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HIGH HOPES; On the road to elite status, Georgetown's come a long way in a short time. Now it has to decide just what kind of university it wants to be

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On a mild, late August day at Georgetown University, a man in clerical collar, priestly black shirt and casual khakis prepares to lead an orientation-week discussion of the Athol Fugard play "My Children! My Africa!" He has before him two dozen of the best students that American high schools have to offer. The freshmen come from across the country, and some of them have turned down places like the University of Pennsylvania, Brown and Duke to be here.

"I'm Father O'Donovan," the man says in a mellow voice. "I work for you." Behind him, on the classroom wall, a crucifix and a silhouette of Thomas Jefferson watch over the students. The Rev. Leo J. O'Donovan, the president of Georgetown, is a trim man of average height, with a pink face and boxy half-rim glasses. To break the ice further, he tells a brief anecdote about meeting President Clinton, Georgetown's most famous alum, during a campus visit. The subtext seems to be: I may be a mild-mannered priest, but I move in some elite circles, and Georgetown can open these doors to you, too. The freshmen like it. He recounts a self-deprecating story about the time he met Fugard and "babbled" like an over-eager college applicant. Soon after, he opens the floor to comments about the play.

Unlike the stereotypical overawed freshman, these students plunge right in. One, a burly guy with sizable mutton chops, says that the drama, which traces the relationship among two high school students (a black boy and a white girl) and their black teacher, in apartheid South Africa, raises questions about the usefulness of academic knowledge. "Yet tacitly, by writing the play, Fugard is affirming the value of education," he says. Another student finds the early scenes, which sketch the relationship between the boy and girl, too frictionless: "Even in New Jersey, in 2000, bonds don't form that quickly." Hands shoot up and the comments flow -- as fast as O'Donovan can call on people.

"I don't know what you thought," he tells me later, "but I thought the young people in that class were extraordinarily insightful."

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Indeed. Georgetown's popularity among smart high school seniors is the engine driving its phenomenal rise as a national university. That ascent, in turn, is one of the more interesting stories in American higher education. Many people who are used to hearing Georgetown mentioned in the same breath as Ivy League colleges, Stanford and the University of Virginia aren't aware how far it had to come to reach that elite level, or how fragile its place there could be.

The uniqueness of Georgetown's rise is easy to overlook. America, after all, has some 4,000 colleges and universities, and the hierarchies tend to be rigid. A generation ago, Yale was a top university, and today it is still. Meanwhile, hundreds of Middling U's plug along in their own well-worn grooves, hoping somehow to catch the attention of students and parents. Georgetown actually pulled it off: Three decades ago, it was a solid, unspectacular liberal arts college serving Catholics in the Middle Atlantic and Northeast. Now it is on the collegiate A-list.

Just how elite is Georgetown? It is part of a tiny circle of universities that admit fewer than one-quarter of their applicants. That selectivity helps to make it 23rd on U.S. News & World Report's controversial but much-thumbed list of the best national universities. When students are admitted to the University of Pennsylvania, Brown, Duke, Cornell or U-Va. as well as Georgetown, roughly half the time they choose Georgetown.

And Georgetown has more than selectivity going for it. In a world of cookie-cutter universities, it has a distinct image. It trades on its proximity to Washington power, drawing future wonks and budding pols, and making it worth their academic while with a strong School of Foreign Service. The university's religious heritage -- evident in a required theology course on "The Problem of God" as well as in O'Donovan's collar -- not only attracts Catholic students but also gives it a moral sheen.

Georgetown's pitch works. When you ask students why they came, they sound as if they're reading from an admissions brochure: "I like the access to so many options -- so many internship possibilities -- and I love the campus," says Julia Bain, a willowy first-year student from Los Altos, Calif., who was in the O'Donovan class. She snubbed Northwestern and Duke to come here and is enrolled in the School of Foreign Service. "One of the best parts of the university is that much of your education takes place off campus," says Sarah Walsh, editor in chief of the Hoya, a campus newspaper. "People are always coming to talk here: Kofi Annan was here last year, and I've seen President Clinton on the campus."

Yet Georgetown's rise has brought it to a peculiar, difficult place. For one thing, it is hamstrung by limited finances. Among its competitors, it's like the scholarship boy who tries to fit in at the rich kids' fraternity -- the guy who works in the cafeteria and rents his tux, but affects a prep school drawl. Georgetown's endowment of \$ 684 million (as of last year) is one-fifth that of the University of Pennsylvania. It is less than half that of Johns Hopkins. Georgetown, a university with a medical school, a law school and a total of 13,000 students, draws on resources less than those of Pomona College, a liberal arts school with no professional programs and only 1,500 undergraduates.

