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# "Democracy's Colleges" Under Pressure: Examining the Effects of Neoliberal Public Policy on Regional Comprehensive Universities

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# "Democracy's Colleges" Under Pressure: Examining the Effects of Neoliberal Public Policy on Regional Comprehensive Universities

## **Abstract**

Four million undergraduate students enroll in regional comprehensive universities each year. Numbering close to 420, these universities have been called “democracy’s colleges” in recognition of their role in facilitating educational opportunity through requiring low barriers for admission, emphasizing teaching as opposed to research, and engaging in the civic and economic life of their regions. These activities have given rise to the three elements of their public purpose; specifically, they are often student-centered, regionally engaged and open access. Despite the important function regional comprehensive universities serve, they are facing unprecedented challenges created by a neoliberal public policy context that narrows their purpose to their role in improving the market. Within a neoliberal public policy context, these universities are facing rising expectations, demands for greater private sector engagement, cuts to public funding and the introduction of performance based funding. This dissertation is a qualitative case study of the institutional responses of four regional comprehensive universities in a single state to challenges created by a neoliberal state public policy context. University stakeholders including senior administrators, staff, faculty and community leaders of the four universities were interviewed. Also interviewed were national policy and education experts and senior policymakers from the state under study. Findings show that a neoliberal public policy context coupled with declining student enrollments have forced the four universities into a series of Faustian bargains about which elements of their public purpose they can afford to maintain and which they must allow to be eroded. Specifically, the universities are eschewing access missions and becoming more selective in order to enroll students who will be more likely to graduate and improve the university’s standing in performance based funding allocations. Some are also curtailing regional civic engagement efforts in favor of economic development. Findings also show that universities whose organizational identities embody their public purpose are better positioned to preserve elements of their purpose within a neoliberal public policy context. Finally, two of the universities were found to be striving to create alternative models of legitimacy focused on embodying their public purpose. Implications for public policy, educational opportunity and regional public life are described.

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“DEMOCRACY’S COLLEGES” UNDER PRESSURE: EXAMINING THE EFFECTS OF  
NEOLIBERAL PUBLIC POLICY ON REGIONAL COMPREHENSIVE UNIVERSITIES

Cecilia Marie Orphan

A DISSERTATION

in

Education

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania in

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Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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“DEMOCRACY’S COLLEGES” UNDER PRESSURE: EXAMINING THE EFFECTS  
OF NEOLIBERAL PUBLIC POLICY ON REGIONAL COMPREHENSIVE  
UNIVERSITIES

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2015

Cecilia Marie Orphan

## **DEDICATION**

To the learners, leaders and teachers of regional comprehensive universities –  
our democracy's colleges.

And to Byron, whose belief in me has guided me each step of the way.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Questions of purpose are at the heart of who I am as a researcher, teacher and human being. I have many people to thank for pushing me to relentlessly pursue my purpose of advancing our understanding of the role of higher education in promoting democracy and equity.

It was only through the support of my “Fourth Floor Siblings” – Keon Mcguire, Awilda Rodriguez, Jamey Rorison, Kata Orosz, Demetri Morgan and Andrés Castro Samayoa – that I made it. While the higher education department has moved to a new building, we all know where we got our start: trading snacks, ideas, laughs and sometimes tears on the fourth floor of 3700 Walnut. And especially to my cohort, Collin Williams and Felecia Commodore - “ain’t nobody fresher than my clique.” Three in, three out!

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together. For the higher education division at Penn, this person is Karen Carter. Her humor, wisdom and kindness make things a little easier for us all. And to Sharon Ravitch, who gave me a picture of what an irreverent blue collar girl with a mouth and a moral compass can accomplish.

My interest in the public purpose of higher education began at Portland State University, a phenomenal regional comprehensive university in Oregon. I have often said that being a first generation college student felt like going through an obstacle course that everyone else but me had a map for. That was until Candyce Reynolds, Amy Spring and Kevin Kecskes gave me a map that was community engagement and teaching. Thank you for helping me find my purpose.

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And finally, to my mother, who I lost when I was 13, and to the promise she asked me to make. Looping her pinky finger through mine, I'll never forget her saying, "Promise that you'll make the world a better place, Sweet Pea." Dear Mommy, I promise to keep fighting to make the world a little freer, fairer and more democratic.

## **ABSTRACT**

### **“DEMOCRACY’S COLLEGES” UNDER PRESSURE: EXAMINING THE EFFECTS OF NEOLIBERAL PUBLIC POLICY ON REGIONAL COMPREHENSIVE UNIVERSITIES**

Cecilia Marie Orphan

J. Matthew Hartley

Four million undergraduate students enroll in regional comprehensive universities each year. Numbering close to 420, these universities have been called “democracy’s colleges” in recognition of their role in facilitating educational opportunity through requiring low barriers for admission, emphasizing teaching as opposed to research, and engaging in the civic and economic life of their regions. These activities have given rise to the three elements of their public purpose; specifically, they are often student-centered, regionally engaged and open access. Despite the important function regional comprehensive universities serve, they are facing unprecedented challenges created by a neoliberal public policy context that narrows their purpose to their role in improving the market. Within a neoliberal public policy context, these universities are facing rising expectations, demands for greater private sector engagement, cuts to public funding and the introduction of performance based funding. This dissertation is a qualitative case study of the institutional responses of four regional comprehensive universities in a single state to challenges created by a neoliberal state public policy context. University stakeholders including senior administrators, staff, faculty and community leaders of the four universities were interviewed. Also interviewed were national policy and education experts and senior policymakers from the state under study. Findings show that a neoliberal public policy context coupled with declining student enrollments have forced the four universities into a series of Faustian bargains about which elements of their public purpose they can afford to maintain and which they must allow to be eroded. Specifically, the universities are eschewing access missions and becoming more

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iv
ABSTRACT .....	vii
LIST OF TABLES .....	xii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....	1
Regional Comprehensive Universities: “Democracy’s Colleges” .....	2
Neoliberal Public Policy.....	4
Purpose of this Study .....	10
Organization of the Dissertation.....	16
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .....	18
Institutions with Many Names: The Mission and History of Regional Comprehensive Universities.....	19
Mission Making, Evolution, and Drift.....	21
Mission Drift at Regional Comprehensive Universities.....	26
“Muddled” Institutions: Organizational Identity and Prestige-Seeking at Regional Comprehensive Universities.....	30
Neoliberal Ideology and Public Higher Education .....	35
Democracy’s Colleges: Rupture or Recalibration? .....	42
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.....	45
Research Design .....	45
Site Selection .....	47
Sampling Strategy and Data Collection .....	50
Data Analysis and Conceptual Framework.....	56
The Role of the Researcher and Trustworthiness.....	58
Limitations .....	60
Conclusion.....	60
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS, THUNDER STATE UNIVERSITY .....	62
Regional Context .....	62
Thunder State University .....	63
The History of Thunder State University .....	65
The Mission of Thunder State University.....	70
The Identity of Thunder State University.....	73
Challenges Facing Thunder State University .....	75
Responses to Challenges .....	76
Conclusion.....	85
CHAPTER 5: RESULTS, RIVER STATE UNIVERSITY.....	86
Regional Context .....	86
River State University.....	87
The History of River State University .....	92
The Mission of River State University .....	96
The Identity of River State University .....	103
Challenges Facing River State University.....	107
Responses to Challenges .....	110

<b>Conclusion</b> .....	114
<b>CHAPTER 6: RESULTS, CITY STATE UNIVERSITY</b> .....	116
Regional Context .....	116
City State University .....	117
The History of City State University .....	120
The Mission of City State University.....	125
The Identity of City State University .....	128
Responses to Challenges .....	129
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	139
<b>CHAPTER 7: RESULTS, INVENTOR STATE UNIVERSITY</b> .....	140
Regional Context .....	140
Inventor State University .....	140
History of Inventor State University .....	143
The Mission of Inventor State University .....	146
The Identity of Inventor State University.....	151
Challenges Facing Inventor State University .....	154
Responses to Challenges .....	156
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	163
<b>CHAPTER 8: ANALYSIS, PUBLIC PURPOSE UNDER PRESSURE</b> .....	164
<b>The Public Purpose of Regional Comprehensive Universities</b> .....	165
<u>The Student-Centered Mission of Regional Comprehensive Universities</u> .....	165
<u>The Regional Engagement Mission of Regional Comprehensive Universities</u> .....	167
<u>The Access Mission of Regional Comprehensive Universities</u> .....	169
<b>Faustian Bargains: What is Kept and What is Lost</b> .....	170
<b>Changes to the Access Mission</b> .....	173
<u>Evidence of Adaptive Strategy</u> .....	173
<u>Evidence of Interpretive Strategy</u> .....	179
<b>Changes to the Student-Centered Mission</b> .....	181
<u>Evidence of Adaptive Strategy</u> .....	181
<u>Evidence of Interpretive Strategy</u> .....	183
<b>Changes to the Regional Engagement Mission</b> .....	186
<u>Evidence of Interpretive Strategy</u> .....	186
<u>Evidence of Adaptive Strategy</u> .....	188
<b>Framework for Understanding The Effects of Neoliberal Public Policy on the Public Purpose of Regional Comprehensive Universities</b> .....	189
<b>CHAPTER 9: THE ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY IN TIMES OF STRESS AT REGIONAL COMPREHENSIVE UNIVERSITIES</b> .....	195
<b>The “Essential Character” of Regional Comprehensive Universities</b> .....	197
<b>Member Identification with Institutional Characteristics of Regional Comprehensive Universities</b> .....	202
<b>How Regional Comprehensive Universities Distinguish Themselves Among Their Peers</b> .....	205
<b>Organizational Identity Over Time at Regional Comprehensive Universities</b> .....	207
<b>How Regional Comprehensive Universities Are Viewed by External Audiences</b> .....	209
<b>Stakeholder Involvement in Identity Formation</b> .....	213
<b>Dualism of Identity at Regional Comprehensive Universities</b> .....	217
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	224

<b>CHAPTER 10: BEYOND STRIVING: PRESTIGE AND LEGITIMACY SEEKING DURING TIMES OF STRESS AT REGIONAL COMPREHENSIVE UNIVERSITIES .</b>	<b>225</b>
<b>Becoming Full-Fledged: Striving for Legitimacy</b> .....	<b>227</b>
<b>Islands of Excellence and Incremental Change: Striving for Prestige</b> .....	<b>230</b>
<b>Preeminence on Our Own Terms: Striving to Create Alternative Models of Legitimacy</b> .....	<b>235</b>
<u>Towards an Alternative Model of Legitimacy</u> .....	238
<u>Creating an Alternative Model of Legitimacy</u> .....	241
<b>Realizing the “Impossible Dream”: Creating Distinctiveness</b> .....	<b>246</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>250</b>
<b>Incentivizing Isomorphism and Competition Among institutions</b> .....	<b>254</b>
<b>Institutionalizing Governmentality: Surveillance, Data and Measurement</b> .....	<b>255</b>
<b>Data Collection and Use at Regional Comprehensive Universities</b> .....	<b>258</b>
<b>Eating the Seed Corn: Being Uncertain and Underfunded</b> .....	<b>263</b>
<b>Doing More with Less: The Hidden Costs to Faculty Culture of Efficiency and Budget     Cuts</b> .....	<b>266</b>
<b>Building the Workforce: The Hidden Costs of Neoliberal Public Policy for Students</b> ....	<b>268</b>
<b>Who are We? Who am I? Hidden Costs for Organizational Identity and Member     Identification</b> .....	<b>271</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>276</b>
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b> .....	<b>278</b>
Recommendations for Enacting Interpretive Strategy .....	279
Recommendations for Improving Student Retention and Completion Rates .....	285
<b>Recommendations for State Policymakers</b> .....	<b>287</b>
<b>APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS</b> .....	<b>290</b>
<b>Interview Protocol for Admissions Personnel</b> .....	<b>290</b>
<b>Interview Protocol for Community Partners</b> .....	<b>291</b>
<b>Interview Protocol for Junior Faculty Members</b> .....	<b>292</b>
<b>Interview Protocol for Senior Faculty Members</b> .....	<b>294</b>
<b>Interview Protocol for Senior Administrators and Staff</b> .....	<b>296</b>
<b>APPENDIX II: SAMPLE CODES USED TO ANALYZE DATA</b> .....	<b>298</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>299</b>

## LIST OF TABLES

<b>Table 1. Interviews Completed for the Study.....</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>Table 2. Adaptive and Interpretive Strategy Along the Three Elements of Public Purpose at Regional Comprehensive Universities.....</b>	<b>190</b>
<b>Table 3. Framework for Understanding Institutional Responses to (Neoliberal) Public Policy Flow.....</b>	<b>191</b>

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On the Main Street of an imagined American town filled with abandoned buildings bearing the fading logos of defunct factories stands a small university founded in the 1960s to provide access to higher education for the town's residents. This institution, the only public university within 50 miles of the town, educates nearly three quarters of all school teachers in the region and remains an open door to all seeking a college degree, requiring simply that students have a high school diploma or GED for admission. A majority of students that attend this imagined university are first in their families to pursue higher education. Many are Pell recipients and working adults juggling full-time jobs and children while going to school. In addition to serving these students, the university is the largest employer in the region and collaborates with area businesses and civic leaders to address the economic, civic and social issues facing a region that was once a major manufacturing center and has since fallen into decline as boom times ended. For those living in the town, the university remains a beacon of hope and a promise of better economic and civic times to come.

While the university described above is fictional, it is a composite sketch of the institutional commitments and characteristics of the 420 regional comprehensive universities located throughout the United States (AASCU, 2002; AASCU, 2013; Henderson, 2007). Regional comprehensive universities educate 20% of all undergraduate students nationwide, enrolling four million students annually, a majority of whom are minority, nontraditional, low-income and first generation students. These universities have been called by some the "people's universities" and "democracy's colleges" in recognition of their public purpose of facilitating educational opportunity and stewarding the civic and economic life of their regions (2007, p. 14). Despite the important role these universities serve, they are facing unprecedented challenges created by a neoliberal public policy context that narrows their purpose to their role in improving



the economy (Berman, 2012; Brown, 2003). Challenges created by neoliberal public policy include precipitous declines in state appropriations, rising expectations for retention and degree completion, declines in state student financial aid, demands for accountability and assessment, and calls for greater involvement in the economic and workforce development of their states (Dunderstadt, 2000; Gumpert, Iannozzi, Shaman & Zemsky, 1997; Kirshstein & Hulburt, 2012; Mehaffy, 2010; SHEEO, 2015). State policymakers enacting neoliberal public policy often use performance based funding, a strategy borrowed from the private-sector, to incentivize universities to meet state economic needs (Dougherty et al., 2014; Ellis & Bowden, 2014; Giroux, 2004; Lahr, et al., 2014). With the introduction of this funding model, to varying degrees depending on the state's specific funding formula, regional comprehensive universities are no longer funded by how many students they enroll but instead by how many they retain and graduate. Additional weights within performance based funding formulae often incentivize graduating students with degrees in economic growth areas within the state. In addition to the use of this funding model, another challenge facing regional comprehensive universities are enrollment shifts with some universities experiencing enrollment growth and others experiencing enrollment declines (2015). These complex challenges create a perfect storm that is threatening the public purpose of regional comprehensive universities. This dissertation examined how the strategies employed by regional comprehensive universities in responding to challenges created by neoliberal public policy are affecting their public purpose of being student-centered, regionally engaged and open access (2007). As neoliberal ideology shapes higher education, profound implications are created for upward mobility and regional civic life nationwide.

### **Regional Comprehensive Universities: “Democracy’s Colleges”**

Regional comprehensive universities are located in towns like the one imagined above as well as cities and suburbs, and draw nearly 90% of their student bodies from people living in the region. Many of the students who graduate from regional comprehensive universities remain in

the region, becoming its civic and economic leaders and schoolteachers. Indeed, these universities are responsible for preparing 50% of all schoolteachers in the U.S. (AASCU, 2013). Regional comprehensive universities developed throughout the country during what has been called the “golden era of higher education,” a time when expanding access to postsecondary education was a primary goal animating state and federal public policy (Harclerod & Ostar, 1983; Henderson, 2007; Thelin, 2004). These universities, along with community colleges, were created to give shape to a vision articulated by members of the Truman Commission for the Future of Higher Education in 1947; specifically, that all people living in the U.S., regardless of their ability to pay or level of academic preparation, should be provided access to higher education. The leaders of the Commission asserted that education was “by far the most hopeful of the nation’s enterprises” and that “education for all is not only democracy’s obligation but its necessity” (p. 5). This report established a covenant between the federal and state governments and the populace of the U.S.: that higher education’s primary purpose was to improve democratic life and promote equity, and that policymakers would ensure that colleges and universities fulfilled this promise.

During the 1960s, regional comprehensives became an important lever for realizing the vision articulated by the Truman Commission as they ensured that a majority of Americans were no farther than 100 miles from a public university (Harclerod & Ostar, 1983; Henderson, 2007). Some were newly created and many others repurposed from technical and community colleges, branches of flagship state universities, YMCA night schools and former normal schools that had sprung from a societal imperative to educate teachers for the expanding public school system (Thelin, 2004). While they had disparate founding stories, all regional comprehensive universities were created to embody three public purposes: that they be teaching-centric and student-centered; that they be open enrollment and accessible; and that they be regionally focused. Since their inception, regional comprehensives have evolved in a variety of ways, many of these evolutions

closely connected to the changing needs of their regions and their desire to be viewed as legitimate, full-fledged universities (Henderson, 2013).

### **Neoliberal Public Policy**

Nearly sixty years after the Truman Commission issued its landmark report promoting the public purpose of colleges and universities, another federal commission was created to study the future of higher education (Spellings Commission, 2006; The White House, 2013). The Spellings Commission had as its goal the formulation of a national strategy for enacting reforms within public higher education. The central concerns of the Spellings Commission were promoting college access and degree completion, improving instruction and learning outcomes for students, and ensuring tuition affordability. To realize these goals, the Commission called for expanded accountability and assessment of public higher education institutions so that they demonstrate their progress toward realizing this vision. The overriding emphasis of the Commission was to ensure that higher education was configured in ways that enhanced its ability to improve economic life in the country. In this emphasis, neoliberal ideology that evaluates public institutions by their ability to improve the economy is evident (Berman, 2012; Brown, 2003). Although regional comprehensive universities have always been an important access point for higher education, they have long struggled with low retention and completion rates for students (Henderson, 2007; Scheneider & Deane, 2015; Skomsvold, Radford & Berkner, 2011; Yin, 2015). With its emphasis on improving student outcomes, the Spellings Commission report sent a shockwave through the sector and inspired a variety of efforts to meet its recommendations including the Voluntary System of Accountability, a national initiative launched by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, the national body responsible for guiding these institutions (Mehaffy, 2010; Miller, 2008).

The Spellings Commission couched its recommendations in language describing the need for the country to be globally economically competitive, stating that “education is more important to our collective prosperity than ever” (Gildersleeve, Kuntz & Pasque, 2010; 2006, p. vii). This rhetoric is a marked change from the Truman Commission’s articulated concerns for the future of democratic life and equality in the U.S. As another way to mark this shift in public policy priorities, one can look to the number of times “democracy,” “democratic,” “economy” and “economic” appear in the two national reports. In the Spellings Commission report, the word “democracy” appears just once, whereas “economy” and “economic” appear 44 times. Within the Truman Commission report, all four words appear frequently, with “democracy” and “democratic” appearing nearly twice as many times as “economy” and “economic.” More than simply a word count, this rhetorical change is symbolic of a larger shift within the U.S. that has ushered in an age of neoliberal public policy and public opinion which narrows higher education’s purpose to its role within the economy and threatens the democratic, public purposes that public higher education generally, and regional comprehensive universities in particular, were founded to serve (Berman, 2012; Brown, 2003; Giroux, 2002; Harclerod & Ostar, 1983; Henderson, 2007; Newport & Busted, 2013; Teixeira & Dill, 2011).

Neoliberal ideology within public policy has evolved from a political rationality that submits

every action and policy to considerations of profitability, equally important is the production of all human and institutional action as rational entrepreneurial action, conducted according to a calculus of utility, benefit, or satisfaction against a micro-economic grid of scarcity, supply and demand, and moral-value neutrality (Brown, 2003, p. 4).

Some have described the shift articulated above as the creation of ‘academic capitalism,’ the ‘commercialization of higher education’ and the rise of the ‘academic entrepreneur’ (Berman, 2012; Bok, 2003; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). These concepts are useful for understanding the various facets of a larger phenomenon at work – specifically, the ascendance of neoliberalism as a

guiding ideology within higher education. However, they conflate the effects of neoliberalism with its underlying ideological causes. Neoliberal ideology has profoundly reshaped public life and led to the defunding of social programs, public institutions and welfare while imposing market-driven approaches to administering these programs (Giroux, 2002). Within a public postsecondary education policy context, neoliberal ideology narrows higher education's purpose to its role within the market and creates a set of state governance and funding structures that align the operations and priorities of higher education institutions with this political rationality.

Neoliberal ideology within higher education is evidenced at the national, state and institutional levels (Berman, 2012; Giroux, 2002). State legislators and federal policymakers can be understood as employing neoliberal ideology as they issue calls for accountability and the use of private-sector performance metrics to assess university operations related to degree completion rates and student learning outcomes articulated by the Spellings Commission (2006; The White House, 2013). At the state level, governors and state legislators are using neoliberal ideology as they create pay-for-performance funding schemes for institutions and sound demands that universities prepare skilled workers for the economy instead of engaged individuals for full participation in democracy (2012). This is demonstrated by demands from governors across the country to eliminate liberal arts curricula within colleges and universities in favor of increasing the number of vocational degrees and programs (Huckabee, 2013). As a result, neoliberal ideology has transformed the way people enrolled in college are viewed from students engaged in learning – democratic and disciplinary – to consumers and customers in pursuit of marketable skills. Perhaps most concretely, neoliberal ideology is shaping institutional life and operational strategies at colleges and universities, trends of particular concern with regard to the public purpose of regional comprehensive universities (Axelrod, 2002; Mehaffy, 2010). Within the neoliberal framework, university administrators have begun acting as senior management in charge of corporate cultures (Bose, 2012; Giroux, 2002). University presidents, once chief

academic officers, now often act like chief executive officers who engage in significant fundraising and partnerships with corporations to address losses to public funding (Mortimer & Sathre, 2010). Additionally, to align university operations with market rationality and increase institutional productivity, the administrative staff of universities has grown significantly. University administrations have also begun measuring organizational productivity in market terms (Zemsky, Wegner & Massy, 2005). Administrators evaluate faculty 'productivity' in terms of articles published, patents obtained and grants secured. Campuses are urged to brand themselves and identify niches within the higher education landscape so that they remain competitive with peer higher education institutions.

Neoliberal public policy not only challenges the public purpose of higher education institutions, it threatens the identities of public colleges and universities as *public* institutions. As such, neoliberal public policy can be understood as an identity threat which can contribute to dualism of organizational identities and establish multiple competing identities that can lead to organizational dysfunction (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Identity threats that relate to mission can inspire leaders to engage in reactionary behavior through the use of communication and branding efforts as they attempt to influence how the organization is viewed by external audiences. Organizational leaders may also change internal organizational practice to align culture, mission and identity. Ultimately, these efforts are undertaken to alleviate conflicts between external perceptions of the organization and its own identity while addressing the negative outcomes of dualism of organizational identity. Dramatic shifts in mission are often accompanied by changes in organizational identity. Indeed, some argue that organizational change, and by extension mission drift, is impossible without reshaping organizational identity (Simsek & Louis, 1994). As neoliberal public policy conveys to higher education leaders that the sole purpose of colleges and universities is to improve the economy, dual identities and new

identities are created that compromise the identities of regional comprehensive universities as public institutions.

This shift in the view of public higher education's purpose and creation of identity threats has been accompanied by precipitous declines in public funding. Under neoliberal ideology, this is unsurprising as policymakers become reticent to fund colleges and universities as they are increasingly understood as vehicles for ensuring individual prosperity (Newport & Busted, 2013). Never before has public support for public higher education been lower (SHEEO, 2015). While overall public funding for higher education has increased (Jones & Wellman, 2009), funding has not kept pace with enrollments (2013). For this reason, Full Time (Student) Enrollment (FTE) is the most accurate measure of funding for public higher education. In 2014, state and local funding per FTE was at a 25-year low of \$6,552. As way of comparison, in 1987 state and local funding was \$8,497 per FTE. In response to decreases in funding, the average tuition of regional comprehensive universities rose from \$4,114 in 2000, to \$6,360 in 2012 (all dollar amounts given in inflation-adjusted dollars) (Kirshstein & Hulburt, 2012). This shift has meant that universities are increasingly tuition-dependent. In 1987, 23.3% of university budgets came from tuition. By 2014 that proportion had grown to 42.7%. This trend has resulted in public institutions engaging in an "ongoing search for sufficient resources to enable institutions to fulfill their mission" (Hossler, 2005, p. 145). The current funding climate coupled with the neoliberal accountability movement has caused some to observe that public higher education institutions have gone from being state-supported, to state-assisted, to state-located, to state annoyed (Dunderstadt, 2000).

In addition to these ideological and funding challenges are enormous structural challenges. Attendant with the continuing massification of higher education have been dramatic shifts in student demographics resulting in higher numbers of students enrolled who require remediation and robust student supports (Mehaffy, 2010). Public higher education experienced

the sharpest spikes in enrollments during the recession (Doyle, 2010; SHEEO, 2015). Accompanying the difficulties created by shifting enrollments is the introduction of new competitors. Specifically, for-profit, online providers are enrolling students who have historically attended regional comprehensives – low-income, minority, nontraditional and place-bound populations (Mettler, 2014; Morphew, 2009; Zumeta et al., 2012). Additionally, for-profits are now responsible for offering a majority of online teaching degrees, formerly a domain of regional comprehensive universities (Sawchuck, 2013). This means that these universities are experiencing declines in a key demographic they have historically educated: future K-12 teachers.

The writers of the Truman Commission articulated what they saw as a time of crisis, saying that the country was in a “decisive moment of human history” (1947, p. 3). Once more we are confronted with a decisive moment in human history as neoliberal ideology, arguably the most powerful shaper of modern higher education, narrowly promotes higher education’s private purpose and threatens the public purposes with which regional comprehensive universities were founded. Many regional comprehensive universities and community colleges are set to celebrate 50<sup>th</sup> anniversaries (Henderson, 2007; Harclerod & Ostar, 1983). It is within this moment that we must decide if we remain committed to the covenant established by the Truman Commission of expanding higher education participation and leveraging higher education’s democratic and equalizing potential, or if public higher education is solely an economic engine that should be leveraged as such.

A story from the founding of the United States of America is instructive as we consider the future of public higher education with regard to the tensions described herein. As Benjamin Franklin was leaving the Constitutional Convention he was stopped by a woman on the street who asked him what kind of government he had helped create. He responded, “A republic – if you can keep it” (McHenry, 1906, p. 85). As Giroux stated, higher education should be a place to keep “alive the tension between market values and those values representative of civil society that



cannot be measured in narrow commercial terms that are crucial to substantive democracy” (2002, p. 433). Our ability to protect the public purpose of *public* higher education will in large part determine how well we preserve the democratic principles with which the U.S. was founded. The onus is on higher education leaders, the public and lawmakers to assiduously ‘keep’ the public purpose of *public* higher education alive. To do this, we must better understand how neoliberal public policy is affecting regional comprehensive universities – our nation’s “democracy’s colleges” (Henderson, 2007, p. 14).

### **Purpose of this Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine how neoliberalism public policy is affecting the public purpose, mission enactment and organizational identity of regional comprehensive universities. Given neoliberalism’s influence over higher education, it is important to understand how regional comprehensive universities are responding and how these responses affect their underlying public purpose (Hartley, 2002; Henderson, 2007). With a better understanding of the variety of institutional responses to neoliberal public policy, examples of institutional practices that preserve or erode the public purpose of regional comprehensive universities can be provided. This knowledge can inform policymakers of the implications created by neoliberal policy for democratic life and upward mobility, and it can assist institutional stakeholders interested in protecting the public purpose of regional comprehensive universities.

Institutional purpose is derived from the underlying mission and values of an organization, and its organizational identity and daily operations (Hartley, 2002). Institutional mission within colleges and universities is important because it provides faculty, staff and students with a sense of their affiliation and affinity for the institution (Fjortoft & Smart, 1994). A clear mission also contributes to the success of any organization. When mission drift occurs, it is problematic because it can create a feeling on campus that the institution has lost its way and has become purposeless. Regional comprehensive universities are currently facing immense pressures

created by neoliberal public policy that make them susceptible to mission drift with regard to their public purpose and this is troubling because of the implications created by mission drift for educational access and regional civic life. Mission drift may appear to be a necessary response to the unique set of challenges facing public higher education, though, as higher education leaders attempt to navigate a terrain that has become increasingly more complex and demanding.

Scholars generally understand how organizational identity and mission relate to one another and how these two institutional features evolve in response to identity threats and external challenges (Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b; Hartley, 2002; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Simsek & Louis, 1994). Less is known about how university missions and identities are being changed by neoliberal ideology (Berman, 2012). Moreover, the ways regional comprehensive universities are making sense of their public purpose given neoliberal influences and cuts to funding needs to be better understood. While mission drift within higher education settings has been explored, with the exception of very few scholarly pieces, scant studies explore mission evolution at regional comprehensive universities (Dubrow, Mosely & Dustin, 2006; Henderson, 2013; Kastinas, S. & Kinkead, 2011; Orphan & Hartley, 2013). In light of the challenges facing this group of universities, the purpose of this dissertation was to uncover how the public purpose of regional comprehensive universities is affected by neoliberal public policy.

Scholarly attention to the challenges described herein has mostly been paid to the two ends of the public higher educational spectrum – community colleges and flagship, research-intensive state universities (e.g., Hossler, 2004; Jones & Wellman, 2009; Lambert & Callan, 2014). But what of these middle institutions that are instrumental in expanding educational opportunity and stewarding regional civic life? To explore how these challenges are affecting this sector, this dissertation drew on three theoretical frameworks. The first was Matthew Hartley's notion of institutional purpose, which is derived from the conceptualized and enacted organizational mission, vision and daily operations of colleges and universities (2002). Using

Hartley's notion of institutional purpose, how the historic public purpose of regional comprehensives is interacting (and at times, conflicting) with contemporary organizational operations and responses to the neoliberal public policy context was explored. Instances of mission drift with regard to the public purpose of regional comprehensive universities were also examined (Dubrow, Moseley & Dustin, 2006). Mission drift when applied to colleges and universities describes a misalignment of organizational operations (mission enactment) with institutional purpose and history (2002). The second theoretical framework this dissertation drew on was Elizabeth Popp Berman's theorization of the influence of neoliberal ideology over higher education (2012). The final theoretical framework used was Stuart Albert and David Whetten's concept of organizational identity defined as the "central, distinctive and enduring characteristic of an organization [that] distinguishes the organization on the basis of something important and essential" (1985, p. 266).

In 1987, Burton Clark, the eminent higher education scholar, wrote that the evolution of regional comprehensives "has left them with a muddled institutional character – neither teachers colleges nor full-fledged universities – that complicates the identities of professors who serve them" (p. 13). While regional comprehensive universities have evolved to become accredited colleges and universities, for a variety of reasons they remain institutions "caught in the middle" (Henderson, 2013, p. 4). This muddled legacy has been a central feature of the sector and explains much of its contemporary mission drift (Henderson, 2009). A lack of clarity around organizational identity leaves some regional comprehensive universities susceptible to the creation of dualisms in identity and mission drift due the dominance of neoliberal ideology. Alternatively, a clear organizational identity tied to their public purpose can assist regional comprehensive universities in mounting a response to the neoliberal public policy context with the goal of shaping how external stakeholders such as policymakers view their purpose.

To understand how regional comprehensive universities are responding to challenges created by a neoliberal public policy context, Ellen Chaffee's theory of adaptive versus interpretive strategy was used (1985a, 1985b). Adaptive strategy occurs when an organization is striving to respond to and align itself with the external environment without regard for how these responses will affect the underlying purpose and mission of the organization. The primary goal of this form of strategy is organizational survival through securing resources. Alternatively, interpretive strategy occurs when an organization uses its underlying purpose and mission as a guide for responding to external threats and opportunities. The primary goal of this form of strategy is embodying the underlying purpose and values of the organization. This study explored the role of organizational identity in determining the types of institutional striving and strategy (adaptive or interpretive) taking place at regional comprehensive universities in response to a neoliberal state public policy context. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How does a public policy context shaped by neoliberal ideology affect the public purposes of that state's regional comprehensive universities?
2. How do the organizational identities of regional comprehensive universities influence the strategies they employ in response to neoliberal policies?
3. To what degree does a neoliberal public policy engender institutional striving?

This dissertation is a case study of four regional comprehensive universities in a U.S. state whose policymakers exhibit neoliberal ideology in their governance and funding of higher education through a statewide emphasis on public higher education's role in facilitating the economic recovery of the state following the Great Recession (Yin, 2014). State policymakers have introduced expectations for higher education to build the workforce through producing more graduates within STEM and health fields, industries assumed to be growing within the state. To realize these goals, state policymakers have used performance based funding to incentivize institutional performance. Performance based funding within the state accounts for over half of

higher education appropriations. This dissertation examined the changing university policies and practices of regional comprehensive universities in response to neoliberal public policy over the past 10 years. Specifically, this study sought to understand how changes to the public purpose of regional comprehensives are affecting educational access and the universities' status as hubs of regional civic life.

An important selection criteria for universities was the presence of language within strategic documents (mission and vision statements, strategic plans, institutional histories, etc.) describing the following ideals that capture the public purpose of regional comprehensive universities: regional service and/or civic engagement, teaching and learning, and status as an open-access and/or accessible university. This research study used semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2002) with university stakeholders including administrators, staff and faculty members as well as community stakeholders surrounding the campuses. Also interviewed were state and national policymakers and experts. A thorough analysis of state policy and individual university documents was performed to triangulate interview data.

Findings show that given the immense pressures they are facing, regional comprehensives have been forced into a series of Faustian bargains about which elements of their public purpose they may afford to preserve through enacting interpretive strategy, and which they must de-emphasize through enacting adaptive strategy (Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b). These compromises are the result of each university's efforts to grapple with a neoliberal policy context that demands greater efficiency, assessment and accountability at the same time as revenue from state appropriations and student enrollments are declining. For one of the universities, its involvement with improving civic life in the region has been foregone in favor of engaging in economic development and maintaining a relatively open admissions policy while reconfiguring university life to retain and graduate students. In this institutional response, adaptive change that threatens the public purpose of the university is evident in the decision to forego coordinated

regional civic engagement and interpretive strategy that protects the public purpose of the university is evident in the decision to remain open access. In the three other universities, while interpretive strategy has been evident in deepened institutional commitments to regional civic engagement, these efforts are at times being overshadowed by economic development efforts that are taking place in response to neoliberal demands for universities to actively work to improve the economy. Each university has also engaged in adaptive strategy focused on institutional survival through reducing the number of tenure track professors employed and replacing them with nontenure track faculty members. These responses create implications for student learning and support and challenge each university's student-centered mission. Most troubling is that each of the four universities to varying degrees has elevated admissions standards, either by requiring that students submit standardized test scores or by mandating minimum GPAs and test scores for admission. The reason for these changes is that given declines in funding and demands that universities retain and graduate more students, recruiting better prepared students becomes the quickest and most cost effective strategy available. In these institutional responses, adaptive strategy focused on ensuring the financial security of the university is evident.

Findings also reveal differences in striving behavior and strategy enacted among the four universities in the face of these challenges influenced by how each university conceived of its organizational identity. Institutions that had organizational identities tied closely to the underlying values and public purpose of the university tended to enact more interpretive strategy with regard to their public purpose (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b). Alternatively, universities whose identities were more closely aligned with institutional features such as being small and underfunded, and with the university's position within the broader higher education state context tended more toward enacting adaptive strategy. With regard to striving, all four universities evidenced prestige- and legitimacy-seeking, but two have attempted to create alternative models of legitimacy that embody elements of their public purpose. In these efforts,

university strategy aimed at mounting an offensive to the identity threat created by neoliberal ideology is evident (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). These two universities were also the most likely to enact interpretive strategy in response to the neoliberal public policy context. While these efforts are promising, given the neoliberal public policy forces affecting each university's mission, tradeoffs remain with emphasizing elements of each institution's public purpose while downplaying others. Ultimately, even as they strive to preserve their public purposes, their status as "democracy's colleges" remains under threat.

A final set of findings was uncovered concerning the unintended consequences and hidden costs created by the neoliberal public policy climate. The first unintended consequence is a growing culture of surveillance on campuses as stakeholders are required to demonstrate how they are promoting the university's retention and graduation efforts (Foucault, 2010). This culture potentially jeopardizes the identification campus members feel with the public purpose and mission of each institution (Dutton, Dukerich, Harquil, 1994). Many campus members sought employment at the four universities because they felt a personal connection to aspects of its public purpose. As campus members are held accountable for state mandates and assessed in their daily work, individual engagement with the larger public purpose of each university is threatened. There have also been hidden costs to the efficiency created by cuts to public funding. The first has been the requirement that heavily burdened campus members "do more with less," as people are asked to take on additional responsibilities in the face of staff and faculty shortages. Another hidden cost has been to the ability of the two least well-funded universities to engage in long-term visioning for the future as they are required each year to cut more of their budgets.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

The first chapter of this dissertation introduces the study and identifies the guiding research questions – specifically, how neoliberal public policy is affecting the public purpose of regional comprehensive universities. Additionally, this chapter provides a rationale for why it is

imperative to examine this problem. The following chapter offers a review of the relevant literature pertaining to the mission and history of regional comprehensive universities and articulates the conceptual framework that guides this study. In chapter three, an in depth description of the methods and research design used to examine this problem is provided. The context of the state selected for this study is described as well as the sample selection process. In addition, the data collection and analysis strategies and efforts to ensure trustworthiness are discussed. In chapters four, five, six and seven, the findings are presented from the four cases. In chapters eight, nine and 10, these findings are analyzed using the conceptual framework guiding the study. In the concluding chapter, the implications of these findings are explored and policy and institutional recommendations are offered aimed at preserving higher education's public purpose.



## **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In 1987 Burton R. Clark, the eminent higher education scholar, wrote that the evolution of Regional Comprehensive Universities “has left them with a muddled institutional character – neither teachers colleges nor full-fledged universities – that complicates the identities of professors who serve them” (p. 13). Regional comprehensive universities have been called institutions “caught in the middle” (Henderson, 2013, p. 4). This muddled legacy has been a central feature of the sector and explains much of the mission evolution that has characterized these institutions throughout their evolution, even as they have become accredited and recognized as colleges and universities (Henderson, 2007). Yet regional comprehensive universities have been instrumental in expanding access to higher education for underrepresented students and serving as stewards of civic and economic life for their regions (AASCU, 2002; Doyle, 2010; Geiger, 2004).

