\)](#)

[Duke University \(1938\)](#)

[University of Rochester \(1941\)](#)

[New York University \(1950\)](#)  
[University of Washington \(1950\)](#)

[Vanderbilt University \(1950\)](#)

[Iowa State University \(1958\)](#)

[The Pennsylvania State University \(1958\)](#)

[Purdue University \(1958\)](#)

[Tulane University \(1958\)](#)

[Michigan State University \(1964\)](#)

[Syracuse University \(1966\)](#)

[Case Western Reserve University \(1969\)](#)

[University of Maryland, College Park \(1969\)](#)

[University of Oregon \(1969\)](#)

[University of Southern California \(1969\)](#)

[University of California, Los Angeles \(1974\)](#)

[University of Pittsburgh \(1974\)](#)

[Carnegie Mellon University \(1982\)](#)

[University of California, San Diego \(1982\)](#)

[Brandeis University \(1985\)](#)

[\*\*Rice University \(1985\)\*\*](#)

[The University of Arizona \(1985\)](#)

[University of Florida \(1985\)](#)

[Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey \(1989\)](#)

[University at Buffalo, The State University of New York \(1989\)](#)

[Emory University \(1995\)](#)

[University of California, Santa Barbara \(1995\)](#)

[University of California, Davis \(1996\)](#)

[University of California, Irvine \(1996\)](#)

[University of Colorado at Boulder \(1966\)](#)

[Stony Brook University-State University of New York \(2001\)](#)

[\*\*Texas A&M University \(2001\)\*\*](#)