There has been a lot of progress on this front. The Rev. Timothy S. Healy, the charismatic president who led Georgetown from 1976 to 1989, is generally credited as the man who decided that Georgetown could be great, and lit a fire under it. But O'Donovan, a much quieter leader, who announced this spring that he plans to step down at the end of June 2001, has worked to build a financial foundation for the new Georgetown: The endowment has tripled in the 11 years since he took office, and the machinery of fundraising is far more powerful than

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it used to be. The university is in the midst of an unprecedented \$ 1 billion capital campaign.

Unfortunately, just when the new cylinders were kicking in, Georgetown was badly shaken by a financial crisis at its medical center, around the corner from its main campus. As other colleges entered an economic golden age, thanks to the booming stock market, Georgetown's hospital, pinched by managed care, was a money pit, losing \$ 218 million since 1995. Concluding that the risks of health care finances were too much to bear, Georgetown in March of this year agreed to sell the patient-care facilities of the center to MedStar Health Inc., a non-profit hospital chain. (Georgetown kept control of the research and teaching programs.)

At a level deeper than finances, the university's quick ascent has also led to an identity crisis. Georgetown may seem content and confident to outsiders, but among faculty members and administrators there is confusion and disagreement over what kind of a place, exactly, the university should be. In the words of a 1997 faculty report on intellectual life at the university, "The push to transform Georgetown into a first-rank institution has left in its wake conflicting signals about what is truly valued." Some on the faculty and in the administration think that as Georgetown has risen in the rankings, it has drifted away from its core commitment to teaching undergraduates. But others, particularly those who have been hired in the last 15 years, believe Georgetown needs to move much more aggressively than it has so far to build its graduate programs and to retain its best young scholars, and give them an intellectually vigorous environment in which to work.

It takes more than good undergrads, after all, to make a great university. Those schools that have been on top for a long time have world-renowned faculties whose research sets the pace in their fields; graduate students flock to them. The reputation of graduate programs is more or less a measure of the general prestige of the faculty. Georgetown does have strong professional programs and a handful of good, niche departments, but for the most part its graduate academic reputation falls far short of those of its elite rivals. Rankings of graduate programs published by the federal National Research Council bear this out. While the schools Georgetown competes directly with for undergraduates have many top-10 graduate programs, in the most recent report only one of its programs was ranked even in the top 25. (And the exception was in an unusually small field: linguistics, where Georgetown was 19th out of 41.)

In short, having gotten itself Ivy-level prestige, some people say, Georgetown needs to live up to it. Its performance fails to match its image, they argue, and it is past time for that to change.

"In the humanities in particular, [Georgetown] has yet to make up its institutional mind as to the importance of graduate programs in contributing to its identity," says Michael Gerli, a star professor of Spanish literature who departed this year for an endowed chair at U-Va. "Great universities, of course, define their academic selves through the reputations of their faculty and graduate programs. If Georgetown is to compete seriously with those institutions it claims to compete with, it will have to change this."

Quite a few at the university think that this moment represents a crossroads for Georgetown. Can it stay near the top? The albatross of the medical center losses has been removed, and a change of president is in the offing. Georgetown could solidify its position or begin to slide back to the middle.

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One Georgetown professor describes the quandary this way: "The question is, do we want to be Harvard or do we want to be Mr. Chips?" He quickly adds, "I want to be Harvard."

The arc of Georgetown's history is captured by the title of a famous study of Catholic higher education in the United States, published by Andrew M. Greeley, the sociologist and priest, in 1969: *From Backwater to Mainstream*. Except that by now Georgetown has left most of the mainstream in the dust.

Georgetown was founded in 1789 by John Carroll, the first Catholic bishop in America. It started small, with 76 students by 1800, providing instruction from elementary school through college, and like many American universities it had a precarious existence well into the 19th century, with some alumni and professors calling for the whole thing to be uprooted from malaria-ridden D.C. and moved to New York. It was strengthened at mid-century, however, by an influx of Jesuit emigres, and again in the 1870s, under President Patrick Healy, who has been called the university's second founder. He oversaw the construction of Healy Hall, the majestic Romanesque structure whose tower is still a city landmark.