Despite the important role these institutions play within their states, regional comprehensive universities are facing unprecedented challenges that predispose them to mission drift (Henderson, 2009). Scholars often attribute the causes of mission drift at public colleges and universities to decreases in funding and rising expectations, as well as a host of other circumstances (Mehaffy, 2010; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Zemsky, Wegner & Massy, 2005; Zumeta, Callan & Finney, 2012). These assessments confuse the underlying forces that are causing mission drift at public universities with their effects. As is shown, mission drift is occurring at public universities because they lack coherent organizational identities tied to their public purpose, defined as a widely shared and communicated values and mission of an organization, that would situate and distinguish them within the broader postsecondary context (Albert & Whetten, 1985). This lack of clarity around identity leaves regional comprehensive

universities susceptible to the dominance of neoliberalism, a political project that reduces the purpose of public institutions to their value in the market (Brown, 2003). Neoliberal ideology is shaping public higher education generally and the missions of regional comprehensive universities in particular (Berman, 2012). The convoluted history of regional comprehensive universities particularly as it relates to mission, mission drift, and the organizational identity of these institutions is explored. The effect of neoliberal ideology on public higher education is also explored.

### **Institutions with Many Names: The Mission and History of Regional Comprehensive Universities**

Regional comprehensive university is a designation given to nearly 420 public, four-year universities and colleges (Henderson, 2007). A majority of these institutions are members of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), a national organization that engages in public advocacy and lobbying for the sector, and offers guidance and professional development for its institutional leaders (Colvin, n.d.). Many regional comprehensive universities were founded as normal schools, springing from a societal imperative to educate teachers for the expanding public school system (AASCU, 2013; Thelin, 2004). The use of the word, ‘school,’ within the name ‘normal schools’ hints at the early position of regional comprehensive universities within higher education – that of lesser postsecondary institutions, a position reflected by Burton’s description of them being neither colleges nor universities (1987). This status has since changed as regional comprehensive universities have evolved from being schools, then colleges, with a majority now calling themselves ‘universities’ (Morphew, 2002). The legacy of educating teachers has infused many of regional comprehensive universities with a focus on teaching and learning, and as such these institutions have historically conducted little disciplinary or basic research. But not all regional comprehensive universities began as teacher’s colleges.

Some were founded as extensions of flagship universities, called 'branch campuses', and still others were vocational schools that became colleges and universities.

'Normal schools,' "branch campuses," "vocational schools' and 'teachers colleges' are not the only appellations these institutions have enjoyed. They have also been called "The People's Universities," "the university next door," and the colleges of "forgotten Americans" (Henderson, 2007, p. 7; Kastinas & Kinkead, 2011, p. 13; Scheneider & Deane, 2015) in honor of the open-access nature of their missions. Indeed, these institutions educate 50% of all college students and enroll the largest proportion of low-income, minority and first-generation college students of all not-for-profit universities (Geiger, 2004). Regional comprehensive universities have been called 'state' and 'regional' universities, alluding to their focus on improving the economic and civic life of their states and local communities. Regional comprehensive universities have served as hubs of civic life, hosting electoral polls, town hall meetings and engaging in public problem solving (AASCU, 2002; Bringle, Games & Mallow, 1995; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011; Thelin, 2004). This regional service and engagement is reflected in another name given to regional comprehensive universities: "stewards of place" (2002, p. 3). Regional comprehensive universities acquired this name during a visioning process led by AASCU and it is intended to articulate a unique mission and identity for these institutions within the higher education context and U.S. society.

Perhaps most telling within the list of names used to describe RCUs has been the word 'comprehensive,' reflecting an expanding mission and set of educational activities that have developed in response to regional needs, legislative imperatives, and desires of institutional leaders and students (Clark, 1987; Henderson, 2007, 2013). The name 'comprehensive' was given to regional comprehensive universities by the Carnegie Foundation within the early classifications in recognition of the multiple functions they play (Aldersley, 1995). The 'comprehensive' moniker serves as a metaphor for the "muddled" evolution of regional

comprehensive universities, reflecting the fluctuating, expanding, and nebulous nature of their institutional missions (Morphew, 2002). Given the disparate roots of regional comprehensive universities, it is no wonder that they have experienced difficulty in creating discrete organizational identities and institutional missions (Albert & Whetten, 1985).

### **Mission Making, Evolution, and Drift**

As is evidenced by this historical account, the missions of regional comprehensive universities have undergone transformations throughout their histories (Henderson, 2007). This evolution continues with mission drift occurring across the sector (Henderson, 2009). The purpose of this section of the literature review is to describe the concepts of mission and mission drift, and explore the evidence of mission drift within regional comprehensive universities.

Mission has been called the “life force” of organizations (Scott, 2006, p. 1) and is defined as the essential purpose of an institution (Hartley, 2002). Mission is derived from an organization’s founding charter, history, culture, and organizational strategies. Mission and vision are related ideas but distinct in operation (Kotter, 1996). Vision describes the future directions of organizations and informs the creation of specific steps that will be taken to embody mission. Effective visions are manageable, desirable, feasible, focused, flexible, and easily communicated. Vision, mission, and history culminate in the creation of institutional purpose (2002). How well articulations of institutional purpose, vision and mission align with day-to-day operations is a question of mission agreement and coherence. Ideally, all organizational policies are manifestations of mission and vision.

Mission enactment involves both structural (policies and operating strategies) and ideological (widely shared values and beliefs) elements (Hartley, 2002; Scott, 2006; Simsek & Louis, 1994). Mission can be an unsettled matter with stakeholder disagreement existing over the fundamental purpose of the organization (MacTaggard, 2007; Smart, 1975). When this occurs, institutional dysfunction may arise as members struggle to determine organizational activities and

direction. While shifts in university operations are expected in response to external threats or changing contexts (Zemsky et al., 2005), organizational theorists believe it is important to remain focused on the institution's original purpose, suggesting that mission coherence (the opposite of mission drift) in the form of alignment between operations and mission is a predictor of organizational success (Eckel & Kezar, 2002; Fjortoft & Smart, 1994).

Mission is often expressed through written statements (Davies, 1986; Morphew & Hartley, 2006). These statements evolve with parent organizations but for mission coherence to be achieved, the core values with which the organization was founded should be present at all times. Within the corporate sector, mission statements are remarkably similar and often include language about diversity and social service (Bartkus & Glassman, 2008). In universities, these statements include the three commonly recognized purposes of higher education: research, teaching and service (2006; Scott, 2006). Though mission statements can be indicators of overall institutional purpose, they do not always illuminate organizational practices or historical missions (Delucchi, 1997), and have been criticized for being "rhetorical pyrotechnics" (2006, p. 456). The process of articulating mission helps organizational members distinguish themselves from others within a system and as such, mission is related to organizational identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985).

Kanter found that mission, in written form and when enacted, if used as such, can serve as an important commitment mechanism within institutions (1972). Commitment mechanisms are elements of a socialization system that cause members to adhere to its work (for example, shared sacrifice, group identity, communal labor, rituals and ceremonies, and mutual criticism). How well mission serves as a commitment mechanism, though, depends largely on the culture and leadership of the organization. Mission is most effective as a commitment mechanism within organizations that are tightly coupled (Gamoran & Dreeben, 1986; Simsek & Louis, 1994).

Organizational theorists often agree that missions are not, and should not be, static notions (Davies, 1986; Hartley, 2002; Zemsky et al., 2005). Indeed, some degree of evolution often takes place as organizations adapt to new circumstances, constituencies, and discoveries. The overriding mission of the higher education system has evolved greatly over time (Scott, 2006; Thelin, 2004). Colleges and universities were founded to advance human reason, with this goal being subordinate to promoting the teachings of the Bible and edicts issued by the Catholic Church, and most were single-sex institutions. During the Enlightenment period, humanism arose as a force within postsecondary education and missions of universities and colleges evolved to promote pure research, teaching and service to mankind. In the U.S. context, higher education was founded to promote religious instruction and to prepare (White, male) citizens for participation in the newly created Republic (Clark, 1987). Since then, institutions have become coeducational and access has expanded greatly. A modern addition to the mission of higher education is preparing students for jobs in the private sector (Delucchi, 1997).

Higher Education's status as either a private or public good as it relates to the system's overall mission has been contested throughout its history (Bose, 2012; Giroux, 2002; Labaree, 1997; Thelin, 2004). A primary reason for this contestation concerns the variety of purposes postsecondary education serves – universities educate students for jobs and lives as citizens, produce research that advances human knowledge and improves organizational efficiency within the private sector, and engage in the civic and economic life of local communities (Benson, Harkavy & Hartley, 2005; Berman, 2012; Bringle, G., Games, R., & Malloy, 2000; Ehrlich, 2000; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2010). These multiple functions create tension as postsecondary institutions attempt to fulfill their public and private purposes.

Reflecting these ongoing debates over higher education's essential mission and purpose, a multiplicity of postsecondary institutions with distinct missions have flourished, including colleges and universities focused on either research, service, teaching, parochialism, or often, a

mix of two or more of these ideals (Clark, 1987; Scott, 2006; Thelin, 2004; Teichler, 2008). Some institutions are elite, research-intensive and cater to those best-prepared (and often wealthiest) students, and other institutions are open-access and focused on student support, teaching and learning (Henderson, 2007; Perna & Jones, 2013). The diversity of higher education institutions is a strength of the system because it provides a variety of options for those seeking a college degree, as a majority of people in the U.S. do (Adelman, 2006; Bowen, Chingos & McPherson, 2009; English, 2011). As this historical account shows, the mission of the higher education system has fluctuated dramatically and with it, the missions of individual colleges and universities have also changed.

When universities and colleges change organizational behavior, they are often met with accusations of mission drift (Dubrow, Moseley, & Dustin, 2006). The concept of mission drift is derived from military operations and was originally used to describe shifts in the goals and methods of military missions. Mission drift when applied to colleges and universities describes a misalignment of organizational operations (mission enactment) with institutional purpose and history (Hartley, 2002). Within higher education, mission evolution and drift are common. One notable example is Harvard University. The university was founded to provide religious instruction to priests and has since secularized (Thelin, 2004). While the history of higher education is rife with examples of mission drift (Morphew, 2009), two are offered for the purposes of explaining this phenomenon: that of liberal arts colleges and parochial colleges.

The 1990s were a time of uncertainty for liberal arts colleges as student enrollment, which had once been steadily increasing, was projected to decrease (Delucchi, 1997; Hartley, 2002). In anticipation of these declines, liberal arts colleges shifted curriculum away from a pure focus on the liberal arts to emphasize vocational education to meet student demand (Delucchi, 1997; Hartley, 2002). More recently, liberal arts colleges are encouraging faculty disciplinary research, a shift from the teaching mission of the sector (O'Meara & Bloomgarden, 2011).

Parochial institutions have also faced pressures to change missions (Flory, 2002; Ingram & King, 1995). This drift in mission is directly related to secularizing forces external to the institutions. Evidence of mission drift is rife within the media (Flaherty, 2013; Green, 2010; Redden, 2009), as parochial colleges reshape curricula to offer courses on evolution, admit nonreligious students, and no longer require chapel attendance. Brown University, founded as a Baptist college, has experienced enormous mission drift and secularization similar to that of other religious colleges (Friedman, 2011). And like other parochial colleges (for example, Erskine College, and Gonzaga and Loyola Marymount Universities), Brown has been the subject of criticism for this drift (Green, 2010).

The dynamic nature of mission enactment in universities and colleges raises the following question: if mission is always changing, how important is it to organizational success? Individual university missions can give rise to organizational contradictions (Scott, 2006). If a college has a mission to promote research *and* offer high-quality educational experiences while simultaneously serving the local region, faculty members may experience role confusion in the process of determining what they should focus most of their time: teaching, service or research (Dubrow et al., 2006; O'Meara & Bloomgarden, 2013). Indeed, mission statements that are contradictory can be used to justify the inclusion of new goals or activities within university operations contrary to historic missions (Ingram & King, 1985). These circumstances can give rise to conflicts over fundamental organizational values as institutional leaders attempt to reconcile official and operational goals (Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2005). Mission drift is a problem for the system of higher education because it leads to its homogenization as institutions become more alike (Clark; 1987; Morphew, 2009; Morphew & Huisman, 2002; Thelin, 2004). When mission drift has occurred, institutions have the ability to reclaim core values as was evidenced in Hartley's study of liberal arts colleges (2002) and MacTaggard's study of academic turnarounds (2007). These efforts are successful when institutional leaders are able to re-align daily operations



with mission, and effectively confront external and internal forces that are harming mission coherence.

### **Mission Drift at Regional Comprehensive Universities**

The missions of regional comprehensive universities have evolved throughout their histories as they have become more comprehensive (Clark, 1987; Henderson, 2007, 2013). This can be attributed to the efforts of regional comprehensive universities to accommodate multiple and competing demands from students, regions and state legislators. The historic mission of regional comprehensive universities has been to educate teachers, facilitate access to higher education and enhance the civic and economic life of their regions. These aspects of the mission of regional comprehensive universities demonstrate the interplay of the larger public and private purposes of higher education. This section explores the shifts in mission of regional comprehensive universities and the challenges scholars often cite as causing these shifts.

Changing university operations evidences mission drift within the sector. As was described, regional comprehensive universities were founded to promote access and as such, have historically required low standards for admission (Henderson, 2007, 2013). Regional comprehensive universities are beginning to increase admissions standards to privilege better prepared and often wealthier and less diverse students (Zumeta et al., 2012). Regional comprehensives have historically been focused on teaching, learning, and undergraduate education. When standards for K-12 changed and the requirement arose that teachers have master's degrees, regional comprehensive universities expanded degree offerings to accommodate this shift (2007). As regional needs have evolved, regional comprehensive universities have continued to broaden curricula and university operations. These shifts can be viewed as appropriate mission evolution given the historic regional and teaching foci of regional comprehensive universities. Within the last 20 years, though, regional comprehensive universities have added curricular offerings that include non-education master's degrees and doctoral

programs. These additions constitute mission drift as regional comprehensive universities shift away from core values of teaching and learning in favor of expanding research activities (Morphew & Huesman, 2002).

In line with amplifying research agendas, regional comprehensive universities have reshaped faculty tenure, rewards, and promotion guidelines to encourage more research. While Clark wrote derisively about the “teaching load” born by faculty at regional comprehensive universities (1978, p. 46), this very requirement was formally what led to the recognition of regional comprehensive universities as “teaching institutions” (Henderson, 2009, p. 185). This change in faculty expectations has resulted in an increase in basic and disciplinary research, as well as the attainment of the coveted ‘Research University’ designation within the Carnegie Classifications (O’Meara, 2007). This change has been accompanied by expanded class sizes, increases in nontenure faculty and institutional resources being diverted away from the teaching missions of regional comprehensive universities towards research (Morphew & Baker, 2004). Part of the justification for increasing research given by leaders of regional comprehensive universities is that doing so will attract funding and alleviate budget deficits. Ironically this solution has the potential to exacerbate the effects of deficits, as pursuing research requires enormous institutional resources and infrastructure regional comprehensive universities often lack (Henderson, 2013). A final outcome of these drifts of mission has been the creation of dual identities over as these teaching institutions engage in more research (Albert & Whetten, 1985).

The regional engagement mission of regional comprehensive universities is also under threat. The results of a forthcoming case study examining the unraveling institutional civic commitments at three regional comprehensive universities and one land grant provides evidence of this drift (Orphan & Hartley, 2013). The three regional comprehensive universities in the study were found to be directing institutional resources away from regional service and toward research. Tenure and promotion guidelines have been changing to reflect a shift in institutional

priorities as faculty are encouraged to do less community-based research and instead pursue grant-funded disciplinary research. This finding parallels that of another study tracking the spending of colleges and universities. Desrochers and Kirshstein found that regional comprehensive universities have reduced institutional funding and support for local engagement initiatives (2012).

A number of reasons have been given to explain the mission drift taking place within regional comprehensive universities specifically, and public higher education generally. Crisis is a word often used by scholars in these descriptions (Hartley, 2002; Ingram & King, 1995; Newfield, 2008; Jones & Wellman, 2009). This word is used so frequently that some commentators have ruefully observed that higher education has existed in a state of perpetual crisis since its creation (Calhoun, 2006; Thelin, 2004; Tight, 1994). While it is not the purpose of this chapter to claim that public higher education is in crisis, it is important to enumerate the immense and unprecedented challenges colleges and universities are facing.

A set of forces often pointed to as explaining mission drift in public higher education are ideological in nature. Public scrutiny of colleges and universities has arguably never been greater, with powerful national funders including the Gates Foundation, the Lumina Foundation, and federal policymakers including the Department of Education and the Obama Administration, calling for assessment of student outcomes and improvements to degree completion rates (Mehaffy, 2010; Obama, 2009; Spellings Commission, 2006; The White House, 2013). State legislators at times fail to enforce the mission of individual universities, encouraging instead drift as part of regional boosterism and goals focused on responsiveness to economic needs (Henderson, 2009; Mophew, 2009). These circumstances create environments within which the leaders of public universities are being asked to “do more with less” (Giroux, 2002, p. 444). The general public has become increasingly critical of public higher education, questioning high tuitions, the provision of what is seen as superfluous student services, and the perceived luxury of

faculty life (Labaree, 1997; Taylor, Parker, Fry, Cohn, Wang, Velasko & Dockterman, 2011; Thelin, 2004).

A popular explanation given for mission drift in public higher education in light of decreased funding, shifting student enrollments and rising expectations was offered by Slaughter and Leslie (Doyle, 2010; SHEEO, 2015; 1997). The authors asserted that resource dependence theory explains the trends towards privatization, dictating that as institutions lose revenue from one source, they will look to other sources for resources. In doing so, institutions begin to resemble those organizations from which they are seeking revenues. This dependence on resources can lead to distortion of public missions as colleges and universities privatize and engage in academic capitalism. Although Slaughter and Leslie are correct – universities do seek other revenue sources to make up for losses, resource dependence theory does not fully explain mission drift within public higher education.

Slaughter and Leslie also point to the growing portfolio of activities to which federal and state funds are devoted as reason for overall declines in funding (1997). While it is true that there are more demands placed on public dollars, this does not fully explain the phenomenon of decreased ideological and financial support for public higher education. The common justifications given for increased public scrutiny – rising tuitions, mixed graduation rates, and low student learning outcomes – also falls short of uncovering larger trends occurring within U.S. society and their effects on higher education (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Mehaffy, 2010; Zumeta et al., 2012). Moreover, although the challenges facing public higher education are significant, they do not fully account for the drifts in mission taking place. Indeed, these explanations confuse the underlying causes of mission drift within regional comprehensive universities with its symptoms.

Mission drift at regional comprehensive universities is due to their unique susceptibility to the dominance of neoliberal ideology operating within U.S. society (Brown, 2003). Because regional comprehensive universities lack coherent organizational identities that embody their

public purpose, they are particularly vulnerable to mission drift in the face of larger neoliberal forces (Albert & Whetten, 1985). First described is the role of organizational identity in higher education and regional comprehensive universities. Second, the influence of neoliberal ideology on the mission of higher education institutions is explored.

### **“Muddled” Institutions: Organizational Identity and Prestige-Seeking at Regional Comprehensive Universities**

Organizational identity, similar to culture, is communicated through the metaphors, stories, and myths that an organization uses to describe and understand itself (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Kanter, 1972; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Martin, Feldman, Hatch & Sitkin, 1983; Simsek & Louis, 1994). Organizational identity is defined as the "central, distinctive and enduring characteristic of an organization" that “distinguishes the organization on the basis of something important and essential” (1985, p. 266). Organizational identity has the dual purpose of communicating distinctive values and institutional features to members and external audiences. Mission drift, evolution and coherence involve questions of organizational identity, because mission is an important driver of institutional culture and identity. Organizational identity contains three components: a central character of an organization, a clear distinction between the organization and its peers, and a sustained sense of identity over time.

The first component of organizational identity, a central character, provides members with a feeling of distinction that is derived from a seemingly unique set of attributes and characteristics (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Within a higher education context, there are institutions that have clear and distinctive organizational identities. Harvard University, for example, understands itself as being an elite, research-intensive, high-quality institution (Townsend, Newell & Wiese, 1992; Thelin, 2004). Unlike Harvard, regional comprehensive universities have less sense of their organizational identity (Henderson, 2007, 2009, 2013). This lack of clear

identity can be attributed to the “muddled evolution” of the sector, and the comprehensive nature of its mission (Clark, 1987, p. 4).

The second attribute of organizational identity, distinctiveness within a system, serves to situate and distinguish individual organizations (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008). Thus, organizational identities culminate in the creation of institutional taxonomies. Distinctiveness communicates individual organizational values to external audiences while differentiating the institution from peers. The creation of the Carnegie Classifications was an effort to codify and differentiate the organizational identities of higher education institutions (Aldersley, 1995; Clark, 1987; Thelin, 2004). As has been widely documented, though, the Carnegie Classifications have become a ladder for aspirational and prestige-seeking behavior among colleges and universities (O’Meara, 2007; Morpew, 2009).

The transformation of the Carnegie Classifications from a taxonomy into a hierarchical assessment demonstrates the way organizational identity interacts with vision and mission, capturing not only how the organization currently is but what it is striving to be (Aldersley, 1995; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). In colleges and universities striving and a desire to advance in the Carnegie Classifications can be explained by the isomorphic tendencies of higher education (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Morpew, 2009). Because colleges and universities lack clear products or technologies with which to differentiate themselves and evaluate performance, they tend to compete for prestige by mimicking the behavior of elite institutions. Evidence of isomorphism in higher education can be found in institutional documents such as mission and vision statements that include aspirations to resemble elite peers. This tendency contributes to mission drift (Davies, 1986; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Scott, 2006). As institutions attempt to “ape the programmatic offerings of the most prestigious” (2009, p. 246), they become more comprehensive in degree offerings and organizational operations, a phenomenon called upward or academic drift (Morpew & Huisman, 2002). In *The Academic*

*Life*, Clark tellingly declared the rightness of academic and upward drift within the Carnegie Classifications, writing that the model of the research university was superior. This rationale is shared throughout higher education and as Henderson observed, regional comprehensive universities recognize this as a desired standard to aspire to (2009).

Despite the documented mimetic nature of higher education (Clark, 1987; Morphew, 2009), distinctiveness remains a prized institutional attribute (Townsend et al., 1992). A university or college is distinctive

if it has one or more of the following characteristics: stands out as being not only different, but better; excels in serving an obviously desired need; is more effective in achieving its end; and has a style or process that is not used by others (1992, p. xv).

Borrowing again from the example above, Harvard is widely considered a distinctive institution. There is very clearly only *one* Harvard University and external audiences are aware of the institution's singularity. Due to their evolution and mission drift, regional comprehensives, on the other hand, are often not distinctive or recognizable to those unaffiliated with individual institutions (Henderson, 2007). Paradoxically, true distinctiveness within organizational fields is exceptionally rare and difficult to acquire, so this organizational attribute remains illusive for most institutions that pursue it (Delucchi, 1997; Martin, Feldman, Hatch & Sitkin, 1983).

Within the Carnegie Classifications, regional comprehensive universities have had the designation of "comprehensive" and "masters" institutions, a nebulous categorization that highlights the sector's lack of distinctiveness (Henderson, 2013). Perhaps not by coincidence, the comprehensive/master's Carnegie designation is situated in the middle section of the taxonomy, reflecting again the status of regional comprehensive universities as being "caught in the middle" (p. 4). This de-facto assessment on the part of Carnegie of regional comprehensive universities as being middling echoes that of the larger public's understanding – or lack thereof – of the unique niche within higher education that these institutions occupy. A coherent organizational identity can act as a commitment mechanism, safeguarding institutional missions in the face of

isomorphic pressures (Kanter, 1972). Given the still nascent organizational identity of many regional comprehensive universities, however, they are particularly prone to these impulses with many actively attempting to, and succeeding in, moving ‘up’ the Carnegie Classifications by becoming Research Universities (O’Meara, 2007).

AASCU’s *Stewards of Place* report was an effort to discourage mission drift and prestige-seeking while also creating an organizational identity for the sector (2002; Henderson, 2007). This report encouraged regional comprehensive universities to adhere to the access, teaching, and regional engagement values within their missions. *Stewards of Place* was a public relations tool that was intended to communicate the organizational identity of regional comprehensive universities to external audiences. While this conceptualization of organizational identity has been adopted by some institutions, it has not prevented the mimetic impulses that are well documented among regional comprehensive universities and it has yet to be embraced widely through U.S. society as a way to describe and understand the contributions of the sector.

The final criteria for the creation of organizational identity is that it be sustained over time (Albert & Whetten, 1985). While organizational identity may experience fluctuations as organizations renegotiate and reinterpret founding principles and respond to external forces, a sense of continuity of original mission pervades institutions with strong organizational identities. This principle in higher education is evidenced by the overlap between institutional age and membership within the prestigious and historic Association of American Universities, as well as other measures of prestige as determined by position within national rankings schemas (Thelin, 2004; Usher, 2009). In his study of mission drift at liberal arts colleges, Delucchi found that those institutions that maintained a liberal arts mission during the turbulent 1990s were older and tended to be more selective (1997). In this case, longevity and prestige served as commitment mechanisms that encouraged institutional leaders to protect the historic mission of these institutions. Regional comprehensive universities are among the newest additions to higher



education, many being founded within the last 100 years (Henderson, 2007). Considering again the “muddled evolution”, further evidence is found that the third criteria necessary for the creation of organizational identity – “temporal continuity” – is absent (1985, p. 265).

An organization can acquire multiple identities, called dualism, throughout its evolution, a phenomenon that is clearly evidenced in the evolution of regional comprehensive universities and reflected again by the label comprehensive (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Henderson, 2007). Dualism within organizational identities can be caused by the divestiture of organizational divisions or the acquisition of separate organizations. Dualism can also occur when there are competing ideals held by organizational members. Within regional comprehensive universities, dualism with regard to organizational identity has been created by the values brought by faculty who were socialized at research-intensive institutions (Clark, 1987; Henderson, 2013; O’Meara, 2007). Many faculty members may wish to reshape their institution in the image of their research-intensive graduate schools. Dualism has also occurred as institutions have absorbed new state or regional imperatives, and evolved from being offshoots of established flagships.

External forces, called identity threats, can contribute to dualism and affect internal operations through reshaping organizational identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Ravasi & Schultz, 2013). Identity threats that relate to mission can inspire reactionary behavior and attempts to influence how the organization is viewed by external audiences through the use of communication and branding efforts. Organizational leaders may change organizational practice to align culture, mission and identity. Ultimately, these efforts are undertaken to address conflicts between external perceptions of the organization and its own identity, and address the negative outcomes of dualism of organizational identities. *Stewards of Place* can be seen as an organizational response to identity threats created by prestige-seeking behavior of AASCU’s member institutions (2002).

Dramatic shifts in mission are often accompanied by changes in organizational identity. Indeed, some argue that organizational change, and by extension mission drift, is impossible without the reshaping of organizational identity (2002; Simsek & Louis, 1994). How well organizational identity acts a commitment mechanism binding members to the core missions of colleges and universities depends largely on how well developed it is with regard to the criteria described above (Kanter, 1972). As has been described, because regional comprehensive universities often lack clear organizational identities, they are more prone to mimetic and striving behaviors. This lack of organizational identity illuminates an important underlying cause of mission drift within regional comprehensive universities. The dominance of neoliberal ideology constitutes the final underlying cause of mission drift at regional comprehensive universities.

### **Neoliberal Ideology and Public Higher Education**

The tensions around mission being experienced by regional comprehensive universities are symptomatic of historic trends within public higher education. Scholars contend that the public purpose of universities and colleges is being crowded out by market logic and propose a neoliberal framework for understanding the current state of public higher education (Bose, 2012; Berman, 2012; Brown, 2003 Giroux, 2002). Some have called this phenomenon ‘academic capitalism’ and the rise of the ‘academic entrepreneur’ (2012; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). These theoretical frameworks are useful for understanding how neoliberalism operates, however they confuse the effects of the dominance of neoliberal ideology with its core causes. For the purposes of this literature review, Brown’s conceptualization of the phenomenon is used (2003). She posits that neoliberalism is a political rationality that submits

every action and policy to considerations of profitability, equally important is production of human and institutional action as rational entrepreneurial action, conducted according to a calculus of utility, benefit, or satisfaction against a micro-economic grid of scarcity, supply and demand, and moral-value neutrality (2003, p. 4).

It is important to distinguish between privatization and neoliberal ideology. While privatization of public spaces is a symptom of neoliberal ideology, neoliberalism is a larger political project that employs market rationality in shaping public life and public institutions. Neoliberal ideology has led to the use of market rationality to guide public policy and the defunding of social programs and welfare while imposing market-driven approaches to various areas of public life (Giroux, 2002). Neoliberal ideology has narrowed the purposes of public institutions generally, and education in particular, to their utility to the economic health of the nation. While higher education has always possessed private goals and values, until the rise of neoliberal ideology in the 1980s, these private purposes were fairly well balanced by public purposes. First, the history of public and private purposes in higher education is described. Then neoliberal ideology as a political project that has eroded the public mission of public higher education is described.

Beliefs about the private purpose of higher education date back to the creation of the system and parallel the debates of the country's founding fathers (Bose, 2012; Labaree, 1997; Thelin, 2004). Thomas Jefferson, also the founder of the University of Virginia, believed that the primary purpose of education was to prepare citizens for participation in the new republic. Alternatively Alexander Hamilton believed that education should prepare elites to participate in the economy and workforce. The mission of higher education has evolved greatly since its founding and as is described above, this evolution has reflected the opposing perspectives of Jefferson and Hamilton (Scott, 2006; Thelin, 2004; Zemsky et al., 2005). Up until the 1940s and 1950s, equilibrium existed between the public and private purposes of higher education. The shift of higher education's balance between public and private purposes can be situated in the period following World War II.

Following the war, the federal government was eager to find a societal place for returning veterans and enacted the G.I. Bill (Gumport et al., 1997; Thelin, 2004). This, along with other

federal investments in public education, created a boom in middle class enrollment. Concurrently, the Civil Rights and Women's movements led to growth in participation of traditionally underrepresented groups, while expanding upward mobility throughout U.S. society. As the system massified it focused inwardly on growth and was less susceptible to private sector demands. Higher education was also largely perceived as a public good. This view of higher education as a public good in service to American democracy began to shift in the 1950s-1960s, when experiments commenced with connecting university operations to market and private sector demand (Berman, 2012). The notion of human capital was gaining wide acceptance and universities were seen as places to increase human capital while educating and skilling a workforce (Hursh & Wall, 2008).

During this time there were legislative regulations preventing private sector influence within higher education, effectively acting as a check on private influence. This changed in the 1970s and 1980s when policies were enacted to remove barriers for universities seeking partnerships with the private sector (Berman, 2012). The Bayh-Dole act of 1980 is a notable shift in federal policy, which law allowed universities to patent their research findings. This occurred during a time of declines in federal funding and so universities began to engage in research not solely to promote human reason but also to make up for budget deficits. While scholars often point to Bayh-Dole as the cause of privatization (Geiger & Heller, 2011; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Zemsky et al., 2005), this again confuses the effects of neoliberalism with the larger political project at work. Another outcome of funding cuts was rising tuitions as more of the onus for funding public higher education shifted to individuals. This shift was encouraged by a Carnegie Commission report titled *Higher Education: Who Pays? Who Benefits? Who Should Pay?*, in which the Commission advocated for higher tuitions in light of the private benefits of a college education (1973).

In a national effort to compete with the Soviet Union during the Cold War era, the federal government invested heavily in the research capacity of colleges and universities, further cementing higher education in U.S. society as an engine for market competitiveness (Newfield, 2008). By the 1980s, partnerships between higher education and the private sector were flourishing, with universities receiving funding for research. These trends parallel the rise of neoliberal ideology within the U.S. (Harvey, 2005).

Polling data during this time demonstrates a perceptible shift in the regard of higher education as a private good (Gumport et al., 1997). This shift led to demands for increased accountability and assessment of colleges and universities, with efficiency evaluated using market rationality (Berman, 2012). Thus, privatization has occurred because of the success of the larger neoliberal project in shifting the perspectives of policy makers and the public to evaluate the purpose of higher education in economic terms. As this history demonstrates, postsecondary education has experienced a gradual but persistent whittling away of its public purpose, resulting in disequilibrium in the between the private and public goals of public higher education as neoliberal ideology has become the dominant rationale (Giroux, 2002; Labaree, 1997).

The modern dominance of neoliberal ideology within higher education is evidenced at the national, state, and institutional levels and has traces of historic trends. Current calls for accountability and the use of private-sector performance metrics related to degree completion to assess university operations can be understood as neoliberal (Spellings Commission, 2006; The White House, 2013). At the state level, neoliberal ideology is evidenced by pay-for-performance funding schemes and demands that universities prepare skilled workers for industry instead of engaged citizens for full participation in democracy (Berman, 2012).

Perhaps most concretely, neoliberal ideology is shaping institutional life and operational strategies at colleges and universities, trends of particular concern with regard to mission drift of regional comprehensive universities (Axelrod, 2002; Mehaffy, 2010). Under the neoliberal

framework operating in higher education, university leadership has been transformed into senior management of corporate cultures (Bose, 2012; Giroux, 2002). University presidents, once chief academic officers, are now chief executive officers who engage in significant fundraising and mergers with corporations to make up for losses to public funding (Mortimer & Sathre, 2010). Additionally, to align university operations with market rationality and increase institutional productivity, the administrative staff of universities has grown significantly. Shared governance norms are being eroded by the ascendance of corporate culture (Berman, 2012). Specifically, universities have begun measuring organizational productivity in market terms. Administrators evaluate faculty 'productivity' in terms of articles published, patents obtained, and grants secured. Campuses are urged to brand themselves and identify niches within the higher education landscape. Endowed chairs created by corporations and private foundations further illuminate the corporatization of higher education. Endowed chairs are often answerable to the corporations as well as the university, resulting in corporate influence within university governance.

Another feature of the corporate culture of higher education is the increasing power of administrators to bypass shared governance and set university policy (Berman, 2012; Bose, 2012). The rise of management culture has contributed to a decrease the number of tenured faculty positions because tenure and shared governance constrains administrative management. Corporate culture has transformed notions about higher education's democratic responsibility into private sector accountability, including preparation of a skilled workforce and research productivity that will support industry needs. Responsibility centered management has become a primary way in which universities function (Newfield, 2008; Zemsky et al., 2005). This management technique requires academic units to be self-sustaining and has caused the more profitable disciplines, such as business and engineering, to gain attention and prestige within academic cultures because they are able to sustain themselves. Responsibility centered management is often pointed to as a driver of the privatization of higher education but it is

important to note that this is simply an outcome of a larger neoliberal ideology at work. These cultural transformations represent a dramatic change from earlier times, as is evidenced by a story of the University of Illinois (2012). In 1961 in response to legislative demands, the university convened a committee to study the university's impact on the economic development of the state. The final resolution of this committee was that it is not the university's responsibility to support industry. By 1999, when the university was asked the same question by legislators, it responded by expanding its economic engagement with state.

Under the neoliberal framework, humane education for lives as citizens has evolved into professionalization for the workforce (Giroux, 2002). This is demonstrated by demands by governors across the country to eliminate liberal arts curriculum within colleges and universities in favor of increasing the number of vocational degrees and programs (Huckabee, 2013). Neoliberal ideology has transformed the way college students are viewed from being learners in pursuit of learning – democratic and disciplinary – to consumers and customers in pursuit of marketable skills. Because higher education is now viewed as a private good, it makes sense that the public believes the burden of funding it should be placed on individuals (Newport & Busted, 2013). Neoliberal ideology within public universities with regard to student life is also evidenced by the recruitment of international and out-of-state students who pay higher tuition, eliding the regional access missions of regional comprehensive universities in particular (Bound, Hershbein & Long, 2009; Clark, 2012).

Attendant with these roles shifts are changes to faculty responsibilities. Neoliberal ideology treats university-created knowledge as proprietary and not public – as was evidenced by the passage of the Bayh-Dole Act of 1980 (Berman, 2012; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Faculty members, once considered teachers and scholars advancing human knowledge, have been transformed into entrepreneurs and academic capitalists focused on advancing their own careers. The conceptualization of faculty members as academic laborers instead of teachers is

fundamentally neoliberal (Zemsky et al., 2005). Faculty members are now required to raise funds to support their salaries and research, and have been furloughed or experienced salary freezes in order to make up for constricting university budgets (Giroux, 2004). Scholars contend that requiring faculty to fund their own research threatens the integrity of university-conducted research, as many faculty must answer to funders and account for research findings. While the norms of academic culture may have found this to be a particularly thorny issue, under a neoliberal ideology that evaluates the public sector on its private sector contributions, it is an appropriate institutional response.

These shifts in faculty roles have resulted in the diminished political activism of faculty (Bose, 2012). Because nontenure faculty are cheaper to hire and easier to fire, universities increasingly rely on this form of academic labor. Nontenure faculty now far outnumber tenured faculty, with 56% of the postsecondary teaching force being nontenure related (AAUP, 2011). These instructors often lack opportunities to participate in shared governance and are paid less than tenure-related peers, further cementing the corporate model of university life. With the decreasing political activism of faculty, the lack of agency of adjunct faculty and dominance of a management style of university leadership, corporate culture has become further ensconced in academic life.

Public opinion has become increasingly critical of public higher education and contributed to neoliberal calls for greater efficiency, accountability and focus on learning outcomes (Newport & Busted, 2013; Teixeira & Dill, 2011). Those polled by Newport and Busted decried the cost of college degrees and reported skepticism about students receiving a “return” on their monetary investment in college (2013). Forty-seven percent of those polled believe that the primary purpose of higher education is professional development, and just 39% say it helps students grow intellectually and personally. It is worth noting, though, that because polling agencies are beginning to reflect neoliberal ideology, they often focus specifically on the



role of higher education in the economy and ignore the public aims of education (Taylor et al., 2011). As such, it is difficult to ascertain the public's view of the public purpose of higher education.

There is evidence that regional comprehensive universities have shaped university operations in a variety of ways to meet multiple and competing demands related to the public and private dimensions of their missions (Henderson, 2007, 2009, 2013). Despite articulations of public mission regional comprehensive universities, many are struggling to reconcile their public missions with declines in public support (Orphan & Hartley, 2013). Neoliberal ideology represents a significant identity threat as described by Ravasi and Schultz (2013). Because many regional comprehensive universities lack a clear organizational identity, they are uniquely susceptible to the neoliberal forces shaping higher education.

### **Democracy's Colleges: Rupture or Recalibration?**

When explaining dualism within organizational identities, Albert and Whetten offered the example of university life as a model for understanding this phenomenon (1985). The authors saw the university as a place in which the private and public impulses of U.S. society were well balanced, and described its status as being "in the world, but not of it" (p. 283). Albert and Whetten explained how the university used some market logic (what they called utilitarianism) in operations, but claimed that the fundamental public values of the university were well guarded. They acknowledged the challenges experienced by normative organizations with less equilibrium between public values and utilitarianism, especially during times of retrenchment, writing that

In its struggle for economic survival the normative organization may rightly fear the ironic truth of the slogan that it may be necessary to destroy the organization in order to save it (p. 279).

