

## IDEAS

# The Harvard of the South ... Of the West?

Elite universities are taking the concept of a satellite campus to its logical extreme.

By Rose Horowitz

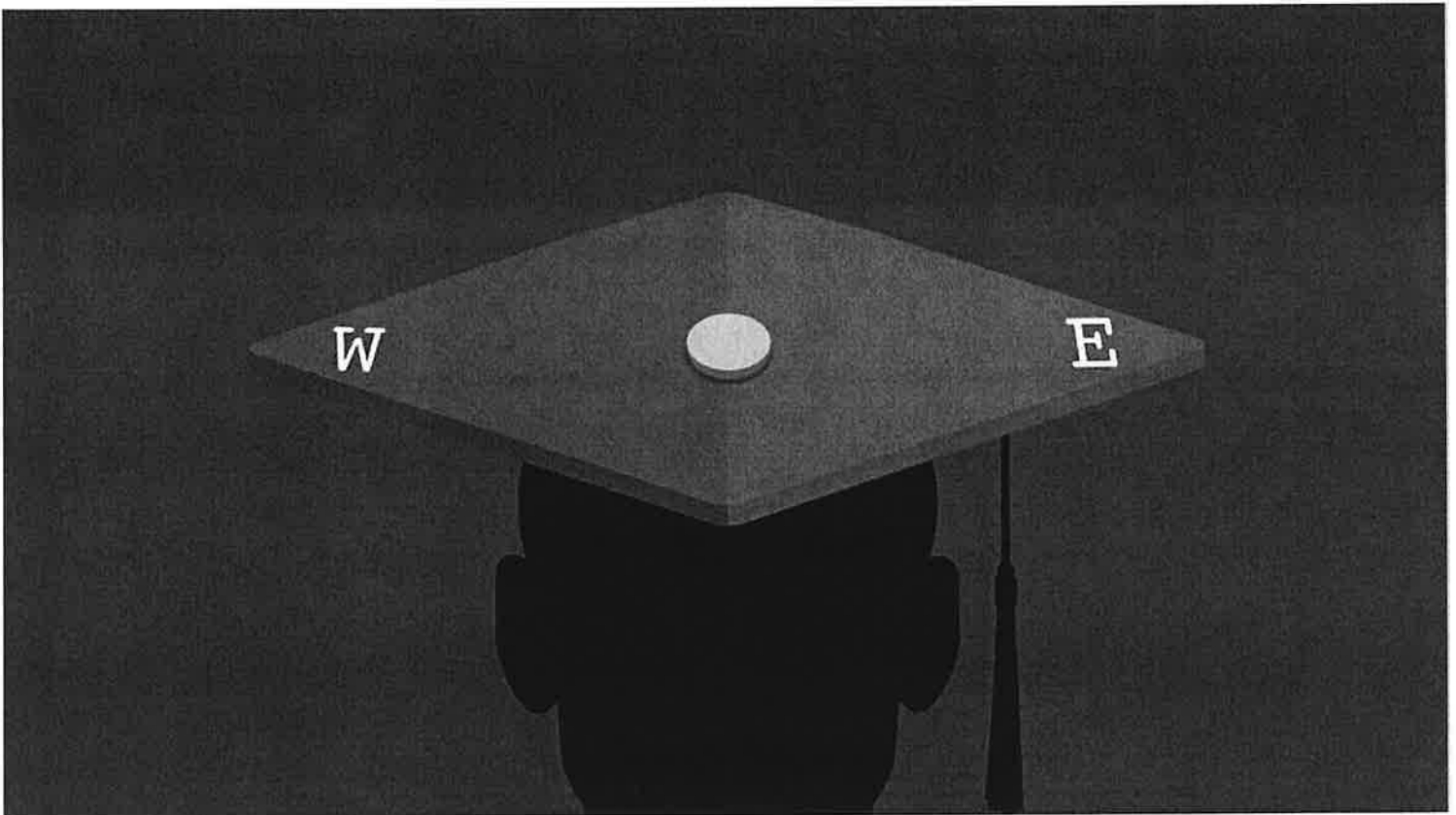


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Vanderbilt University, in Nashville, is the sort of highly selective institution that jockey for the unofficial title of Harvard of the South. Recently, the university's chancellor had a new idea: What if   74 also in San Francisco? Maybe it could become the Harvard of the West too.

Last month, Vanderbilt announced that it was acquiring the facilities of the financially insolvent California College of the Arts and would be converting the space into a new campus. Private universities have been experimenting with satellite campuses for decades. Typically, these outposts are either overseas or limited to a graduate program or two. The Vanderbilt expansion, set to open in 2027, will be different: It will include a full-blown, four-year undergraduate college, not in Abu Dhabi but in the San Francisco Design District. This new tactic, pioneered by Northeastern University a few years ago, is taking the satellite-campus concept to its logical extreme: the national-chain model of undergraduate education. If it works for Vanderbilt, other selective institutions are likely to follow—because no one really wants to be the Harvard of the South. Everyone wants to be Harvard. Perhaps the way for excellent regional schools to develop a national reputation is to set up shop around the nation.

For most of the history of higher education, a university has been ineluctably tied to a particular city: Bologna. Oxford. Cambridge. The other Cambridge. In the United States, the first wave of satellite campuses began to appear in the post–World War II period as the share of Americans attending college surged. To meet growing demand, public universities opened branches in far-flung areas of their state. (Most Texans, for example, live far from Austin.) That’s how systems such as the University of California evolved into sprawling behemoths.

