

**Media Agenda and Cultivation Effects on College Recruitment and Academic Values: A Comparative Analysis of Texas Southern University, Rice University, the University of Houston, and the University of Texas**

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### Abstract

Media narratives play a critical role in shaping university reputation, student decision-making, and perceptions of academic value. Guided by agenda-setting and cultivation theories, this study examines how sustained media coverage influences institutional visibility and recruitment outcomes. Using Texas Southern University (TSU) as a case study, alongside Rice University, the University of Houston, and the University of Texas, the research highlights disparities in media representation. While elite institutions benefit from consistent positive coverage that reinforces prestige, TSU's limited visibility affects perceived academic standing. These findings demonstrate how media exposure shapes enrollment patterns and reinforces institutional hierarchies, emphasizing the need for strategic media engagement and digital storytelling to enhance recruitment and public perception..

MediaMyth.org – The Website



Media Myth – A Documentary



## Introduction

Media narratives significantly influence institutional reputation, student decision-making, and perceptions of academic legitimacy. Universities operate within a competitive educational marketplace where prospective students rely heavily on mediated information, including news coverage, rankings, social media discourse, and institutional marketing—to evaluate schools. Communication theories such as agenda-setting and cultivation theory provide critical frameworks for understanding how sustained media messaging shapes perceptions about universities and academic values.

Agenda-setting theory suggests that media institutions shape public priorities by emphasizing certain topics and issues in coverage (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In higher education, this means that media emphasis on rankings, prestige, research funding, or campus controversies can influence how prospective students evaluate universities. Meanwhile, cultivation theory explains how repeated exposure to media narratives influences long-term perceptions of reality (Gerbner et al., 2002). When applied to higher education, cultivation theory suggests that continuous portrayals of certain institutions as elite, innovative, or prestigious can shape the public's long-term perception of academic hierarchy.

This research explores how media agenda-setting and cultivation effects influence college recruitment and perceptions of academic value, using Texas Southern University (TSU), a historically Black university—as the primary case study. TSU is compared with neighboring non-HBCU institutions, including Rice University, the University of Houston (UH), and the University of Texas (UT), to examine differences in media narratives and their potential impact on recruitment outcomes.

## Literature Review

**Agenda-Setting Theory.** Agenda-setting theory was introduced by McCombs and Shaw (1972), who argued that the media do not necessarily determine what people think, but they strongly influence what people think about. Media coverage prioritizes certain issues, thereby shaping their perceived importance in public discourse.

In the context of higher education, media agenda-setting often focuses on:

- Institutional rankings
- Research output and funding
- Athletic success
- Campus controversies
- Admissions selectivity

These narratives affect public perception of universities and influence prospective students' decisions. For example, institutions frequently highlighted in national rankings or research news coverage are more likely to be perceived as academically prestigious.

**Cultivation Theory.** Cultivation theory, developed by Gerbner and colleagues, examines how long-term exposure to media shapes perceptions of reality. According to this theory, repeated portrayals of certain ideas eventually become normalized in the audience's worldview.

Within higher education discourse, cultivation theory suggests that:

- Elite institutions portrayed frequently in the media become associated with academic excellence.

- Universities with limited positive media representation may struggle to maintain perceived prestige.
- Negative narratives can persist long after events occur.

This theory is particularly relevant when examining historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), which often receive less mainstream media coverage compared with predominantly white institutions.

### **Institutional Context**

#### *Texas Southern University*

Texas Southern University is a public historically Black university located in Houston, Texas. Established in 1927, the institution plays a critical role in expanding access to higher education for minority students and contributes significantly to the region's economy and cultural life (Texas Southern University, 2024). Recent enrollment statistics show that approximately 8,704 students are currently enrolled at TSU, including 6,844 undergraduates and 1,860 graduates. The student body is approximately 65% female and 35% male (Texas Southern University enrollment data).

TSU's demographic profile highlights its mission as an access-oriented institution, with approximately 86% of students identifying as African American and nearly 98% of students overall being students of color.

Although TSU maintains strong community ties and academic programs, it competes with larger universities in the Houston region for visibility in recruiting.

