

# THE CHRONICLE

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## Elite Group Admits Georgia Tech; Who's Next?

AAU adds a member  
as research universities  
ask how to make the cut

By PAUL FAIN

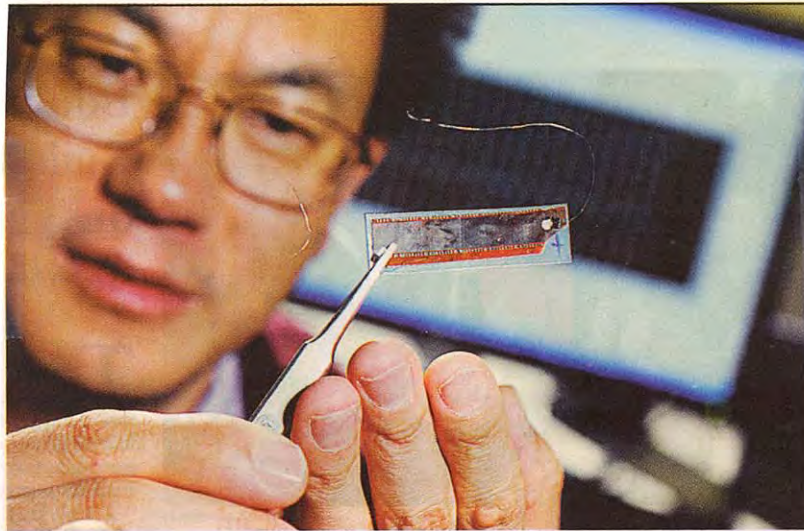
AS PRESIDENT of the Georgia Institute of Technology from 1994 to 2008, G. Wayne Clough was often asked why he didn't attend meetings of the Association of American Universities.

Georgia Tech was not a member, but "people were always saying, 'We thought you were in,'" says Mr. Clough, now secretary of the Smithsonian Institution.

It was a reasonable assumption. The association represents universities with the most prestigious profiles in research and graduate education, and Georgia Tech has long been strong on both counts. The university's share of federal research dollars topped the shares of almost all non-AAU, comprehensive universities, as well as those of quite a few members.

Last week the invitation-only association made it official, naming Georgia Tech to the exclusive group that now numbers 63 universities. "We're very excited," Georgia Tech's current president, G.P. (Bud) Peterson, said. Membership, he noted, puts the university in the room during important national policy discussions. "When the president, Congress, industry, business want to try to understand

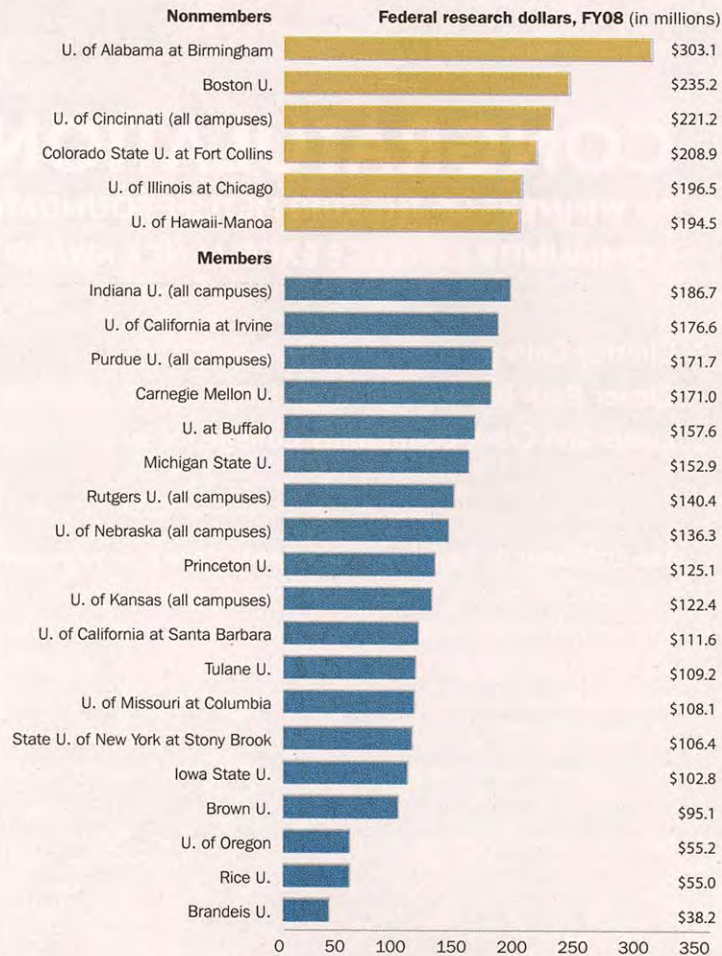
*Continued on Page A13*



GARY MEEK, GEORGIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

Georgia Tech's invitation from the Association of American Universities reflects its leading role in high-tech research, such as that done in nanotechnology by the physicist Zhong Lin Wang.

The Chronicle examined the 100 institutions receiving the most federal research dollars. Here are six institutions that are not AAU members but whose research dollars exceeded those of 19 AAU members.



Note: Figures on total federal research spending were published by the National Science Foundation for the 2008 fiscal year, the most recent available. To evaluate institutions for membership, the Association of American Universities deducts from those figures its estimate of the institutions' spending from federal agricultural-research grants, most of which are awarded noncompetitively. Land-grant universities — such as Colorado State, listed here — receive a substantial amount of all federal agricultural-research dollars, so the association's adjustments could affect its evaluations of those institutions. This analysis by The Chronicle excludes specialized institutions such as free-standing medical schools, which the AAU has typically not included as members, although some of those nonmember institutions receive large amounts of federal research dollars. The bottom four AAU members listed were not among the top 100 institutions in federal research money in 2008.