In the 20th century, the story neatly tracks the evolution of the Roman Catholic Church in America. Staffed and run by Jesuits, the university tended both to the ambitious children of immigrants and to bright, third- and fourth-generation Catholics who might have wound up in the Ivy League, had the Ivy League not been so hostile to non-WASPs. Jesuits are noted for their learning and for their openness to the secular world, so Georgetown was never quite as cloistered as some other Catholic colleges. In particular, the School of Foreign Service, founded in 1919, provided a bridge to the elite secular world.

By the 1970s the pieces were in place for a surge, as the barriers between Catholic and secular colleges continued to fall. When Timothy Healy, who had been a top administrator at the City University of New York, took office in 1976, he realized that there was a vacuum in Washington: no world-class university. Georgetown, he decided, would be it. It's hard to say what combination of factors led to the eventual takeoff, but several things happened to help put Georgetown on the map. Healy started to use his presidency as a moral bully pulpit -- condemning, for example, President Reagan's social policies -- at a time when most college presidents were retreating from the civic sphere into campus budget meetings. Reagan appointed a Georgetown professor, Jeane Kirkpatrick, to be his ambassador to the United Nations. And it didn't hurt that the basketball team started to kick butt.

On the academic front, Healy thought the university was doing far too many things, most of them not well enough. He ordered a review of the graduate programs. In 1983, he killed 10 programs perceived as weak, including those in physics, various foreign languages and Russian studies, and diverted resources to several "centers of excellence," including chemistry, history, linguistics and Spanish. Government and philosophy were later added to the list. (Today, the physics PhD program is in the process of being revived.) He pulled the plug on the dental school. He faced down protests against all these cuts. "His presidency was characterized by farsighted, bite-the-bullet decisions, which put Georgetown on a very competitive track," says Gerli.

Healy tackled teaching loads, too. Georgetown professors had teaching loads like high school teachers: four courses in each semester. The very best young scholars wouldn't tolerate that, because it leaves no time for research and writing. He began hiring more faculty, a process O'Donovan continued. Now professors teach three classes one semester and two the next, or in certain cases two and two. Some professors resisted the growing emphasis on research, viewing the move as a devaluing of teaching. Hungry young scholars found themselves arguing with

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older ones, who tended to look back with nostalgia on a partly mythical Georgetown, where professors invited students over for lunch every afternoon, and tenure committees didn't press you too hard about when your next book would be finished.

O'Donovan has had a much lower profile than Healy, who died in 1992, but he can point to a roster of accomplishments. "I'm very proud that the university has shown great care and courage in its financial planning," O'Donovan says. Georgetown used to communicate with most alumni via student volunteers, who manned rotary phones in the basement of a campus building. Bringing in pros helped boost the proportion of alumni who write checks from 27 to 34 percent. Georgetown sent a team down to Duke to figure out how it went about soliciting large gifts and had its eyes opened: Duke never rests. Taking cues, Georgetown has built a fresh network of fruitful relationships. The Blue & Gray Society, a club for people who have given the university \$ 10,000 in one year, has grown from 100 members in 1995 to almost 1,500 today.

The current president has also poured money into the campus, notably to renovate eight dorms and to start construction on a massive new dorm complex in the campus's southeast corner. Georgetown is also constructing a \$ 20 million performing arts center, because it has almost no space to put on plays and musical performances. It has a \$ 38 million science building on its wish list, too, because its science labs "are in poorer condition than those of neighboring community colleges," according to a university report. There's also a huge office space crunch on the campus, leading one professor to tell the Chronicle of Higher Education in January: "I have friends from other universities who see our working conditions and they say, 'This is Georgetown?' " O'Donovan has had to be a politician as well as a fundraiser: The university has some very wary neighbors -- tired of waking up in the middle of the night and finding drunk students urinating in their flower beds -- who have the power to limit its expansion.

Despite his immersion in financial issues, O'Donovan is a romantic at heart. I spoke with him for an hour in the courtyard behind Healy Hall -- an enclosed island of repose on the campus. It was in discussing the spiritual side of education that his eyes lit up. "What I'm proudest of is how the idea of a university has continued to flourish here," he said. One project that shows O'Donovan's stamp has been a series of discussions and proposals concerning the role that the university's Jesuit and Catholic identity should play in the day-to-day life of the place. (The undergraduate student body is 56 percent Catholic.) Secular faculty wish this issue would go away, but it clearly will not, especially as the Vatican, in recent years, has begun to muscularly assert its (at least theoretical) authority over Catholic universities. "Our society is in desperate need of meaning and a sense of community, and I would also say the reasons to make the sacrifices that are necessary in human life," O'Donovan said. Georgetown, he added, as a Catholic institution, has a "special tradition and promise" in addressing such issues.