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The next phase of expansions was very different. In the 2000s, some private institutions began establishing international outposts to cash in on global demand for their prestige. Northwestern University started awarding bachelor’s degrees out of a campus in Qatar in 2008. Columbia opened a Middle East research center in Amman, Jordan, in 2009. The next year, New York University established an undergraduate campus in Abu Dhabi; NYU Shanghai followed not long after. Less selective institutions are trying this approach as well: The University of New Haven recently announced that it would create a campus for undergraduates and grad students in Riyadh. “You would find 74 rian petro-state somewhere that had a ton of money and was very impressed by the brand allure of high-class

American universities,” Kevin Carey, the vice president of education and work at the think tank New America, told me.

More recently, colleges have focused on domestic expansion, creating outposts in the nation’s capital. Nearly 20 institutions have satellite campuses in Washington, D.C. Some are small, occupying a floor of an office building; others, including the University of Southern California and Arizona State University, have their own buildings emblazoned with their school’s logo in massive font. In 2019, Johns Hopkins University, based in Baltimore, paid more than \$370 million to acquire a new home for its School of Advanced International Studies in the building that had previously housed the Newseum. D.C. campuses tend to confer graduate degrees and serve as a home base for undergrads interning on Capitol Hill and K Street. They also give university leaders easy access to government officials.

The school that has come closest to a true brick-and-mortar national-chain model is Northeastern University, which is known for its emphasis on combining academics with career-focused internships. In the 2010s, as the university’s officials realized that they could attract only so many students to Boston, the school began setting up campuses to reach more markets. “A university cannot be defined by its campus,” Joseph Aoun, Northeastern’s president, told me. “We’re going to them rather than asking them to come to one campus.” Since 2011, Northeastern has opened eight graduate-focused branch campuses in major cities across the U.S. and Canada. These are designed to help students network and land a job in their preferred city after graduation. Northeastern has used this strategy to enroll more students—raising tuition revenue—without increasing the main campus’s acceptance rates. “Going back about 25 years ago, Northeastern was a top-150 university,” Peter Stokes, a higher-education consultant who previously worked at Northeastern and helped launch its expansion, told me. “Today it’s a top-50 university.”

Most graduate programs are small. Setting up a full undergraduate campus is a much more ambitious undertaking. In 2022, Northeastern acquired Mills College, in Oakland, absorbing the school’s re<sup>(74)</sup> the tenured faculty, and creating Northeastern University at Oakland. It merged with Marymount

Manhattan College to create a New York-based undergraduate campus. Aoun calls Northeastern a “global university system.” He said, “We don’t like to call them branch campuses, because our model is not to export into another city or another country what we have been doing in Boston.”

Now comes Vanderbilt, adopting a similar strategy. Daniel Diermeier, the school’s chancellor, is widely perceived within higher ed as trying to elbow into the Harvard-Yale-Stanford stratum. When I asked him if the expansion plan is an effort to rise in the rankings, he deflected, saying that “our aspiration is to be innovative.” But he did not deny a certain ambition. “A core component of being a great university in the 21st century is to be part of an innovation economy,” he said. He pointed to Stanford in the 1990s, when the university and its surrounding area became the global center of the tech industry. “If you believe that, then it matters where you are,” Diermeier told me. “Location becomes a strategy.” It’s easier to entice the top computer-science professors to work in the Bay Area than in Nashville. Diermeier expects the San Francisco campus to eventually host 1,000 students and 100 faculty members. (Vanderbilt is also opening a graduate campus in West Palm Beach and recently opened a study-away program in Manhattan.)

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The education-franchise model—Diermeier calls it “network campuses”—can be a risky proposition. Drexel University, in Philadelphia, tried to improve its reputation by opening a graduate-focused satellite campus in Sacramento. The effort fizzled out six years later. Middlebury College, in Vermont, is similarly winding down its graduate programs in Monterey, California. “It can become like managing an empire,” Stokes said. “It’s like being Rome in the fourth century. If you get too geographically dispersed, it can be difficult to maintain the front of the empire.”

For top schools, the biggest risk might be brand dilution. Ivy League universities are highly unlikely to open new campuses around the country. Their power and prestige depend on exclusivity. The institut

they're also more willing to experiment. Vanderbilt has less of a national brand to dilute—indeed, that's the problem it's trying to solve.

Other top-tier schools will therefore be watching to see how Vanderbilt's expansion plays out, and some may follow suit. The population of American 18-year-olds is expected to peak this year, followed by a precipitous decline. Stokes's consulting firm has identified nearly 400 private colleges that are at risk of closure in the next five to 10 years. Everyone's jockeying to be in the best position on the other side of the crisis. "For institutions like Northeastern and Vanderbilt, taking advantage of this weakening and precarity that certain institutions are experiencing, that creates an opportunity for them to get real estate," he said. Small colleges in major cities or Sun Belt states, which have seen a population boom, are valuable sites for branch campuses. Aoun said that at least one college asks to be acquired by Northeastern each week. Ryan Allen, an education professor at Soka University of America, calls it higher education's "Age of Conquest": The big schools will get bigger, and the smaller schools will be absorbed. Soon, high-school seniors who get accepted into a top college might start having to answer a question that their parents never did: "Which location?"

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