# Prestigious Group Admits Georgia Tech, as Others Wonder 'Why Not Us?'

*Continued From Page A1*

the position of academia, one of the places they often go is the AAU," he said, "and they'll seek advice, guidance, and input from that organization on a whole host of issues."

Nobody could rationally complain about the association's new addition, but several other university leaders may be scratching their heads and wondering why their campuses haven't made the grade.

Georgia Tech was the only institution recommended for membership at last week's meeting, according to two AAU university presidents. And although Robert M. Berdahl, the association's president, says "several" other universities are getting a serious look, no meetings are scheduled to consider new additions.

The AAU's membership criteria, available on its Web site, focus primarily on the amount of government research money an institution receives, and the share of faculty members who belong to the National Academies.

Despite the stated importance of federal research as a criterion, some universities left out of the association outpace member institutions. According to a *Chronicle* analysis, at least 11 nonmember institutions received more federal money in 2008 than did 13 members, and six received more than 19. Among members, Brandeis and Rice Universities and the University of Oregon drew the fewest federal dollars.

Institutions have left the association in the past—Catholic University of America in 2002 and Clark University before that. Both universities were original members, joining in 1900, and said their changed missions no longer made membership a good fit.

Research heavyweights that can make good arguments for joining the AAU include, but are hardly limited to, Boston University, Dartmouth College, Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge, North Carolina State University, the University of Cincinnati, the University of Georgia, and the University of Miami. Officials at several of those institutions acknowledge that they would like to join the club.

"The AAU is the pre-eminent research-intensive membership group," says William R. (Randy) Woodson, North Carolina State's chancellor. "To be a part of that organization is something N.C. State aspires to."

## PERKS OF MEMBERSHIP

Athletics conferences double as academic peer groups and give a glimpse into the pecking order among research universities. Among Bowl Championship Series conferences, Southern institutions seem particularly underrepresented in the AAU. All of the Big Ten universities are members, while from the Southeastern Conference, only the University of Florida and Vanderbilt University get the nod.

But even some institutions from the old guard would like a seat at the table. Dartmouth, which has long emphasized undergraduate education, is the only Ivy League institution not in the association. Jim Yong Kim, Dartmouth's president, would like that to change, citing the college's research clout and strength in areas like health-care delivery.

"Dartmouth certainly would welcome an invitation to join the AAU," Dr. Kim wrote in response to an inquiry. "Our level and complexity of research activity and our commitment to research seem to us reflective of a leading institution."

The AAU imprimatur comes with several valuable perks. A wide range of officials from member institutions meet annually, including

separate meetings for presidents, provosts, research chiefs, and government-relations officers. Those gatherings are closed to the news media and nonmembers, and are a rare chance for candid conversation. And they often include access for the small group to big names in government, the business world, and the news media. David Brooks, the *New York Times* columnist and author, for instance, spoke to a gathering of association presidents last week in Washington.

Mr. Peterson, who went to Georgia Tech last April after serving three years as chancellor at an AAU institution, the University of Colorado at Boulder, said that he couldn't necessarily identify a specific benefit that Colorado gained from AAU membership. He did, however, cite possible examples, such as intensive discussions among members about security options following the April 2007 shootings at Virginia Tech, as well as assessments of the economic-stimulus measure approved last year by Congress.

So for many universities, particularly up-and-comers, the big draw is prestige. Trustees, lawmakers, and donors want to see signs of progress, and being on the shortlist with Yale and Berkeley looks good in a rankings-obsessed industry.

"Everyone wants to invest in the very best," says Freeman A. Hrabowski III, president of the University of Maryland-Baltimore County, which is not an association member. "And success breeds success."

Mr. Woodson just arrived at North Carolina State, after having served as provost at Purdue University, an AAU member. He says state legislators would like to see North Carolina State join the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, a member since 1922.

Despite his being on the job for only two weeks, Mr. Woodson says, people have told him "many, many times" that they'd like the university to make it to the AAU's ranks.

## AN EFFECTIVE ADVOCATE?

Not everybody buys the value of AAU membership. Daniel S. Greenberg is a journalist in Washington who covers science policy. He is skeptical of the association's influence and says the reason universities pay it so much attention is because of the stingy and slow admissions process.

"It runs like a restaurant that limits their reservations," Mr. Greenberg says. "People clamor to get in because they're told it's hard to get in."

James D. Savage does not agree. A professor of politics at the University of Virginia, Mr. Savage acknowledges that there is a "self-affirming" side to universities' desire to join the association. But he says the AAU is an effective advocate for higher education in Washington.

The association has "helped demonstrate the value of federal dollars that went to research universities," says Mr. Savage.

Joining the association comes with an actual cost. The group survives almost entirely on membership dues, which accounted for \$4.6-million of its \$5-million in total revenue in 2008, according to its most recent federal tax filing. Annual dues are \$80,500.

But that's a price most aspiring members would gladly pay.

"If somebody called and said, 'We'd like you to be a part of the AAU,' I'd take that call," says Anthony A. Frank, Colorado State University's president.

Colorado State is one of several promising candidates. The university received \$209-million

in federal research funds in 2008. Yet Mr. Frank says Colorado State isn't making the pursuit of AAU membership or higher perches in common university rankings a top priority.

"We're worrying about doing our job better

and dealing with rankings and memberships as they come," says Mr. Frank.

*Paul Basken and Jeffrey Brainard contributed to this story.*