The authors then elaborated on the rise of utilitarianism within universities, especially with regard to faculty rewards, but declared their belief that balance between the public and private purposes

of higher education would be retained due to the strength of normative organizational identities possessed by universities.

A contemporary reading of this account seems quaint and antiquated. This perception strengthens when one considers the extent to which neoliberal ideology has shaped the operations and organizational identities of public universities and colleges, as well as the public's understanding of higher education's role in society (Berman, 2012). Scholars of neoliberalism reject its assumptive inevitability, though (Brown, 2003; Hursh & Wall, 2008). Indeed, the service-learning and civic engagement movement has been a national effort to reverse the erosion of higher education's public purpose (Kezar, Chambers & Burkhardt, 2005; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). With regard to regional comprehensive universities, *Stepping Forward As Stewards of Place* was a national call for these institutions to recommit themselves to the public purposes with which they were founded (AASCU, 2002). Ultimately, *Stewards of Place* was an effort to rebalance the private and public goals operating within public higher education. While neoliberalism may not be inevitable, those institutions lacking organizational identities – let alone identities that have achieved balance between private and public purposes – are particularly susceptible to neoliberalism. Thus regional comprehensive universities, in their quest to be all things to all people, are uniquely at risk for mission drift and rupture.

Despite their large share of the higher education landscape, insufficient research exists exploring the operations, mission enactment and drift, and organizational identities of regional comprehensive universities (Henderson, 2007, 2009, 2013; Katsinas & Kinhead, 2011). While mission making in higher education has been examined (Fjortoft & Smart, 1994; Hartley, 2002; Smart, 1975; Zemsky et al., 2005), there are no studies that explore mission drift as it relates specifically to neoliberal ideology. More important than this gap in the literature is what would happen to upward mobility and civic life if regional comprehensive universities were no longer bastions of access and regional democracy because of mission drift. For all of these reasons,

regional comprehensive universities – our “democracy’s colleges” – must be better understood  
(Henderson, 2007, p. 14).

## **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study was to understand how a state public policy context that evidences neoliberal ideology affects the public purpose of regional comprehensive universities. To understand how regional comprehensive universities are responding to challenges created by a neoliberal public policy context, Ellen Chaffee's theory of adaptive versus interpretive strategy was used (1985). Adaptive strategy takes place when an organization is striving to respond to and align itself with the external environment without regard for how these responses will affect the underlying purpose and mission of the organization. Alternatively, interpretive strategy takes place when an organization uses its underlying purpose and mission as a guide for responding to external threats and opportunities. This study explored the role of organizational identity in determining the types of institutional striving and strategy (adaptive or interpretive) taking place at regional comprehensive universities in response to a neoliberal state public policy context. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How does a public policy context shaped by neoliberal ideology affect the public purposes of that state's regional comprehensive universities?
2. How do the organizational identities of regional comprehensive universities influence the strategies they employ in response to neoliberal policies?
3. To what degree does a neoliberal public policy engender institutional striving?

### **Research Design**

This study focused on the ways that university policies and practices change in response to neoliberal ideology within a state policy context. Specifically, this study sought to identify how mission enactment with regard to the public purpose of regional comprehensives is changing given these challenges. In light of the research questions that guided this study, qualitative research methods were the best way to gain an understanding of this topic because they allowed for the "use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning

individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2007, p. 37). Strategic direction and mission are enacted by institutional stakeholders in response to external contexts and challenges (Kanter, 1972; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Thus, institutions were the most appropriate level of analysis for this study.

Because a phenomenon within a bounded system (mission enactment at regional comprehensive universities) was studied, a case study approach was most appropriate (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2014). This study sought to answer “how” and “why” questions. Specifically, how are institutions changing in response to these challenges and what reasons are given by institutional leaders for these changes? (Yin, 2009). Case study analysis allowed for an exploration of how university leaders were governing their institutions given the challenges described herein. More importantly, qualitative research design and case study methodologies provided a view into the complexities of institutional change during times of stress (Patton, 2002). This study sought to shed light on how these pressures are affecting faculty and student life, the strategic direction of the university and its engagement with its region. Qualitative case study methodology allowed for a view into the effects of these decisions on university life.

A cross-case study approach was selected to examine how these challenges are unfolding in a variety of college settings. A bounded time period was selected for analysis – specifically the last 10 years. Within this time period, higher education appropriations declined by nearly 50% and the modern accountability movement within public higher education took shape (SHEEO, 2015; Spellings Commission, 2006; The White House, 2013). This period was selected because it was also when the state in question mandated higher expectations for retention and degree completion and economic development, and implemented performance based funding. It is within this time period that enrollment fluctuations also took place. A case study analysis of changes to university life given these challenges during this period of time allowed for an exploration of the specificities of how these challenges affect campus life over time.

Purposeful critical case sampling was used to collect data that directly pertained to the questions guiding this study (Patton 2002). The state under study was selected because it evidenced neoliberal public policy through a statewide emphasis on higher education's role in facilitating the economic recovery of the state following the recession (Berman, 2012; Giroux, 2002). State policymakers have introduced expectations for higher education to build the state workforce through producing more graduates within STEM and health fields, industries assumed to be growing within the state. To realize these goals, state policymakers have used performance based funding to incentivize institutional performance. Performance based funding, a funding strategy borrowed from the private sector, accounts for over half of higher education appropriations within the state. The goal of this case selection was to first hold the state policy context constant to gain a picture of the nuances of how these policies affect institutional life, and then to select campuses that represented data rich samples of the diversity of founding heritages and missions of regional comprehensive universities and the diversity of regional comprehensive universities in the state.

### **Site Selection**

The specific population of interest was regional comprehensive universities. These institutions were selected because they educate a large share of college students in the U.S. and because they are less well resourced than state flagship institutions and thus more susceptible to the influence of neoliberal public policy (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). There are 420 such universities and colleges within the U.S. higher education system (Henderson, 2007). A majority of these institutions are members of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU, 2013). These institutions, given their "muddled institutional character," are particularly susceptible to mission drift in light of neoliberal public policy and so they were most appropriate units of analysis for the research questions included in this study (Clark, 1987, p. 13; Henderson,

2007, 2009). The following criteria were used to differentiate regional comprehensive universities from other public higher education institutions within the U.S.:

- Founded either as a normal school, a branch campus of a flagship university, a YMCA or Technical Institute, a Minority Serving Institution, or a community college;
- Four-year, bachelor's degree granting institution;
- Carnegie designation as 'comprehensive' (either currently or historically);
- Historic focus on teaching and learning with little to no disciplinary or basic research;
- Relatively open enrollment policies;
- High number of professional schools and master's degrees awarded;
- High percentage of the student population drawn locally or regionally (at least 80% of student population);
- Evidence of long-standing efforts to serve as stewards of regional economic and civic life; and
- Membership within AASCU.

A two stage sampling process was used to select the state and institutions studied.

Because it was not possible to study the entire population of regional comprehensives, four universities within one state were sampled. The first stage in the sampling process involved selecting the state and the second involved selecting the four institutions. Selecting a single state allowed for an understanding of how neoliberal public policy was shaping the public purpose of the four universities under study. By studying a single state, it was possible to hold funding levels and state policies constant and track individual institutional changes. Limiting the site selection to a single state also helped gain an understanding of the organizational identities of institutions within the state as members at each university were able to offer their perception of peer regional comprehensive universities in the state.

The first important selection criteria was that the state allocated at least 10% of its appropriations to higher education using performance based funding. At the time of sampling, this narrowed the list of states to 10. Evidence of the following neoliberal public policies related to the governance of higher education were then sought: a decline in state appropriations, incentives for workforce development and degree production within state identified economic growth areas, demands for data collection and use in order to enhance accountability, incentives to broker private sector partnerships and engage in economic development activities, an emphasis on STEM and vocational fields and changes to student aid (including reductions to student aid that solidify the idea that higher education is the responsibility of the students and special scholarships put into place to meet state workforce demands). Governors' speeches and the strategic initiatives of the state governing body for higher education were analyzed for espoused rhetoric that evidenced neoliberal ideology including statements that narrow higher education's purpose to its role in improving the economy and the belief that higher education is an individual, private good. Another important selection criteria was that the state had experienced difficulty in recovering following the Great Recession and had below average unemployment rates as compared to the rest of the country. These economic indicators were important because it was thought that a state whose economy was still in recovery might be particularly susceptible to enacting neoliberal public policies for higher education. After considering which states met all of these criteria, a list of two states resulted. To finalize the selection of the state, two national experts about regional comprehensive universities and public policy were consulted: George Mehaffy, Vice President for Academic Leadership and Change at AASCU, and Joni Finney, professor of higher education policy at the University of Pennsylvania. Drs. Mehaffy and Finney pointed to some of the neoliberal ideology adopted by the state that can be empirically shown in the cases. They also had knowledge of individual institutions that seemed to be actively working to protect their public purpose while responding to state demands. After consultation with these



two experts, a single state was selected that evidenced neoliberal public policy and met the listed selection criteria. This state has also experienced difficulty recovering after the Great Recession with sluggish job growth, loss of industries and, during the time of data collection, an unemployment rate was 1.5% higher than the rest of the country.

### **Sampling Strategy and Data Collection**

The selected state has less than 10 regional comprehensive universities. To finalize site selection, two levels of pilot research were conducted. From this list, data rich cases that constituted 70% of the universities in the state were selected. Based on preliminary data collected, it was determined that these institutions had evidence of both mission drift and mission coherence. These institutions represented the five different founding legacies of regional comprehensive universities: two were formal normal schools, one was a former community and technical college and branch of a flagship university, one was a Historically Black University and one was a former YMCA night school. These five institutions also represented the different geographic locations of regional comprehensive universities in the state: two were located in suburban areas, two were located in rural areas and one was located in an urban area. In the second step of the pilot, senior university officials at the presidential and provostial level from each of the preliminary campuses participated in a 30-minute pilot phone interview so that a picture could be gained of how the university was responding to the neoliberal public policy context. These university officials were recommended by national experts including Drs. George Mehaffy, Jennifer Domagal-Goldman, Joni Finney, Marybeth Gasman and Matthew Hartley.

After consultation with the dissertation committee it became clear that a theoretical framework that would help make sense of the type of change being enacted was needed. Ellen Chaffee's conceptualization of adaptive versus interpretive organizational strategy was selected to examine institutional change, mission coherence and mission drift within the four universities (1985a, 1985b). Adaptive strategy occurs when an organization focuses primarily on being

responsive to external influences and demands. This can occur when client desires and needs change, external threats or opportunities are introduced, or new competitors and products are offered. Organizations that are adaptive will modify organization processes and activities to respond to these external forces with the primary goal of strategy being survival. Alternatively, interpretive strategy takes place when an organization is most concerned with maintaining its own ideologies and cultures in the face of external threats and opportunities. An interpretive organization will change practices and activities only when these changes align with existing organizational ideology, with the primary goal of strategy being legitimacy. Chaffee found that interpretive organizations tend to fair better during times of stress than adaptive organizations because they are bound by a purpose and ideology larger than simply being responsive to the external environment.

Chaffee's conceptualization of adaptive versus interpretive organizations was helpful for studying regional comprehensive universities because it provided an organizational typology and theoretical framework for categorizing institutional responses to the challenges and forces examined. If a regional comprehensive is adaptive, it will evidence changes in operations and mission that are responsive the neoliberal public policy context without an institutional reckoning with how these changes in organizational practices align or misalign with existing mission. Alternatively, if a regional comprehensive is interpretive, it will change organizational behavior in ways that protect its public purpose from the neoliberal public policy context.

After conducting pilot interviews, four campuses were selected: two that appeared to be enacting interpretive strategy in response to the challenges it was facing and two that appeared to be enacting adaptive strategy (Chaffee, 1985). Specifically, two had adapted institutional operations to focus more on survival and alignment with state policies than public purpose and institutional mission. Examples of adaptive strategy included dismantling a center for community service to create a center for student professional development and elevating admissions policies.

Examples of interpretive strategy included the deepening of regional engagement commitments and the creation of cabinet level positions focused on regional engagement. Another important selection criteria was the presence of language within strategic documents (mission and vision statements, strategic plans, institutional histories, etc.) describing the following three ideals: regional service and/or civic engagement, student-centeredness and status as an open-access and/or accessible university. A final selection criteria for the four universities was their geographic location within the state. Regional comprehensives are located in rural, urban and suburban settings and distributed throughout a state (Henderson, 2007). In order to reflect this geographic diversity and placement, I selected one university in an urban setting, two in rural settings, and one in a suburban setting.

This research study used semi-structured interviews with university officials at the four universities (Patton, 2002). These officials were identified through recommendations provided by national experts, suggestions from senior campus leaders and consultations of administrative cabinet listed on university webpages. Participants included administrators who had been involved in administrative decision making, senior and junior professors that could speak to the ways that the institution's changes were affecting faculty life and staff members that could speak to changes in centers and offices involved in enacting the university's public purpose. Senior administrators (presidents, provosts, chief financial officers, vice presidents for enrollment management and vice presidents for multiculturalism and civic engagement) were interviewed with a view to understanding strategic leadership and the formation of administrative policies. University officials were asked questions that concerned institutional policies related to the university's mission such as if tenure and promotion and faculty requirements had changed to emphasize research, teaching or community engagement, and if

community/university partnership policies and practices were changing. Finally, questions were asked about how the university has changed institutional operations in response to cuts to state appropriations, rising expectations and demands for greater economic partnerships and engagement.

University staff responsible for community/university partnerships, university/private sector partnerships and student support offices were also interviewed. Staff members were asked about the specifics of these partnerships and student supports: how and why were they established, how they have evolved over time particularly given funding cuts and how they fit into the university's larger mission. Senior admissions officers of each institution were interviewed to understand how enrollment policies and recruitment strategies were changing. This allowed for an examination of any changes taking place with regard to each university's open enrollment and access mission.

Community members (including nonprofit directors, school principals, teachers and nurses, presidents of chambers of commerce and local mayors) surrounding the four universities were interviewed to gain a sense of the community's perception of university engagement over the past 10 years. Community leaders were asked if they had felt a change in their interactions with the university. Community members were through recommendations from faculty and administrators and through consulting university websites describing these partnerships. Representatives from the Chambers of Commerce of the regions surrounding the four universities were selected through consulting the websites of these organizations.

To fully explore the ideology operating in the public policy context, two senior members of the state's Board of Regents were interviewed: the policy director for the state and the vice president for finance and data management. Additionally, Paul Lingenfelter, the former president of the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, Thomas Harnisch, the director of state relations and policy analysis and Dan Hurley, the Associate Vice President for Government

Relations and State Policy for AASCU were interviewed. During these interviews, questions were asked about the higher education policy context under study.

**Table 1. Interviews Conducted for the Study**

<b>Thunder State University</b>	
<i>Senior Administrators</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• President (emeritus and current) (2)</li> <li>• Provost (1)</li> <li>• CFO (former and current) (2)</li> <li>• Vice President, Enrollment Management (1)</li> <li>• College Dean (2)</li> </ul>
<i>Professors</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full Professor (1)</li> <li>• Associate Professor (3)</li> <li>• Assistant Professor (1)</li> </ul>
<i>Staff</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Director of Government Relations and Civic Engagement (1)</li> </ul>
<i>Community Members</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mayor (1)</li> <li>• Volunteer Coordinator, Partner Organization (1)</li> <li>• Owner, Small Business (1)</li> </ul>
TOTAL PARTICIPANTS	17
<b>City State University</b>	
<i>Senior Administrators</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provost (1)</li> <li>• Vice President, Enrollment Management (1)</li> <li>• Associate Provost for Academic Affairs (1)</li> <li>• Special Assistant to the President (1)</li> <li>• Vice President, Multiculturalism and Civic Engagement (1)</li> <li>• College Dean (1)</li> </ul>
<i>Faculty Members</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Associate Professor (3)</li> <li>• Assistant Professor (1)</li> </ul>
<i>Staff</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Directors, University Engagement Offices (3)</li> </ul>
<i>Community Members</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• President, Regional Philanthropic Organization (1)</li> <li>• High School Nurse (1)</li> </ul>
TOTAL PARTICIPANTS	15
<b>River State University</b>	
<i>Senior Administrators</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• President (1)</li> <li>• Provost (1)</li> <li>• CFO (1)</li> <li>• Vice President, Enrollment Management (1)</li> <li>• Vice President, Student Affairs (1)</li> <li>• College Dean (2)</li> <li>• Executive Director, Development Foundation (1)</li> </ul>
<i>Faculty Members</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professor (1)</li> <li>• Associate Professor (2)</li> <li>• Assistant Professor (1)</li> </ul>
<i>Staff</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Director, Institutional Finance (1)</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Director, Student Career Services (1)</li> <li>• Director, Center for International Education (1)</li> <li>• Director, Admissions (1)</li> </ul>
<i>Community Member</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• President, Chamber of Commerce (1)</li> </ul>
TOTAL PARTICIPANTS	17
<b>Inventor State University</b>	
<i>Senior Administrators</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• President (1)</li> <li>• Vice President, Multiculturalism and Civic Engagement (1)</li> <li>• Vice President, Enrollment Management (1)</li> <li>• CFO (1)</li> <li>• Assistant Vice President, Institutional Effectiveness (1)</li> <li>• College Dean (2)</li> </ul>
<i>Faculty Members</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professor (2)</li> <li>• Associate Professor (1)</li> <li>• Assistant Professor (1)</li> </ul>
<i>Staff</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Librarian (1)</li> <li>• Director, Center for Healthy Communities (same as full professor) (1)</li> <li>• Director, Women’s Center (1)</li> <li>• Director, Center for International Education (1)</li> </ul>
<i>Community Members</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volunteer Coordinator, Partner Organization (1)</li> <li>• Owner, Small Business (1)</li> </ul>
TOTAL PARTICIPANTS	16
<b>Policy Experts and Policy Makers</b>	
<i>National Policy Experts</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AASCU (3)</li> <li>• SHEEO (1)</li> </ul>
<i>State Policy Makers</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State Board of Governors (2)</li> </ul>
TOTAL PARTICIPANTS	6

Interview protocols solicited specific information about how current organizational practice was evolving given the challenges facing regional comprehensive universities. (See Appendix A for sample interview protocols used.) Interviews lasted 60-90 minutes and were conducted during campus visits. At least three administrators and three faculty members from each university were interviewed. Additional interviews were conducted as necessary until a point of data saturation was reached (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2014). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Transcripts, institutional documents and field notes were password protected and encrypted on my laptop and backed up on an external hard drive. All identifying

information was sanitized from the data after transcription. Certain case details were also changed to obscure the identities of the four universities.

As is the practice for case studies, this study also used document analysis (Yin, 2014) of institutional documents including student fact books, university budgets for the last 10 years, strategic plans, minutes and reports from university Board of Trustees meetings, newspaper articles, community forums, student ratings websites, state policy documents and speeches by university officials, Board of Regents members and state policymakers. University recruitment and public relations videos were also analyzed. Evidence of organizational identity, mission drift and mission coherence, and changes to strategic direction in response to neoliberal public policy were sought in these materials. IPEDS was also used to collect institution-level data about enrollment trends, retention and completion rates, and student demographics. Finally, during site visits, field notes were taken to capture initial analysis and observations during data collection. Following campus visits, follow-up interviews with participants from the four universities were conducted as needed to gain a greater understanding of the research questions.

### **Data Analysis and Conceptual Framework**

This study used Hartley's conceptualization of institutional purpose (2002), Berman's (2012) theorization about the neoliberal forces shaping higher education, and Albert and Whetten's (1985) theory of organizational identity to explore the evolution in mission at regional comprehensive universities. Additionally, this study examined how neoliberal ideology within state public policy is influencing the public purpose of the four universities through university governance, conceptualizations of faculty work, university/community relations and institutional commitments to being open access.

Organizational theorists often agree that missions are not, and should not be, static notions (Davies, 1986; Hartley, 2002; Zemsky et al., 2005). Indeed, some degree of change often takes place as organizations adapt to new circumstances, constituencies and discoveries. It is

important to differentiate mission drift and mission evolution, though, when examining changes to institutional mission. I defined mission evolution as changes to organizational activities that are coherent with historic conceptions of mission and public purpose. Put another way, mission evolution in response to external threats often involves instances of interpretive strategy as conceptualized by Chaffee (1985). Appropriate mission evolution for regional comprehensive universities is evidenced in their response to changing standards for K-12 teachers. When the requirement arose that teachers hold master's degrees, regional comprehensive universities expanded degree offerings to accommodate this shift (Henderson, 2007). Regional comprehensive universities were also founded with regional engagement missions. As regional needs have evolved, these universities have continued to broaden curricula and university operations to respond to these needs. These shifts can be viewed as appropriate mission evolution given the historic regional engagement and teaching foci of regional comprehensives. When universities and colleges change organizational behavior significantly, they are often met with accusations of mission drift (Dubrow, Moseley, & Dustin, 2006). Mission drift when applied to colleges and universities describes a misalignment of organizational operations (mission enactment) with institutional purpose and history (Hartley, 2002). Mission drift in the face of external threats can also surface instances of adaptive strategy as conceptualized by Chaffee (1985b). Two examples of mission drift within regional comprehensive universities are useful for understanding this phenomenon. Regional comprehensive universities were founded to promote educational access and as such, have historically required low standards for admission (Henderson, 2007, 2013). Regional comprehensive universities are beginning to increase admissions requirements to privilege better prepared and often wealthier, less diverse students (Zumeta et al., 2012). Mission drift is also evident when regional comprehensive universities reshape faculty tenure, rewards and promotion guidelines to encourage more research. This change in faculty expectations has resulted in an increase in basic and disciplinary research as



well as the attainment of the coveted ‘Research University’ designation within the Carnegie Classifications (O’Meara, 2007). These changes constitute mission drift as regional comprehensive universities shift away from core values of teaching and student-centeredness to expand research activities and selectivity (Morphew & Huesman, 2002). These examples provided a framework for understanding instances of mission drift and mission evolution sought within the data.

Institutional documents, website pages and forums, and government reports and speeches were collected and thoroughly analyzed to gain impressions of institutional strategy, public policy and university reputation (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2014). These data were also used to triangulate interview data. Specially, examples were sought of interpretive and adaptive strategy within strategic plans or mission statements. A set of codes was created to guide initial analysis of the field notes, documents and transcripts (Saldaña, 2013). These codes were derived from the guiding research questions of this study as well as theory and prior research (Yin, 2014), and captured instances of changing institutional strategy, participant meaning making related to mission drift, mission evolution, neoliberal ideology and shifts in state funding and policy priorities. (See Appendix B for a list of sample codes used.) Atlas.ti, an online secure qualitative analysis software, was used to code the data. As data analysis proceeded, emergent codes were developed to capture themes and findings that relate to the study’s guiding research questions. After coding was complete, case study summaries and the governance context of the state were written. The case study summaries were used for cross-case analysis.

### **The Role of the Researcher and Trustworthiness**

I am the first person in my immediate family to graduate from college. I attended Portland State University, a regional comprehensive university in Portland, Oregon. After graduating from Portland State, I became the director of the American Democracy Project, a national civic engagement initiative of the American Association of State Colleges and

Universities (AASCU). When I started at AASCU, the Spellings Commission had just issued its call for greater accountability for public higher education (2006). During my five years at AASCU, state appropriations decreased from funding 60% to 20% of university budgets. While these shifts in public support and rising expectations were taking place, I had numerous conversations with AASCU administrators about how they were responding. The people I spoke with reported using a blend of private-sector partnerships, recruitment of out-of-state students, elevated admissions requirements and grant-funded research to make up for losses in revenue. As I was starting my doctoral program, rising calls for completion were sounding from the nonprofit sector, the White House and the Department of Education (The White House, 2013). I observed that an increasing emphasis for higher education was being placed on economic development and preparing students for jobs. Thus, the source of my interest is both professional and personal. Because I have existing relationships with many administrators, faculty and students within the AASCU network, I had ease in negotiating entry into these institutions. Additionally, because I attended a regional comprehensive university, I have the perspective of a graduate that enhanced my understanding of this group of institutions.

Trustworthiness is an important mechanism of rigor within qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). I used two methods for improving the trustworthiness of this study: member checks and triangulation of data sources. I conducted member checks by sharing case study descriptions of each university with key informants at each site with a goal to understanding if the analysis conformed to the participant's understanding of their institution. Members I chose for this process included those that had nuanced understandings of their institution's mission and purpose and could speak to the accuracy of my portrayal. Additionally, data were triangulated through the use of interviews, observations and document analysis, in line with accepted practice of case studies and qualitative research (2007; Yin, 2014). For example, when a participant described a committee meeting or old strategic plan that had relevance to the research questions, I

acquired these documents to corroborate the interview. This triangulation created a data-rich approach to constructing a nuanced understanding of the sites in question.

### **Limitations**

This was a qualitative research study using case study design. Given this research methodology, a clear limitation is the scope of the study – just four universities in one state were studied (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2014). Because four sites were studied, a less in-depth analysis took place as compared with conducting a case study of a single university. While the study focused specifically on a single state, many regional comprehensive universities in the country are facing similar challenges and forces. It is my belief that the findings from this study illuminate institutional practice and state contexts beyond the universities in the state studied. The findings from this study are most relevant to those states that have similar higher education contexts to the state studied. Additionally, studying four universities allowed for the creation of a robust theoretical understanding of my research questions. Obtaining candid responses from state administrators and policymakers about declines in state funding and increases in accountability was a concern. Because all four universities are public, there was a plethora of publicly available data that allowed me to triangulate these responses with institutional documents. A final limitation of this study related to the variability in data sources with regard to the robustness of archives and websites of each university. To alleviate this issue, I asked institutional stakeholders for documents I was not able to find on websites and in archives.

### **Conclusion**

With the exception of a previous study I worked on and one edited volume (Orphan & Hartley, 2013; Schneider & Deane, 2015), scant empirical research examines mission evolution of regional comprehensive universities (Henderson, 2007; Katsinas & Kinhead, 2011). And while mission making in higher education has been explored (Hartley, 2002; Zemsky et al., 2005), there

are no studies that examine mission evolution and organizational identity as these phenomena relate to the organizational behavior and strategic direction of regional comprehensive universities. More important than this gap in the literature is what would happen to upward mobility within the U.S. if regional comprehensive universities are no longer options due to increased admissions standards and decreased emphasis on educating students regardless of preparation. Additionally, the civic and economic life of the regions served by these universities could be threatened should they engage in isomorphic behavior aimed at resembling elite, selective and research-intensive peers (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Given their status as access points to postsecondary education for a large share of Americans and their efforts to improve local and national civic life, regional comprehensive universities must be better understood particularly as neoliberal ideology is encroaching on university life. This study sought to shed light on an understudied and vital sector of U.S. higher education.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESULTS, THUNDER STATE UNIVERSITY**

### **Regional Context**

Down a winding two lane country road is one of the oldest Historically Black Universities in the country: Thunder State University. The campus's rural setting has long been a draw for urban students seeking an environment different from their home cities. Thunder State is located 20 miles from Inventor State, a Predominantly White Institution. The university is also located within a few miles of its founding institution, a private HBCU. The small town surrounding the university has a population of under 30,000 people. Just 14% of the town population is Black or African American, a contrast to the racial makeup of the university with 95% of the students identifying as Black or African American. The difference between the town's and university's racial demographics as well as the tendency of Thunder State students to be from cities at times causes tension between the town and the university. Since assuming office, the current president has partnered with the mayor of the town to improve community relations and deepen the partnerships between the university and its surrounding community. The Director of Government Relations described these efforts in the following way:

Our relationship with [the town] over the years has been strained. One of the goals of this president was to repair that relationship. We are members of the Chamber of Commerce, the Rotary. We are there any time they are putting on any kind of service activities.

In the 1970s, a natural disaster hit the town and university and in many ways, the area has been recovering since. Following the natural disaster, the median incomes of the area have remained low. The economy is primarily made up of manufacturing, retail, education and human services, however evidence of prior economic prosperity can be seen across the street from the university where former businesses frequented by students stand abandoned. There are a number of religiously affiliated institutions within the town that engage in community development work. There are also community organizations and public schools that offer a variety of human services. It is within this local context that Thunder State is located.

## **Thunder State University**

Thunder State is the smallest public university in the state. It is also the most affordable with a yearly tuition of just over \$6,000. Currently, 1,900 students attend Thunder State University, a decrease from recent years. Seventy-six percent of students receive Pell grant and 80% have an expected family financial contribution of zero. Half of all students are the first person in their families to go to college. Most of the students are traditional college age but 13% are over 25. Fifty-seven percent of the students attending the university are residents of the state and the remaining 43% are out-of-state or international students, most coming from large cities in the adjacent states. There has been a growth in out-of-state students population in the last 10 years with 35% of students coming from outside the state in 2010. The students that attend Thunder State tend to require more than just academic supports. Because many are first-generation college students, they require personal development and socio-emotional support. For most of its history, the university was completely open access. The nature of its open enrollment policies meant that the university also provided remedial education for incoming students when needed. The institution has a 56% first to second year retention rate, and a 27% six-year graduation rate. Improving these student outcomes is a key priority for the administration.

The campus administration, composed of a president, a provost, a chief financial officer, a vice president for institutional advancement, a vice president for student affairs and enrollment management, and a director of government relations is lean when compared with its peer institutions. There are currently 90 full-time, tenured or tenure track faculty in the institution, down from 100 in 2009. Thunder State is a teaching-centered institution with faculty members assigned a 12-12 load and many teaching overloads. While faculty members are not expected to perform research at the same level as research institutions, some scholarly activity is required and often tips the balance within tenure and promotion decisions.

Evidence of historic funding shortages can be seen in the physical appearance of campus. A simple campus sign with green lettering greets visitors, markedly different than the insignia of the other three universities in this study. University buildings largely comprise simple brick 1970s-era buildings that were built with functionality in mind. Many are in need of repair. The suite of administrative offices in the administration building has thin walls and a number of the water fountains throughout campus do not work. While expressing pride in their institution on national student rankings websites, Thunder State students also commented that campus dormitories and buildings are rundown and often dirty. The tallest structure on campus is a tower. The tower is the oldest structure on campus and its presence on university public relations materials are symbolic of the institution's old age. Thunder State's evolution has been marked by resilience in the face of financial and natural disasters. As such, in addition to symbolizing the campus's age, the tower symbolizes the university's resilience, as it was the only structure remaining after the disaster. The university has recently received federal funds for capital improvements in recognition of its land grant status, and this money will be used to improve the appearance of the campus.

The university has a number of distinctive curricular and co-curricular offerings including a nationally ranked natural resource program and a well-regarded fine and performing arts program. The university's band has toured internationally and has been nominated for several awards. The university also has Division II football and basketball teams that compete nationally. Sports games are major campus events that the president, administrative staff, faculty and students attend. The university has a number of active Black Greek Life groups that organize campus events and community service projects. The university also has a student-run radio station whose mission is to extend Thunder State's brand throughout the region.

## **The History of Thunder State University**

Thunder State was founded in the early 1900s as a Normal and Industrial Science two-year training department within a private HBCU. A distinguishing characteristic of the founding university was that it accepted any students who sought an education regardless of race or gender. The university is also an 1890 Land Grant institution, a designation for Historically Black land grant universities. In the 1950s the university began offering a four-year curriculum and seven years later, through the efforts of its founding president, gained independent status as a college. In the early 1960s, reflecting the diversification of academic offerings and the creation of a liberal arts curriculum, the college's name changed to Thunder State College, and 10 years later the college was granted university status and changed its name from 'college' to 'university.' The university was also organized into several colleges as part of this newly acquired status, including Colleges of music and art, education, business administration, and graduate studies.

The founding president was a Princeton-educated historian nationally known for his research on American history and activism during the Civil Rights movement. His reputation helped build that of the newly independent university until it became well known in the state as a high-quality normal school. A key goal of the president's administration was increasing the number of teaching faculty who held PhDs. By paying a salary comparable to other universities in the state, he was able to attract over 30 faculty members who held terminal degrees. The hiring practices during this time were fairly selective. There were some on campus who wanted to increase the number of faculty who were engaged in research, the thinking being that promoting research would further build the reputation of the institution. The university established a system of merit pay to encourage faculty research. While increasing the scholarly production of the faculty was a goal of the administration, the president was conscious of the potential tradeoffs in terms of teaching. To ensure that effective teaching was taking place, the university began requiring student evaluations for all courses. In the 1970s, a graduate program in education was



added to meet state requirements that teachers hold master's degrees. For a brief time during the 1970s, the university had a graduate program in Philosophy but the accrediting body for the university recommended that this program be eliminated due to budget difficulties and because accreditors believed that graduate programs overextended the faculty given their teaching loads.

Thunder State's first president believed that no students should be denied admission due to an inability to pay. To ensure access for all interested students, the university provided scholarships as well as paid positions on campus. The president and other university leaders also believed that Thunder State should be a place of second chances, and as such should remain open for those unprepared for college. To serve these students, a number of remedial course supports were created. While these practices ensured that a Thunder State was accessible it also contributed to budgetary difficulties.

In the late 1960s, a natural disaster hit the surrounding community and devastated the university, destroying campus buildings and killing six people. Following the disaster, classes were in session within 10 days. Professors and students used makeshift structures and borrowed classrooms of neighboring universities. When not in class, students and professors provided supplies and peoplepower for the rebuilding effort in the local community. Despite the resilience shown by university stakeholders and its status as one of the only public HBCU in the state, the governor was unsure if the university should be rebuilt. The university's president and alumni were vociferous in their objections to the university's closing, saying that the state could either pay to rebuild the campus now or pay at a later date in jail and welfare costs. After further protest by university stakeholders and alumni, the governor agreed to rebuild the university. In the words of the president at the time, the university was able to pick itself "out of the mud of the rains and the debris of the winds." Following the natural disaster, university officials worked to improve the efficiency of the institution and make effective use of state resources to better serve students. A feature of the culture of the campus that evolved during this time and remains is the familial

feeling many members feel in light of its small size and the sense that people band together to address challenges.

The university was not alone in experiencing destruction. Indeed, there were numerous buildings that were leveled in the surrounding community. Shortly after the disaster, a number of residents left the town causing a five percent reduction in the population. The current mayor, an alumna of Thunder State, reflected on the shared challenges the university and town have faced since the natural disaster, saying, “Many people did not return after that, and so that affects all the areas and the same with Thunder State...[The town] is still really trying to rebuild...” Thunder State has always been a small institution with enrollment hovering around 2,000 students. At the height of admissions in the late 1960s, enrollment swelled to 2,600 students, 22% of which were White. This was because Thunder State was the only public university in the immediate region. Residents from major cities in the state and bordering states began attending the institution, attracted by its quality and financial accessibility. These students were largely drawn through word of mouth of relatives and fellow churchgoers. In the years following the disaster, Thunder State experienced enrollment fluctuations and times of financial exigency during which the state again threatened to close the university. In the late 1980s, the university was \$12 million in debt and was given a \$4 million infusion of support from the state to remain open. Alumni of the university were closely involved in responding and remain highly active during times of financial crisis. During difficult times, university leaders often reiterate the difficulty the university encounters in educating a large proportion of high-needs students with meager state resources, lower than that of their Predominantly White counterparts in the state.

In the 1980s, disparities in funding caught the notice of the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights. The Office brought a civil rights suit against the state because of what it found to be discriminatory funding differentials between Thunder State and its peer public institutions. The Civil Rights Office’s suit also pointed to the establishment of Inventor

State, just 20 miles from Thunder State, as a way in which the state had neglected the university.

Many university stakeholders share this perception, as was described by the Director of the Women's Center at Inventor State:

I have met so many 50, 60-year-old White Thunder State grads and now you don't see that. That's why at the time they were like, "Why are you founding another state institution in our backyard?" ... It pulled a lot of those White students over the years to here and it defunded Thunder State and Thunder State still suffers from that.

As a result of the suit, the state was required to pay a fine and create a strategic plan for the university to increase enrollment and funding so that it would be saved from financial exigency. During the 1990s, an option was also floated to merge these two institutions but this was rejected on the basis for the need for the public HBCU in the region.

Following this era of financial turmoil was a decade of relative financial stability, kicked off in 2000 by a strategic planning process that sought to "reaffirm [the university's] mission, and articulate its role in the [state's] system of higher education." The mission that was affirmed was one of providing an affordable education to students including remedial education as needed, and an emphasis on teaching. While the university had at times engaged with its local community, particularly in the aftermath of the tornado in the 1970s, this dimension of its public purpose remained dormant for several years in part because of conflicts and tensions that arose due to the campus's racial makeup when compared to that of the local town. Although institutional members rhetorically affirmed the access mission of the institution, there was a growing emphasis on enrollment management as the university shifted from its purely open enrollment admissions policies, and began to elevate to admissions standards to the present day requirement that prospective students attain a 16 ACT and a GPA of 2.2. During this time, the university also established a College of Engineering with an emphasis on natural resource management. The creation of this college reflected the growing needs of the region for natural resource management and engineering.

In 2005, the university collaborated with the state Board of Regents to draft a strategic plan for growing student enrollment to what was considered the ideal level of 6,200 by 2018. It was decided that this level of enrollment would ensure that the institution would remain financially solvent while still providing high-quality academic experiences to students. To assist the university in realizing this plan, the state infused the university with funds, with the goal of weaning the university off of its reliance on the special state supplemental funding of \$10 million per year once it reached the enrollment target. The university used these funds to increase enrollment, improve academic programs, and partner with area community colleges to increase the number of transfer students. The plan was successful in growing enrollment by 600 students, to the high of 2,600 in 2010. As a result of improved funding and strategic management, the retention rates for the university also improved by five percent.

When the recession hit the state, funding for this plan was eliminated and the university's retention rate dropped to 55%. As the recession worsened, the state share of instruction continued to decline from being 39% of the university's budget in 2005 to its present day level of 28%. At the same time as state appropriations were declining, tuition caps were placed on public higher education preventing Thunder State from raising tuition to make up for budget shortfalls. As performance based funding was claiming a larger share of state appropriations, the university's board of trustees submitted a letter to the Board of Regents expressing concern about the formula, saying that it would dis-incentivize the institution from accepting high-needs students. This same year the university lost funding under the new funding model.

The reputation of the university has varied over time. Many in the surrounding community watched as Thunder State experienced financial difficulties and have developed a perception that the university is mismanaged. Members of the university have long struggled with mixed and negative perceptions about the university, arguing in public forums that it has never been fully funded and this lack of institutional resources has been a primary reason for its

financial difficulties. The previous president was quoted in a public forum describing the university's value in terms of its public purpose, saying that it provides service to its local community and helps create diverse intellectual capital for the state. She went on to say that these contributions were not reflected in what the public thought about the university. In a separate newspaper article, the vice president of a local community college echoed this opinion saying that Thunder State has long struggled with "issues of presenting the quality programs they now have."