Precisely how much academic greatness has been achieved after two decades of striving is still a matter for debate. Although he has been criticized for not making scholarship a priority, O'Donovan has made some headway in this area. Under his administration, the number of endowed chairs -- prestigious prizes to dangle before top scholars -- has doubled and several new research centers have been set up, including a Center for German and European Studies. The size of the faculty has risen significantly, too, from 1,465 to more than 1,800. He has been hampered, however, by instability in the office of provost, the top academic officer at a university: The job turned over five times in the last decade.

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"Georgetown has worked really hard to make the transition to a world-class research university," says Ellen Henderson, the chairwoman of the biology program, "and has done it quite wonderfully, retaining the commitment to undergraduate teaching." The university can point to academic stars of various sorts. Deborah Tannen, author of *You Just Don't Understand*, is the household name in linguistics, and Anthony Lake joined the Foreign Service School when he stepped down as national security adviser in 1997. Less glittery but highly respected figures include Richard Stites, a historian of Russia, and John L. Esposito, director of the new Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding.

Judging by the rankings, however, Georgetown has a long way to go. The National Research Council's rankings are important: Graduate students use them to choose which programs to attend, and faculty members constantly consult them to verify the pecking order. But in the 1995 rankings, even Georgetown's "centers of excellence" weren't so excellent. The history department was ranked 50th out of 111 graduate programs. Economics tied for 54th out of 107. Political science was 37th out of 98. Chemistry lagged even farther behind the leaders, tying for 101st out of 168. In general, in academic reputation at the graduate level, as in finances, Georgetown is closer to George Washington, the crosstown rival it turns its nose up at, than to Penn. Nothing to sneeze at -- but not what Georgetown sees when it looks in the mirror.

Of course, the rankings, derived from surveys of professors across the country, are controversial. Georgetown officials will explain that since the survey data go back as far as 1993, the rankings don't capture improvement since then. (The next rankings will come in 2005.) Administrators also point out that Georgetown's programs tend to be small, and small programs may be overlooked in surveys (although with its 18 PhD programs, Georgetown qualifies as a major research university). There's truth in both claims. However, it is also true that almost every academic department in America complains that it is underrated and that it will shoot up when the next NRC report comes out. Very few do.

Nor do outsiders detect any big surge on Georgetown's part in recent years. Some professors in top programs elsewhere don't seem to have Georgetown on their radar screens. "We have never lost a graduate student that we wanted to Georgetown," says John Herd Thompson, chairman of the history department at Duke (ranked 15th in 1995). "Students who apply to us for graduate school probably don't apply to Georgetown." Robert Shapiro, chair of Columbia's political science department, didn't know Georgetown offered a full-blown PhD in government. Told that it does, he said, "Then it's not in the very top tier, the top 20 group. Is it in the second tier or the third tier? I don't know."

Few people today would dare to say that good research and the good teaching Georgetown has prided itself on can't coexist -- or, indeed, that the two endeavors don't strengthen each other. Still, the university's squishy identity provides an out. Whenever Georgetown fails to measure up to places like Duke, professors can say they simply aren't playing the same game. And if classes are not nearly as small as they are at a true liberal arts college, like Swarthmore? Well, that's because Georgetown is a research university.

Early in my reporting, I asked a university spokesman why Georgetown's graduate programs lagged so far behind those of other elite universities. He counseled me against comparing friendly little Georgetown with Yale or Duke or Columbia. Georgetown, he said, was far more undergraduate-centered.

"That's old Georgetown," snapped a professor in the social sciences when I later related the comment to him. "That's precisely the kind of thinking that's going to hold us back. Really, that's stupid. You can't compare us to a major public university. But what you can compare Georgetown to is Cornell, Duke, Brown,

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Emory. The people who apply to our [graduate] programs are comparing us to those places." Saying he needed to work closely with people he disagreed with on this, he didn't want his name used.

Healy and his lieutenants tried to stamp out the ambivalence about improving the graduate school, arguing that there are no great American universities without great research and great graduate programs, and that, as the dean of the graduate school wrote in 1989, "a schizophrenic undergraduate-versus-graduate view is simply not possible in an institution aspiring to excellence." Many on the campus, however, think the schizophrenia still exists and the university is moving too slowly to end it. "For Georgetown to remain a competitive institution and to improve its standing it has to improve those programs on the cusp of national excellence," says Eusebio Mujal-Leon, chairman of the government department. His department is especially hungry, as it has seen one of its subfields, international relations, climb as high as 16 in one U.S. News ranking. "We have tasted what targeted resources can do."

