



Telling Time Comparing Faculty Instructional Practices at Three Types of Institutions

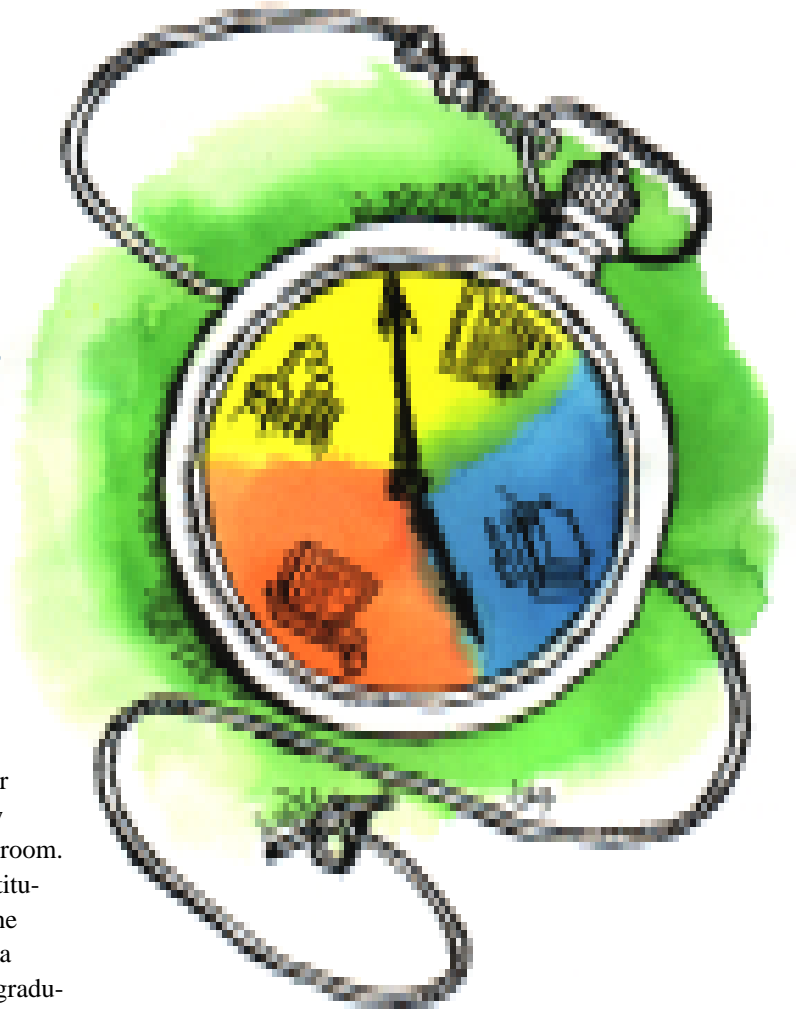
It would be nice if there were a demonstrable relationship between the price that a college or university charges and the product that it delivers. Institutions with superior market positions most often make that claim, whether true or not, when defending their higher prices—stating that what the student pays for is both a better and a different educational experience. Those vaunted differences ought to include what faculty do before a course begins, how they prepare for the daily challenge of the classroom, how they administer their courses and assess their students' progress, and how frequently they interact with students outside of the classroom.

Are students at higher-priced and more selective institutions really getting more for their money—more out of the faculty members who teach them? A new survey, part of a larger project to uncover the underlying cost of an undergraduate education, offers initial answers to that question. The survey provides a rich source of detailed information on how faculty organize their teaching, how they spend their teaching time, what they expect of their students, and what kinds of learning goals they set for themselves as well as their students.

This issue of *The Landscape* reports on the first set of issues that the project examines—the amount of time faculty at highly selective and, hence, higher-priced institutions spend on course-related activities and on interaction with students outside of the classroom, as compared with faculty at less selective and, hence, lower-priced institutions.

The Faculty Survey

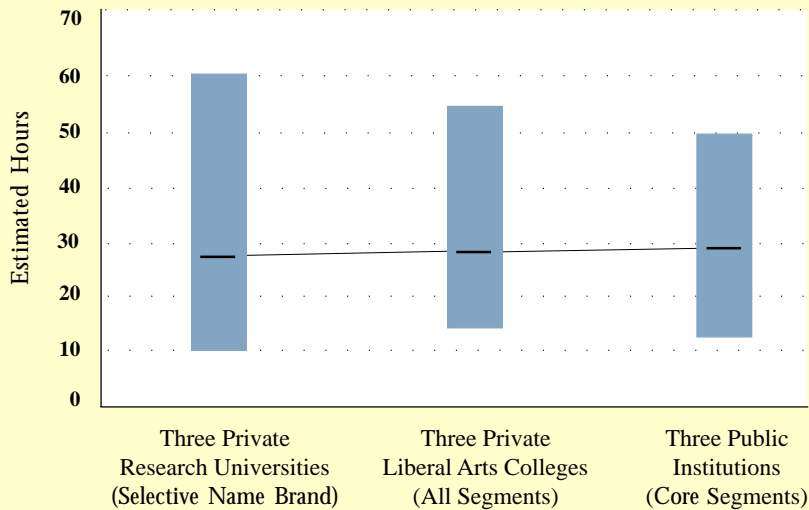
As part of a collateral project examining the underlying costs of delivering an undergraduate education, NCPI researchers Robert Zemsky of the University of Pennsylvania and William Massy of Stanford University interviewed faculty at nine institutions about their instructional practices. A set of



courses from a sample stratified by discipline was identified for each institution, and the faculty member who taught each course in the target semester was contacted to participate in a 30-minute telephone interview. The most important part of the interview was where each faculty member was asked to characterize his or her activity for the course during three distinct time periods: prior to the academic term, during the term, and subsequent to the term.