Although the university has been known for its financial difficulties it has also been known in the region as an open door for higher education, particularly for minority students. The university has also become known within the state for its ability to attract out-of-state talent to not only study but also live and work in the state after graduation. When compared with other institutions, Thunder State's relative success with supporting and graduating African American students is also often acknowledged, as is the university's success with producing Black engineers in the state, 95% of which graduated from Thunder State.

### **The Mission of Thunder State University**

By and large, institutional members understand the university's mission and purpose as providing access to higher education for students that may not otherwise have the opportunity. These students tend to be first-generation, low-income, and African American. The chief financial officer of described the mission the university's mission, saying:

Thunder State has in its mission to provide an opportunity for minorities to acquire a college degree. We recruit, primarily, in a lot of the urban areas ... from the public school system and many of these kids are average students, 2.0, maybe 2.5 [GPA]. They're the ones who can't get into the [flagship universities in the state] because the admission requirements are much higher, but, at the same time, they have the aptitude of pursuing a college degree. So, our school becomes attractive, primarily, to these first-generation students who are looking for an opportunity to elevate their level of education.

While there is member agreement and support for the HBCU mission, the mission is currently changing with the goal of diversifying enrollment beyond African American students and recruiting better prepared students.

Another key dimension of the university's mission is to provide holistic support to students. Specifically, institutional members think of this mission in terms of creating a "nurturing" campus environment that allows students to grow personally, professionally, spiritually, and academically. Campus members believe that the university's small size and tight-knit community better supports the variety of needs students bring than larger universities, as was described by the president:

[We] nurture those students who are looking for a small intimate environment where the faculty members actually know their names, and they can do research with the students, and yet at the same time have a community of learners that allow them to talk with each other, learn with each other, do projects with each other and maintain the intimacy of a very friendly and communal type campus.

Students in campus videos and newspaper articles describe their feeling that the campus regards them as more than a number and that faculty take an interest in their individual development, saying that Thunder State is "not just a place you come to learn, it is where you come to grow socially, mentally and spiritually." Student testimonials also echoed the theme of the university as providing transformative opportunities, as one student said: "I am not the same person I was when I came to the university; from the way I talk to the way that I view myself holistically."

Thunder State's first generation college students face unique challenges. A quote from the dean of the University College illuminates these challenges:

A lot of our students come from first generation families where I believe, they do not come from that environment that - now, I'm going to use this word real loosely - that understands and values education.

In light of the high proportion of first-generation students, another dimension of the university's mission is to address the specific needs of students while encouraging them to persist despite academic challenges and familial responsibilities, as was described by the vice president for enrollment management:

Our students are coming ... with this weight of life back home or having to navigate systems of poverty or navigate systems of oppression and situations ... Then we're talking to them about curriculum and trying to focus on the pathway and the roadmap and they're like, "Do you understand that my mom's lights is about to get shut off. I need to

figure out how to get some money. Where is this refund?" ... So their focus is off. To help a student not shut off that voice but to quiet that voice so they can focus on this over here, that takes a lot of time.

As this anecdote shows, supporting students from underrepresented backgrounds requires robust individualized supports that go beyond academic offerings.

The university's student-centered mission also dictates that it focuses primarily on teaching. A provost in the previous administration wanted to increase faculty research and faculty rejected this proposal in light of the high teaching loads and the teaching-focused mission of the university, as was described by a professor:

We voted that down with the rationale that if you want to expect more from us for research, you need to give us more support in order to do our research. And we are not going to impose a greater burden on ourselves when the institution is not supporting us.

Outside the College of Engineering that was created in part to do research, tenure and promotion guidelines of the other colleges place caps on the amount of research that faculty can conduct.

When new faculty, staff and administrators are hired, the hiring committee communicates the university's teaching focus, as is described by the president:

We do our due diligence where we hire a faculty member a staff. We have to know right up front that this is not [the Flagship]. We have expectation that you will go beyond just teaching your classes. That you will mentor. We ask them, have you ever had an experience in mentoring? Have you had any experience in stepping outside of your comfort zone as a professor somewhere else?

The final element of the university's mission concerns its land grant status. This land grant mission has compelled the university to engage in research in partnership with area agricultural leaders on topics such as natural resource management and the use of technology in farming. The university has also begun supporting and creating agricultural, nutrition and horticulture programs for area school children. Under the current president, the university is in the process of deepening its cooperative extension mission through solidifying partnerships with the local community and using federal dollars to build an extension center. The university also involves the local community in its administration. The faculty of the university tends to be

involved in the community, leading service projects and incorporating these experiences into classroom experiences for students, as was described by this professor:

The faculty goes a long way to reach out to the community in many ways. For example, in the engineering program here, we are every year a part of the TechFest program, where we're there making demonstrations over a two-day period, Saturday and Sunday, to students in the K-12 cadre...

A number of faculty members have held public office in the local town. The university also allows the K-12 sports teams to use its athletics facilities free of charge.

The university also has economic ties to the community. Not only does the university employ people from the region it also attracts students who shop at area businesses. In 2011, the university established a Center for New Technology whose purpose is to “drive economic advancement” through promoting STEM education in the state and encouraging students to pursue STEM fields. There is a growing emphasis on ensuring students have internship and co-op experiences in the private sector. A professor described this emphasis, saying,

Our students are groomed to get in summer internships. Some of them go into core programs where they work alongside industry and get experience. Those experiences are very valuable in enhancing their employment value.

One way in which the university is realizing this goal is through creating an internship manager position, the job description calling for “aggressive” efforts in contacting business leaders and corporations to increase paid internship opportunities for students. The university is also seeking commercialization opportunities.

### **The Identity of Thunder State University**

When describing the university, stakeholders call on both institutional features and cultural elements. Institutional stakeholders frequently point to the institution’s status as one of the state’s only public HBCUs as an important dimension of its identity. The old age of the university and its 1890 Land Grant designation are also invoked. Another institutional attribute that contributes to identity is its low-cost tuition, as was described by the CFO of the university:



“Thunder State offers a affordable – *affordable* – that’s so important – education...” Other institutional characteristics that inform the university’s identity include its resilience, familial culture, and the image of the institution being an open door for students, even as admissions standards have heightened. A key element of the culture of the institution that contributes to its identity is faculty mentoring, as described by this professor:

Every faculty member who’s younger than me I want to see stay around until the end of time ... I want to do everything I can do and I know everyone who’s in senior faculty feels the same way. To make sure that our junior faculty are doing absolutely everything that they need to do to get promotion and tenure.

Student success stories also compose an important element of how the university sees itself, particularly stories about students overcoming enormous personal and academic challenges. These stories demonstrate the university’s commitment to providing transformative education. The university’s rural location is also related to a narrative of providing a rural oasis of sorts to urban students who seek refuge far from the cities in which they were born.

A number of institutional members chose to work at Thunder State because they felt a personal connection to the institution’s mission. The chief financial officer described his desire to work at an HBCU because he was product of one himself:

All of my White colleagues were getting letters of acceptance at Florida State, University of Florida, and the other schools, and my letters were coming back as rejections ... I went and told my counselor and said my mom wants you to help me get in [an HBCU]. He pulled the catalog, I got the application, filled it out and I got accepted to all three.

Some institutional members described family members experience with segregation as important motivation for working at an HBCU. In addition to having a personal connection to the HBCU mission of the university, many university members were first in their families to attend college, as was described by the president:

A lot of the faculty and the staff that are here who have terminal degrees have walked the same walk and the same experience as these students. Many of the faculty and staff were first generation students.

Prior to seeing the job posting, a number of institutional members had never heard of Thunder State. As such, there is a contingent of faculty and administrators who came to the university because of a tight labor market with plans to find a different position, as was described by this professor:

I've totally fallen in love with Thunder and I got the job straight out of school. And I said three years and then I was going to move to the "better gig" and that never happened because I have no desire for anything else.

This sense of personal connection to Thunder State's mission has translated into stakeholder commitment to fulfilling it despite external challenges, as was described by the president, "We have very committed faculty and staff. We adjust the way we teach and also provide supplementary instruction if necessary."

### **Challenges Facing Thunder State University**

The challenges facing the university are all related to its efforts to enact its mission of providing educational opportunity despite cuts to state appropriations and fluctuating enrollment. As a former president of the institution commented publicly during a time of financial crisis, the university has a "specific mission" that would be compromised if additional cuts were made. The former Chancellor of the state's Board of Regents responded by saying that institutions run into trouble when the vision an institution holds for itself surpasses available funding. Funding over the last five years has been particularly dire. The governor's proposed budget for 2015-2016 includes a \$600,000 cut to Thunder State's supplemental earmarked allocation that the governor plans to phase this out completely by 2018. In 2008, state grants and contracts accounted for \$1.5 million of the university's budget. That number has dropped to \$575,000. During the years of the state-sponsored enrollment strategic plan, there were special state infusions of funding reaching \$20 million, which slowly tapered off to the current level of \$15 million. The university's academic support budget has grown by nearly \$500,000 since 2011. Its administration budget has decreased by \$4 million. The funding allocated to scholarships has increased from \$300,000 to

\$400,000 over the same time period. Funding devoted to research has decreased by nearly one million. Finally, the budget for student service has decreased by \$1.5 million. The majority of grants that Thunder State has received were focused on supporting students and improving academic life. In 2013, the university received two large grants from the state to support efforts to increase the number of students majoring in STEM fields and co-op experiences available to students.

Because the number of high school aged students is projected to decrease, all four institutions are facing enrollment challenges. Currently Thunder State's enrollment is 1,900, a 15% decrease from 2012. Institutional members site two reasons for this drop in enrollment. First, with the implementation of new admissions criteria, fewer students are eligible for admission. Second, with new performance based funding giving weight to "at-risk" students, high performing low-income and minority students have become attractive to flagship and elite state institutions. This has meant that Thunder State is being pulled into competition with better-resourced institutions that are intentionally recruiting the best-prepared African American students who have historically attended Thunder State. The director of government relations described how this has affected the university: "Talented Black kids when in the past, they used to come to Thunder State...But now, we have to compete with the [state flagships] of the world." This has meant that while the average academic standing of students has increased, fewer high-performing students are attending the institution. With the drop in student enrollment has also come a drop in institutional funding as tuition accounts for 14% of the university's budget.

### **Responses to Challenges**

To respond to its enrollment challenges, the university is improving the appearance of the campus through building a new student union and updating buildings. There is a limit to how much the university is able to do, though, as the money being used to make improvements is

finite. The university is also attempting to grow and advertise programs that are popular. For example, the university created a criminal justice program that has become popular with students.

The university's recruitment strategies have also changed in response to enrollment challenges. As was described, Thunder State raised its admissions standards with the goal of recruiting better prepared students more likely to persist and graduate in light of the funding formula. Additionally, the university desires growth in the number of international students in attendance. Currently there are only 10 international students attending but Thunder State is finalizing an articulation agreement with two higher education institutions in China to increase the number of Chinese students attending.

Thunder State is also working to improve relationships with area guidance counselors, community organizations and the local community college. To do this, the university issued a survey of guidance counselors to assess the quality of these relationships with the goal of addressing specific challenges. The university is dispatching admissions staff to high schools in the region to inform guidance counselors of the raised admissions standards of the university and to dispel the myth that only African American students may attend. The president has met with the superintendents of the counties adjacent to the university, as was described by the vice president for enrollment:

She [the president] has worked to facilitate some conversation and dialogue with superintendents in what we call the 30-mile radius. Looking at [the counties in the area], she's met with the superintendents of those districts and talk to them about how Thunder State can partner. They're on board so now it's about filtering down.

As part of these new partnerships, the university has issued a college-readiness survey to high school students and offered free college advising. The university also finalized an articulation agreement with the closest community college in the region with the goal of increasing the number of transfer students. Admissions staff members have begun sending recruiters to community organizations and churches in the region to educate members of these organizations

about the university with the hope that they will be encouraged to apply. The vice president of enrollment described these efforts:

There are a lot of people that go to church... Getting in with those communities and figuring out, "Okay, how can Thunder State be an option for your church?" Whether it's people deciding to come back to school, nontraditional students, or if you have up and coming high school students that maybe interested in attending.

There is widespread support on campus for diversifying the student body. One reason cited by stakeholders is that these students will expose current students to different cultures and better academic habits that will make them successful. As the university continues targeted recruitment with the goal of diversifying the racial makeup of the student body, there are also plans to maintain its HBCU culture. The director of government relations described these efforts in the following way:

You don't lose those things. But in turn, I think those things can be enhanced by broadening the racial and ethnic demographic. I think you maintain them through your normal activities, your alums, your chorus, your football, some of those kind of traditional things.

While the university had a goal to recruit more state residents to attend, given the decrease in recent high school graduates and the increasing competition for African American students, this goal has been difficult to realize. Tuition of out-of-state students has been important for addressing budgetary shortfalls. The university gained approval from the state to charge 80% of out-of-state tuition to counties adjacent to the state. In 2010, 40% of students were from out-of-state. In 2015, that number had grown to 42%.

Part of the university's goal in raising its admissions standards is to shift the balance between academically prepared students and those that require extra help. The vice president for enrollment said,

We have the ability to take a student from that point to this point but our goal is not to have all of our incoming student population at that point because we don't have the resources to take ... because it took that student to have that 1-on-1 mentorship and really engagement from the faculty. Unfortunately, you don't have every faculty member that has the ability, time or even the disposition to be that hands-on mentor. So it's important for us to balance out our incoming student cohort to have a mixture.

The average academic profile of incoming students has been creeping up over the last five years in response to elevated admissions standards. In 2010, the average ACT score was 17 and the average GPA was 2.6. In 2015, the average ACT score had risen to 17.5 and the average GPA had risen to 2.8. While the university has increased its admissions standards, it is also in the process of creating non-cognitive admissions evaluations to determine if students will be successful despite having low standardized test scores or GPAs. The director of government relations described the goal of these non-cognitive measures:

Some students just aren't good test takers. They may have a low GPA or high GPA and a horrible ACT or vice versa. What we do now is we look at both of those variables to see which students just absolutely blew the ACT out of the water but may not necessarily have the GPA to come and we consider that in their admission application.

The university has also reconfigured its retention efforts. The university is experimenting with learning communities for students who have an ACT score between 15 and 19. Fifty-nine courses have added study sessions for students. A University College, modeled after River State, was created to focus on student retention. This department strives to be student-centered and has the goal of providing individualized support to students who require remediation. The unit's website says that it assists students in developing close and supportive relationships with faculty members. The College offers a first-year experience course geared toward helping students develop the skills and efficacies necessary for success in college. Three experts in reading, mathematics and writing staff the course. Students receive "comprehensive and integrative academic advising." The College also houses a suite of tutoring and academic support, as well as six-week summer program offered to prospective incoming freshmen who require remediation.

Previously, the University College offered developmental courses. Now all students take the same freshmen-level English and Mathematics courses and those who require remediation take supplemental tutoring credits. This means that a student taking a three-credit English class may be required to take an additional one or two credits. While this provides more time for the students to develop in these core subject areas, this also means that student credit loads are

higher. For students with high-needs, particularly those who are first-generation, this could be potentially difficult to juggle, as was described by the Dean of the University College:

Most of our students come from inner city high schools where they could really use the developmental experience. A lot of them come in with low GPAs, a lot of low standardized test scores and all that, and so that was a shock to me that we had taken away.

Another approach to addressing the remedial needs of students has been to direct them to the community college for developmental courses. The university administration made these changes to remedial education because they anticipate the state removing funding for remedial course completions. Another reason for this change is administrator belief that taking remedial courses stigmatized students and mainstreaming them prevented this.

The university is also piloting a mentoring program for incoming freshmen. The university has updated classrooms, residence halls and recreation facilities and is piloting an intramural sports program. The university has begun using intrusive advising and an early alert system that requires faculty to submit mid-semester grades that will ensure that students are notified of university supports if their grades indicate they could use the help. Staff members in enrollment management have also begun contacting students who have dropped out after fall semester to encourage them to return. Staff members also increasing communication with students over the summer to ensure they reenroll in the fall.

Ultimately, the use of performance based funding has swept in winds of change, as is described by the chief financial officer of the university:

It has changed the entire attitude from the president down to our grounds and housekeepers ... I mean when we're having our town hall meetings, these are the things we're talking about now. We're now getting faculty, staff and administrators to look at the data.

As this quote shows, one of the changes has been regular student-level data collection and sharing with faculty and staff with the goal of helping them understand the university's progress in

improving retention and graduation. The university administration is also focused on helping all members of the campus community see retention as part of their jobs.

While the university is in the process of implementing new initiatives, there have also been widespread budget cuts. The university's responses to funding cuts have been multifaceted. The first response has been to freeze hiring on all non-critical vacant positions. The university has also imposed a travel moratorium for faculty and staff and suspended cell phone stipends and Internet for nonemergency staff. Merit pay has been deferred and the university shuts down completely during holiday and spring breaks. The response with the most impact has been the 65 staff positions eliminated. The chief financial officer described these cuts as,

low-skill or non-technical jobs that we ended up losing. But, guess what, the campus is still running efficiently which means many of those positions were, I would say, non-critical anyway because no one is staying here after five. So, we have still been able to fulfill our core mission with this reduced staffing or workforce here on campus.

There has also been a reduction in the number of tenure track faculty members, a fact that was flagged by the university's accrediting body. In its self-study report, Thunder State reaffirmed its desire to replace these positions in a timely manner once institutional resources become available. When a faculty line is approved for hire, the university is not able to provide funding to bring prospective candidates to campus.

Departmental support staff members have been eliminated and groundskeepers and cleaning staff members have been significantly reduced. A professor described what these cuts have meant for faculty life:

My own department, Humanities, we no longer have any support staff in the department. We have to rely on the dean's office for staffs in one of the other departments ... The things that used to be done for the faculty by that person, if you call in now and you're not going to make it to campus hopefully you can get somebody in the dean's office because there's no longer anyone in the department to contact that you can depend that will be at their desk. You can try to call a colleague, but they may be in class or not in their office or what not. It just hampers basic function.



As a result of these cuts, the university has cut its operating costs by 20% while cutting its workforce by 25% in the last two years. There have also been additional demands placed on existing staff as administrative staff positions have been cut across the university.

While the academic support of the institution in terms of tutoring and advising has increased, units such as financial aid and registration are understaffed which causes students to experience longer wait times. Two areas in which academic support for students have been affected is the limited number of staff that are employed by the University College and changes to the staff of the Writing Center. The Center's full-time staff position was eliminated and a faculty member with a course release now facilitates the work of the center. A professor described the cuts in the following way:

We still have a Writing Center director who is a faculty member who gets course release time. Now that is a significant change from ... four years ago we had a full time writing center director ... When it became a half time position, what we have done, we have a University College that also has tutors, so we just draw on the University College tutors and have them come over and spend time in the writing center, but they're no longer directly supervised or directly work for the writing center because with the cutbacks. We just weren't able to maintain.

The university's support for faculty development has also been cut. Funding for travel to enrichment conferences is frozen and the center for faculty development no longer has a budget for on-campus enrichment activities. While there are few opportunities for faculty development, the university has created a faculty mentoring program that intends to fill this gap. This program was described by a faculty member:

They had senior faculty sign-up and said willing to be a mentor to a junior faculty member and then junior faculty sign-up saying, 'I'm seeking a senior faculty mentor.' And what they're doing is just pairing people so that not only within your department but across campus you're getting some advice and help.

When the current president took office in 2012, she launched a campus-wide strategic planning process intended to help the university cope with challenges it was facing. As part of this process, the university identified three ideals that would drive institutional life including stakeholder engagement with university and local community life, respect, and adherence to

university processes and procedures. The president described these ideals, saying, “It’s about adherence to the very best practices structure because everything in this world has a structure. If you follow the structure you’ll get the results that you want.” As part of the strategic plan, the university has identified improving academic quality, student retention, and university efficiency as key goals.

While administrators on campus understand these changes as being ways the university is becoming more efficient, faculty are being asked to teach overloads and perform more university service, causing some to feel as though they are continually being asked “to do more with less.” A faculty member described the teaching demands in the following way, “at the last minute, you need your classes taught, full time faculty are pressed into taking overloads.” Because the faculty at Thunder State are the lowest paid of all four-year faculty in the state, many faculty have come to rely on teaching overloads schedule to increase their earnings. Some academic departments have up to five full-time faculty members, but many rely on nontenure faculty members to teach. In some departments, as much as 60% of instructional hours are delivered by nontenure faculty. Finding nontenure faculty to teach at the institution is also a struggle because salary levels are low. In one department, an instructor quit mid-term, citing inadequate pay and a long commute as reason for leaving. In a recent university-wide program review, departments reported the instructional needs of the department, all stating that they require up to three additional faculty to bring teaching loads of faculty back to 12 credits per semester.

The university has also engaged in revenue-saving and generating efforts. To respond to a state law requiring that universities reduce energy use, the university used a state loan to retrofit buildings with energy-efficient mechanisms, reducing energy costs by one million dollars per year. The university is also conducting its first capital campaign targeting alumni, corporations, and other potential funders. The president is in the process of building strategic relationships with the local town and drawing on land grant funding to address outstanding infrastructure needs. The

university's improved relationship with the town has led to plans for it to annex the university. This will mean that university employees will pay a small tax and the city will maintain key infrastructure elements of the university, as is described by the chief financial officer:

If the city annexes us and all of the employees including myself begins to pay a tax, it becomes revenue for the city but at the same time all those services that we're currently paying will be at no cost to the university.

The mayor of the city expressed her support of these efforts, saying:

I never had a closer relationship with a President than the current President who's really doing a lot to bridge the gap so to speak between [the town] and the Thunder State community. With the two of us kind of working together, and that being my alma mater, that certainly is my goal as well.

Despite sweeping cost cutting measures, the university has just been placed on fiscal watch by the state due to a four million dollar shortfall last fiscal year. The university is required to submit a detailed "financial recovery plan" that would remove the university from fiscal watch within three years. The university is also required to cooperate with the state's auditor's office and submit quarterly financial reports. University officials cite loan repayment after the energy efficiency measures, enrollment, and changes to student financial aid policies as being primary reasons for financial trouble.

The university is also working to counter negative aspects of the reputation it has acquired, as was described by a professor:

I don't think that internally or externally are we particularly good as an institution about celebrating our successes ... So when we don't go out and brag to the world nobody's seeking out "Hey, what do you guys do well?", you know? It's like we've either got to be in the headlines for something bad, or they don't know us ...

In 2009, the university engaged in a rebranding effort to address challenges with its reputation. As part of this process, it changed the university's tagline to reflect its efforts to serve as a change agent for students. The provost who was in office during this time described the university's identity in the following way: "We look at opportunities to take students where they are and build them. The university looks at itself as a change agent for students." This branding effort remains.

Raising admissions standards was also in part a strategy for improving the university's standing in the local community and broader state higher education context, as was described by the vice president for enrollment:

What is our image in the community? How do people view us? That's also going to be a key with recruiting a higher caliber student. Are we considered an institution that higher caliber students want to attend?

The director of government relations identified the strategic plan as another effort by the institution to reshape its reputation in the state,

We want to show the community, not just [the local town], but the state, that we are producing students who are mature, academically focused, socially engaged. It [the strategic plan] was her [the president's] way of branding to the community that, 'whatever happened prior to me, whatever interaction you have with the Thunder State student before I got here, I cannot address, but I can address your interactions moving forward.

### **Conclusion**

In his 2011 campus-wide address, the previous president stated his belief that it was no longer sufficient for the university to identify itself as one of the only HBCUs in the state because the "competition is tough and the expectations are high." Faculty members and current administrators share this sentiment. Efforts to respond to funding cuts and demands for greater efficiency and accountability have been done to solidify the university's standing within the state so that its perspective is considered in policy and education discussions, and it is able to shore up student enrollment. Time will tell how these efforts will affect the public purpose of the institution and its academic life and the fiscal health.

## CHAPTER 5: RESULTS, RIVER STATE UNIVERSITY

### Regional Context

Situated along a river in a small town surrounded by farmland and a forest is River State University. On the walls that protect the small town from flooding are murals depicting the history of the town. On this wall is evidence of the town's Appalachian heritage and legacy as a stop along the Underground Railroad. Also depicted is the town's manufacturing heyday with paintings of the main street lined with shops and restaurants brimming with patrons. Midway along the floodwall is a painting of the rains that caused massive flooding and destroyed businesses and factories along the river. Towards the end of the floodwall are two murals showing the creation of River State. First shown are its early days as a branch of one of the oldest universities in the state, and a technical and community college. On the next panel is a portrait of the state representative instrumental in elevating the community college to a university. These murals are not only artistically beautiful but they are a visual record of the region's good times and bad. While the factories have since been abandoned, leaving only fading signs that speak of the town's former prosperity, the university remains, called "a reason for hope in a region plagued by unemployment, poverty and low educational attainment."

Currently 75,000 people live in the county that River State thinks of as its region and 25,000 live in the town. At one time the town's population was three times its current level. A primary driver of outmigration has been a lack of economic opportunities, particularly college educated and older adults who have the means to move. The provost of the university described the town's history, saying,

It was a big manufacturing textile river town ... And then as the economy changed and floods and all that, you see a lot of empty lots. You see a lot of dilapidated buildings. The economy hasn't transitioned, reformed from all of that yet.

The town's population is overwhelmingly White with just five percent of residents identifying as a racial majority. The education level is 20% below the national average and its poverty rate is

high with 40% of people living below 200% of the poverty level. Some residents are so economically challenged that they do not have running water in their homes. As has been well documented in other parts of Appalachia, the town also struggles with drug use. These social challenges are made more complex due to the geographic isolation of people living in the region and a lack of sufficient nonprofit organizations. Outward migration has thinned out the population in such a way that there are fewer business and civic leaders available to guide the town into better times. While there are many challenges facing the region, its Appalachian culture is a point of pride that is celebrated in music and art festivals and other events that convene residents. The region is tightknit and family-oriented with neighbors helping neighbors through financially difficult times. Another way the Appalachian culture shapes the area is in encouraging many to stay within the region so that they can be close to family.

Although industry has largely left the town, there remains a demand for government employees, schoolteachers and healthcare workers. The town is situated near a major rail yard and its residents are thought to be hard working when given jobs. The town was once an important port along a major river that was instrumental during the industrial era of the U.S. As the Panama Canal opens there is hope that the town will once more take a leadership place within the economy of the state and region. Until then there is a sense among many that the town is still waiting for the steel mills to return.

### **River State University**

River State is the youngest in the state public higher education system and faces immense challenges related to navigating uncertain performance funding allocations, educating Appalachian students, and solidifying an identity for itself. With the exception of the university's founding building that housed the original branch campus in the 1960s, the buildings of River State are all new. The founding building is in many ways the centerpiece of campus and is believed to give River State some sense of longevity and history as it nears its 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

The campus is small and includes a clock tower in the center of a large green space, a student center that houses the student success center, student affairs and admissions, a performing arts theater and a planetarium. The students that attend River State during the day can be seen shuffling to class from their dormitories in sweat pants. After 6:00 pm, the demographics change with an influx of working adults and continuing education students, many wearing their work attire.

As can be inferred from the attire that students can be seen wearing, River State educates both traditional age students that live on campus and working adults who are either pursuing a college degree or continuing education credits. Twenty percent of students are over the age of 25. Nearly 7,000 students attend the university in pursuit of continuing education, and 4,300 students pursue associates, bachelors or master's degrees, 85% of which attend full-time. The commonly shared trait among students is that 80% are first generation. Some students are even first in their families to graduate from high school. This professor described one such student:

A student in one of my classes, who talked about introducing herself, talked about being the first one in three generations to graduate from high school from her family, and she will be the first one in her family to graduate from college.

As might also be surmised given the region's economic situation, many of these students are low-income. Thirty-seven percent have EFCs of zero. To afford their education, many work while attending school while balancing family responsibilities. A professor described the multiple responsibilities of students in the following way:

We have a lot of individuals who have to work along with going to school because they have challenges of raising children or marriages or families that they're carrying for ... I think our students do face those challenges *a lot*.

Reflecting the region's demographics, 84% of students are White although the percentage of minority students has grown by seven percent in the last five years. Fifty-six percent of students attending the university are from the region, as was shared by a professor:

We have many students who really could not see their way to leave the area and go to school somewhere else. So, this is right here in their community or within an hour's drive, and they can come here and have an affordable education.

In 2000, the proportion of students attending River State from the region was 71%. A variety of forces contributed to this shift including the draw of one of its distinctiveness programs, the desire of students from around the state to have a small, rural campus environment, and the university's status as the only open enrollment university in the state. Six percent of students attending the university are international students, up from two percent in 2010. While the regional reach of the university is expanding, the types of students drawn have remained largely the same with one exception. Since the university constructed dormitories, there has been growth in the number of traditional aged students while the number of nontraditional, commuter students has remained the same. This has constituted a shift in the proportion of nontraditional and traditional students. Currently, 16% of students live in on-campus housing, compared with three percent in 1995. In 2002 50% of incoming students lived in dorms and in 2012, 91% of incoming students lived in dorms. To grow enrollment and increase the number of traditional students, River State has created a number of activities for on-campus students. By the president's admission, the university does not program as well for nontraditional students in large part because it is difficult to create offerings that will meet their diverse needs:

I personally believe that we don't program as well for our non-traditional as we do for our traditional students but also now, there's no one way to program for non-traditional students.

Sixty-six percent of students require remediation and 54% of graduates have received remediation at some point during their time at the university. The university's first to second year retention rate is 52% and its graduation rate is 22%, statistics that campus members largely attribute to the many challenges facing students and the lack of funding to fully support these students. The university uses ACT scores to determine student remediation needs. There has been a five percent growth in the number of students in the top 20% of ACT scores between 2008 and 2014. To



ensure a larger proportion of well-prepared students, the university offers three merit-based scholarships. Many of the students, particularly first-generation students, also require cultural and professional support to acclimate to college and many campus members see filling this need as a primary responsibility of the university.

The university offers over 50 bachelor's degrees, over 20 associates and four master's degree programs, and is composed of three colleges: one devoted to remedial education and student retention, one devoted to professional and technical studies, and one devoted to the liberal arts. The three masters degree programs River State offers were created to meet regional needs. Two are in teacher education and one is in occupational therapy, a need within a region where many live with disabilities. The university has two distinctive manufacturing programs, both nationally ranked and known throughout out the state. River State's health science programs are well regarded within the state. Graduating nursing students have above average licensure passage rates and 100% of pre-medical students are accepted to medical schools. In 2000 the university created an honors program. Incoming students are offered admission if they have a high school GPA of 3.5 or higher and a composite ACT score of at least 28. Students take smaller classes and are closely mentored by faculty. In university public relations materials, the program is described as enrolling the "best" students and has the "characteristic of a selective admission college."

The university holds the Carnegie designation for high nonresidential undergraduate enrollment and is primarily focused on teaching with only limited research taking place. What little faculty research that occurs is primarily within occupational therapy and the two distinctive programs, although there is moderate faculty research within the College of Liberal Arts. Faculty in this college desire more support for research however given the university's budget constraints, they do not foresee this coming to fruition. Younger faculty members tend to conduct more research than their senior peers. The director of institutional finance described these generational differences, saying:

We have some newish faculty members with great energy who want to pursue their research agendas and that's very exciting. Do we have the resources to support them in that? We have not made that choice ... Others may have been here and this is totally generalization but for 20, 30 years very comfortable. They're here because they love to teach which is awesome.

The university has held annual conferences commemorating faculty and student research for the past 10 years.

River State's administration is composed of the president, provost, vice president for student affairs, chief financial officer, dean of students, and directors for institutional advancement, institutional research, admissions, information and finance. A majority of the administration has been at the university for several years and is passionate about the types of students that River State educates, as is described by the Vice President for Student Affairs:

If you would have asked me in 2000 when I came here was I going to stay here for 15 years and quite possibly end my career here, I would have said, "Highly unlikely." I like it here. I like making a difference with kids. And you know, being in an open-access institution, especially when I was in the admission role, it was fun. It was satisfying to sit with a family and talk to them and say, "Hey, we're going to give you a chance."

The outgoing president served the university for nearly half of its existence and is beloved by many on campus. Both the incoming and outgoing presidents are first-generation college graduates and both were drawn to the university because of its access mission and high proportion of first-generation students. The Dean of the University College described the outgoing president's leadership of the university, saying:

She has been very deliberate and intentional in a lot of the work she's been doing and sometimes I would get frustrated because I think why are we moving faster but in her wisdom it needed to go slower so buy in would occur ... She's one of a hundred. I mean, they were so lucky to get her here. At the time they did. Because she's been able to establish us in the state.

The acting interim provost was also a first generation college graduate who took office after a failed provostial search. The provost was recruited for his expertise in assessment and strategic planning to serve as a bridge between the two presidents' tenures. Many of the faculty that teach at the university also identify as first-generation college graduates and a large share are from the

immediate region or from rural parts of the state, choosing River State for its rural atmosphere and open enrollment and teaching mission. The director of institutional finance described the multiple pathways taken by faculty, saying:

Some have ties to the region and really want to be here. Some I think are more drawn by the teaching mission which has always been the primary component. Some come here and like it who [didn't] intend to stay.

The strategic plan currently guiding the university was created in 1995 and asserts three goals: to ensure that teaching and learning responds to regional needs, to grow student enrollment, and to deepen the university's relationships with the local community in order to create a "shared sense of purpose" between the university and its region. One of the first goals of the new presidential administration will be guiding River State through a strategic planning process, the second in its history.

### **The History of River State University**

In the mid-1970s, the community college that would later become River State was created by combining a general and technical college with a branch of a research university. Later in the mid-1980s, due to the lobbying efforts of a member of the state's House of Representatives from the region and the support of the then governor, the community college became a university. For the House representative, creating the university was a way of providing students from the region with an access point for higher education and creating a public institution well-positioned to serve the region's civic and economic needs.

When the university was founded, nearly all of its students were commuters, and some were women who had escaped abusive home environments, as was described by the current director of the center for international education who was a nontenure faculty member during this time:

Many of the students that I saw were mothers, divorcees or soon to be divorcees because their boyfriend or husband didn't want them getting education. I saw a really classic

Appalachian attitude towards mistrust of formal education. [They] paid a high price to go to school here.

Since its early days in the original building, the university's campus buildings have increased to 29 and student enrollment has grown by 60%, with enrollment growing each year until 2011 when enrollment began to dip due to the end of the recession and the decline in the number of high school graduates in the state. In 2007, the university created an enrollment management division housed within student affairs. Prior to this time, the head of admissions and recruitment visited social service offices to recruit students, with just the university catalog in hand as a recruitment tool. When the enrollment management division was created, the university used funds from the development foundation to offer merit-based scholarships to recruit better prepared students while also maintaining the university's open enrollment policies. In 2006, the university launched its first master's program in occupational therapy and in 2009 and 2012 created two separate master's of teaching programs.

In 2005 the university established an Alumni Association and began recruiting the 15,000 graduates living in the region to join. Three years later, due to the efforts of the Alumni Association and Development Foundation, the university held its first development campaign and raised \$16 million. Through these efforts, the university came to understand that among graduates, River State had been a "game changer," helping them to become upwardly mobile and promoting college-going behavior in their family. A year later, the university created a Center for Community Service to deepen its commitment to regional social revitalization. The director of the center established partnerships with 50 service and nonprofit organizations and facilitated student and faculty volunteer hours aimed at addressing regional needs. The center also served as a clearinghouse for the university's community partnerships. The director led alternative spring breaks each year and assisted faculty in adopting service learning for their courses.

A year later, responding to a call for proposals from the state's board of regents, the university submitted a proposal to create a Center for Applied Research. The proposed foci of the

center were scholarship to improve regional health and research in the two distinctive programs. The overriding goal of the proposed center was to leverage research in promoting regional economic development and social revitalization. While the university's research facilities were underdeveloped, it had obtained the agreement to borrow their infrastructure from the research university that had sponsored its earlier iteration as a branch campus. The president had studied the habits of peer regional comprehensive university and asserted that this would be a natural development for the regional university. Ultimately the state rejected this proposal and instead funded an identical center at the flagship university. The president cited two reasons why she believed this proposal was rejected. First, River State did not yet have faculty positions to support this work, although she had plans to hire more using state resources. And second, the university did not have the infrastructure to support research but the administration had secured agreement of a nearby research university to use its facilities. The president asserted that had the state leadership been willing to support it and fund it, it would have happened:

It's suffered from the lack of funding but mostly, quite frankly, if [the state capital] had pushed that there would have been some funding that followed it ... I think it's on hold and it's going to find its way to match the new economy.

The university once housed a Center for Educational Access that served the Appalachian region of the state, paying close attention to its specific cultural and economic challenges. The Center promoted research focused on the barriers facing prospective college students and funded grants to school districts to address these challenges. The Center also provided direct college planning assistance to 28,000 students in the region. Despite gaining national attention for this work, the state ended funding to this Center. The former director maintains its blog, posting information about college scholarships as well as Appalachian cultural events, but she no longer offers services under the auspices of the Center.

Between 2010-2012, a number of new structures and policies were created that helped River State look more like a full-fledged university. In 2012 the university lobbied to gain

permission to close a downtown street to create a bounded campus with green spaces and new buildings. In preparation, the university acquired houses and abandoned lots and leveraged its relationships with a real estate developer to build dormitories. While the university held town hall meetings to solicit feedback from residents, for a time following approval of this plan there were some in the community who were upset by the university's expansion. Nonetheless, River State's expansion resulted in the creation of a campus that mimics that of older universities of the state.

In 2013 during union negotiation of faculty contracts, the university created a tenure and promotion system. Senior faculty members who had union contracts and had been teaching at the university with doctoral or masters degrees were grandfathered into tenure status and newer and incoming faculty were required to abide by the new guidelines. With this change came the requirement for faculty to conduct some research. To preserve the university's emphasis on teaching, requirements for scholarship are light when compared to research universities, as was described by a professor: "It can be a variety of those external articles, books, presentation ... As a faculty member, scholarship could include helping those students do scholarly activities..." While the faculty had organized for the creation of tenure and promotion requirements, some members of the board and administration were resistant because they believed this change would remove a progressive characteristic of the university. A professor described this sentiment, saying, "I think they were, I hate to say it, wanting to be innovative and ... move away from the traditional tenure system." Faculty were motivated to establish tenure because doing so would mirror the behaviors of established universities while also ensuring more faculty say in hiring and promotion decisions.

In 2012 the university created three new divisions on campus. The first was the office of institutional effectiveness, created to respond to state reporting requirements and to systematically collect data primarily related to student demographics, enrollment patterns, and retention and graduation rates. The second was the Center for Teaching and Learning that was created to

provide professional development to faculty for teaching and to help them understand their role in ensuring student retention. The third was the University College, established to provide developmental students with remedial supports and to institutionalize River State's retention strategies. Overall, the evolution of the university over its 35-year existence has been focused on creating the trappings of a full-fledged university while maintaining community college offerings.