Salaries are becoming a key issue among those who share Mujal-Leon's views. Georgetown was lucky that it rose to prominence at a time when the job market for academics was brutally tight: It was possible to lure outstanding assistant professors with even below-average salaries. (The D.C. location helps.) According to a 1999 Georgetown report, the average Georgetown faculty salary is about 10 percent below the average at the other members of the Consortium on Financing Higher Education, a club of 31 highly selective private colleges. For senior professors, the gap is even bigger. The average senior professor at colleges in the consortium makes \$ 99,530, while at Georgetown he or she makes \$ 84,720.

In the recent past, as a cost-saving measure, it seems to have been an unwritten Georgetown policy to decline to match outside offers when its good young scholars were wooed by other universities. But if it wants to retain its reputation, it's going to have to compete. Asked if Georgetown matches offers these days, Dorothy Brown, the provost since April 1999, says, "The answer is that we try." The university has a plan to raise salaries across the board, and several department chairmen do report that they have gotten the green light to offer a lot of money when someone exceptional comes on the market. However, Terry Pinkard, a biographer of Hegel and a former star of the philosophy department who was just lured away by Northwestern this year, says Georgetown "fell way, way short" when it came time to make a counteroffer.

To be fair, it's not clear whether Pinkard would have stayed in any case. Still, he says the halfhearted effort was telling. He calls the department he left a "very prominent, up and coming" one, with many promising scholars. "The real question," he adds, "is whether Georgetown keeps them and whether they provide the right atmosphere for them to develop."

Alot will be in the hands of the university's next president. He or she could aggressively target resources -- graduate student stipends, merit pay, freedom from administrative duties -- to the most promising programs and could urge departments, as Healy did, to develop special areas of expertise. He or she could raise the bar even higher for earning tenure. Or, he or she could choose to take on other issues.

The search for a new chief is complicated by the Jesuit question. Georgetown's president has always been a Jesuit. Yet, as in many Catholic religious orders, the ranks of the Society of Jesus are thinning fast, and there is concern that the pool may not be deep enough to produce a superlative candidate.

This puts the search committee in a bind. Its "preference," according to the advertisement for the opening, is to hire a Jesuit. Yet it is also committed to

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finding the best person, period, and so for the first time is reaching out to lay candidates who are capable of "appreciating" the "pastoral and spiritual . . . dimensions" of the presidency -- an open-ended requirement, to be sure. Georgetown would be the first of 28 Jesuit colleges in the United States to select a layperson as its leader (though one is run by a nun, not a Jesuit).

The search committee began interviewing a mix of candidates this fall. The Jesuit candidates are likely to be drawn from such Jesuit universities as Fordham, Loyola Marymount and the University of San Francisco. (O'Donovan, a Georgetown alumnus, came from the Weston Jesuit School of Theology, in Cambridge, Mass.) The committee plans to recommend at least two candidates to the board of trustees early next month.

The party line among administrators and trustees is that it wouldn't be a big deal if a non-Jesuit were selected. But when I ran into one Jesuit on the main quad, and asked him if he cared, he said, off the record: "Yes, it matters to me. I don't want to be the first" -- the first to go secular.

The professors who want scholarship to be the first order of business are watching the search carefully. They are afraid that woolly talk about Jesuit and Catholic identity will serve as a cover for fear of excellence. "Does the university indeed want to be a first-rate research institution?" asks Colin Campbell, a university professor of public policy (and an ex-Jesuit). "We have been pursuing this vigorously since the early '80s, and there are ways in which we aren't doing that well. I wouldn't take this position at all, but you could see the board and the faculty, because of their ambivalence, going for a president who says, 'We're not going to push the academics so hard. We are going to change the emphasis to what we know we were good at. And that is teaching.'" He adds: "I'm not convinced we were good at it. But people think they were."

Or the board could choose a new president eager to push graduate education and scholarship, and to face the inevitable criticism that follows. Charles Keely, a professor of demography, offers one clear-eyed vision of what such a president could do for the university: "If we work hard, we get to be a very good second-level university," he says. "We would be in a group of places like Dartmouth and Rice -- places that have very good programs and some excellent ones."

The first challenge would be convincing people that Georgetown isn't at that level, or higher, already.

Christopher Shea writes for *Lingua Franca*.

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