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Chart 1
Faculty Time Spent on Course Planning



Of the nine participating institutions, three are private research universities, three are private liberal arts colleges, and three are public research or comprehensive institutions. The three private research universities and one of the liberal arts colleges are from the selective name-brand segment of the market for postsecondary education—the elite institutions that charge the highest prices for the educations they offer. (For a description of the postsecondary market, see the November/December 1997 Landscape.)

One of the liberal arts colleges is from the name-brand segment, the next most competitive and expensive part of the market. All three of the public institutions and the third liberal arts college are from a core market segment, whose colleges and universities supply lower-priced degrees and greater access for their students.

Counting the Hours

Are the instructional contexts at the three private *selective name-brand* research universities in our sample measurably different from those at the other six institutions? Do faculty at these universities—some of the

nation's best-known educational institutions—invest their teaching time differently from their counterparts at the other institutions in the sample?

During the interview, faculty reported the amount of time they devoted to four basic teaching activities: planning the course, preparing for and administering the course, assessing student performance, and interacting with students outside of class. For each of these four categories, the researchers performed two statistical analyses: the first, a basic display of faculty responses; and the second, a regression model.

Chart 1 displays the distribution of faculty time spent planning the course in question. Faculty responses are grouped by institutional type; the median response is indicated by the bar inside the box, the top of the box marks the 75th percentile, and the bottom of the box represents the 25th percentile.

Chart 1 makes clear that the amount of time faculty spend planning their courses differs considerably from individual to individual—the interquartile ranges displayed are between approximately 40 and 50 hours. Those time differences, however, do not pertain to type of institution. The median hours of planning time are nearly identical for faculty at private research universities, liberal arts colleges, and less costly public universities. The regression model estimating planning time reinforces this point and adds an interesting twist: the more time faculty members spend engaged in the advance planning of a course, the more time they are estimated to devote to class preparation and to course administration.

Chart 2 displays—by type of institution—the distribution of time that faculty reported spending on preparation and other activities in support of the in-class delivery of instruction. The chart suggests that faculty at public institutions spend less time and faculty at liberal arts colleges spend more time on course preparation,

although the variance is greatest for faculty at the sample's highly selective *name-brand* research universities. In general, prep-time was predicted to increase as faculty time devoted to course planning and the assessment of student performance increased.

The time that these faculty members spent assessing student performance follows similarly expected patterns (Chart 3). On average, those who reported engaging in this activity the least were faculty at the three *selective name-brand* research universities; those reporting devoting the most time to assessing student performance were at liberal arts colleges. Twenty-five percent of the faculty from *selective name-brand* universities reported spending fewer than 22 hours assessing the performance of students in the targeted course during the term. The median number of hours for faculty at liberal arts colleges was 65, with 25 percent of these faculty members reporting spending more than 89 hours during the term on the targeted course.

Chart 4 maps the amount of time faculty reported spending outside of class with students enrolled in the target course. Here, the distribution is unexpected. On average, faculty at the *selective name-brand* research universities spent considerably more time interacting with students outside of the classroom—20 hours more than faculty at liberal arts colleges and over 10 hours more than faculty at public institutions.

Yet faculty did not trade off time with students for the other demands of delivering their courses. In fact, the more time faculty members devoted to planning their courses, preparing their classes, and attending to administrative details, the more time they were predicted to devote to interacting with their students outside of class. Accordingly, as the size of the class increased (doubling or tripling), so did the amount of time faculty members reported spending with their students outside of