### **The Mission of River State University**

The first dimension of River State's mission is tied to its founding purpose of providing educational access to a region that previously had no higher education institution. When the college became a university, it preserved this mission. University leaders couch the access mission as the university being the only option for place-bound students. This means the university accepts students that other institutions might refer to a community college, as was described by the dean of the University College:

I had a colleague ... say, "Well, we just don't accept and they go to the community college." I'm like, "In my area they go to a community college, they would have to go *two hours away*." I don't think people understand geographic isolation, and social isolation that some of our residents have.

As this quote shows, the university's access mission has an element of specificity in that it dictates a responsiveness to and understanding of the unique barriers facing prospective college students in the region.

The university's board of trustees has been protective of the university's access mission. When a university committee formed to study River State's admissions policies and recommended that standards be elevated, the board of trustees rejected the proposal and "affirmed the access mission." The Vice President for Student Affairs who was the director of admissions during this time described the board's decision, saying:

I was on that committee and we actually recommended that we initiate some admission standards. Minimum ACT, minimum rank in class, minimum GPA, presented the report. The Board of Trustees did not agree with that report, so they reiterated our open enrollment access mission.

While the board affirmed the access mission and there is wide support for this work, there are some on campus that still believe that the university's admission standards should be raised, particularly given the state's use of performance based funding. Nonetheless, overall there is strong member agreement that the university's mission is primarily one concerned with access.

One way the university's access mission is conceived of is through providing opportunity. The outgoing president often called River State "a university of opportunity." Promoting opportunity has meant ensuring prospective students have an opportunity to become educated even when their public school system may have been lacking, as was described by the chief financial officer:

They just haven't had the opportunities, they are not ready. They can't write, a lot of them ... These students are marked for life. They're going to be unable to get jobs ... That's our mission is that population - is to help them understand: you can raise your intellectual, your educational level and you can qualify for more than what you think. And get them out of poverty and out of the welfare mindset that kind of permeates a poverty-driven area.

As this quote demonstrates, the access mission is also connected with facilitating the economic prosperity of students that allows them to break free of poverty.

Another dimension of River State's mission is a focus on teaching. Faculty members teach 15 credits per semester and are hired for the passion and potential they show to be good teachers. The provost described his belief that the faculty love teaching and are drawn to the university because they will be primarily assigned teaching duties:

The faculty here love teaching typically. They like students. They're great. They're real down to earth kind of faculty because this is what they do. They're not sort of the theoretical researchers that you might find....

Within the new guidelines for tenure is a statement that teaching is the primary focus of faculty members and should claim 70-80% of their time. As such, scholarship requirements are considered in light of the university's status as a "teaching institution," as is illuminated by the advice a professor shared for new faculty members:



Make sure that they're serving both departmentally but also on campus wide committees ... I still think that we put rather minimum [research] requirements in because we're really a teaching institution and we don't want to put too much of a burden, particularly one that's not being supported financially.

Committee service is an additional requirement for tenure and promotion, particularly because faculty members are fairly involved in the administration of the university. This faculty member acknowledged that with the change in tenure guidelines, his advice might change, though.

According to NSSE results and online student polls, students perceive the faculty as caring about teaching. Within NSSE, half reported that faculty were available outside class and gave prompt feedback – two indicators that demonstrate an emphasis on teaching given all that faculty are required to manage. On the chat forums and student-produced videos, students shared their belief that faculty wanted them to succeed and that they were focused more on teaching than research.

Another aspect of the teaching mission concerns the small size of the campus which members believe supports this mission, as was described by this professor:

We have more individual interaction a lot of times, I think, with the students with smaller class sizes than maybe what can be offered at a larger university. And I think that the faculty are very accessible to the students through that.

The small campus setting also contributes to a family atmosphere on campus. Because so many campus stakeholders have different roles and work closely with a variety of people, this family feeling is enhanced.

The university also has a student-centered mission related to an awareness on the part of faculty, staff and administrators about how rural Appalachian culture affects student success, as was described by the provost:

I think the rural setting has had an impact on the kind of students that come here. We get a lot of first generation students who are the first from their families to come to school. That definitely is part of the culture ... Some of them have never really been far from home. They're not world travelers.

This awareness is expressed in a variety of institutional features. First, given the health challenges facing the region, the university provides a number of supports for the health needs of students

including drop-in health clinics, psychological supports, and a dental clinic that offers teeth cleanings to students for five dollars. There is also support for students with drug abuse issues and with disabilities. Second, given the high proportion of first generation students, the university works to establish relationships with the parents of traditional-age students that help them understand the value of higher education while educating them about university processes. This effort is done in honor of the family-centered culture of people of Appalachian backgrounds, as was described by this professor, “Appalachian people tend to be very family oriented. Family is involved in what they do, so they like to be a part of what’s going on with [their students].”

Another aspect of River State’s student-centered mission is providing transformative experiences to students and their families, as was described by the president of the development foundation:

For us, our access to education is, truly, it's transformative ... We have more of an impact on that changing of a family's ability to earn a living and have some social mobility as a result of paycheck and career.

There is a sense on campus that when students graduate from River State, they “become new people” through becoming credentialed, adopting “a new way of life” and learning college-going behaviors and professional skills. Given the high need for remediation, there are some students who make enormous academic progress to obtain their degrees, as was described by the CFO:

Students come in, they are unable to produce a product that gets them in some place else. They're probably a 16 or a 15 ACT, maybe lower. They need that intensive push to figure out how to think, to figure out how to study, to figure out how to express themselves.

Many people on campus believe that if students are given adequate opportunities to become remediated, they will catch up quickly and that it is important that the university ensure these opportunities are provided. A large part of supporting these students is helping them learn how to navigate university bureaucracies including course registration, academic planning and financial aid. An example of this was described by the president who shared the individualized financial aid advising students receive:

We have some people on financial aid office that sit with families ... They treat them like they're their own members of the family to help them really understand what they're considering ... "Have you thought about this, have you thought about this?" I think we do more of that kind of thing but these kids have no models.

The final dimension of the university's mission concerns its regional engagement, although it has had some challenges solidifying this commitment. The first cause for difficulty is that the university has a somewhat complicated relationship with its town in light of the university's expansion and because some residents mistrust people not from the region. For these reasons, there is a sense among new university stakeholders that they have to prove themselves, as was described by this professor:

You have to prove yourself to let them know that you really do know what you're talking about, that you really have had experience because the phrase that was said to me when I first moved here was, "You need to learn how things are done around here."

Another issue that the university faces when working with the businesses and community organizations is the perception that as one of the region's largest organizations, they are the "gorilla in the room." As such, university stakeholders and particularly the president strive to act in ways that respect and defer to local culture and ways of doing things.

While there can be tension with regard to the university's relationship with the town, there is also a feeling that if the university did not exist, the region would be facing larger problems than it is. University stakeholders think of River State as an economic anchor, as was described by the provost:

The two big economic anchors here are River State and the two medical centers. There's two fairly large ones. If it wasn't for that, this would be ... This just would be really a shell here. It's immensely important to the community.

Many business leaders believe that River State is responsible for keeping businesses alive, particularly those located adjacent to the university. During the school year there is a 20% increase in business in the town. The president of the area Chamber of Commerce expressed this sentiment:

Everybody in our area would pretty much agree, if we didn't have River State we wouldn't have much of a downtown. And, I think everybody recognizes that, embraces it, and like you say, we try to partner with them in everything we can.

With its continuing education and degree options, particularly those focused on teacher preparation, health sciences, and manufacturing, the university plays a vital role in workforce development as well. Many of the prominent business leaders in the region were educated by River State. The university also facilitates partnerships with area businesses focused on addressing the economic concerns of the region, as was described by the president of the Chamber of Commerce, “To have that connection, being the educational institution that they are, being one of our major employers, I think it's important that we interact with them.” The university’s economic engagement was documented in 2009 in an economic impact report where it was found that River State makes an annual impact equivalent to \$97 million to the region.

The university’s civic engagement is less focused and strategic than its economic engagement largely because of a lack of university resources, as was described by the director of institutional finance:

Our active role in terms of community development and stuff has been less than I’m seeing in other university communities. Perhaps because we have limited resources, perhaps we don’t have the same set of expertise among our faculty.

When the university dismantled its Center for Community Service, it reassigned the director to work on career development for students. While there is ideological support for River State to do applied research, there has not been financial support from the state. There is also no recognition for civic engagement in faculty tenure and promotion guidelines, although as was described by this professor, some professors are engaged because they feel personally motivated to do so:

It’s important to me and therefore I do it ... Really the only other incentive for faculty would be that, that would be something you could add to your service portion of your portfolio as you go for promotion opportunities.

There are also university representatives that sit on school boards, run for public office, and volunteer. To facilitate this form of stakeholder engagement and educate new employees about

the particularities of the region, the university encourages incoming employees to participate in the Chamber of Commerce's orientation to the local city. This event exposes participants to area civic and governmental organizations and provides networking opportunities with representatives of these organizations.

Students are particularly active in the community, largely through student clubs and organizations. The director of institutional research observed that incoming students have a "focus on community service," saying:

I think this generation wants that component to their education. I think there's great opportunity to find that match with the community that has great need and students who are anxious to help.

The activities that students are engaged with tend to focus on alleviating poverty through working in homeless shelters, conducting food drives, tutoring area school children, and facilitating health care. With regard to health care, the nursing and medical science programs are heavily involved in the local community to help students gain real-world experience, as was described by this nursing professor, "As part of the objective sometimes of courses you want to have a community presence and teach the students about various community things." Students perform medical screenings, assist with counseling services, and work in internships in hospitals. The university also runs a mobile health clinic that serves place-bound residents in the region and a low-cost dental clinic. Finally, River State hosts three campus-wide community service days: one in the summer, one in the fall for new students, and one on MLK Day. During these service days, nearly 55% of students participate and up to 35 community organizations are involved.

The university also sees its regional engagement mission as providing area residents with exposure to diverse people who attend or work at the university. The dean of the University College explained this:

The area we're in, we don't have a lot of diversity, but with this being a college campus we bring in professors from around the world. We bring in international students. So I think we help the region, the - not just this county but adjoining counties that they see things that they wouldn't without us being here.

River State uses its performing arts center to provide cultural offerings. This is a major regional cultural hub that draws touring theater groups, musicians and other performance artists. In the summer, the university facilitates arts workshops for students in the space. The university also invites residents and K-12 students to visit its planetarium.

### **The Identity of River State University**

In many ways River State's identity is still being determined, as is evident in the following two quotes from professors:

I think the size is one thing, that we are smaller, and for faculty, the focus on community has been so strong whereas I think research universities [don't] focus on that a lot. [Long pause.] ... I'm trying to think if there's anything else I can help you with there. Can't think of anything at this moment.

That's an interesting question. I'm sure that there is some sort of identity. May be hard to put my finger on it ... Probably depend[s] on who you ask ...

There was a branding effort a few years ago that attempted to establish an identity for River State but it stalled in part due to state pressures and uncertainty over if it would be able to maintain its access mission given cuts to funding and the transition to performance based funding. The director of institutional finance described this confusion over identity due to the policy context:

Previous gubernatorial administration had some very clear goals for the system ... In some ways, there were concepts developed that made us think are we going to have to be forced to abandon our access mission completely and if so how do we define ourselves? ... We've had individual targeted exercises to address particular issues but knowing who we are, who we want to be, who we can be, one of the tenants of that ... and I can't even remember we've been through enterprise university, all the different terminology.

A number of catchphrases were entertained and ultimately, administrators settled on the theme "outstanding" as a brand for the university, however this has not been widely adopted by stakeholders. The logo is symbolic of the university's underdeveloped identity as it is a simple picture of a river that forms the first letter of the university's name. Part of the reason for this lack of a settled identity is because the university serves many different types of students and has a variety of program offerings that are very different. As the university continues to recruit better

prepared students from throughout the state, its student body diversifies making it difficult for River State to fully formulate an identity for itself.

While the university has yet to formulate a settled identity, there are some institutional features that members use to differentiate River State from other universities. The first are the distinctive programs which are points of pride for people on campus, even those unaffiliated with them, because they are nationally ranked, draw top students and faculty, and are deeply connected to the unique needs of the region. The university also thinks of itself as being a place that excels at preparing graduates for the health science industry. The university's small size further distinguishes the university, as does its status as one of the only open enrollment universities in the country. River State's Appalachian culture is another contributor to its identity, as is demonstrated in this quote from the president:

This is an open access institution primarily serving a very underserved region of the country, Appalachia, that's comprehensive in nature so it's primary goal is to provide the education that is needed to have the region thrive.

There are some that think of River State as being lean in its operations and focused on teaching, as is reflected in this quote from a professor:

I kind of see us as a lean, as far as faculty is concerned, a really lean, uhm, operating sort of machine that um, um, we're focused on teaching [Pause]... You know, sort of like a teaching institution.

Still other see other see the university as being affordable, particularly for first-generation students from the region, as was described by the chief financial officer: "We've kept our tuition low over the years because we're proud that we are able to offer quality at a lower cost." A final institutional trait that contributes to the university's identity is the number of "at-risk" students that attend who are low-income, first-generation, and in need of remediation.

Because the university was founded as a community and technical college as well as a branch of a research institution, there has been some mixture in how institutional members view academic life. The three colleges are symbolic of this disunion of identity with the former

community now the Colleges of Professional Studies, the University College that is primarily responsible for remediation, and the former branch campus that became the College of Liberal Arts, as was described by a professor:

You have the college of arts and sciences which is a very traditional curriculum that you would find in most university campuses. And then you have the college of professional studies which really harkens back to the community college technical school days of the university because those programs continue to exist.

Another expression of this dual identity is the different degrees held by faculty in each of these colleges, with faculty in the College of Liberal Arts tending to hold terminal degrees and those within the College of Professional Studies and University College holding master's degrees.

Despite an internal perception that the university has a dual identity as both a community college and a liberal arts university, externally throughout the state there are many that still view the university as a community college. Professors attribute their status as being among the lowest paid faculty in the state to this misperception:

With [River State], there's also the complication that it started its life as a community college and although it shifted to become a four year institution years ago, the pay scale was low and did not really get corrected completely ...

As a young university, River State has yet to develop traditions. To address this, the president moved a Spirit Rock onto campus for students to paint. There are some who believe that the university could build its identity through highlighting the stories of student transformation.

With the new incoming president there is hope on campus that he will help finalize a sense of the university's identity, as was expressed by the chief financial officer:

I think that what we want to be is a question mark, so, but I think it's a campus/university issue that has to be debated, and, but we can't take forever, because we do not have the resources to think about it.

The university's reputation in the region is generally very positive. A goal of the strategic plan was to increase university communication and public relations efforts. As a result of this commitment, the university is generally well covered in the regional media, particularly in the



local newspaper. The high passage rates of nursing and medical studies students is also well-regarded, as was described by a professor:

They had a strong reputation in the community for providing quality education to nurses. And that was really important to me because I've seen the impact of that in the hospitals. And so I wanted to be associated with a university that had a strong reputation.

As another testament to the university's reputation in the region, in the last three fundraising campaigns led by the development foundation, there was high community support. While River State generally has a good reputation in the region, there are some that question its quality and refer to it as "Riverbank Tech."

The university's reputation in the state is more mixed. As was described, there are many that still regard it as a community college. The president described how she is often reminded of this while in the state capitol:

I meet people on the streets [of the streets of the capitol] who say, "I remember when the speaker made you a university" and what I say to them is, "Let me tell you what a great investment that was for [the state]." I'm ready with that answer but it just amazes me that people still remember after all that time.

Because of this perception, the university at times experiences difficulty in gaining state approval for creating new programs, particularly at the master's level. There have been those that believe that this is an improper use of funds. Ultimately three programs have been approved because the university was able to demonstrate that it had the required expertise and there was a need in the region that other universities were unable to meet. Nonetheless, one of the professors involved called the process an "ordeal."

Another challenging aspect of the university's reputation relates to the special funding supplement it receives which can create the perception that the university cannot survive on its own. When the university has attempted to insert itself into policy debates about performance based funding, there have been some that have said that the university has not done a good job of educating its "at-risk" students even though it receives the supplement. The supplement also means the university is grouped with Thunder State. When Thunder State is struggling, there are

some in the state that extend these problems onto River State as was described by the Director of Institutional Finance, “If Thunder State has operational problems, people associate their same problems issues with us.”

### **Challenges Facing River State University**

River State’s funding challenges are related to its dip in enrollment and the unpredictability created by performance based funding. The university reached peak enrollment in 2012 and since has less students each year. At the start of the 2014-2015 school year, the university lost 150 students in part due to the ACT requirement. There has also been an eight percent decline in the number of seniors graduating from high schools in the region which affects the university’s enrollment. Since 2012 the university has had to cut eight million from its operating budget. In the last 10 years, the university’s state supplement has declined from five million to its current level of three million. For a university whose entire budget is \$50 million, this is a significant loss. With the state’s decision to eliminate the stop loss component of performance based funding allocations and the potential for a state-mandated across the board five percent tuition cut, the university is facing up to a 10% budget cut.

The uncertainty created by the use of performance based funding during the previous academic year led university leaders to eliminate staff positions and combine departments in anticipation of a significant loss of revenue only to discover that they had done better than expected with regard to student outcomes. The president reflected on the difficulties created by this uncertainty, saying:

We had an embarrassment ... The first round where we got more money than we expected. We'd had to cut anyway but every school ... The unpredictability of this model is terrible. There's so many variables. We're feeling our way through the woods right now. I was going to say struggling but that's not the right word.

The uncertainty with the funding model has created some mistrust between administrators and faculty, contributing to a perception on the part of some that the administration does not have a

handle on financial planning for the university. There has also been faculty perception that the number of administrators has grown even as support staff positions are being cut and retiring professors are being replaced with nontenure faculty. The administration is aware of this view however asserts that additional lower-level administrators are needed to respond to state reporting requirements. Uncertainty over funding also creates a sense of people waiting for the next round of cuts, causing morale to suffer on campus. Because of the cuts, there is also a perception that the university's family atmosphere is being harmed. University staff, administration and faculty are also continually asked to "do more with less," as was described by the Vice President for Student Affairs:

I think the funding issue is the top one. And it becomes a morale issue I think on campus, as well. You know, you always want to do more with less. And we've had to cut some staff, we've cut some positions, we've not filled some positions.

The university's funding situation is made precarious by its lack of revenue-sources. Because River State is located in an economically depressed region and many of the people who would have had the capacity to give have either moved from the region or have been tapped recently, there are few other donor options. Additionally, the university's alumni are fairly young and not well established and so they have a limited capacity to give. The president of the development foundation described this set of circumstances, "We do not have an alumni base that has matured ... The community has been tapped. We have a small group of community members who still give."

With budget cuts and uncertainty over funding, it is difficult for the university to fund the unique needed supports required by the student demographic. This also means that the university's ability to respond to state demands for improved retention and graduation rates is affected. The university's ability to engage in long-term visioning and strategic planning has also been harmed with the feeling that River State is skating from one set of budget cuts to the next. The dean of the University College described her quandary over what more River State can cut

given its current level of efficiency: “So if you do a cut, what do we not do anymore? When you’re already lean?”

The enrollment patterns of a majority of the university’s students also creates challenges for River State as there is a tendency of students to attend part-time or off and on while balancing other responsibilities, as is described by the president:

Students in this culture drop in and out, they work full time, they do things that make sense for them. None of the accountability models take that into account.

The high proportion of students that require remediation is also challenging because of the additional supports required to help these students succeed. Some students enter with composite ACT scores as low as eight or nine and may not be ready for even remedial math and English because they are barely literate, as was described by the provost:

You have to provide more academic support. You have to provide more tutoring ... We have an entire college here that it’s a college for students who need remedial courses – an *entire college* ... So all that cost money but the funding formula is really as counter to that.

The ability of students to fund their education has also been threatened by the change in state student aid grants and the loan adverse nature of many incoming students. The families supporting students have also been strained by the recession.

Additionally, the university struggles with ensuring that it promptly responds to state reporting requirements and policy initiatives. The president described these requirements as being “overwhelming” at times. The rapidity with which the state requires responses creates difficulties particularly for an administration that is already leanly staffed. As an example of how this plays out, before the holiday break the governor issued a mandate requiring universities to submit plans for ensuring career advising for students. Because many university stakeholders had left for the break, fewer people were available to prepare this report. Administrators who worked on the report expressed their doubt over the quality of the report, as was described by the dean of the University College:

This happens *all the time*. And I'm not saying the report wasn't needed. It *was* needed ... But I didn't expect it has such a short turnaround on such an important document. Because it's a three-year plan and we had 30 days.

The state's requirement that the university encourage students to major in STEM and health science fields also creates tension in determining how to educate students. The president of the development foundation reflected on this tension, saying:

Particularly with our population, to what extent do we exclusively focus on prepping students for the in-demand jobs that are published by the state every month? To what extent do we focus on developing a whole person who is prepared for a career and has critical thinking skills, and all that?

### **Responses to Challenges**

In responding to enrollment and funding challenges, the university has identified an enrollment target of 5,300 students. University administrators believe that attaining this level of enrollment will allow the university to “take control of its own destiny” and be less prone to state policy fluctuations and declines. To attract more students, the university has improved its distance education offerings and is awarding credit for prior learning for adults with relevant professional experience. The university has begun engaging in targeted enrollment and data use to realize enrollment growth. The university has developed scholarships for high performing students from the neighboring state. The admissions department is also increasingly relying on data to determine which students will be most successful, as was described by the president:

As we looked at the new data that we've been developing, we know what kid is going to succeed here and I can pick a small high school and we can, probably, even pick the kid that will succeed here.

The dean of the University College was once a regional college access coordinator and has leveraged her existing relationships with area high schools to promote River State as an option for graduating seniors. The university is also attempting to expand its “service region” even though this has meant less attention to enrolling the regional students it was founded to enroll, as was described by the chief financial officer:

I think we are expanding our reach to a larger area because we need more students, but I think we have plenty of students here ... I think that we need to find ways to help students understand the importance of education in this region because we have a low number of students that actually go to college from here.

To balance its budget after cuts, the university has taken a variety of steps. First, it has dipped into its reserves. The university has also eliminated 15 staff positions. When professors retire, some are not replaced or there is a delay in hiring with the goal of saving money. The dean of the University College described her reliance on nontenure faculty, saying:

I've also been able to shop for adjunct pools and being from the region I know good retired teachers that I can bring in sometimes but again still having that full time faculty with office hours *here* helps the developmental students, I think, more.

The university has also made cuts to its Center for Teaching and Learning by reducing activities offered. The university has begun discussions about the potential need for program prioritization to determine which programs should be restructured, eliminated or better supported. River State has also taken some steps to generate revenues. The president hosts a gala each year that raises up to \$30,000 for student scholarships. The development foundation is expanding its fundraising efforts by approaching people outside the region. The finance division is considering a charge for parking that could generate as much as \$200,000 annually. The university has also taken steps to become more efficient. First, the university responded to the state's mandate that public institutions reduce energy consumption through developing LEED certified building expansions and retrofitting existing buildings with energy saving strategies. These efforts resulted in a 20% reduction in energy consumption. The university has also become more efficient with staff positions and administrative operations, as was described by the director of institutional finance:

Done a lot of reorganization, reduced what we may be spending on certain central efforts to lessen the impact primarily in instructional areas but really across the campus. The layoffs were a big deal culturally but they didn't achieve the savings that we would've expected perhaps

In responding to the state requirement that River State improve retention and graduation rates, there has been a temptation to drift from the university's access mission, as is described by the provost:

If your funding formula is tied to how many degrees you produce, your retention rates and so forth, the *easy* strategy, from my perspective, from any president's perspective, is okay - we just won't let anybody in with less than a 20 ACT and 2.5 GPA and our problems are over.

While the university does not enforce admissions minimums, requiring students to submit ACT scores effectively raised admissions standards. Until 2010, the number of students that applied to the university equaled the number who were admitted. Since 2010, there has been a 600-700 gap in these numbers. The university made this change after consulting data and finding that those students who entered without ACT scores tended to drop out or achieve low grades. These students also tended to default on their loans. By requiring that students submit ACT scores, the university's retention rates improved as did its loan default rate. The university has also begun suspending students if they achieve a 0.0 GPA during their first semester.

To better support students while they are enrolled and improve retention, the university has taken a variety of steps. They have added staff to the student success center and increased disability services. The university has also begun tracking student performance in courses to identify those with low completion rates with the goal of providing supplemental instruction and tutoring. The university has made changes to its curriculum as well. The University College has designed a student success curriculum for students determined to be "at-risk." Students are labeled at risk if their ACT scores are below 17 and if they have an EFC below \$2,190. The student success curriculum includes a first year seminar that is intended to help students acclimate to college life. The university also redesigned its remedial English and mathematics courses to increase student/faculty interaction. Another key offering of the success curriculum is additional tutoring and mentoring. As students progress through this curriculum, they earn an associate's degree in generalized studies. Data on the first cohort of students in this curriculum show

improvements in grades, remediation and retention rates. River State has also begun requiring that students achieve minimum GPAs for certain majors. For students unable to achieve a required GPA for their desired major, the university created an individualized studies major.

The university has also made changes to advising. Data collection and analysis has been a key strategy used to make these changes. First, the university collected data concerning the factors that lead to course failure and withdrawal to create an advising dashboard that tracks student progress in these courses. The university hired advisors for the freshmen year and created an early alert system that faculty use to signal to advisors that a student is struggling. If the problem is academic, the advisor refers students to tutoring services. If the problem is social, financial or psychological, the advisor refers the student to units on campus responsible for addressing these needs. Advising was described by this professor:

Intentional advising is an important piece trying to help students matriculate through the system so that they can complete courses and complete degrees versus the student who comes and maybe flounders around from one program to another program to another program and is still here six years later without a degree.

River State has also implemented milestone course tracking using Complete College America's Guided Pathways system. University representatives have begun partnering with area high schools to improve math and reading instruction to strengthen the academic preparation of incoming students. In addition to providing direct support to high schools, the university has been collecting trend data about student remediation needs of area high school graduates and sharing this data with high schools so they are aware of the specific deficiencies of students.

The university has long played a role in the economic development of the region. To respond to state demands, River State has expanded these efforts. The university now conducts alumni surveys to determine post-graduation employment levels. The university also created 15 professional modules that students may take to become specialized in various professional skills. There have been efforts to respond to statewide workforce demands by identifying a list of majors that could be used to fill in-demand jobs. This information is shared with students during



university-wide information sessions. The president created a Workforce Advisory Committee to solidify the university's role in meeting the changing needs of area businesses through curricular and co-curricular alignment. The university also hosts a web form that allows business leaders and residents to submit commercialization ideas. The newly created Student Career Center works closely with industry partners to increase the number of internships available to students. The university also has the goal of working closely with students to ensure they are being developed professionally. The director described this work, saying:

Everything a student does throughout college, including the courses they choose, the grades they earn, internships and jobs they hold, and experiences inside and outside of the classroom, work together to make him or her stand out with potential employers. We want to help students develop plans early so they can begin to work toward the future careers that they want.

With the Center for Community Service being dismantled, no one in the university is directly responsible for liaising with community organizations that has effectively meant that these partnerships have been abandoned. The former director expressed her concern that the region will have a shortage of volunteers desperately needed to ensure they are able to offer services because the university no longer coordinates these efforts.

### **Conclusion**

University stakeholders are generally hopeful about the region's future. There is a sense that it has been able to reinvent itself before and it will be able to do this again. The university is seen as being an important player in this reinvention, as was described by the outgoing president: "River State University has become the hope of the community and its future ... this hope is critical in our community's ability to reinvent itself." That said, the challenges facing the region are more than economic - there are social and civic challenges as well. Without university sponsored civic engagement it is unclear if the region will be able to make a full come back. More importantly, with the budget challenges River State is facing, its ability to embody other

aspects of its mission remain threatened. There are some on campus who believe the university should act more like a business in responding to these challenges.

River State is approaching its 35<sup>th</sup> year anniversary. It has hired a new president who supports its access mission and is responsible for guiding it through continued financial turbulence while also engaging in strategic planning and identify formation activities. The incoming president is thought to be of blue collar stock, a characteristic that inspires confidence on the part of university members, as was described by the Director of the Career Center:

He had a very blue collar-type background and I think that's really important when you're coming to an area like ours. A lot of the students that we have come from blue collar backgrounds as well and so I think that he'll really mesh well with the students.

In the meantime, there remains wide support for River State's access mission and hope that it will continue to provide opportunity to students who are often excluded from higher education. The Vice President for Student Affairs expressed this sentiment:

We're going to give you that opportunity to be successful here. We're not [the state's flagship]. You don't have to pass this hurdle or be this smart or score this on the ACT. If you want to put forth the effort, we're going to give you the opportunity." I like that ... I like the kind of kids that we have here. They're just good, solid kids by and large ... And they're fun to deal with. So it's a satisfying place to be, and we do serve a role. You know, we'll see what happens in the next four to five years and hopefully River State will continue to thrive.

## CHAPTER 6: RESULTS, CITY STATE UNIVERSITY

### Regional Context

Located in one of the poorest, most segregated urban centers in the country is City State University. In the 1930s, the city was home to nearly three million people. Since this time, due to White flight and the collapse of the manufacturing sector, its population has declined to its current level of 600,000 and there are projections of further declines. The number of people aged 15-19 is expected to decline by 25% by 2030. The current population is 50% Black, 37% White, and 10% Hispanic. The city's median income is \$27,000 and its unemployment rate is nine percent. While the unemployment rate has declined in recent months, there is enormous wage inequality that maps onto racial segregation within the city, with White residents living in the outer rim of suburbs making far more money than minority residents living near the center of the city. The city also experiences high crime rates that many attribute to income inequality.

The city was once a major manufacturing hub for the country, owing this status largely to its proximity to two major waterways that allowed imports and exports to move efficiently through the city. The city has long been a leader in health care research and treatment and is also home to a number of national and international equity firms and companies as well as one of the largest law firms in the country. In the mid-2000s, the mayor, a City State alum, identified tech-transfer as an important direction for the city to take. Under the mayor's leadership, the city has also increased funding to the public school system. In 2010, city policymakers, civic leaders, residents and higher education professionals created a coordinating body of higher education institutions and civic leaders focused on addressing issues surrounding college access. While it still faces economic issues and racial tension, the city is being revitalized and is considered a model of economic revitalization by many city planners nationwide. The city has also positioned itself as an arts and cultural center and is host to one of the largest performing arts centers in the

country. City State is widely recognized as being an important player in this revitalization through engaging in economic, cultural arts, workforce and civic development.

### **City State University**

The challenges facing City State are significant, though, with a student population whose enrollment patterns are not rewarded in the state funding formula, projected population declines, and declines in funding that have led to program retrenchment. City State is the largest landowner downtown and its campus buildings form points in the city's skyline. The university is located steps from the city's performing arts center and it has close relationships with this organization. Throughout the last 10 years, the university has rebuilt its campus building new buildings including student recreation facilities and a health sciences building. The university also added a series of sky bridges linking its buildings and constructed green spaces between buildings. These efforts have helped the university create a campus feel even as it is situated among office buildings and businesses downtown. Walking through campus, one observes the university's colors and logo throughout the buildings. The university's motto, which encapsulates its engagement mission, is present on signs, banners, and murals. The university's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary is also displayed prominently, as are statements about various points of pride for the university including the number of Fulbright Scholars on the faculty, NCAA championships, proportion of students with high G.P.As, and the names of area companies headed by City State alums.

City State is arguably the most diverse university in the state by multiple measures. It is racially diverse with 38% of students identifying as ethnic minorities. It is also diverse in terms of income levels with 27% of students having an Expected Family Contribution of zero and 45% receiving Pell grants, although the number of Pell recipients has declined from 58% in 2009. Thirty-six percent of students are first in their families to attend college. Ten percent of students live on campus, 62% identify as commuter students, and 40% are 25 and older. The average age of an undergraduate student was 21. In 2010, it was 25. Currently, 90% of students are from the

state and 75% are from the immediate region, compared with 95% and 80% respectively in 2010. There has been a growth in recent years in the number of international students attending the university. In 2009, two percent were international. Currently, five percent are international, their numbers nearly doubling since 2010. Fifty percent of the university's students are transfers, many from area community colleges. Compared to their peers, these students do well academically and are thought to improve the university's standing within the performance based funding formula, as is described by the Vice President for University Engagement:

The graduation rate among transfer students ... is much higher than students who enter here first year ... To the point where the president essentially said, "Thank goodness for [the community college]. It looks like they're saving our behind."

Tuition is \$9,5000, \$1,000 higher than Inventor State, and the cost of tuition is a concern for many students. The university has a 28% six-year graduation rate and a 68% first to second year retention rate. Both indicators have improved since 2009 when retention was 56% and graduation was 20%. While 38% of students require remediation, the academic standing of students has grown. In 2010, the incoming class had a high school GPA of 3.15 and average composite ACT scores of 20. In 2014, both measures had grown to 3.25 and 23 respectively.

With the large share of low-income and nontraditional students attending the university it is not surprising that 84% work outside of school. Many incoming students are from high-poverty areas of the city. In light of these characteristics, university members have come to think of students as gritty, as was described by the provost of the university:

Very diverse. We still have, majority of students ... they're first in their family. Most of them work. I think we just sometimes describe our students as gritty. I don't know if I could do it, could ever have done what they did.

While students are generally thought of as being gritty, there is generally a lack of faculty understanding of all that they balance. To address this ignorance, the university conducted a student survey to uncover the nuances of student life. A finding that shocked the administration

and conveyed the reality of student lives was that a majority had skipped a meal to balance their finances. A high number were also on welfare.

A centerpiece of academic life at City State is its commitment to community engagement and engaged learning. As such, all areas on campus have robust efforts in place to engage faculty and students in the local community. The university offers 75 bachelor's degrees, 30 master's degrees, and five doctoral degrees in its eight colleges including Colleges of Engineering, Education, Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, Business Administration, Urban Affairs, Health Sciences, and Law. Individual programs on campus have acquired distinction including the online MBA program that is considered one of the best in the nation and the urban studies program that is ranked in the top 10 in the nation. The College of Health Sciences offers the only PhD in Nursing in the region. The University's Law School has an emphasis on recruiting diverse students, a commitment that has won the university national attention and awards. The student passage rate on the state's Bar Exam is among the highest in the state, second only to the prestigious flagship, a fact that gives university members pride.

In 2004, City State established an Honors College. Currently the program is small with just 200 students enrolled, many of which receive full scholarships. The administration caps the program because it is resource-intensive and because the administration wants to maintain the program's selectivity. In creating the college, leaders hoped that it would improve the reputation of City State, as was described by the vice president for academic affairs:

The then president wanted to try to make it more of a school choice, or at least for some students, and so they created an honors program with a fairly hefty scholarship program associated with it to try to recruit some really top notch students to CSU. The theory was that that would help change the perception of the school which is partly done.

A donor recently gave \$3.6 million to endow the college and create additional scholarships.

The administration of the university is highly supportive of the university's engaged learning focus and devotes resources and ideological support to advancing this mission. The provost has won civic engagement awards and the president often describes the university's status

as being “of the city, not in it.” The university administration is fairly large with seven vice president-level positions including a chief financial, a provost, and vice presidents for Enrollment, Student Affairs, Civic Engagement and Multiculturalism, and Research. The university also has three associate vice presidents for academic planning, academic programming and research. The university recently underwent a conversion from four-credit courses to three that was championed by the president. This change was met with faculty consternation because it increased their workload by 50% and resulted in a vote of no confidence in the president. The president also gained statewide attention for using university resources on a chartered flight. These two instances have created faculty distrust in the president. The provost, while new, is generally well liked.

City State has the “high research” activity designation from the Carnegie Foundation with \$60 million in annual expenditures on research and development. The university touts its rankings in terms of its research output. Much of this research is focused on the economic and civic development of the city. There are a variety of grants and faculty incentives to encourage more research. The faculty has a high teaching load with a requirement that they teach 24 hours per year. Recently the university created a tenure system that allows faculty members to choose a teaching or research track for tenure. Under this new model, faculty may elect to teach fewer classes as they pursue their research.

### **The History of City State University**

City State traces its roots to the 1880s when the local YMCA began offering evening classes to students ineligible to attend the city’s prestigious private university. These efforts were later organized into an institute of technology named for its founding investor, a prominent businessman. In the early 1920s, the Institute gained university status and began offering bachelor’s degrees. The college was completely housed in one of the city’s first skyscrapers and was known as the “college in the sky” by people in the region. Surrounding the original building

were parking lots, a vital feature promoting accessibility given City State's downtown location. A distinctive feature of the early college was its cooperative learning and internship model that allowed students gain professional experience as part of their studies. These paid internships also helped make the collegiate experience more affordable for students. The university's modern community engagement mission can be traced to these experiences. At the same time as the YMCA began offering evening classes, a public law school that founded that also offered evening classes to working adults. This law school was one of the first in the country to admit minorities and women. Both institutions shared commitments to providing an affordable college experience that was flexible and catered to students with few other options.

The technical institute was perpetually underfunded and operated at a deficit. The College was also in competition with the newly created community college. To address these issues and to realize the governor's vision of every state resident being no farther than 30 miles from a university, the state transformed the technical institution into a University and combined it with the law school. With university-designation came an infusion of state funding. Campus members familiar with this founding history couch it in terms of the university arising from a 1960s movement to expand educational opportunity, as was described by the dean of the College of Urban Affairs:

The university was a pure product of the 60s. It saw itself as an access university. Mostly it was ... When we moved in there was only one dormitory and that was mostly for the athletes. It was very much a downtown commuter campus.

There were 6,000 students attending the newly founded university, 85% of which were from the surrounding six counties. A student that graduated in one of the first classes remarked when he came to campus that he found "Adults! The average student age was 28. The average attitude was focused and appreciative." Ten years after the university was created, enrollment doubled and reached an all-time high of 20,000 in 1985. After that the university enrollment settled near 18,000 where it has remained the last five years. The university offered only



undergraduate and law degrees its first 10 years, awarding its first PhD in 1975. With the growth in the student body has been a growth in the buildings used to educate them. The earliest iteration of the newly formed university spanned nine acres. In the mid-1960s, some classes were offered in modular buildings. By the early 2000s, the campus footprint covered 85 acres. The growth of City State's campus transformed university life, as was described by this senior professor:

Probably the most tangible change is the campus itself. I never would have realized how much of a difference that makes to everything else ... The campus environment is, it's got a ways to go, it's much better now. I think it's developing more of a sense of community in a way, just because people are around.

Until the 1990s, the university maintained its focus to serving commuter students by providing flexible schedules, work experiences, and parking lots. A picture from the university archives shows a parking garage for students. In this picture the price of parking is shown: 25 cents, or roughly \$1.40 in inflation adjusted dollars. The newly created university also had a number of community service programs including a "Hearing Clinic" for people with hearing problems and a "Legal Clinic" for low-income residents in need of legal advice. These two features – being primarily commuter and engaged with the community - continue to shape campus life, as was shared by The Director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching:

City State was originally one of the core urban universities. It was founded to be a downtown university and to serve the city population. I think it's grown in that mission quite a bit. That was 50 years ago.

