

THE INCONTROVERTIBLE LOGIC OF THE ACADEMY*

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I've spent decades at one university and regularly visit others, but I still sometimes have trouble understanding academic logic. Whenever my bewilderment reaches a critical point I like to check in with my old grad school buddy Kreplach, who always seems to be on top of everything. I ran into him at a conference the other day.

"So, Kreplach—I hear your Engineering School has raised the first 10 million dollars in its latest fund drive."

"Right—our 'Forward to the Future' campaign is off and running. We're going for 150 million big ones."

"But last month you told me that you just finished raising 50 million in your 'Tackling Tomorrow's Technology Today' drive, and you haven't spent all of that money yet."

"Right again...so what's your problem?"

"Why do you need another 150 million?"

"So we can build new state-of-the-art bionanoinfotechnology facilities."

"I thought you already had them—wasn't your biotech center built just last year?"

"Well sure, but what we've got now doesn't have nearly enough room to put in the labs and offices that the new graduate students are going to need."

"What new graduate students?"

"The ones we're going to go after with those 60K fellowship programs that will come out of the 150 million."

"Sixty thousand? But that's more than we pay our new assistant professors."

"Yep, same with ours, and with that kind of money we should be able to pull a bunch of hotshot undergrads away from Stanford and MIT."

"That would be nice, but don't you and your colleagues already have as many graduate students as you can handle—can you just keep on adding new ones indefinitely?"

"Probably not, but that's where the new faculty members come in."

"What new faculty members?"

"The ones in the new distinguished chairs, of course."

"You mean the ones you endowed from the 50 million?"

"No, the eight new ones that will come from the 150 million. We're going to be able to pay those puppies a lot more than the chancellor gets and almost as much as the football coach—the Stanford and MIT faculties will be falling all over themselves to get some of that action."

"That would make sense, since you'll be getting their students...but look, Kreplach—why do you need so many new professors? Most of you are already teaching only two courses a year."

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“Right, and with those new professors on board we can get it down to one. Pretty sweet, eh? Besides, who’ll advise the new graduate students if we don’t bring in more faculty?”

“I forgot about that.”

“See, that’s your problem—you keep missing the big picture. Now, what do you think will happen when we’ve got all those new faculty members and graduate students on board?”

“It will get even harder for you to find a parking place on campus?”

“No...well, yes, but never mind that. Think about all the grants we’ll pull in and the papers we’ll churn out and the research dollars we’ll spend—we’ll be right up there with Stanford and MIT!”

“You should be ahead of them since you’ll have most of their faculty and graduate students...anyway, I’m still not sure I see the point.”

“It’s simple. Since U.S. News & World Report bases its ratings on grants and papers and research expenditures, we’ll move right up into the top ten...”

“And then...”

“And then our graduate school applications from other top ten schools will go up and we can boost our productivity and cut down our teaching loads even more, and we’ll become attractive to faculty at...”

“Cal Tech and Minnesota because there’s no one left at Stanford and MIT?”

“Right! Is that a plan, or what?”

“Let me see if I have it straight. You’re trying to squeeze 150 million dollars out of companies and alumni so you can build new facilities to house new faculty members and graduate students who will increase your research funding and output, enabling you to recruit even more new faculty and graduate students?”

“I couldn’t have put it better myself.”

“But where will you put those people?”

“Aha—glad you asked! The Dean has put me in charge of the ‘Engineering the Dream of a Brighter Tomorrow at the Dawn of the New Global Millennium’ campaign we’re getting ready to announce.”

“Catchy title.”

“Yeah, the Dean thought of it himself. We’re thinking that 400 million dollars should cover most of our needs for at least two years.”

“I like how you think big, Kreplach, but where are you going to find any more companies and alumni willing to kick in after all those other campaigns?”

“We thought about that, and we came up with two untapped sources with a strong vested interest in making us numero uno. Here, check this out.”

“Let’s see—whoa, a pledge form for the faculty with check-off boxes for salary tithes and a free legal service to help them redraw their wills. Outstanding!”

“Yeah, and don’t overlook the space for the number of boxes of cookies they commit to sell every year.”

“Brilliant thinking, Kreplach—I know everyone on your faculty will jump at the chance to help out...but what’s your other group of eager donors? I can’t believe there’s a turnip you haven’t already tried to squeeze blood from.”

“Lots of them, my boy. Think—who is the most important person on campus, the one the faculty and administration are primarily there to serve, the one who gets more benefits from the university than anyone else?”

“That would be the football coach.”

“Don’t be absurd—it’s the undergraduate student. The value of a college education to every undergraduate over the course of a lifetime is over a million dollars, right?”

“Yes, but...”

“So if we just ask each of them to kick in a mere \$100,000, which is only a tenth of what we’re giving them, we’re home free.”

“Fiendishly clever, Kreplach—our fundraising people would be green with envy.”

“And who could blame them? Oh, before you go, our chocolate macadamia shortbread wafers are particularly fine this year. How many boxes can I put you down for?”