Chart 2
Faculty Time Devoted to Course Delivery

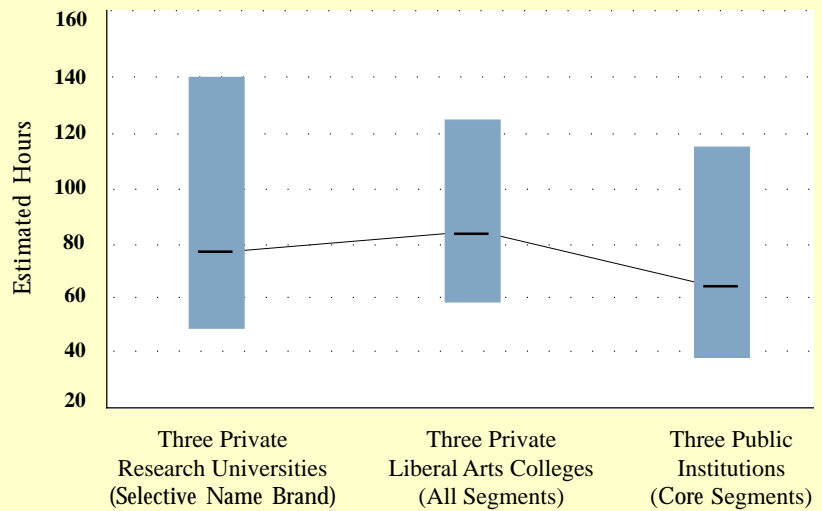
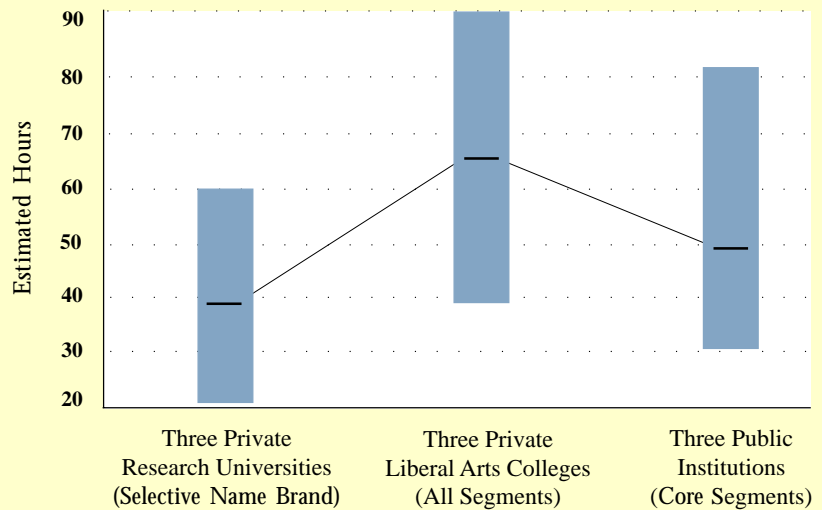


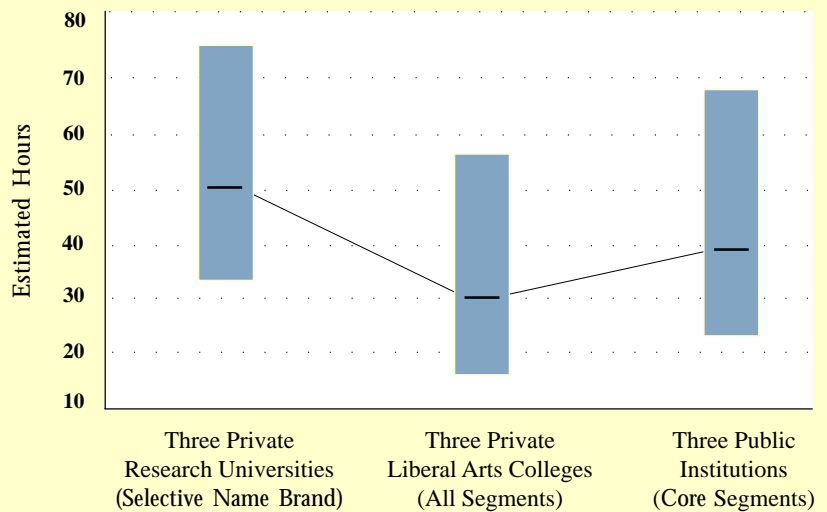
Chart 3
Faculty Time Spent Assessing Student Performance



class. Finally, the greater the *number* of times a faculty member had taught the course, the more hours he or she was predicted to spend with students outside of class.

The intriguing finding is that faculty at the *selective name-brand* research universities were estimated to have spent more time outside of class with their undergraduate students than faculty at the liberal arts colleges. The

Chart 4
Faculty Time Spent Interacting With Students Outside of Class



reasoning is straightforward: when faculty at high-priced, prestigious private research universities spend time with students outside of class, more likely than not it is in activities related directly to their research interests and is due to a lower teaching load. Since greater institutional resources—often gained through higher tuitions—are what make possible the larger faculties and lower teaching loads at private research institutions, the higher rates of student interaction may be one important benefit that students attending those institutions receive.

Perspective

Do faculty at the nation's *selective name-brand* research universities teach their undergraduate courses fundamentally differently from faculty at other types of institutions? Do they spend more time on their undergraduate courses? The answer is, by and large,

“No.” True, the faculty from private research universities were likely to devote less time to assessing the performance of their students and more time to interacting with them outside of class. But those differences in themselves accounted for relatively little of the variance in how faculty allotted time to the key activities associated with teaching an undergraduate course. Rather, the general pattern that emerges from the data is one detailing the similarities of the undergraduate teaching function—a homogeneity that stretches across all institutional types.

Zemsky and Massy also examined whether or not the instructional focus of these courses varied—in terms of technical and computer skills, communication skills, and general learning and concept skills—by institutional type. Stay tuned for the results of that analysis, which will be reported in the next issue. □