In the early 2000s a president assumed office with an expansive view of what the urban, commuter university could be. Prior to this president's administration, the university was regarded as a last resort for aspiring students from the city. The first thing the president noticed about the university was its "low self-esteem." The president felt a deep love and commitment to the university and was fond of saying that if he heard something negative about the university, he would take it as personally as if someone said something negative about his mother. He made growing the university's pride in itself a central feature of his administration by identifying a unique niche for City State. Under this president's leadership, the university's health science and

academic programs grew, culminating in the creation of a Health Sciences College and an Honors College. Merit scholarships were created and admissions requirements were put into place that students have a minimum of a 2.6 GPA and 17 composite score on the ACT. These efforts led to a growth in the number of traditional-age, residential, and academically prepared students.

The president expanded the campus footprint significantly during his tenure and spent time and resources solidifying the university's commitment to civic and economic engagement with the city. A central theme of these changes was promoting the view of City State as being embedded within the city. The president advanced a notion with his staff and faculty that its urban identity and community engagement were a form of prestige. This change in the identity of the university filtered through the city, as was described by the president of a regional philanthropic foundation:

It's a sense of ownership and prestige that ramps up everybody's attitude about an urban university, which counterbalanced this "woah is us, we don't have any money and we're just this public institution that's here, serving the needy." So it has morphed their mission, and their attitude, and their self-prestige.

As part of growing the university's prestige, the president encouraged academic leaders to apply for a \$25 million statewide grant to establish a tech transfer center for which, before the university won the grant, none thought it would be competitive. The president also suggested ideas that would grow the university's prestige that were ultimately rejected because they made the university appear private and risked alienating the alumni. The first was to establish a football team that the president believed would confirm City State's status as a full-fledged university, and the second was to change its name to the University of [name of the city]. A professor reflected on these efforts, saying:

I would love for it to be University of [Name of the city] because then we would have the sound at least of being a University of Chicago...then there was talk of even starting a football program, which certainty would've been crazy but it also probably would've raised our profile.

The president was often heard saying that he would mark his administration a success when a critical mass of students could be seen wearing City State t-shirts. By all measures he set for himself, the president was successful, from growing the number of traditional-age, academically competitive students to improving the university's reputation, to the symbolic measure of seeing more students wearing City State t-shirts.

Not everyone on campus was enthusiastic about some of these changes, though, with commuter students decrying the loss of parking in opinion pieces in the student newspaper. For many on campus, the administration's desire to grow its traditional student population was intended to shed its commuter identity. As one student said, "universities do not aspire to be known as commuter schools." Perhaps most symbolic of this shift in the university's priorities was when the original building that housed the earliest version of the university was converted into dormitories.

The current president has continued the work of his predecessor through deepening the campus's commitment to community engagement, creating university-specific language to describe this work. He also committed university resources to growing its identity as an urban research university. Under his leadership, the university applied for the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification and was awarded this honor. The same year, the university appeared for the first time on the President's Honor Roll for Community Service.

Given the rapid growth of the university from a few classes offered in a YMCA classroom to a bustling campus of 18,000, the university embodies a sense of constant transformation. A few points highlight this culture including the university's transformation from being primarily a commuter campus to one that also serves traditional students, from being a campus that felt little pride in its purpose into one in which a distinctive identity and culture has developed, from being known as "Concrete State University" occupying a single office building to being a sprawling urban campus, and from being a primarily teaching-centered university to

having a significant research agenda. An alum described these changes saying that recent alums may visit campus and not recognize its buildings or students.

### **The Mission of City State University**

The university's mission is strongly connected to the city it was founded to serve. Within the university's current mission statement are the words "diversity" "engaged learning," and "region." These three words are anchors guiding campus life. The first element of this mission has been the university's commitment to being a regional access point to higher education. Originally this meant enrolling primarily low-income and commuter students. During this time period, the university was known as a commuter school, as is demonstrated by the director of the Center for Teaching Excellence:

For a lot of years, City State was primarily a commuter campus. I think that's why in this city there's such a saturation of City State graduates, because you could just commute in and out, get your degree, stay working, it was very much designed for the needs of the city.

The university's access mission has evolved to include diversifying the university's student body to include residential, academically high-performing and minority students.

Closely related to its access mission is the university's student-centered mission. The university has created a set of offerings to support different types of students including a commuter student lounge that is open late and offers free food and a parent support group for students juggling school and parenting responsibilities. One focus of the student centered mission is helping first generation students learn professional behaviors, as was described by this professor:

The part of the unwritten curriculum is to teach professional behaviors and things like being to class on time, dressing appropriately for public appearances, you know, we need to be able to have that interaction with them.

Another manifestation of the university's student-centered mission is its desire to learn about the particularities of the challenges facing students so that university leaders are better able to address

them. While being accessible and student-centered is generally accepted, the university's rhetoric does not always match its practices, as was described by the vice president for community engagement and multiculturalism:

The president talks as though that's what he wants to be ... Embrace the city. Embrace our students ... he tells a story of our students ... We're the place for them. There's a rhetoric around that, but a lot of our habits are just traditional university habits running the rat race, trying to be what everyone else is. Basing our success on selectivity.

The university also espouses its commitment to teaching. As was described, faculty members tend to have high teaching loads although this is changing with the new 'research' and 'teaching' tenure designations. The university also deliberately recruits new faculty members who have demonstrated experience and excellence in teaching as well as research. There is a Center for Teaching and Learning that hosts weekly faculty development opportunities. Faculty members are also given instruction and encouragement to teach community-engaged classes.

Perhaps the most pronounced of the university's efforts to embody its public purpose is its regional engagement mission. Campus members see the future of the university as being tied to the future of the city, as was described by the vice president for community engagement and multiculturalism:

This president has said, "We're going to be the city's university. We're going to tie our fate to the expectation that students are going to want to learn in an urban environment. They're going to want to live in an urban environment. [The city's] making a comeback.

This regional commitment was the centerpiece of the university's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. To commemorate this commitment, the university hosted community forums about pressing public issues, highlighting the variety of community engagement projects underway. The university's application for the Carnegie Classification coincided with these celebrations and afforded the City State with an opportunity to deepen its commitment to community engagement while strategizing for its future civic engagement. Through this process, a number of additional initiatives arose, as was described by the vice president for community engagement and multiculturalism:

There are a number of spin-offs from actually having done the application. For instance, we now have a grant program for faculty, civic engagement grants ... We developed a civic engagement portal.

In 2013, the president created a vice president level position for community engagement and multiculturalism by combining the Chief Diversity and Economic Development positions. This position oversees and coordinates the civic engagement work described, as well as career services. This position is symbolic of the university's desire to think of civic engagement, economic development and professional preparation of students holistically. This division has two primary goals: to ensure that students have access to lifelong learning with engaged learning being a central focus of these efforts and to serve as a central coordinating body for the university's efforts to find solutions to the "grand problems" facing the region.

The commitment to faculty community engagement varies by department, with some departments considering it with tenure and promotion and others not. As a result of this mix, a goal articulated by the provost is to reshape faculty tenure and promotion guidelines to reflect the university's community engagement mission. The university is also working to establish community partnerships that are reciprocal, as was described by the provost:

The true definition was that university and communities come together in a symbiotic relationship, respectfully recognizing the knowledge and the wisdom that's in them both, and you bring them together.

The university's office of community engagement coordinates much of this work and has employees thinking strategically about how to win supporters and further embed the civic commitment into campus life.

Since its early days as an Institute for Technology, the university has had a mission to improve economic life in the region. Its board of trustees demonstrates this commitment with one member identifying as a civic leader and the remaining board composed of business leaders. The university has had a long history of technology transfer and commercialization in the region. In 2001, the university began issuing economic impact reports, a finding of these reports being that

the university generates \$2.5 billion in economic growth in the region through workforce development, employment, tech transfer, and other economic development activities. The College of Urban Affairs along and the newly created Division for Regional Engagement have been strategic in guiding this work. As a result of these efforts, the university is said to anchor the downtown of the city, creating a confluence of the city's emerging identity as an arts and cultural center with its economic and civic revitalization.

### **The Identity of City State University**

The university's identity has evolved along with its mission. The primary way campus members think of the university is as an urban engaged research university. A related dimension of its identity is its regional focus and diverse student body. The university thinks of itself as a young institution, called by some a "higher education teenager." The university has also long thought of itself as a commuter campus although there have been efforts to shed this identity, as is described by the vice provost for academic affairs:

There was an effort to shift away from the commuter identity, but it wasn't ever an attempt to completely make this be [an elite flagship] or one of those kind of schools... I think it was more of an attempt to make it more of a mix of things.

There are some that are pleased with these developments, as is described by this quote by a professor: "I think [the former president] smartly decided that City State needed to change its profile. It needed to abandon being a university that was primarily for locals only, primarily a commuter campus." There are others, particularly commuter students attending the university, that believe that the university's identity as a commuter campus should be embraced, as was described by the vice president for community engagement and multiculturalism:

There are a handful of us who have been advocating a way of thinking that says, "The students who come here are the future." The game is moving to those students. Let's just beat everyone at being great at it ... Just claiming it. Yeah, that's what it is. We're an urban commuter university. That's what we are.

As this quote demonstrates, there is a desire to create an identity around being excellent at educating students who other institutions have had less success in supporting.

City State University's reputation within the region and state has grown significantly. There are a few indicators of the university's growing reputation. First, high school guidance counselors now advise academically competitive students to consider City State particularly because of its honors college. Residents in the city have taken notice of the expansion of campus buildings and connect this with the university's improving quality. The university has also become nationally known for its community engagement and draws faculty and administrators from around the country who want to participate in this work. More recently, the university has been garnering national attention for its student success initiatives.

While there are improvements in the university's reputation, there are still negative perceptions that persist. Some still see it as a commuter campus which holds negative connotations. Additionally, because there are a large number of city residents who attended the university but failed to persist to graduation, the university's academic quality at times is questioned. There is also the perception that City State should not be pursuing donations because it is a public institution. Nonetheless, on the whole the university's standing regionally and nationally is improving.

### **Responses to Challenges**

The confusion on the part of area nonprofit leaders over why the university is pursuing regional grants and donations points to the first challenge the university is facing. The university has lost revenue due to declines in its enrollment and cuts to state appropriations. In 2014, the university received \$71 million in state appropriations that accounted for 20% of its budget. This is down from a high of \$83 million in 2009 when appropriations accounted for 40% of the university's budget. This has caused tuition revenue to grow from 58% of City State's budget in 2009 to its current level of 67%.



As a result of funding cuts, the university has reduced staffing levels. Between 2009 and 2014, the university lost 130 support staff and administrative positions. As staff positions are lost, university functioning is hampered. The dean of the College of Urban Affairs described how these losses affect community and donor relationships:

Our relationship with donors is fraying just because money is being put into looking for new funds while maintaining things like scholarships and the advisory committees who perform the management of gifts are falling apart.

The university has also lost 63 tenure-track faculty positions and added 47 nontenure faculty positions. In 2009, 10% of the teaching faculty members were nontenure. In 2014, that proportion had grown to 20%. Nontenure instructors tend to teach entry-level classes which have been growing in size. This has forced the university to rely on large, lecture-style freshman-level courses. Currently nontenure faculty members have fixed term contracts that have led to protests and walkouts. Student supports have also been affected with a reduction in staff and faculty members, as was described by the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs:

They [students] just think "Okay, this is what universities are like. My classes are big. The professor is a person down there on the stage, and my ability to get help is bounded by my level of energy. How hard am I going to work to try to find that help?" This poses unique challenges for the first generation college students because faculty time is limited and students may not know how to or be intimidated by asking for help or approaching the professors.

As budgets have been cut and faculty are required to teach more classes and closely monitor student behaviors, there is growing faculty discontent. One professor described this set of circumstances as "draining," saying,

We don't have a lot of teaching assistants, even undergraduate aides. So if you're giving a piddly little assignment that, yes it will help with their understanding the material hopefully if it's well designed, but it's also, you're going to have to grade it ... It just ... All that stuff taken together is just draining.

Another challenge facing the university is projected enrollment declines. The university is located next to several other higher education institutions with which it is competing including a major community college and a prestigious private institution. Related to the university's desire

to grow its reputation is the necessity to demonstrate to prospective students that attending City State makes good sense, as was described by the vice president of community engagement and multiculturalism, "There's a value proposition that we've got to prove. It's not an automatic to both employers and students. It's more about exploration and connecting."

The university is also facing challenges serving its commuter students. The first concerns student grouching over parking fees that cost as much as \$200 – nearly 20 times the cost of parking when the university was established, as was described by a student:

The beginning of a semester is always when concerns about parking are the highest ... Students are coming from jobs or are dropping off kids and do not have much time to spare.

At the same time as parking has become more expensive it has also become more limited, with parking lots being torn down to build dormitories. This has led to the perception that the university no longer values commuter students, as is shown in this quote from the director of the Center for Teaching Excellence:

They have taken out parking to put in dorms. They have taken out parking to put in the condos. For people who have been around, there is a little sense of pushing folks out to make room for others. You do hear that among some students.

An outcome of the student survey administered by the university also pointed to problems with a curriculum that is becoming increasingly geared toward encouraging students to attend full-time, as is described by this student respondent:

Being a single parent, enrolling in more hours is not a benefit for me. Graduating on time is important, but this is an undergraduate commuter based school in which many parents attend. Adding more hours is not beneficial.

This quote points to another challenge facing the university as it responds to demands for greater retention and completion. Specifically, full-time enrollment at a single institution does not fit the patterns of commuter students. When the university is being pushed to adopt changes that encourage more traditional college behaviors, it risks alienating commuter students. A typical pattern for commuter and nontraditional students is taking classes at both City State and the area

community college or taking a few classes and then taking time off. On the whole, work and family responsibilities dictate student enrollment. When a student's situation changes, they re-enroll. These student behaviors are not rewarded within the state's funding formula, as was described by this professor:

They drop out and they come to us. Some of the funding formula and stuff that they've decided to adopt in the state hurt us, in that respect, because our first-time students, the proportion was low ... You have a lot of people that drop in and out, in and out, and in and out, so they don't complete in four years.

Student course enrollment patterns also pose a challenge for the university in its standing in the funding model as there is a culture on campus of "shopping" courses through enrolling for more courses than a student can take and then dropping courses that are not appealing. One of the results from the student survey was that students like doing this because they are able to make informed decisions. Alternatively, the university administration refuses to allow this because it harms course completion rates. As such, the university is working to change the culture of course withdrawal as was described by the special assistant to the president:

We're trying to go with the parts that make sense and at the same time trying to educate about how unfortunate withdrawals are. They also wanted to move the withdrawal deadline, which we're not going to do.

The price of tuition is another challenge facing the university particularly given its low-income student population. Faculty members are becoming increasingly aware of the financial realities of students and are desirous of university initiatives geared toward addressing these challenges. An expense faced by students is course textbooks. One of the findings of the student survey was that one out of three students do not buy all of the assigned course textbooks to mitigate costs.

The university has attempted to be nimble in experimenting with strategies for addressing the challenges it faces. At times, though, various stakeholders are required to act quickly to make a particular change. A related issue is that when experimenting with a variety of strategies for addressing a university problem, it can be difficult to drill down into any one strategy to

determine its efficacy. The special assistant to the president described this as being problematic because it becomes challenging to learn what particular strategy is having an effect, as is described by the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs:

One theory is that it's the Hawthorne effect<sup>1</sup>. It's just because we're paying attention, and it's not any specific thing that we're doing and the students notice we're watching. So you can't really say. Or is it because we got more aggressive advisors, or is it because we've changed the scholarship programs or because we have tutoring that we didn't have before, or we don't know.

A final challenge facing the university is responding to state demands for increased production of STEM majors while ensuring that students receive the remediation and support needed to pursue these fields. There is also concern on campus that the region may become saturated with health professionals because a high-profile medical school and a variety of health-related training institutes exist within the region that are also producing graduates with these degrees. Another challenge with an emphasis on STEM degrees is that students feel pressure to pursue these fields even if they are not necessarily passionate about them. As they take courses and struggle to become remediated, if they do not have an interest in a particular field, they are more at risk for withdrawing from the university, as was described by the vice provost for Academic Affairs:

How long are we really going to need more physical therapists or engineers, or whatever? The data don't say that we need millions and millions and millions more. The other bad thing is that it's kind of created this mono culture of student ... They want to be a nurse. They can't get in. They leave. They don't even want to hear about some other alternative major.

To address budget shortfalls the university has employed a number of strategies while avoiding undergraduate tuition increases. The provost described her desire not to pass the cost of budget cuts onto students, saying,

Clearly you just can't keep passing that on to in a form of tuition because cutting your nose to spite your face frankly, especially with our population, is just going to make it less and less attainable and unaffordable.

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<sup>1</sup> The Hawthorne Effect is said to occur when individuals improve their behavior because they are being observed.

First, the university leased land to a local real estate developer to build additional dormitories. Once these dorms are completed, the developer is able to collect dormitory fees from students. The university has also placed caps on the number of courses students are able to take without incurring extra fees. The university considered implementing responsibility centered management but ultimately rejected this model because of the unforeseen consequences to collaboration associated with this model. Instead, the administration engaged in program prioritization and involved all campus stakeholders, spreading the burden of reducing costs across campus and promoting transparency. The provost described her rationale for this effort,

We can't be all things to all men, but we sure actually try to be as good and strategic in offering the kind of programs where the demand is high, both by the students and the economy and labor statistics are telling us for this city and this region and what we do well.

As a result of program prioritization, the university collected data about programs it could afford to maintain, those it must restructure or eliminate, and those in which it should invest more resources to increase revenue. Key indicators to determine program prioritization were student enrollments, faculty staffing levels, and graduate school and employment prospects. As a result of this plan, 103 degree and certificate programs were maintained, 37 were eliminated, four were restructured, and five are “under review for viability” with the possibility of elimination. Among the programs eliminated were graduate programs in philosophy and art history and undergraduate programs in specialized fields in business, computer science, art education, and classical and medieval studies.

The university has also implemented revenue-generating activities. The first was an increase in parking fees that led to a \$600,000 increase in revenue. The university also cut funding for student activities and the recreation center. The state placed a two percent tuition cap on undergraduate enrollment for public colleges and so the university increased its undergraduate tuition by two percent. The state did not place limits on the tuition for graduate and professional

schools, though, and City State increased its graduate tuition by 2.5% and its law school tuition by 10%.

The university has also begun seeking revenue externally through facilitating commercialized relationships with area business leaders and fundraising. The university has a long history of economic partnerships with the city's business community. These partnerships have received greater attention as the university is ramping up its revenue-generating activities. The College of Business hosts three centers focused on assisting the private sector with business development and facilitating international trade. These are fee-for-services centers are competitive with private companies with similar missions because they are low price and provide access to experts in various areas of business development and management. In the summer of 2013, the university established a 10-year agreement with an area bank to establish a branch within one of the university's main classroom buildings. By allowing the bank to be located on campus, the university will generate one million dollars annually and the bank will be designated the "Official Bank" of City State. The final revenue-generating activity the university has engaged in is launching its first capital campaign in celebration of its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The campaign hopes to raise \$120 million. The central focus of the campaign is to establish additional merit and need-based scholarships, fund student career success and co-op experiences, increase faculty development opportunities, and improve academic programs. The vice provost for Academic Affairs described the capital campaign, saying:

The idea is to try to raise money for scholarships ... Like most public institutions, we don't have a huge endowment. So I guess the idea is to try to attract some more funds that can then be turned into scholarship funds.

To address retention challenges, the university has taken a number of steps. The first was to appoint a mathematics professor to serve as a special assistant to the president. The second was to create a committee focused on retention. A major goal of the people leading the retention

strategy was to change some of the negative perceptions campus stakeholders held about students, as was described by the provost:

You can moan and you can say, “Oh, they haven’t prepared this and that.” That’s our population. We get to figure out how to educate them. You’ll wait for hell to freeze over for the schools to get better at this or whatever it is ... They’re not stupid. They’re *not* stupid. They’re bright and they’re hard working.

The student survey was conducted in part to dispel the negative opinions and myths held by campus stakeholders. The committee made a variety of recommendations based on this survey including creating intrusive, centralized advising for freshmen. The vice provost for academic affairs described the changes made to advising, saying,

Dedicated freshman advisors who have the ability to do intrusive advising so that in other words, the follow up, to see what students are, if they are going to get into trouble, to see if they can help, that might reduce the numbers of students who leak out ... Once they've got their feet under the major that they've settled on and they seem to be in good academic shape.

To coordinate these advising efforts the university is using an online program that allows various stakeholders including faculty, residence administrators, and student affairs professionals to create an alert when a student evidences academically risky behavior of any kind. This alert sends an email to one of the academic advisors who then contacts the student to determine what the problem is and strategize about addressing it. Class attendance is one of the metrics used to track student success. Because faculty tend to be heavily burdened, the university is currently investigating the feasibility of requiring students to swipe identification cards when entering classroom buildings to track attendance.

To ensure students are making on-time progress to degree completion, the university has also created an online degree audit program that uses a personalized roadmap and allows students to monitor their progress. The university also enforces admissions standards for individual colleges to ensure that students entering a major are prepared for the level of work required. Data is being used to predict the ideal course credit load individual students should maintain to make timely progress in their degrees. The advising system and awareness campaign are

communicating this information to students with the hopes that they will either add or reduce the number of classes they are taking to ensure success. When students elect to change their major, the university helps them translate the classes they have taken into their new major. The university has also capped the number of credits allowed for a bachelor's degree to 120.

In 2013, the university began providing financial incentives in the form of bookstore credit and tuition reimbursements for students in good standing who are making timely progress toward degree completion. This is a fairly new program and it is unclear yet if students are aware of it however there are efforts to promote awareness of the program. The second change was to allow multi-semester registration, which allows students to plan long-term and makes it easier to balance work and family responsibilities. This change has been highly popular with students. To address remedial challenges, the university is offering blended English classes with three credits of college-level subject instruction and one of remedial instruction. The university also created a mathematics emporium that has led to an improvement in course completions. Additionally, the university partnered with the city to create a bus line that will be more convenient for commuters and is offering bus passes. There is skepticism over how much this change will help students particularly those with children, though.

To address enrollment challenges, the university created a taskforce to study the problem that led to a multi-pronged approach. First, the university has made curricular changes that make City State attractive to non-traditional student through awarding up to 24 credits for prior learning gained through significant work experience. The degrees that these students could pursue include urban studies, nonprofit administration, and economic development. The university has also increased the number of fully online programs. City State has also changed its recruitment practices. One idea that was floated is to re-enroll students who have dropped out. A problem with this strategy, though, is that given performance based funding and difficulty associated with supporting these students, re-enrolling them would be a risk. The university has also created a



formal division for enrollment management. The current vice president for enrollment management was hired to professionalize this university function. She described her surprise at finding the university's registrars and admissions offices were co-located:

Before the university was handled like a community college. In fact, that was four years ago when I came here, the admissions processing was done under the registrar's office, and that's where you find community colleges, it's like that. That was shocking to me.

Prior to her tenure, the university did not engage in strategic planning for recruitment or enrollment management. She created a strategic plan to grow enrollment. One outcome of this process has been recruiters attending community events with significant minority and immigrant populations to attract students and encourage people to communicate to family members abroad that the university is internationally friendly. The university has also solidified agreements with neighboring states to extend in-state tuition to out-of-state students and has finalized transfer agreements with area community colleges. Finally, the university is devoting resources to increasing its international student enrollment, as was described by the vice president for enrollment management:

On the international, we have more than double from last year to this year in terms of the type of students we're recruiting and who's recruiting them. We want to do triple that or five times. I don't want to put a number because I think it's important for the university to have a very aggressive plan to meet that.

The vice president has also begun using the incoming GPA and test scores to predict success instead of simply processing student applications for admittance. She would like to raise admissions standards further to make the university more desirable for high-performing students but the provost is adamant about maintaining current standards.

To respond to state expectations that the university produce students who find employment after graduation, the university created a Degree Pathways program that helps students understand how various degrees, particularly liberal arts degrees, can be used in professional settings. In this way, the university is hoping to address some of what the associate vice provost called the "mono culture" of students pursuing the same STEM or health-related

degrees. A central focus of this effort is changing the language used to describe jobs and majors so that employers and students understand how a variety of degrees might align with available jobs. To ensure this translation, the university, in partnership with regional employers, has identified core competencies and matched these with learning outcomes in majors. The vice president of community engagement and multiculturalism described these efforts, saying,

The disconnect is between majors, academic majors, and jobs available. This is our currency or majors. Employer's currency are jobs, the 90,000 unfilled jobs, and there's this two totally different languages.

A major goal of this program is to protect the liberal arts and help students choose majors they are interested in instead of those that they believe will earn the most money.

The university has also undertaken a variety of efforts to elevate its economic development work. First, it has partnered with the city and other area "anchor institutions" including hospitals, nonprofits and businesses to rebuild the downtown and attract people to live there. The goal is to double the population living downtown. The dean of the College of Urban Affairs described the university's success with this goal, saying:

[The city's] immediate downtown ... Went from fewer than 7,000 downtown residents. We're now north of 13,000, rapidly heading to 18,000 ... City State is reconnected to the city. We played a huge role in that.

### **Conclusion**

Following a branding effort, the university updated its marketing materials with the goal of growing student enrollment. The theme of these advertisements was a "university for the new Millennium," and the commercial that resulted encourages first-time, transfer and graduate students to enroll. The overarching goal of these efforts is to push back against the idea of City State being an institution of last resort and instead, as the president described it, a "university of preference." As these efforts continue, City State's status and identity as a commuter campus is in question. What is not in question is its commitment to being an urban-serving university, which is an indelible aspect of campus life.

## **CHAPTER 7: RESULTS, INVENTOR STATE UNIVERSITY**

### **Regional Context**

Situated between two interstate and three state highways in a suburban neighborhood is Inventor State University. The university is located near the fifth largest city in the state in a region home to one million people. The region's proximity to major interstates has meant it has served as a major economic and manufacturing hub for the state. The region has a long history of innovation with multiple important inventions created just miles from the university. Currently, the region's major industries include defense, healthcare and manufacturing. The region also has a major army base that engages in significant research activity.

The region enjoyed a long period of economic growth due to manufacturing before much of this activity was outsourced in the 1980s. In 2008, the last major manufacturing company in the region relocated to another state cementing the region's economic decline. Currently, the region has 4.7% unemployment, down from a high of 6% in January, 2015. The decline in the economy has led to a loss of 50% of the region's population. The median household income is \$36,000. The region is diverse with 50% of people identifying as an ethnic minority, and 43% identifying as African American. In response to the challenges facing the region, economic and community leaders have partnered with politicians to create a plan to diversify the economy so that manufacturing claims a smaller share of available jobs and businesses. To do this, the region's leaders are solidifying the health care, human services and education sectors. Area higher education institutions including Thunder State and Inventor State have been called on to assist in these efforts.

### **Inventor State University**

The primary challenges facing Inventor State include meeting the needs of students that come with varying levels of academic preparation, a 2,000 student dip in enrollment created by

its transition from a quarter to a semester calendar, and solidifying its university identity as both a teaching and research institution. Inventor State is a middle-sized university with 14,000 undergraduate students and 4,000 graduate students, 700 of which are pursuing PhDs. The university offers 15 associates degrees, 93 baccalaureate degrees, 65 master's degrees, and 10 doctoral degrees. While university leaders pride the university on offering an affordable tuition, when compared to other universities in the state it is mid-range. Published undergraduate tuition is \$8,700, \$2,700 more than Thunder State University, its neighbor 20 miles to the east, and \$2,000 less than the major flagship. Eighty-five percent of students are state residents with a majority coming from the surrounding 16 counties, 10% are international, and five percent are out-of-state. Once these students graduate, many remain in the region, as was described by the dean of the College of Liberal Arts: "Our students are out in the community. They will probably get a job in the community ... Our alumni are here and everything that we do is focused on them."

The university is Predominantly White with 14% of students identifying as African American, three percent as Asian American and three percent as Hispanic. Forty percent of the students receive Pell grants and 40% are first generation. Students attending Inventor State tend to work while attending school. The director of the Women's Center shared a story about a student that demonstrates all that students balance:

She worked full time like at night. She had 40-hour a week permanent job doing, like, some customer line or something that was well paid. She had benefits and I was like, "Why are you here all the time? When do you sleep?" She goes, "Sleep is overrated," and I couldn't believe it. I mean that was a really wake up call for me about how different our students are ... It's like even the ones who appear to be your traditional students are not necessarily.

While 80% of undergraduates are younger than 24, 10% are parents and 23% attend part-time. The university has the largest population of students with physical disabilities in the state and has become recognized as an accessible campus. Given its relationships with the army base, the university has a large veteran population with 1,000 students receiving GI Bill benefits. The university has identified enrolling and supporting these students as a central university priority.

The university has a 65% first to second year graduation rate and a 42% six-year graduation rate. Reflecting its student demographics, institutional members think of their students as being nontraditional either because they are working adults, commuters, parents, people with disabilities, low-income, minority or veterans.

While walking through the wheelchair-accessible tunnels linking the buildings on campus, the nontraditional character of the student body is evident as one sees some students carrying children, some navigating the halls in wheelchairs, and some wearing military uniforms. One might also see construction workers and campus administrators touring campus, holding iPads with blueprints and wearing hardhats with the university's logo emblazoned on them. When compared to the campus of Thunder State University, Inventor State's feels like a young and growing university with sprawling buildings, many of which are newly constructed or undergoing renovation. A primary reason for the difference in resources between these two universities is Inventor State's larger enrollment base and higher tuition as well as its research activities and partnerships with the army base. Another reason is the location of the two universities. While Thunder State is tucked into a rural center 15 miles away from the closest interstate highway, Inventor State has its own interstate exits making it easy to access for commuter students. A final reason is the state's historic unequal funding for the two universities.

The disparity in funding between Inventor State and Thunder State is evident in the number of administrators at each campus. In addition to a chief financial officer, Inventor State has vice presidents for student affairs, enrollment management, community engagement and multiculturalism, institutional advancement, research, curriculum development, and strategic planning. The university also has associate vice presidents for international affairs, public affairs and Latino Affairs. By contrast, Thunder State has four vice presidents and one associate vice president. Just one Thunder State cabinet-level position is responsible for both student affairs and enrollment management whereas Inventor State has two. Although Inventor State has been

fiscally healthier than Thunder State, it has experienced its share of funding cuts. Despite the cuts to public funding, there is a feeling for growth, possibility and innovation on campus. Many attribute the positive culture to the president who has been a passionate advocate for Inventor State and identified a unique niche and role for the university within the region and the state.

Academic life at the university involves experiential learning and research. Students are required to take service-learning classes and each major requires an internship within a business or nonprofit organization in the community. The academic leadership of the institution emphasizes the importance of both finding a career path and making a difference in the world. The university participates in NSSE and has demonstrated improved first to fourth year student engagement outcomes. The university is also host to six statewide centers of excellence, five of which focus on research and one that focuses on arts education. In 2012, the university received the “high research activity” designation from the Carnegie Foundation and has \$100 million in sponsored research each year. Inventor State is also site to a variety of research labs including one that focuses on neuroscience research on disability. The university has a few highly ranked graduate programs in curriculum and instruction program, aerospace engineering, nursing and business. The university’s basketball and baseball teams compete at the Division I level and there is no football team, a fact that many on the campus believe has helped the university avoid the temptation to mimic some of the behaviors of the flagship research universities in the state.

### **History of Inventor State University**

In the mid-1960s, Inventor State University was founded as a branch of two of flagship universities and in a single building on land donated by the army base. The author of a history book about Inventor State published in the mid-1980s wrote that the university enjoyed a “rare and privileged relationship” with the region within which it was located and that the founding goal of the university was to provide higher education at a “reasonable cost so as not to deny young people the chance to improve themselves.” The original building was surrounded by a

parking lot. Two prominent business leaders and the two presidents of the flagship universities were instrumental in founding the university in response to organizing and fundraising efforts on the part of working class individuals in the region, many of whom were employees of the founding business leaders. To fund the university, three million dollars were raised in three months, an effort the university's official history calls, "a campaign of the people." In honor of the boosterism that gave birth to the university, Inventor State's founders held a contest for residents of the region to choose its name. The name chosen honored the legacy of a prominent inventor and entrepreneur from the region. In the early 1970s, the state delegated \$15 million to expand the campus. In response to growing regional needs for health care professionals, the university established a medical school in the mid-1970s. To cut costs and embed itself in the region, the medical school used facilities of area hospitals instead of creating its own.

During its first year, the university enrolled over 3,000 students and 60 faculty members were hired to teach them. Seven years after Inventor State attained university status, enrollment swelled to 13,000 students. Until 2010, with the exception of two years, enrollment has grown each year, as was shared by the current dean of the college of liberal arts: "We went from 0 to now we have 17,000, 18,000 students. It's been pretty much a continuous growth path over [the] years." With the implementation of admissions standards and the emphasis on growing international and residential student enrollment, in recent years there has been a growing proportion of traditional-age students. The first dormitory was built to house 300 students in 1970 and was the only student residence on campus until 1980 when a housing development opened and solidified the campus's new focus on growing the number of residential students. University housing that exists today includes offerings for both traditional and nontraditional students. In 2010, the university instituted admissions requirements that students must attain a minimum of a 16 on the ACT and a 2.2 GPA. As a result of this change, the average composite ACT score of students has increased by one point and the average GPA has increased by .15 points. Pell eligible

students have decreased from a high of 40% in 2010 to the current level of 34%. This has meant that there is a variety in the level of academic preparation of students, as was shared by the vice president for Civic Engagement and Multiculturalism:

We have some very good students who are excellent, then we have students who ... Here's an opportunity for them to prove themselves, and to seem like they have potential, and maybe because of no fault of their own, didn't get the kind of preparation that they needed in high school ... We run the gamut of students.

In addition to implementing university admission standards, individual programs and colleges on campus have implemented admissions standards of their own. Depending on the college or program, a GPA of 2.0 or higher is required. There are no further plans to raise admissions standards because the university administration believes that the correct “mix” of well-prepared and under-prepared students has been achieved.

The founders of the university were manufacturing tycoons and a manufacturing emphasis has long existed with academic offerings and research in engineering and manufacturing. Over the years, the university has solidified relationships with manufacturing companies and the army base to conduct research for industry and the military. In partnership with Thunder State, an area community college and an area private university, Inventor State helped establish a Research Park in the mid-1980s that is responsible for technology research and technology transfer to support the economic and industrial needs in the region. As manufacturing in the region continues to diminish, Inventor State is continually being asked by regional leaders and policymakers to address economic development needs.

The university has also had a long history of civic engagement. Following the natural disaster that devastated Thunder State and the county adjacent to the university, Inventor students raised money and contributed clothing and other supplies. The university has also had long established partnerships with area human services nonprofits and has been involved in K-12 education through preparing schoolteachers. In 2009, the university was the founding partner in the creation of STEM regional K-12 school.



Upon assuming office in 2007, the current president led the university in a strategic planning process. The resulting plan had the theme of “tirelessness.” The first goal of the plan was to achieve academic distinction through assessing student learning and recruiting nationally known faculty. The second goal was to improve enrollment and retention of both traditional and nontraditional students and help students develop their career plans. The final two goals were to increase university research and enhance the university’s ability to improve its local community.

A central feature of the university’s history has been its exponential expansion and growth. While this has contributed to an innovative and entrepreneurial spirit on campus, it can create unique challenges with solidifying an alumni base as different classes of graduates have difficulty relating to one another because the university each attended, while Inventor State in name, was in a state of constant evolution. The changes on campus, particularly with the growing academic profile of students, makes it difficult at times for commuter students to relate to traditional age residential students. Additionally, as campus buildings continue to grow, graduates of earlier days visit campus and find that Inventor State looks very different. Nonetheless, the community-minded, entrepreneurial, and student-centered spirit that marked the university’s establishment continues to inform its culture and strategic direction.

### **The Mission of Inventor State University**

The university was founded to be an affordable access point for higher education for working class students and to serve the region. While the university’s admissions standards have elevated, many institutional members think of it as providing access and some even think of the university as being open enrollment. A professor shared her thoughts on how this mission shapes campus life:

Access mission for us is just a given. I don't think anybody even feels like you have to be reminded of it ... I think the access mission as I say, it's just part of the fabric ... We take it for granted. That's exactly right. I don't think people even question it or think about it. We just know it's there.

Over the years, the mission has evolved to include the goal of transforming the lives of students through helping them find careers and impressing upon them the importance of being active civically. This is not just a mission stated on paper, it is one felt by campus members, as was described by a librarian: “Everyone on this campus is after the same thing. We all really want to help students succeed. A lot of us really go above and beyond the minimum expectations to do that.” An important aspect of the student-centered mission of the university has been supporting the growing cultural diversity of the campus. To do this, the university has modified enrollment and recruitment strategies to attract more diverse students, established a VP-level position focused on community engagement and multiculturalism, and created a number of student support services and multicultural groups. These centers are on call to assist students, as was described by the vice president for Community Engagement and Multiculturalism:

Our cultural centers are evolving as well, in terms of educating the campus to help the campus become more culturally competent, but also working with the ethnic affiliation groups associated with each center to make sure that they're academically successful, and in addition to providing a place where they feel like they have roots, and can be at home.

The university frequently solicits information from current students to learn how they might be better supported and then modifies university practices. One example of this was when the university decided to allow students who had grown up in the foster care system to remain in campus dorms during holiday breaks. The university has also been focused on ensuring accessibility for students with disabilities and has made changes to both the academic and physical landscape of the university to promote student success.

Inventor State has long focused on providing high-quality instruction as one way to transform the lives of students, although recently the number of tenured and tenure track professors has been declining and the number of nontenure professors is on the rise. While the university has a fairly robust research agenda and set of graduate student offerings, there are not plans to establish more programs. Instead, the university has emphasized involving undergraduate students in research. In this way, the university attempts to balance a tension inherent in being a

teaching and research university. Another way in which the university attempts to maintain this balance is through allocating university resources to research, community engagement and teaching, as is illuminated in this quote from a professor:

Look at the university level internal funding opportunities. There's some for teaching. There's some for research. There's some for community engagement ... I don't see them necessarily in conflict.

These resources take the form of financial incentives for faculty for research, community-engagement, and teaching and in the form of new construction on campus, one building that will serve as a community-affiliated performing arts center, one building that will house the university's student success initiatives, and one building that will be a state-of-the-art laboratory for neuroscience research.

Stakeholders have long been conscious of the regional rallying that gave birth to Inventor State and feel a sense of purpose in being a steward of the region through improving economic and civic. Indeed, many campus members share a feeling that if the university did not exist, the region would be profoundly different. The dean of the college of liberal arts captured this sense of purpose in the following way:

It's all about changing the lives of our students and the communities we serve ... Inventor State makes a huge difference in this community. If we weren't here, I think, this community wouldn't have a lot of the services and interactions and growth and development and research and everything that Inventor State brings.