#### *Rice University*

Rice University is a private research university in Houston, widely regarded as one of the nation's elite institutions. Media narratives frequently highlight Rice's high selectivity, strong research output, and global reputation. Because of these narratives, Rice benefits from sustained positive agenda-setting that reinforces its prestige among prospective students.

#### *University of Houston*

The University of Houston is a major public research university serving a large and diverse student population. UH's media presence frequently emphasizes research growth, urban engagement, and its status as a large metropolitan university.

#### *University of Texas*

The University of Texas at Austin represents one of the most visible public universities in the United States. The institution recently reported record enrollment exceeding 55,000 students, with nearly 9,900 incoming freshmen in one year alone. Such statistics reinforce UT's national visibility and contribute to long-term cultivation of its prestige.

### **Media Narratives and Institutional Visibility**

**Agenda-Setting in Higher Education Media Coverage.** Media coverage frequently shapes how universities are perceived by the public. News stories highlighting institutional achievements, rankings, or controversies create a hierarchy of visibility among universities.

For example:

- National news coverage often focuses on flagship universities such as UT.
- Private elite institutions like Rice receive attention for research achievements.
- Regional universities receive coverage primarily in local media.

As a result, institutions such as TSU may struggle to compete for visibility despite their academic contributions.

**Media Recognition and Institutional Reputation.** Recent media coverage recognized TSU and UH for their community engagement initiatives, earning the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification, a designation held by fewer than 10% of U.S. institutions. Such recognition demonstrates how positive media narratives can enhance institutional reputation and recruitment potential.

### **Recruitment Implications**

**Perceived Academic Prestige.** Media narratives strongly influence perceived academic prestige. Students and parents often interpret frequent media exposure as evidence of institutional quality.

Agenda-setting therefore, shapes:

- Application rates
- Yield rates
- Institutional prestige

**Enrollment Trends.** Recent data shows that TSU has experienced enrollment growth alongside statewide increases in college attendance in Texas. However, the university still enrolls fewer students than flagship institutions.

**Influence on Prospective Students.** Prospective students rely on multiple media sources when selecting universities:

- Social media

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- College rankings
- News coverage
- Institutional marketing

These sources collectively shape perceptions of institutional quality.

**Cultivation Effects on Academic Values.** Repeated exposure to narratives about elite universities can cultivate perceptions about what constitutes a “good” university.

Students may begin to associate:

- Academic excellence with selective institutions
- Prestige with large research funding
- Opportunity with highly ranked universities

Such perceptions can unintentionally reinforce inequalities between institutions.

For HBCUs such as TSU, limited national media exposure can hinder cultivation of perceived prestige despite strong academic contributions.

### **Comparative Institutional Media Narratives**

#### **TSU**

Media narratives emphasize:

- Access to higher education
- Community engagement
- Cultural leadership

**Rice**

Narratives emphasize:

- Academic prestige
- Global research leadership

**UH**

Narratives emphasize:

- Urban engagement
- Research growth

**UT**

Narratives emphasize:

- National leadership
- Enrollment scale
- academic competitiveness

**Discussion**

The findings demonstrate that agenda-setting and cultivation effects significantly influence higher education recruitment dynamics. Institutions receiving frequent positive media coverage cultivate long-term prestige narratives that influence prospective students.

Meanwhile, institutions with limited national visibility must rely on regional reputation and community engagement to attract students.

### **Recommendations**

**Strengthening Institutional Media Strategy.** TSU should expand its national media presence by highlighting:

- Research achievements
- Alumni success stories
- Community partnerships

**Invest in Digital Storytelling.** Digital media platforms provide opportunities to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and shape narratives directly.

**Increase Academic Branding.** Strategic messaging emphasizing academic excellence can counter stereotypes about HBCUs.

**Expand Recruitment Partnerships.** Collaborations with high schools, community colleges, and professional organizations can improve recruitment visibility.

### **Conclusion**

Media agenda-setting and cultivation theory offer powerful frameworks for understanding how universities compete for reputation and student enrollment. Institutions that consistently appear in positive media narratives cultivate prestige and influence student decision-making.

For Texas Southern University, strengthening media visibility and academic branding can significantly improve recruitment outcomes while reinforcing the university's historic mission of expanding educational opportunity.

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