To honor this mission, a set of campus activities have developed including research centers focused on studying regional economic and community engagement. Much of the university's community engagement work focuses on improving the health and wellbeing of residents in the region and supporting K-12 public schools, natural developments due to the university's schools of education and medicine. The volunteer coordinator of the regional St. Vincent De Paul described the university's influence in the region, saying,

I definitely think that Inventor State has a huge impact on, whether it be, [on the region]. I can definitely see that the school is reaching out and partnering with different organizations and certainly is a staple piece in the area down here.

A primary driver of this institutional community commitment has been ensuring that students have experiential learning opportunities that help them develop civic identities, a goal articulated within the recent strategic plans of the university. Within the last 10 years, under the leadership of a campus-wide service learning advisory committee, Inventor State expanded the number of service learning offerings available to students and instituted a service learning designation for courses. The university also created a community service certificate for students. As a result of these efforts, students conducted 500,000 service hours during the last year. Due to the leadership of the president and the service learning advisory committee who have built leadership across campus in support of the community engagement efforts, there is generally faculty support for community engagement. Indeed, faculty and staff are attracted to the university in part because they know that it prides itself on being community engaged, as is described by the vice president for Community Engagement and Multiculturalism: “Our faculty come to the university understanding the mission and although we’re a high research activity university, they know that we’re also very much engaged in the community.”

As a result of these efforts, Inventor State achieved the Carnegie Community Engagement designation and has been listed on the President’s Community Service Honor Roll. As the administration was preparing its Carnegie application, it engaged campus constituents in strategic planning to deepen its commitment. Through this process, university stakeholders identified two future thrusts in the community engagement agenda. First, campus stakeholders want to ensure mutuality in its relationships with community partners. To that end, the university surveyed community partners to assess the efficacy of these relationships and has incorporated this feedback into its engagement work. Second, the university is working to include community engagement in faculty tenure and promotion guidelines. While some schools and departments on campus reward faculty community engagement and applied research, not all do. To achieve this change, a faculty committee is investigating infusing these values across campus.

Until 2010, the university's mission statement encapsulated the university's mission of transforming the civic life of its region and the lives of its students. In 2014 with the launch of the current strategic plan, a new phrase was added to the mission statement declaring Inventor State's responsibility to promoting the economic revitalization of the region. The new strategic plan asserted the goal of building the university's research agenda and enhancing incentives for faculty and students to engage in research and promote a "research-centric" culture on campus.

To fulfill its economic engagement mission, the university releases economic impact reports that demonstrate the university's contributions to employment opportunities, construction contracts, and student consumer spending. An emphasis within these reports is the buying power of Inventor State's international students. The university also engages in economic development work. Inventor State has hosted annual economic summits for the past 10 years and there are centers on campus focused on various aspects of economic development including small business development, technology transfer, and market analysis. Faculty members are often approached by business leaders to partner on economic advancement initiatives and the administration is supportive of recognizing faculty economic development work within tenure and promotion guidelines. The university also offers continuing education to graduates living in the region so they may retool. The membership of the university's board of trustees is emblematic of the university's economic development commitment. All but one member of the university's board of trustees is a CEO or business leader. The one member that is not a business leader is a civil rights leader that was appointed by the governor.

The president has been instrumental in embedding the university's regional engagement and access missions. When describing the funding challenges facing the university, the president often asserts his belief that the university is a public good despite policymaker efforts to narrow its purpose to its role within the market. Part of his strategy for ensuring his campus embraces its public purpose is building a critical mass of supportive faculty and administrators and hiring

people who share his orientation. The president also “helps” people transition from the university who do not support this vision, as he described:

I do have is great passion for what I think is important for this region, for our country, for this state ... what I help people understand is this is who we are. This is why I think you should like it here. But I also really work hard to help people say, ‘If this is not a good fit, let's help you move on.’”

### **The Identity of Inventor State University**

The public purpose of the university influences its identity. The university’s identity is also shaped by the entrepreneurial and innovative spirit of its namesake and founder. This legacy has meant that campus members are encouraged by their administration to be experimental in designing new programs and employing new teaching strategies and research agendas, as was shared by the associate vice president for curriculum and assessment,

That sense of purposefulness and stick to it and innovation, I haven't yet said anything to my boss where he said, "We can't do that because we've never done it that way." He might ask questions, but he's never said, "No, we can't do that."

The senior administration actively promotes this identity. One vehicle that the university administration uses to encourage innovation is to emblazon the campus and public relations materials with pictures of the namesake inventor and his invention. There are many faculty who resonate with this legacy, as is expressed by this professor,

That's the whole innovation thing. It informs campus life everywhere. Everybody knows. You can't come to Inventor State without understanding very quickly that the [inventor] was a great innovator. That's what we're supposed to be doing.

There are others that feel as though it is something that the university administration is pushing, as is shown in this quote by a different professor, “It’s funny to see that it’s ... It is a kind of the, again, it is a kind of the business-oriented promotional strategy. I don’t think it is effective....”

The university’s young age and rapid growth shapes the way stakeholders view Inventor State University, as is captured in this quote from a faculty member:

I was impressed with what I would consider to be the opportunities and flexibilities of a young institution. There seemed to be a growth in a lot of different directions which I thought was quite positive.

As this quote shows, many on campus believe that the university is nimble and able to make adjustments as needed. One way the campus has grown that has had an influence on its identity is through providing housing for students leading to a change in the proportion of commuter students. This has also changed the way the university is viewed, less as a commuter campus and more as a full-fledged university, as is described by the director of International Education:

I think it's just going from a really, really new university, young university that's primarily serving commuter schools, to really maturing into a university that's on its own, that's having to have more of a business mindset, because there's less and less dollars coming from the state.

The university is also in the process of navigating seemingly competing identities for itself. The first concerns its status as a public institution that has to act more like a private entity, as the latter half of the preceding quote demonstrates. Another way in which the university is caught between competing identities is in whether it sees itself as a teaching or research university. Many stakeholders are resistant to promoting a view of Inventor State as solely a research university, as is demonstrated in the following quote from a professor, “Some universities want to view themselves as a research university. Inventor State wants that balance between teaching and scholarship.” While there have been administrative efforts to balance these dual aims, their presence can at times create confusion over Inventor State’s identity. Faculty members have relatively high teaching loads of 18 credits per year while pursuing research agendas and engaging with the community. This has led to a feeling on the part of some that there is confusion over the university’s identity, as is described by the director of the Women’s Center: “We are in a weird, we can’t decide if we are a teaching institution or a research institution.”

Although Inventor State arose from the efforts and dollars of individuals in the region, there has long been a lack of awareness on the part of residents in the region about the university. Institutional members attribute this lack of awareness to the university’s inability to properly

communicate its story, as was described by the vice president for Enrollment Management who said Inventor State has, “understated itself. It's never tooted its own horn.” What is widely known in the region is that Inventor State is affordable and that many commuter students attend. The university was also been called “Caucasian State” in recognition of its Predominantly White student body as compared to its neighboring HBCU, Thunder State.

While many in the region have little awareness of what the university does, this is beginning to change. One way in which the university’s reputation is growing is through the high passage rate of its nursing and accountancy students on licensure exams. Additionally, the university is becoming known as an institution that provides experiential learning opportunities to students that prepare them for the real world, as is demonstrated by this quote from the director of the women’s center:

I think our Inventor State alums are seen as being more prepared and this is at least by people in the region because ... They [students] are not going to say, ‘This is the only way it is or this is what I read in a book and why doesn’t it work?’ They have some understanding of that and especially if they have some of these courses where they have done some of this service work.

Community organizations have also taken notice of the university’s desire to engage, as is described by the volunteer coordinator of the regional St. Vincent de Paul:

I definitely think that Inventor State has a huge impact on, whether it be [places within the region], I can definitely see that the school is reaching out and partnering with different organizations and certainly is a staple piece in the area...

Another indication of growing regional awareness of the university’s engagement is two local awards it has won. The university won the “public partner” award from a local chamber of commerce and an award for civic engagement from the regional chapter of the NAACP. The university’s national reputation has also grown through its recognition by the Carnegie Foundation and the White House as a community engaged institution as well as through its designation as a military friendly campus.



## **Challenges Facing Inventor State University**

The challenges facing Inventor State University primarily concern its efforts to balance competing elements of its mission while responding to external pressures related to state funding levels, rising expectations, and enrollment shifts. At the same time as the university transitioned to the semester calendar, the state economy began to improve and fewer people enrolled opting instead to enter the workforce. These two occurrences led to a 2,000 student drop in the enrollment. A professor explained how the semester calendar affected enrollment, saying, “you can't shift from four opportunities to start to only two and not lose people.” Another enrollment challenge has been growing competition from area community colleges, as is described by this professor,

A lot of people who come to Inventor State, it's either [an area community college] or Inventor State ... I do think from an enrollment perspective, we're going to need to pay attention to what distinguishes us for the students for whom [an area community college] or Inventor State are the two options.

The university also faces challenges in responding to the expectations laid out by performance based funding. As the vice president for community engagement and multiculturalism shared, this challenge concerns the metrics being used:

I think one of the challenges is, because we provide education to people from a broad range of backgrounds, how the public and particularly politicians hold us accountable is very important. How do you measure success?

As such, a primary challenge for the university is ensuring that they are measured in ways that make sense given the institution's mission and the students it was created to serve. Relatedly, as the university is being increasingly called on to address the economic needs of the region, maintaining its focus on the civic engagement presents another challenge.

With regard to state policymaker demands for improvements to retention and completion rates, the university is facing issues related to fine tuning its instruction and remediation offerings. Specifically, university administrators are struggling with communicating to faculty the

need for curricular changes that will ensure expanded student success, as was shared by the associate provost of curriculum development:

There's always that faculty element, which is, "I'm the expert." Getting them to understand that it's not that, "I don't believe you aren't the expert, it's that I need you to show me how you apply your expertise. Not because I really care, but because I'm being told I have to." It's creating some tensions.

The mixed levels of student preparation also creates challenges in configuring academic offerings that will reach all students, as was shared by a professor:

In some cases, very difficult to manage the classroom. You don't know where, which student group to focus on, whether it is too easy to most of the student, whether what I'm teaching is too difficult for some of them.

The university is also attempting to determine the appropriate role for the University College within the university's retention efforts. The University College is currently an entry point for all students admitted to the university before they transition into an academic college and begin pursuing their major requirements. Some students are undecided and that is why they are placed in University College and others require remediation. This mix of student preparation within the College can create issues among students who may not feel as though they are truly enrolled in a university, as is described by the vice president for Enrollment Management:

If I'm a very good student, I'm coming in the University College and I'm sitting with people who can't do the work. Now I'm led to believe that college at Inventor State is like high school.

Finally, although Inventor State has fared better than its institutional peers in terms of funding levels, it has undergone three rounds of budget cuts in the last 10 years. The first major budget cut of \$13 million took place in 2010 and the second of \$7.2 took place in 2011. Over this period, the state share of instruction fluctuated and ultimately declined from a high of \$92 million in 2010 to its current level of \$84 million. The university has fared moderately well in the conversion to performance based funding in light of its relatively high retention and graduation rates, the number of underrepresented students it enrolls, and the presence of its medical school and STEM focused programs. Since the conversion to the semester calendar, though, the

university has lost money through the performance based funding formula due to recent declines in completion and retention rates. As a result of these cuts, institutional support for instruction fell from a high of \$150,000,000 in 2008 to its current level of \$120,000,000. At the same time, research expenditures fell by four million dollars and public service expenditures increased by four million.

### **Responses to Challenges**

In responding to these challenges, the university administration first worked to change the narrative on campus about funding cuts implicating financial crisis and instead sought to encourage stakeholders to make the campus more mission-focused and innovative. At the conclusion of budget presentations during the height of budget cuts, the last slide listed a bulleted list of “reasons for hope” including the value the university added to the region’s economic and civic life and projections of various revenue-generating activities. A professor reflected on the administration’s leadership, saying,

The mood shifted I think largely due to the constant optimism of upper administration within the university ... Then we started saying stuff like, "Gosh, it's really good that we're employed, that this school is moving forward," it shifted to, as is often the case when there's an extraordinary force imposing itself on you and then you spend a lot of time fighting, ranting and against it, then you start saying, "Let's make the best of it." I think that's where people are at this point.

For the administration of Inventor State, making the best of funding cuts and rising expectations has taken a multipronged approach. University stakeholders were unwilling to significantly raise tuition or decrease salary ranges for staff and faculty. In responding to the need for budget cuts, the administration sought to make the university budget planning process transparent and involve stakeholders in devising strategies to become more efficient and determine what should be cut, as was shared by a professor,

They've been pretty transparent. The university comes out with a ... There's a Budget Director's Committee. Every school has a Budget Director. They meet at the university level. They sit down. They talk. They say, "We're going to get \$11 million less next year. How are we going to deal with that? What should we do?"

Under the auspices of increasing efficiency, a number of changes have occurred on campus. First, the university made cuts to staff and increasingly relies on nontenure faculty members. In 2009, the university had 560 tenured or tenure track professors and 285 nontenure instructors and faculty members. In 2014, the university had 525 tenured or tenure track faculty members and 325 nontenure faculty members. Faculty members have been called on to teach larger class sections while increasing their research. This set of circumstances has implications for student learning, as was described by the director of the Women's Center, as faculty are being asked to do more with less,

They [students] don't get the same education and faculty are just so overworked and they are less involved than on some of the issues that matter, like the MDA or performance based stuff because there are pulled in 80 directions. You know, trying to run labs and write letters and serve on thesis committees and teach two to three classes and other ... Still publish.

The university also consolidated its two libraries and has entered into agreements with other area higher education institutions to share services.

Inventor State has also taken steps to stabilize and diversify funding streams. The first effort involves university fundraising. The university is in the midst of its second capital campaign with the goal of raising \$175 million. In the process of the campaign, university officials have had to communicate to potential donors the funding realities of the public university, as was described by the president:

We're now in a \$150 million campaign. Why? Because we have to think more like private universities. Now tell the public. It's hard to explain to people when you say, "You're a state institution. You're supported by the state." No, no. ... We think more like controlling our own destiny like private schools do.

The focus of the campaign is expanding educational access through creating scholarships, hiring more professors, creating endowed professorships, expanding the university's regional engagement, increasing research, and enhancing the university's ability to support veterans. In addition to approaching corporations for donations, the university has begun to solidify its alumni

base. The university has also begun commercializing intellectual property and investing in companies. Inventor State's centers of excellence related to regional economic development have been integral to commercializing the campus. For example, recently the university bought a 49% share in a company. The university is encouraging faculty members to participate in revenue-generating efforts through pursuing grant funding, as was described by a professor:

They want to know about grants. Grants come with indirect costs. That means that the money that is generated for the institution. Generally between 26 and 35% of any indirect dollars, the university gets a piece of that. That's a significant metric.

A final strategy used by the university has been to transition into mission-centered budgeting and responsibility centered management, as was described by this professor:

They [the central administration] started specifically paying attention to the extent to which a particular unit was responding to the mission of the university, the mission of the college or the mission of the department.

This has meant that individual departments and units on campus are given resources based on the revenue they generate and the ways in which they fulfill the university's mission. This has given rise to a culture of assessment and a feeling on the part of various units that they must demonstrate their value to the university to secure funding. Faculty productivity in terms of courses taught and grants secured is being tracked and various units including the library and multicultural centers are being pushed to show how they enhance student retention. A librarian described these changes, saying,

There's been a lot of changes here in the library. Most of it's the proving your value kind of stuff, knowing that there is a chance our budget would be affected if we don't prove that we're necessary and how much we affect student learning.

Individual units on campus also have to be more entrepreneurial and act like businesses in seeking external revenue sources and raising money. Community-engaged units have begun to seek greater investment in terms of infrastructure supports from community organizations, as was described by the director of the Center for Healthy Communities:

It forced me to consider where else I could be. I identified for a number of my programs places in the community that would be willing to house us at minimal cost rather than set up your own office or building or whatever.

The shift to responsibility-centered management has had some unintended consequences. First, some academic units have become responsible for outsize amounts of various university services depending on the number of students they enroll. For example, because the College of Liberal Arts has the largest number of students, they pay more for library services even though the cost of materials for the college of engineering is higher. Whereas before there were efforts to create interdisciplinary programs, in some units these efforts have been abandoned because it is unclear which unit will receive student enrollment revenue. A professor described this circumstance, saying,

There's a fake collaboration in terms of that urban affairs, sociology, and poli. sci. directives. Yeah, but it's fake. Whoever directs it, begins advising the students into their courses. That's just the way it works.

In the words of one professor, in response to rising policymaker expectations the university has been proactive in "bobbing and weaving to state requirements." The first way in which the university administration has attempted to do this is in inserting campus leaders into the policy formation process. As a result of these efforts, the university's president was a key architect of the funding formula. In responding to regional and state-wide demands for greater economic development, the university has been leveraging campus human capital, as was explained by the president:

We've embraced economic development. That means where faculty ... have the opportunity to take their expertise into the community, solve real problems, engage in research that solves real problems, engage in research and intellectual property, commercialization that really can stay here in the region ... Doing research to solve business problems so they can grow. We're creating jobs.

The university has strengthened the centers of excellence focused on economic development. The university has also attempted to convey the value of the experiential learning and liberal arts

degrees to area business leaders. Finally, the university has continued to build its professional development and career services for students so that they are employable when they graduate.

The university's responses to state demands for improved retention and completion rates have been multifaceted. First, the university has changed the way remedial needs of students are assessed and delivered. For those students whose ACT or SAT scores suggest they need remediation, the university requires that they take an online preparation program that allows students to test their current skill level and access tailored, self-paced modules that help them address weaknesses. After completing these online modules, students are able to retake the placement exam. The university has also created summer writing and math academies that allow students to prepare for college-level courses. The academy uses a mathematics emporium model with active learning, individualized assistance, and ongoing assessment of student progress towards remediation. To address English remedial needs, the university has created intensive one-hour courses that provide intensive "just in time" remediation. As a result of these changes, the university's remedial success rate rose to 77%. The university has also created a Student Success course intended to help students acquire college success skills.

Changes have also been made to student advising. The university tracks student progress through quarterly and midterm assessments. Additionally, the university is using an online early alert system to flag university personnel of when a student is struggling academically or at risk of dropping out which triggers "intrusive advising." The university has also implemented a milestone system that allows students to track their progress toward degree completion, as is described by the dean of the College of Engineering:

What retains college students is progress towards degree, period. Whatever you do, the goal of it should be [making] sure students make progress towards their intended degree as soon as possible because it's when students are not making progress they will very quickly get disenchanted with majors and switch out.

The university's new Student Success Center building will provide the infrastructure for these retention strategies.

The university has also engaged in wide scale assessment of student learning with the goal of improving instruction and academic supports. Various units on campus have redesigned the academic curriculum to implement AAC&U's High Impact Learning Practices including learning communities, service-learning, and problem-based curriculum. For students not able to transfer into their desired majors, stakeholders advise them to pursue organizational leadership degrees, as described by a professor:

It was the fast track for students who couldn't get through nursing, sciences, business, could not get through a foreign language. It's how you get them out of the university. And it had a sort of attractive name, 'Organizational Leadership.'

Finally, the university is in the process of experimenting with awarding credit for prior learning to adults and returning war veterans.

The university has also begun strengthening its relationships with area high schools to enhance the academic preparedness of incoming freshmen. To achieve this goal, university staff offer tutoring and supplemental instruction to high schools students as well as placement exams that help them determine their deficiencies, as was described by the vice president for Enrollment Management:

We're trying to do is also go out and work with the high schools earlier, like in the sophomore year, and test students on our tests so that they know what kind of gap they have for not placing in remedial work. So that you have the junior and senior year to get the preparation levels up.

Inventor State has also made changes to its recruitment practices in order to grow student enrollment to its target of 20,000 students while enhancing the level of preparation of incoming students. The university hired an enrollment management expert to assume the vice president position and professionalize the university's enrollment management. Staff members in the admissions office are meeting with area guidance counselors with the goal of improving the university's relationship with high schools. The enrollment management staff compiled a list of K-12 schoolteachers in the region who are Inventor State graduates with the goal of establishing communication with them. The overriding goal of these efforts is to place more Inventor State



faculty and admissions professionals in high school classrooms. The vice president shared her rationale behind this strategy, saying:

The bottom line is, if you can get a faculty member in a teacher's classroom doing a presentation on the careers or whatever, answering questions ... We'd like to see much more of because that cements a different kind of relationship. A different kind of chatter in the school.

The university has the goal of expanding the number of articulation agreements to include each community college in the state. The university is also in the process of establishing a transfer student resource center. As was described, there are no further plans to raise admission standards. That said, the admissions office has begun suggesting to students with low ACT and SAT scores that they enroll first in the area community college before enrolling at Inventor State. To recruit better-prepared students, the university offers scholarships to high-performing transfer students and full scholarships to valedictorian and saledictorian students throughout the state.

The university is also working to enhance statewide, national and international recruitment. The university has had success in growing the population of international students. In 2010, 660 international students were enrolled in the university; in 2015, there were 1,900. The university hopes to enroll 100 more students to reach its target of 2,000. University stakeholders offer both educational and financial reasons for this growth in international students, as is illuminated by this quote from the director of International Education:

I think diversity is one of the things in terms of just exposure to people outside the region, and to the fact that this is a much more global economy and you've got to be ready to work in it. Then obviously one of the goals is just stabilizing the revenue stream for the university. Simply because of its growth and expansion, and the fact that no new funding has been coming this way for a very long time.

With the growth in international students has been a growth in the university structure to support them.

Inventor State University has also been working to improve its reputation in the region. These efforts began in earnest in 2008 with the stated strategic priority of growing the university's research reputation. To do this, the university has sought high-profile grants, sent

faculty to national and international conferences, and provided incentives to faculty to pursue research agendas. More recently, the university has devoted institutional resources to marketing so that those in the region and nation will come to know more about the university, as described by the dean of the College of Liberal Arts:

A lot of it is just communication, making sure that people know what we actually do. We've really ramped up our communication, marketing and advertising so that when we're out marketing, we spend our marketing dollars in advertising on radio or in different venues, newspapers, and also, how we portray our selves.

The university is also undergoing a branding effort that will emphasize its access and regional engagement mission, and its innovative and entrepreneurial culture. The university has often escaped the notice of area newspapers and media outlets. To address this, university public relations professionals have been distributing press releases. The university has also been building partnerships with newspapers to increase the number of students doing internships in these organizations with the hope that they will help enhance the university's reputation. The animating goal of these efforts is to attract students, staff members, resources and regional partnerships that will enhance the university's ability to fulfill its mission.

### **Conclusion**

Inventor State University is nearing its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. As it gears up for this milestone, the administration and faculty are revisiting core commitments laid out in the university's mission while assessing the efficacy of efforts underway to respond to external challenges. The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary will also mark the conclusion of the university's capital campaign, a symbolic and strategic effort by the university administration to take control of its own destiny. As the university continues to use strategies borrowed from the private sector, time will tell how the public purpose of the university is affected.

## CHAPTER 8: ANALYSIS, PUBLIC PURPOSE UNDER PRESSURE

In the German legend of Faust, the eponymous protagonist, in an effort to be more fulfilled in his life, makes a pact with the Devil: he will trade his soul in return for gaining limitless knowledge about the world (Goethe, 2014). This legend gave rise to the concept of a Faustian bargain. In entering this agreement with the Devil, Faust sacrifices his morality for scholarly and worldly ambitions. In a sense, the four regional comprehensive universities have been forced into Faustian bargains as they attempt to remain viable while preserving their historic public purpose in a neoliberal public policy context that narrows their purpose to that of strengthening the state economy (Berman, 2012; Brown, 2003). While Faust chose his own fate, the four universities are bound by law to respond to the policy context and as such, enjoy less autonomy in determining how they will respond. In their responses to this policy context, the four universities are enacting both adaptive strategies focused narrowly on survival and alignment with the demands of the external policy context without regard for how these responses will affect their public purpose, as well as interpretive strategies that use the public purpose of the institution as a guide for responding (Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b).

In this chapter, the three primary elements of the public purposes of the four institutions are described; specifically, their student-centered mission, their regional engagement mission, and their educational access mission. Also explored are the Faustian bargains each institution is making through the use of interpretive or adaptive strategy with regard to their public purpose (Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b). To shed light on these processes, the performance metrics used by each university are explored. Performance metrics are an important unit of analysis because they represent formalized abstractions of the underlying goals and values of an organization (Colyvas, 2012). Thus, the performance metrics used by the four institutions reflect the larger goals and values of the institution in responding to the public policy context. This chapter culminates in the presentation of a framework that explains how institutional responses, be they interpretive or

adaptive, to a public policy context that evidences neoliberal ideology affects the public purpose of regional comprehensive universities (Brown, 2003; Berman, 2012; Hartley, 2002).

### **The Public Purpose of Regional Comprehensive Universities**

Hartley posited that institutional purpose is derived from an institution's history, stated mission, organizational identity, and stated vision (2002). An institution's purpose also encapsulates the value system that guides a university. The four regional comprehensives were founded in a variety of ways and as such, derive different values and meaning from these legacies (Harclerod & Ostar, 1987; Henderson, 2007; Thelin, 2004). Regardless of the origin of the four institutions, three elements of public purpose were present: they are student-centered, they are relatively open access, and they are regionally-focused. Each is discussed in turn.

#### The Student-Centered Mission of Regional Comprehensive Universities

The first purpose relates to the student-centered mission of regional comprehensive universities that is often conceptualized as a focus on teaching as opposed to research. In the case of the former normal school, members connect the university's legacy of preparing school teachers to its focus on providing high-quality teaching to students, as is captured in this quote from a professor at Thunder State:

Thunder State University is a teaching institution, so if you don't apply for grants, you're not necessarily penalized. ... Some faculty like it, some faculty don't, but these are the checks and balances to make sure we are student-focused, we do good teaching, and we're able to help students ...

Evidence of how this public purpose is enacted on the four campuses can be found in several areas. First, the seriousness with which institutional members view student evaluations of teaching within tenure and promotion decisions demonstrates a teaching focus. Faculty members at these four universities are also deeply committed to teaching and it constitutes a significant amount of their work. New faculty members are hired for the promise and passion they show as educators. The commitment to teaching also has a profound influence on faculty socialization

processes. New instructors are advised to hone the craft of teaching and student mentoring, and senior faculty members are often well-regarded on campus if they have reputations as effective teachers. As a further embodiment of the student-centered mission of the four universities, faculty members are often hired if they are perceived to share demographic traits with the students of the university or if they have had experience working with underrepresented students. This is particularly important at Thunder State, the Historically Black University, with institutional leaders giving preference to incoming faculty, staff, and administrators who share the ethnic identify of students. The reason for this preference is that as research has shown, students of color respond well to professors of color (AAUP, 2000).

The teaching-focus of each at the four universities is a direct response to the types of students they enroll. With students who often have high needs for additional academic and student supports, a robust faculty research agenda would detract from the university's ability to serve these students. The student-centered mission is also expressed through an overriding sense that faculty, administrators, and staff should "meet students where they are" through providing individualized support. A professor at Thunder State articulated this sentiment:

To us, students are very precious, and we take time to work with them one-on-one ... We also see them not as a number, as they would be in some very large institution, but as a very valuable person that needs nurturing.

Student supports took a variety of forms on the four campuses, but often include academic supports including tutoring, study groups, and supplemental academic programs. Individualized student support is not strictly in the form of academic support, however, in recognition of the unique needs of first generation students who often lack college-going habits. The dean of the University College at Thunder State described this set of circumstances in the following way:

A lot of our students come from first generation families where I believe, they do not come from that environment that - now, I'm going to use this word real loosely - that understands and values education ... A number of our students come from backgrounds where probably the highest grade either of parents would have attained would be a junior college.

Students occasionally need to be told to attend classes, arrive on time, and dress appropriately, as was described by this professor from River State: “Part of the unwritten curriculum is to teach professional behaviors, and things like being on time, dressing appropriately for public appearances.” Although these behaviors may seem de rigueur to the traditional college student, to many first-generation and low-income students attending regional comprehensives, they are not necessarily assumed.

There are also structures in place to help students address social or psychological needs and personal responsibilities. Although the parents of these students are often supportive of their child’s academic goals, they do not always fully understand what it means to be in college. As such, university members help first-generation students and their families adjust to college life through educating them about how to navigate university policies and processes. As this quote from the Dean of the College of Education at Thunder State shows, at times this lack of knowledge concerns things such as financial aid:

Many students who are first generation don't understand about Pell Grants, loans, and other kinds of things. HBCUs including Thunder have made it a priority to recruit these students, go where these students are, encourage them to go to college, and admit them, nurture them, and prepare them for quality lives.

To address this need, faculty and staff help students understand how to make the best use of government and institutional aid. The student-centered mission of the four universities is also present in the knowledge held by institutional members at all levels about the institutional services available to students.

### The Regional Engagement Mission of Regional Comprehensive Universities

A second aspect of the public purpose of the four institutions concerns their regional engagement mission. Specifically, these four universities think of themselves as being stewards of the economic and civic life of their regions (AASCU, 2002). This regional engagement mission translates into geographic boundaries that define the region each institution serves. One way in

which each of the four campuses embodies this mission is through being an educational venue for civic and economic leaders in the region. Each of the mayors of the cities in which the four universities are located was educated at the university, as were a large number of city governmental officials, business leaders, and nonprofit staff. A professor from City State reflected on the large number of public officials and nonprofit leaders who are alumni, saying,

It's interesting going out, again, in the community and discovering how many of the people we work with, the mayor and folks like that, either went here or went to law school here or have kids going here, or whatever. There really is some meaningful sense of that regional identity.

Additionally, a variety of university offerings exist that are aimed at regional engagement. Each of the four universities operate community radio stations and offer free university lectures and cultural programming open to the local community. All four universities also play a large role in stewarding the K-12 education system in their regions through educating a majority of school teachers, providing tutoring support to children, and staying abreast of K-12 policy mandates and specific regional educational needs in order to reconfigure university offerings to address these needs. The four universities, to varying degrees, also offer other forms of community service and engagement. These offerings are tailored to meet the unique needs of each region. For example, given the high poverty rate and presence of health disparities in River State's region, student groups recruit university volunteers to work in homeless shelters, food pantries, and mobile health clinics. Another example is drawn from Thunder State's efforts to advance applied research that focuses on addressing a specific natural resource need in the region.

The four universities also expend efforts aimed at stewarding economic life within their regions through economic development activities. An example of how this is typically conceived of on the four campuses is demonstrated in this quote from the Vice President for Enrollment Management at City State:

It's a public university in the heart of the city, so we really concentrate on the greater ... community in terms of service. We use it as an economic development engine for the city, so most of our alums are really from [the city].

Each university is a major employer within the region and plays a vital role in developing the workforce. Because university members tend to live, work, and consume goods and services in the region, these activities are counted as another element of the university's economic development efforts. Regional economic and business leaders surrounding each university are well aware of each university's contributions and often seek partnerships with the university. An example of these relationships is illuminated in the following quote from the president of the chamber of commerce of the town in which River is located, "I think everybody in our area would pretty much agree, if we didn't have River State we wouldn't have much of a downtown."

#### The Access Mission of Regional Comprehensive Universities

The final component of the public purpose of the four regional comprehensive universities is their mission to provide educational access. This mission has grown out of each university's history of being open enrollment and affordable. Each of the four institutions has tended to draw large proportions of a first-generation, low-income, minority, and non-traditional students. These students can be admitted to the university even if they have GPAs or standardized test scores that would not gain them admission to more selective institutions. One example of campus members conceptualize the access mission is captured by this quote from a professor at Thunder State:

What is its [the university's] purpose? Well it serves because a lot of the students that we get may have not gotten into other institutions because of their past and if we judge people based on just their past then there's ... then you're creating a conveyor belt of "Well, you had a rough start and therefore you're going to stay at a rough start lane" forever and ever and ever. And I don't believe in that.

An important way in which these universities realize their access mission is through providing remedial education, tutoring, and faculty support so that students are able to acclimate to college-level work.



There is a regional dimension to the access mission held by each of the four universities, with stakeholders seeing their campus as an important regional educational access point for those that are not likely to leave the region for higher education. A Dean at River State described this role as an access point of higher education:

I don't think people understand geographic isolation, and social isolation that some of our residents have. They're not going to travel outside of what they know. And that maybe good or bad, but we have to be the ones to educate them.

The regional focus of the university's access mission is also captured in the readiness with which institutional members offer the percentage of residents in the region were educated at their university. In these ways, the regional engagement and access missions of the four universities are deeply connected.

### **Faustian Bargains: What is Kept and What is Lost**

While there is widespread institutional support of, and belief in, the public purpose of the four universities, given the challenges created by the neoliberal public policy context and enrollment declines, they are faced with difficult choices about how to respond (Berman, 2012; Brown, 2003). While scholars assert that mission and purpose should not be static notions, an enduring sense of institutional purpose has been shown to enhance organizational effectiveness and success (Davies, 1986; Hartley, 2002; Zemsky et al., 2005). It is true that organizations often change aspects of their mission to stay relevant given changing constituents and the introduction of new threats or opportunities (Chaffee, 1985a). When organizations change their behavior in ways that abandon core mission or purpose, though, they are often said to be in a state of mission drift (Bartkus & Glassman, 2008; Delucchi, 1997; Dubrow, Moseley & Dustin, 2006). When mission drift is taking place within a university, a variety of dilemmas are created including how the university will define its goals and create performance metrics to ensure these goals are met, how faculty are expected to act to ensure compliance with these goals, and how administrators might best inspire behavior that will solidify the change in direction for the university. While

these dilemmas were present at the four universities as institutional members determined how best to respond to external challenges, mission drift was too simplistic a framework for understanding what was taking place within the four universities because it implies a wholesale reconfiguration of operations that is in opposition with existing mission. What is taking place at these four universities is more nuanced than what mission drift would predict. Indeed, some elements of the public purpose of each institution are being maintained while others are being compromised. As such, drift is not taking place, per say. Instead, elements of the public purpose of the four universities are being eroded as bargains are struck concerning which elements each university can afford to preserve.

To understand how these changes are taking place, Chaffee's conceptualization of adaptive versus interpretive strategy is used (1985a, 1985b). Adaptive strategy is captured in the metaphor of an organization as an organism that must act in evolutionary ways in a Darwinian sense. Adaptive organizations are primarily concerned with survival through maximizing external threats and opportunities and generating resources to preserve the organization. Organizations that are acting in adaptive ways also tend to prioritize flexibility and efficiency so that they are able to quickly and effectively adapt to changes in the external environment. Change often arises in periods of crisis when external threats or opportunities arise. New programs or initiatives are acceptable if they can be shown to maximize institutional resources and ensure survival. An important element of ensuring an organization's survival involves predicting future threats and opportunities so that the organization might configure itself in ways that anticipate the future. As this description shows, an institution's underlying mission and values are not considered when enacting adaptive strategy.

Alternatively, organizations that are enacting interpretive strategy can be thought of as embodying a social contract concerning the organization's purpose for existence among institutional members that dictates the organization's response to external threats and

opportunities (Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b). This social contract is often captured in the underlying values, organizational symbols, and mission of the organization. The leaders of organizations enacting interpretive change will employ symbols and values in dictating an organization's response to the external environment. In this way, communication and messaging are important tools used by leaders of interpretive organizations. Change is often created because members fear that the credibility of their organization is under threat due to a misalignment of organizational operations and underlying assumptions, values, and mission. When an institutional member proposes a new program, they must demonstrate how this program will embody the mission of the organization. As this description shows, interpretive organizations draw heavily on the organization's mission when responding to the external environment.

Chaffee found that interpretive organizations tend to be more resilient during times of organizational stress (1985a, 1985b). The external environment is a factor affecting strategy for both interpretive and adaptive organizations, however those enacting interpretive strategy will respond to threats and opportunities in ways that strengthen the organization's mission whereas adaptive organizations will respond in ways that fail to consider underlying mission. Chaffee found that an organization can enact both interpretive and adaptive change; however, one style of strategy tends to dominate.

The four universities in this study demonstrated evidence of both adaptive and interpretive strategy with regard to the three elements of their public purpose when responding to the neoliberal public policy context and enrollment declines (Berman, 2012; Brown, 2003; Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b). For example, when choosing which of the three aspects of their public purpose to preserve or weaken, an institution might demonstrate adaptive change with regard to its access mission at the same time as it is enacting interpretive change aimed at strengthening their regional engagement and student-centered missions. That said, there were two universities that tended more towards adaptive change and two that tended more towards interpretive change.

In their responses to external challenges, each institution has created performance metrics to gauge their progress in meeting new goals. As Colyvas described, performance metrics can be understood as formalized abstractions of the underlying values guiding institutional life (2012). In this way, performance metrics can be important manifestations of the university's mission or drift from mission. One of City State's community partners described this organizational reality, saying, "What measures gets done." This study points to the role of institutional performance metrics in preserving or weakening an institution's public purpose. What follows is a description of the interpretive and adaptive strategy taking place on each campus, as well as the performance metrics used to evaluate and advance these changes. This discussion culminates in the presentation of a framework for understanding how the universities in this study are enacting the two styles of strategy and how these institutional responses are affecting their public purpose.

### **Changes to the Access Mission**

#### Evidence of Adaptive Strategy

While there is widespread rhetorical and ideological support for the institutional value of providing educational access on the four campuses, there is also a pervasive feeling that policymakers' emphasis on retention and graduation does not reward them for maintaining this mission. As such, each of the four universities has taken steps to elevate their admissions standards in some way. Previously, each institution required students to submit a high school transcript or GED certificate to enroll. Instead of being a totally open door, the four institutions are becoming more selective. In this change, we see evidence of adaptive strategy as these decisions are being made primarily to ensure the institution's survival within performance funding allocations and demands for retention and completion without regard for how these changes detract from each institution's access mission (Chaffee 1985a, 1985b). Perhaps the best

distillation of this form of adaptive strategy with regard to the access mission is captured in a quote from the director of institutional finance at River State, who said,

We had resigned ourselves to the fact that we're going to have to become more selective. Administrations change. The wind blew in a different direction and it was okay to be who we were.... [The president] was saying, "Well, if that's what we have to do to survive."

The notion that important strategic decisions about the university's access mission will be determined by the direction of the "wind" of policy in order to "survive" is highly adaptive, as it demonstrates how the institution is waiting for queues from the external environment about a function that is fundamentally related to their access mission. Yet, raising admissions standards is a logical response given the state's emphasis on student outcomes. As a result, Inventor State, Thunder State and City State have implemented admissions standards including minimum high school GPAs and standardized test scores. Although River State has not instituted required minimums for GPA and standardized test scores, in response to pressures they feel to retain more students and lower the loan default rate of students, they have begun requiring that students submit ACT scores. The expectation that students submit a score effectively raises admissions requirements because standardized test taking is unfamiliar to the Appalachian culture of the surrounding region. The director for institutional finance described the implications created by this new requirement in the following way:

The enforcement of the requirement that students take an SAT exam before applying to the university. Previously, it was in policy but we did not enforce it. We do not require a minimum score ... In high schools, if there's a need, there is assistance available to cover the cost of the exam but if you've been out of school, a year, 2, 5, 10, you're going to have to fit the bill yourself. That has been a natural screening.

As a result of this "natural screening," 200 fewer students applied to the university and the university's federal loan default and retention rates improved, as has their standing in performance based funding allocation. These shifts in admissions policies are evident in institutional data for all four universities. Historically, each had 100% acceptance rates however over time, the acceptance rate of each institution has declined. In addition to elevating admissions

standards, the four universities have also reshaped the allotment of institutional student aid to include larger shares of merit instead of need based aid with the goal of attracting better prepared students. A performance metric reflecting these changes is the number of academically competitive students enrolled on each campus.

Another way in which adaptive change with regard to the access mission has occurred is in the enrollment and management functions of each university. Whereas previously, a student would register for university classes in the same way a student would register for a K-12 school, they are now required to submit an application and wait for the university's acceptance. While this may seem a subtle change in how enrollment is managed on the four campuses, it is a shift away from the access mission of these institutions as they are no longer open enrollment. In this shift, adaptive strategy is present as the primary goal of this change was to improve efficiency, not to strengthen the institution's mission. The performance metric used by the four campuses to measure progress in this shift is each institution's acceptance rate.

Another aspect of the access mission that is changing in adaptive ways concerns student recruitment (Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b). Given projected enrollment declines and diminishing state funding, stakeholders from all four institutions are concerned about maintaining and growing their student enrollment in order to ensure institutional survival. Less emphasis is placed on how various strategies for growing enrollment might affect the regional engagement and access mission of the four universities. All four universities have begun recruiting international students. In the case of River State and Thunder State, this growth has been subtle with just 30 or less international students enrolled. Alternatively, at City State and Inventor State, as much as 17% of the student body is composed of international students. Additionally, each of the four universities has expended efforts to increase out-of-state student enrollment through targeted recruitment, advertising, and scholarships to entice these students. The proportion of out-of-state students has grown most dramatically at Thunder State and currently composes 43% of the student body.

International and out-of-state students help alleviate enrollment declines while paying higher tuitions that help defray losses in state support. The region within which the universities also see themselves as recruiting from is also expanding. The chief financial officer of River State reflected on this change at her university, saying,

Our mission is to provide a truly affordable open access, to students that would not have an opportunity to go to college, mostly in this region. I think we've kind of lost sight of that too. I think we are expanding our reach to a larger area because we need more students, but I think we have plenty of students here.

Performance metrics used by the four universities are enrollment targets for the number of international and out-of-state students each enrolls, as well as the expanded regional reach of student recruitment. These targets are created through an analysis of each university's budgetary needs, demonstrating how this form of strategy is adaptive and concerns institutional financial survival and not mission.

The four universities have worked to support and serve commuter students, efforts that are tied to the access mission of each university. These efforts have included offering night classes, ensuring adequate and affordable (or free) parking, and providing daycare. In the last 10 years, each university has made efforts to shift the proportion of nontraditional and traditional age students so that fewer commuter students are enrolled. Evidence of adaptive strategy can be found in this shift (Chaffee 1985a, 1985b). The reasons for this shift are complex however one major contributing factor is that commuter students often enroll part-time time and hurt the university's standing in performance based funding allocations that privilege full-time student enrollment and on-time degree completion. The primary strategy for shifting this balance was through building dormitories on the four campuses and requiring that students live on campus their freshmen year. As a result, each of the four universities has shifted the proportion of students 25 and older to favor traditional students. In City State's case, parking garages were torn down to build dormitories creating a sense among students and some faculty that this was

symbolic of the university's shift in mission away from serving commuter students, as is described by this director of a teaching center:

They have taken out parking to put in dorms. They have taken out parking to put in the condos, and so there for people who have been around, there is a little sense of pushing folks out to make room for others. You do hear that among some students.

Performance metrics identified by each campus to assess their progress in recruiting a more traditional student body are the number of students enrolled who are under 25 and elect to live in dormitories.

There is a large number of adults in the U.S. who have acquired some college credit but not a degree. In the state that is the focus of this study, an estimated 10% of the adult population have taken college classes but do not have a degree. One way to enact interpretive strategy with regard to each institution's access mission would be to re-enroll these adults or to redefine merit so that it more broadly captures the diverse experiences of adult learners (Guinier, 2015). While each of the four campuses is aware of the large number of adults in their region who have some college education, because it is expensive and difficult to find these students and entice them to re-enroll, this idea has not been pursued. Another reason why these prospective students are not being targeted is because they have too many risk factors that would make it difficult for the university to retain and graduate them, putting the institution's financial security at risk. As such, further evidence of adaptive strategy can be seen in this lack of emphasis on re-enrolling adult students with some college (Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b).

Another way in which the four universities are de-emphasizing their access mission is through requiring students to maintain a certain GPA before they are able to enroll in certain majors and colleges on campus. The rationale for this institutional decision is that students should demonstrate their ability to do the work required by individual majors. The unintended consequence of these policies is that students may gain admission to the university but not be admitted to a college. To respond to this issue, two of the universities created general studies



degrees and another advises students to major in “organizational leadership.” The director of institutional finance at River State described this situation at her institution, saying,

There’s selectivity in the individual programs on campus, relatively few. Our health sciences programs, all of them have an application process ... You have a two-year nursing program but it could take you three or four years even if you’re successful in being admitted. Then we have others who try to get admitted to a two-year program for four years. Age limit kicks in and they’re stuck. That’s why I’m pleased to hear we’ve gotten with the general studies degree because there is at least an outlet. I like to know the students could at least leave us with a credential of some sort of they’ve put that much time and effort into it.

While an argument can be made for requiring admissions standards within a major like nursing given the knowledge demands involved in health care, in other majors it makes less sense. By creating a general studies degree for these students, the university is attempting to credential them in order to meet state demands for degree completion; however, it is questionable how this degree will be treated in the job market. Another unintended consequence of creating selectivity within colleges and majors is that doing so can lead to an arms race of sorts among the colleges on campus, with each desiring elevated major requirements in response to another college doing so, as was described by the provost of City State:

If you get into the admissions war going on, [a] department, they’ll say, “Well, we are putting ours up to, from a 2.5 to 3, or from a 2.5 to 2.75. Then the department over here, we don’t want to get stuck with them.” They start putting theirs up. Well, it’s a race that doesn’t help university.

For the colleges and academic units of the four campuses, requiring students to obtain a minimum GPA ensures that they have better prepared students enrolled and are able to demonstrate to the central administration that they are able to retain and graduate students. As the four campuses eliminate programs that either have poor student enrollment or poor success with students, this decision is directly tied to the individual unit’s survival and does not take into consideration the university’s mission of promoting educational access. For universities that allow differential GPA requirements, individual academic units track the number of students with high GPAs enrolled as a measure of each unit’s quality.

### Evidence of Interpretive Strategy

While there were adaptive changes taking place with regard to the access mission of the four institutions, there was also interpretive change evident as universities attempted to respond to the external policy context and declining student enrollments while maintaining aspects of their access mission (Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b). While City State elevated its admissions standards in the last few years, there are no plans to raise them further. The provost affirmed the university's desire to remain relatively open access despite the funding and policy challenges facing the university, saying,

Sometimes there's an inclination to [raise admissions standards] ... [City State] has raised the admission standards to where it is, I think our concern is how many people you cut out when you do that. It can disproportionately affect minority students.

In the rationale offered by the provost for maintaining admissions standards where they are because raising them would penalize minority students, evidence can be found of a focus on the university's access mission. As a way to track each university's progress towards ensuring access, leaders track shifting student demographics over time to ensure student diversity is being maintained.

Interestingly, Thunder State is engaging in a form interpretive change even as the university is elevating admissions standards (Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b). The enrollment management division is developing a non-cognitive component for the application process it is hoped will discern student traits of leadership or resilience that will help them to remain motivated so they persist and graduate, as was described by the director of government relations:

The first being we attempted to do was refine our application process. Kids who may not necessarily have the academic, the 2.0s and the 17s [ACT scores], now we're looking at, "What did you do in high school? Were you on student council? Did you play sports? Where you in the choir? Did you volunteer in your church?" Some of those other variables that might lend themselves to them pursuing or staying with us until they get their degree – persistence.

The goal of these efforts it to preserve the university's commitment to enrolling ethnically diverse students who may not have the GPA required by the elevated admissions standards.

The four universities also evidenced interpretive change as they negotiated their regional access mission (Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b). The first way in which the universities have done this is through solidifying partnerships with K-12 schools and funneling university resources into improving curriculum to ensure that students are better prepared when they enroll at the university and will be easier to retain. For Thunder State, part of the reason for solidifying these relationships is because there is decreased funding for travel for supervisors of teacher education candidates. As funding shrinks, the college looks to schools nearer to campus to reduce costs while also deepening the university's commitment to the school district. These two actions help ensure that graduating seniors are aware of the opportunity provided by the regional comprehensive in their backyard and that if they enroll at the university, they are better prepared. The four universities are also redoubling their efforts to solidify relationships with area high schools to recruit students from the region while encouraging admissions officers to build or improve relationships with guidance counselors. The vice president of enrollment management at Inventor State created a list of K-12 schoolteachers that received their degrees from the university and is establishing relationships with these teachers. River State has been tracking student knowledge gaps when they begin their freshman year and communicating these curricular issues to area high schools. Another strategy being used by two of the universities is to meet with high school teachers and school district leaders to improve alignment of the high school curriculum with the curriculum of the university. For the four universities, these actions not only improve the academic quality of incoming students, they also help to ensure that the university is fulfilling its access and regional engagement missions. Performance metrics being used by university leaders to measure their progress in these efforts are the number of incoming students who do not require remediation as well as the number of students attending the university who are from the region.

In addition to shoring up recruitment and student preparation within K-12 schools, Inventor State and City State have begun sending admissions recruiters to multicultural

community groups such as those that work with recent immigrants to educate them about the university and its offerings. The four universities have also been enhancing their efforts to recruit veterans. Finally, the four universities are solidifying their articulation agreements with area community colleges so that students are able to transfer with ease without losing course credit. These efforts to shore up recruitment within the region are interpretive in that they are done to respond to declining enrollment while also embodying the university's regional access mission. The performance metrics used by these universities to assess their progress in recruiting diverse students are the socioeconomic standing and ethnic diversity of incoming students.

### **Changes to the Student-Centered Mission**

#### Evidence of Adaptive Strategy

Given the decline in state funding and rising expectations, the student-centered mission of each university has been under pressure (Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b). As institutions that see themselves as places of second chances, remediation has historically been an important institutional feature that allows students to prepare for college success. Indeed, as much as 60% of any incoming class at the four universities require remediation. Because the state policy context encourages four-year universities to offer less remediation and graduate students quickly, there have been changes to remediation. Rationale for these changes is often focused on institutional survival in the face of performance based funding. The following quote from the president of River State demonstrates how changes to remedial education have been adaptive in nature.

With the new performance metrics, we no longer offer college developmental education courses. That is sunk, and we are going to partner with the community colleges to offer that kind of support so that my faculty and staff and the students we are now recruiting a more college ready and can move quicker through the college experience thus reducing the debt that they owe.

These changes largely have the goal of reducing the university's involvement in student remediation and emphasizing the university's efficiency in graduating students quickly, constituting adaptive strategy as these universities forego an important institutional activity that embodied an aspect its student-centered and access missions in order to respond to state policy demands. Three of the universities have eliminated remedial English courses, requiring that students be mainstreamed into freshmen-level English with students who require additional supports being required to take an extra remedial credit. If students do not attain a passing grade, they are either required to retake the class or are placed on academic probation. With this change has been a shift in how the University Colleges of Thunder State and Inventor State operate. Instead of offering remedial courses, these Colleges now provide a number of support services including tutoring, support groups, and computer labs. Due to funding shortages, though, there is a pervasive feeling on campus that there are still an inadequate number of tutors available for these students. The Dean of the University College at Thunder State described her wish for the College, saying, "I would have more staff members so that we can turn this place into a state of the art tutoring center. Tutoring, tutoring, tutoring - just more and more tutors." Performance metrics used to assess these changes are the number of incoming students that do not require remediation and the expediency with which students move through major requirements to graduation.

The teaching mission of the four universities is also experiencing pressure. This is the area in which each university has experienced most adaptive change with regard to its student-centered mission (Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b). Changes that affected the teaching mission concern the availability of faculty development opportunities, the composition of the teaching force, and the size of classes being offered. While City State and Inventor State have enhanced faculty development opportunities available, Thunder State and River State, due to budgetary challenges, have decreased faculty development opportunities. Additionally, all four universities have

increased student class sizes, particularly in introductory courses, and are requiring faculty to teach more classes. With larger introductory class sizes, instructors are less able to engage in innovative teaching and instead often rely on multiple choice exams and lecture formats – teaching strategies proven to have a negative effect on student learning (Dooris, 2002; NCTE, 2014; Stanley & Porter, 2002; Twigg, 2003). Higher teaching loads also reduce faculty availability outside of class to support students. With budget cuts, the four universities are also slowly decreasing the number of tenured professors employed. By increasingly relying on nontenure faculty members, each university is able to reduce their costs and maintain flexibility in staffing. These decisions evidence adaptive strategy as they are narrowly focused on institutional survival without regard for how these changes will affect the quality of instruction and the student-centered mission of the university. In determining the efficacy of the adaptive strategies above, the performance metrics used primarily concern the amount of money being saved and the departmental and university efficiency being achieved.

#### Evidence of Interpretive Strategy

There was also evidence of interpretive change with regard to each university's student-centered mission (Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b). The centerpiece of university responses to demands for improved retention and graduation rates are efforts to place the student at the center of the university's retention efforts. An example of these efforts is provided by this quote from the chief financial officer of Thunder State:

What percent of our classes our graduating? What percent of our classes are being ... students being retained? What has been our course completion rate? Before it gets published through another source, we already know now. We've already engaged students... So, we're looking at every single aspect of student [life] on primarily as a reason of the performance based model ...

Institutions have made changes to remediation, tutoring, and other student supports with the overall goal of encouraging all faculty, staff and administrators to see student success as their personal responsibility. This messaging to fall campus members uses language that invokes the

university's student-centered mission, demonstrating how these efforts are interpretive. In this way, the four universities' responses to the policy climate fulfill their student-centered mission.

Changes to student advising have also been made on the four campuses that reflect the student-centered mission of each institution as they are also striving to address policy demands.

Each institution has begun using some variation of centralized intrusive advising for students.

Intrusive advising, recommended by Complete College America, is defined by the National

Clearing House for Academic Advising as:

...action-orientated advising to involve and motivate students to seek help when needed. Utilizing the good qualities of prescriptive advising (expertise, awareness of student needs, structured programs) and of developmental advising (relationship to a student's total needs), intrusive advising is a direct response to identified academic crisis with a specific program of action. It is a process of identifying students at crisis points and giving them the message, 'You have this problem; here is a help-service' (Earl, 2012).

Inventor State and City State are using online software programs to monitor students, and City State and Thunder State are using email and phone calls to alert campus stakeholders when a student is struggling. When it is believed that a student is experiencing academic difficulty, the university provides tutors, study groups, or other academic support that are aimed at addressing this need. If the issue is financial, in some cases the university provides the student with information about potential jobs, scholarships, or loans they can pursue. If the issue is personal, the university directs the student to other university resources such as childcare or mental health support. City State and Inventor State are also in the process of creating transfer-intake centers that will assist community college students as they transfer into the university with the goal to improving transfer advising. Each of the four universities has historically represented the next academic stop for community college students and this change has as its goal deepening the university's commitment to supporting these students. The performance metrics used to track the university's progress towards meeting advising and tutoring goals are the number of times students use these services and each university's improved retention rates.

Curricular changes have also taken place that show interpretive strategy (Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b). The first major change is that City State and Inventor State are experimenting with offering credit for prior learning to nontraditional students, including returning war veterans. Doing so allows these students to become credentialed and receive credit for work experience they have done while deepening each university's commitment to nontraditional students. The student success curriculum created by River State also provides evidence of interpretive change as it is focused on meeting the specific needs of first-generation and underprepared college students. This curriculum is intended to acclimate students to college life so that they learn study skills and acquire information necessary of a successful college student. This curriculum also automatically enrolls students in an associate's degree for general studies. As the student makes progress towards becoming remediated, they can then apply to join another major on campus. If a student is not eligible to transfer to a major of their choice, they can major in general studies. Passage rates within remedial units as well as timely progression through major requirements are important performance metrics each university uses to assess their success in these areas.

Another instance of interpretive change is drawn from City State's efforts to reshape the student experience after surveying students to uncover the barriers they face in completing. City State now allows students to register for the entire academic year in the fall, making it easier for them to balance personal, professional, and academic responsibilities. City State has also unveiled a suite of financial incentives intended to encourage students to persist that were created in recognition of student financial needs. These changes can be seen as interpretive because they place student needs at the center of responses to external demands for improved student retention and graduation (Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b).



## **Changes to the Regional Engagement Mission**

### Evidence of Interpretive Strategy

The regional engagement mission of the four universities is also changing in response to the challenges they are facing. Thunder State has elevated regional engagement as it responds to external challenges (Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b). A first strategy used by this university has been to strengthen its relationship with the local community through inviting community members participate in the university's strategic planning process and creating a cabinet-level Government Relations and Community Engagement position responsible for assessing and improving community/university partnerships. There has also been faculty energy and efforts focused on recommitting the university to its land grant mission of extension with the goal of aligning existing research activities and community outreach efforts with community needs. The dean of the school of engineering described this work, saying:

There is a professor in [natural resources] ... who's looking at how the air pollution around transportation systems are affecting African-Americans in large cities. We have a program - one professor is researching using snake venom attracting the proteins from the snake venom for a cure for prostate cancer. Yeah, and there is a professor in geography who is looking at how to help disparities for African-Americans using GIS and geographic information systems.

The university has also allowed itself to be annexed by the city in order to reduce infrastructure costs and further solidify its relationship with the region. The university's regional engagement efforts evidence interpretive strategy as they are tied to its goal of responding to external threats in ways that advance the university's regional engagement mission. The performance metrics used by the university to assess its progress in meeting these goals include improved relationships with leaders in the local community, a growing number of community partnerships, and the number of faculty and student volunteer hours expended and community-based projects underway.

Similar to Thunder State, City State and Inventor State have also deepened their regional engagement efforts (Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b). The rationale given for this engagement is tied to each university's values and identity of being regionally-engaged institutions. As a result of this work, both universities have been awarded the Carnegie Community Engagement designation. As part of City State's 50-year anniversary celebrations, the university hosted a series of community forums on the issues facing the city. Both Inventor State and City State also provide office space and university expertise to area nonprofit organizations. The two campuses have also deepened their commitment to regional engagement through asking community partners to take part in campus governance and guide the university's approach to regional engagement. A community partner of Inventor State described these efforts, saying,

I remember last year, getting an email ... to take a survey about students and what they do for us and how we thought the partnership or relationship between Inventor State and our organization was. It was nice to give them some feedback and tell them how beneficial the students are and how thankful we are for them.

City State has responded to state demands for workforce degree alignment by meeting with employers and students to help them understand how liberal arts degrees and community engagement experiences prepare them for jobs. University officials are also helping students develop language to translate their community engagement experiences into resume bullet points. The university conceptualizes these responses as important strategy to preserve the university's regional civic engagement mission as the state emphasizes economic engagement. The performance metrics used by City State and Inventor State with regard to regional engagement include the number of community/university partnerships in existence, the assessment of these relationships, the number of service learning courses being taught, and the attainment of the Carnegie Engagement classification.

All four universities have also expanded their efforts to enhance economic development activities through engaging in business incubation, aligning university degree offerings with regional workforce needs, and expanding the number of internships opportunities available to

students. An example of how this engagement often unfolds can be drawn from City State. The university has begun hosting business advisory boards to determine workforce needs with the goal of aligning curricula with these needs. The work of these advisory boards is described by the provost:

We're inviting them [business leaders] sometimes by kind, but sometimes by size, and asking them what is it they need from us and how we can best respond to their needs... You had to really get involved at the ground level and then just having the willingness to change the curriculum or change the kind of offerings.

Performance metrics used to evaluate each university's economic engagement mission include economic impact indicators such as jobs and businesses created, the number of private sector partnerships in existence, and the number of students graduating with majors that meet regional and state economic needs.

#### Evidence of Adaptive Strategy

While economic engagement has always been important dimension of the regional engagement mission of regional comprehensive universities, there were a few senior administrators at Thunder State and Inventor State that display a tendency to conflate community engagement with economic development. This conflation runs the risk of overshadowing the civic engagement dimension of each university's public purpose. River State provides an example of how conflating economic engagement with civic engagement can cause one of the university's functions to overshadow the other. River State's decision to dismantle the Center for Community Service and create a Center for Student Professional Development is symbolic of the university abandoning its community engagement efforts in favor of economic engagement. This change took place because the state policy context places enormous pressure on institutions to demonstrate their economic value. In adapting institutional operations and foregoing this important aspect of the university's regional civic engagement mission, the university evidenced adaptive strategy (Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b).

**Framework for Understanding The Effects of Neoliberal Public Policy on the Public  
Purpose of Regional Comprehensive Universities**

The cases show that interpretive or adaptive strategy with regard to the tripartite public purpose of these institutions does not occur in a wholesale manner (Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b). It is within the varying responses to these challenges taken up by each institution that we see most evidence of the Faustian bargains being struck between elements of their public purpose. Thunder State's approach provides an example of how the Faustian bargain manifests itself. Although the university has enacted adaptive change through raising admissions standards and eroding its teaching-centered mission, it has also recommitted to regional engagement. Alternatively, River State has abandoned much of its regional civic engagement mission and, due to budget cuts, has had to chip away at aspects of its student-centered mission even as it has held firm on its commitment to maintain an open access mission. It is in the process of claiming one aspect of public purpose while allowing another to be eroded that we see most evidence of the bargaining these institutions are undergoing. That said, two institutions, (City State and Inventor State) evidenced more interpretive change than adaptive change along the three domains of their public purpose. Alternatively, Thunder State and River State evidenced more adaptive change. Incidentally, the two universities engaging in adaptive change along two of the three dimensions of their public purpose are the least well-funded, suggesting that there may be a financial threshold at which institutions can afford to maintain most of their public purpose.

Table 1 shows each university's use of adaptive and interpretive strategy along the three domains of their public purpose. In some instances, a campus demonstrated both interpretive and adaptive strategy in a single domain of public purpose. When determining whether a campus was engaging most in adaptive or interpretive strategy along a domain of public purpose, a critical mass of institutional responses that embodied either strategy was sought through examining the rationale and rhetoric used to enact this change (i.e., if the language to describe changes was

focused on insuring institutional survival and alignment with state policy demands (adaptive strategy), or focused on embodying the institution’s public purpose (interpretive strategy)).

**Table 2. Adaptive and Interpretive Strategy Along the Three Elements of Public Purpose at Regional Comprehensive Universities**

	<b>Interpretive Strategy</b>	<b>Adaptive Strategy</b>
<b>Thunder State University</b>		
Regional Engagement Mission	X	
Student-Centered Mission		X
Access Mission		X
<b>City State University</b>		
Regional Engagement Mission	X	
Student-Centered Mission	X	
Access Mission		X
<b>River State University</b>		
Regional Engagement Mission		X
Student-Centered Mission		X
Access Mission	X	
<b>Inventor State University</b>		
Regional Engagement Mission	X	
Student-Centered Mission	X	

Access Mission		X
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Building on this table demonstrating the Faustian bargains being made by each university between elements of each university’s public purpose, a Framework For Understanding Institutional Responses to Public Policy (Table 2) is proposed. The framework shows how institutions create or adapt existing university operations and performance metrics to respond to a neoliberal policy context. This framework demonstrates that a criteria for determining whether an institution is engaging in adaptive or interpretive strategy is the locus of influence for external threats and opportunities, as is shown by the direction of the arrows in the framework.

**Table 3. Framework for Understanding Institutional Responses to (Neoliberal) Public Policy Flows**

*Neoliberal Public Policy Flows*



	<i>Adaptive Strategy</i>	<i>Interpretive Strategy</i>
<i>Organizational Changes and Performance Metrics (PMs) Created</i>	<u>Access Mission:</u> - Becoming more selective in order to enroll students who will be more likely to graduate - Recruiting out-of-state/international students who will pay higher tuition - Decreasing the number of “conditional admit” students who require remediation - Increasing the number of merit-based scholarships - PMs: Number of high performing students enrolled; Number of international/out-of-state students enrolled; Number of students retained and graduated.  <u>Regional Engagement Mission:</u> - Abandoning community/university partnerships in favor of private-sector partnerships	<u>Access Mission:</u> - Strengthening regional focus in student recruitment - Expanding partnerships with area high schools to improve teacher effectiveness and student college readiness - Implementing non-cognitive admission criteria related to a student’s community involvement, demonstrated leadership abilities, and resilience given significant life challenges - Increasing the number of scholarships that are need-based - PMs: Number of students enrolled from the immediate region; Racial and socioeconomic composition of incoming classes.  <u>Regional Engagement Mission:</u>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Changing university structures that embody the shift in focus (ex. dismantling Civic Engagement Center and creating Center for Student Professional Development)</li> <li>- Emphasizing student professional internships over community service experiences</li> <li>- PMs: Number of students engaged in internships; Number and quality of private sector partnerships.</li> </ul> <p><u>Student Centered Mission:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Hiring nontenure faculty</li> <li>- Decreasing or eliminating remedial education</li> <li>- Decreasing the number of student supports on campus (often due to budget cuts)</li> <li>- Removing parking lots to build dormitories</li> <li>- PMs: Number of students enrolled in remedial course offerings; Institutional resources saved.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- When adding economic development activities, maintaining a focus on civic engagement</li> <li>- Providing incentives for faculty to engage in civic engagement</li> <li>- Creating cabinet level positions for regional engagement</li> <li>- Protecting university budgets for civic engagement</li> <li>- Assisting students in translating civic engagement experiences into resume bullet points</li> <li>- Communicating to regional business leaders the professional skills gained in civic engagement experiences.</li> <li>- PMs: Quality and number of regional community partnerships; Number of students and faculty participating in community-based projects.</li> </ul> <p><u>Student Centered Mission:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Placing caps on the amount of faculty research taking place</li> <li>- Considering faculty teaching an important element of tenure</li> <li>- Increasing individualized support available for students to retain and graduate them (mentoring, tutoring, advising)</li> <li>- Implementing best practices for remediation</li> <li>- PMs: Students retained and graduated; Learning outcomes students achieve.</li> </ul>
<p><i>Institutional Purpose and Identity</i></p> <p><i>(Ideologies and Values)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Abandoning an element of the university's public purpose</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identity and public purpose around providing educational opportunity, being a student-centered institution and engaging with the region strengthened</li> </ul>



**Neoliberal Public Policy Flows**

When neoliberal public policy is introduced, the flow of influence, as shown by the arrows in the table, depends on whether the university is enacting adaptive or interpretive change. When the university is enacting interpretive change along a domain of its public purpose, for example, its access mission, the university first revisits its commitment to providing educational opportunity and then adapts organization practices in response to the challenges and policies that are acting on it in ways that reflect or strengthen its access mission. In this way, the institution's public purpose acts as a prism through which neoliberal policy is refracted. We see this in the case of River State, the only institution that is engaging in a critical mass of interpretive change within this domain. While the university began requiring students to submit an ACT score for admission which could be viewed as an instance of adaptive change, it has also redoubled its efforts to recruit students from the region and there are no plans to institute GPA or standardized test score minimums. After the institution decides on a strategy for responding that preserves its mission, it then creates performance metrics that help it determine its progress towards enacting change. Drawing again on the example of River State, the performance metrics the university created to ensure that they are preserving their access mission while also meeting state demands include tracking student retention in the success curriculum while also surveying these students to determine if the curriculum is helping them be successful. In this instance, the access mission itself is preserved and, in some ways, strengthened as a result of the institution's response to the policy challenges.

Alternatively, when an institution is enacting adaptive change along a domain of its public purpose, it first reacts to an external threat such as the introduction of performance based funding and then quickly changes some aspect of university operations to ensure institutional survival. As a result of this change, the mission of the institution is affected and an element of its public purpose is eroded. An example of this can be drawn from Inventor State, as administrators



require that faculty teach larger courses and employ larger shares of nontenure faculty members. As a result of these changes, the student-centered mission of the institution is affected.

Using the framework, it becomes clear that institutions can attempt to preserve aspects of their public purpose that they deem most vital in terms of the values undergirding the institution. Institutions might also allow some element of their purpose to erode due to a lack of institutional resources, student enrollment declines, and pressure from a neoliberal state policy context. No institution in this study was immune to enacting adaptive strategy and effectively, the public purposes of all four universities have been eroded (Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b). In light of the Faustian bargains playing out on the four campuses, the question becomes: why is it true that adaptive change not dominate institutional responses to these challenges? And what role does the institution's identity play in compelling university stakeholders to cling to aspects of their public purpose? The following chapter explores the role of organizational identity in these processes.

## CHAPTER 9: THE ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY IN TIMES OF STRESS AT REGIONAL COMPREHENSIVE UNIVERSITIES

Times of organizational stress often raise questions concerning an organization's identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985). This is particularly true when identity threats are posed that call an organization's identity into question (Kotter, 1995; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006a; Wallace, 1956). As institutions that conceive of themselves as fulfilling the public good through enacting their public purpose, regional comprehensive universities face a profound identity threat posed by a neoliberal public policy context that narrows their purpose to their role in improving the state economy (Berman, 2012; Brown, 2003; 2006a). What was found is that conceptions of organizational identity held by the four institutions were related to the style of strategy used to respond to identity threats (Chaffee 1985a, 1985b). When a university was enacting adaptive strategy along two of the three domains of its public purpose, it tended more frequently to point to institutional features and organizational efficiency as salient identity markers. Alternatively, when a university was enacting interpretive strategy along two of the three domains of its public purpose, the underlying values and purpose of the university tended to be dominant shapers of its identity.

To understand the role of organizational identity in shaping institutional responses to identity threats posed by a neoliberal public policy context coupled with declines in enrollment, it is first important to differentiate organizational identity from culture and mission. *Organizational identity* involves three components: a central character of an organization, a clear distinction between the organization and its peers, and a sustained sense of identity over time (Albert & Whetten, 1985). *Organizational culture* is captured in the metaphors, stories and myths that embody taken-for-granted processes, values and norms guiding organizational practice (Pratt, 2000; Schein, 2004). For organizations enacting interpretive strategy, myths, values and norms are particularly important shapers of culture whereas for organizations enacting adaptive strategy, processes, institutional resources, organizational efficiencies and external demands are important

shapers of culture (Chaffee 1985a, 1985b). Organizational culture involves questions such as “How are things done here?” (a question particularly important for adaptive organizations) and “What values and norms guide this organization?” (a question particularly important for interpretive organizations). Organizational identity employs the metaphors, stories, processes and institutional features drawn from culture to communicate its essential character to external and internal audiences, and to differentiate it from its peers (Kanter, 1972; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Martin, Feldman, Hatch & Sitkin, 1983; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006b; Simsek & Louis, 1994). While organizational culture is often hidden and includes the “underlying assumptions” that are unspoken about an organization, identity is captured in the espoused values and unique characteristics of an organization (2004). Thus, culture is assumed while identity is communicated. As such, organizational identity involves questions such as “Who are we?”, “Who do we want to become?” and “How do we want to be viewed by external stakeholders?” (Fiol, 1991). In this way, organizational identity is dynamic and informed by elements of its culture. This was particularly true for the four institutions in this study. *Organizational mission* can shape both organizational identity and culture as it captures the guiding purpose and goals of an organization. Questions of mission include “Why do we exist?” and “What specific purpose do we serve?” (Clark, 1972; Fjortoft & Smart, 1994; Hartley, 2002; Townsend, Newell et al., 1992).

Organizational identity can influence decision making as leaders determine how to respond to identity threats such as the introduction of neoliberal public policy and declining enrollments given their understanding of who the organization is (Berman, 2012; Brown, 2003; Giroux, 2002; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006a). In light of the identity threats facing the four universities, it is important to understand how they make sense of their identities. In order to do this, the three components of organizational identity of the four universities are described (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Attention is paid to how identity relates to the style of strategy being enacted by each university. Also described are the sensemaking and sensegiving efforts of administrators

and faculty that influence identity and the choice of strategy (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006b). The sensemaking role of member identification and organizational reputation in forming organizational identity is also explored (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994). Finally, the influence of dualisms of organizational identity in shaping the style of strategy enacted is also described (2006a).

### **The “Essential Character” of Regional Comprehensive Universities**

A variety of institutional facts and characteristics inform the central character of the four universities (Albert & Whetten, 1985). For River State and Thunder State, their small size has created an identity around being close-knit, familial campuses that embody a student-centered mission. This can be seen in the way the president of River State talks about the effects of cuts to public funding on the families of the students attending her university:

My families are struggling with it ... We look at tuition increases because we need more money but my families can't afford it, so, I always bring that third factor to the table when I talk, normally, with my staff here ... It's, my families just can't afford it anymore.

At Thunder State, the president can often be seen hugging students and calling them by name, and many of the students think of professors as teachers and elder family members guiding them through their educational journeys. Because the two presidents can be “seen and touched,” a standard exists for staff and faculty for interactions with students. Another way in which the student-centered mission and familial culture of the universities affects their identities concerns faculty and administrator desire that students be viewed as “more than just a number,” as was described by a professor from Thunder State:

We also see them not as a number, as they would be in some very large institution, but as a very valuable person that needs nurturing, and that they would grow and prosper. That culturally enriching environment, that sense of family and togetherness, has been another very important factor.

Members of each university also draw identity cues from a culture of efficiency that has developed in response to declining funding from the state. An example of how this is conceived of is evidenced in this quote from the dean of the University College of River State,

We are good managers. I'm not saying we're the best but because we're lean and we've always been lean, we have the knowledge to know where the high impact of that funding will do the most good.

For Thunder State and River State, circumstances of being perennially underfunded have not only created an identity around being efficient with state resources but also contribute to the view of each university as being financially uncertain. The following quote from the president of the Student Government Association at River State shows how this identity expresses itself: "The whole institution basically has to save itself every day." An identity that is closely tied to a perception of institutional scarcity and efficiency encourages a view that River State and Thunder State must first focus on survival which contributes to their tendency to enact adaptive change (Chaffee 1985a, 1985b).

While both Thunder State and River State often experience financial challenges that can create a feeling of leapfrogging from one crisis to the next, for Thunder State, the university's ability to overcome financial difficulties serves as a metaphor for the university's resilience. Resilience following a natural disaster that nearly caused the university to close is an important metaphor drawn on during times of stress, as is described by this professor of engineering:

The university has suffered two [natural disasters] and the university survived. We have had hard times, but the university, I think, has developed a resilience or being able to be determined and keep on moving forward in the midst of hard and challenging times. What I've seen is that over the years, we have had our up times when we had great enrollment, and we've had our down times, but through it all, the faculty and staff have been very resilient.

In this way, faculty members are key perpetuators of the university's resilient identity. The university's official colors are a second cultural touch point that speaks to the institution's resilience. The official description of the colors state that they conjure the "fierce, unbroken spirit" of African Americans who escaped slavery. A final metaphor contributing to the university's resilient identity is an architectural feature that survived the natural disasters of the 1970s and is featured on university public relations materials and invoked during presidential speeches. The university's resilient identity is an important determinant of adaptive strategy as it

contributes to a sense that the university will do whatever is required to survive in the face of funding cuts, even if what is required is eliminating staff positions and adding additional responsibilities to faculty and staff, thus threatening the university's familial culture and ability to fully support students (Chaffee, 1985a).

A mission of providing access is another element that contributes to the central character of the universities. All four relate the low cost of their tuition to their identities as accessible institutions. In the case of River State, institutional members are proud of their university's status as having the lowest tuition of all public universities in the state, as is shown in this quote from a professor:

I think it's affordable. I think that it's a huge piece. As I said, we have many students who really could not see their way to leave the area and go to school somewhere else. So, this is right here in their community or within an hour's drive, and they can come here and have an affordable education, because I do believe that we are still in the lower percentage for the state for tuition cost.

As this quote suggests, the regional-focus of the four universities is deeply connected to their identities as accessible institutions. The four universities also think of themselves as being places for second chances. A quote from a professor at Thunder State demonstrates how this identity takes shape:

It's not about who you were; it's about what are you willing to do to change that. And I don't know that every school - all schools don't believe that. Everything is based on ... "How can you distinguish yourself from the pack?". And for many of our students that's just ... not even realistic. It's like "Distinguish myself from the pack? I barely made it out of high school. What? Are you kidding?" So, it's just a very different kind of student we're dealing with and we have to be able to serve everyone regardless of what yesterday was.

As universities that conceive of themselves as places of educational opportunity and second chances, an important cultural touch point informing each university's identity is its students. Some members describe the students attending their universities as people who other institutions would not accept, as is shown in this quote by the dean of the University College of Thunder State who said that her university "caters to students that other people don't want, so to

speak.” Professors, administrators and staff also connect the high proportion of first generation, low-income, minority, and adult learners that attend each university to its identity. There is pride felt at the four universities that the student diversity of campus is reflective of the diversity of the U.S., as is captured by this quote by the provost of City State:

When you look at [City] State’s students, you’re looking at America. We are the demographic ... This is America. *This is America*, with all its characteristics, its diversities and advantages and disadvantages. If you want to know America, you come to [City] State University, you’ll see the people you work with, the people you legislate for, the people you treat.

Another student characteristic that informs the central character of the four universities is the presence of commuter students although this is changing as all four campuses attempt to grow their residential student enrollment. Although each of the universities has an identity that is strongly connected to the types of students they serve, this identity has not been influential enough to prevent adaptive strategy aimed at recruiting a better prepared student body (Chaffee 1985a, 1985b).

Related to the idea of the four universities being places of second chances and transformation, the stories of students are important reference points in each university’s organizational identity. Specifically, stories of students overcoming adversity to obtain a college degree are shared to convey the transformative power of each university. These stories often give institutional members a sense of pride in their institution. One such story about a 19-year-old student whose grandmother was ill and wanted him to leave school and care for her was told by a dean of the University College at Thunder State:

She feels like maybe what he's doing here [at Thunder State] is not valuable enough and he needed to go back home ... The social worker called me and I said, “Well, if this grandparent is on aid, then can you find her some assisted living, someone who will come in and take care of her? We're not going to let this young man go home. He's the oldest of all his siblings. They're looking up to him.” ... The young man stayed ... He's doing very well. Those are the kinds of stories that make my day, that make this job valuable. It helps me to know that I'm making a difference in their life, of not only that one person, but that person's entire family and others that they may be associated with.

While these stories exist and are told on each of the four campuses, Inventor State, City State and Thunder State were more intentional than River State about incorporating them into university public relations materials and fundraising efforts. Interpretive strategy often involves communicating the values of an organization through stories. As such, a tendency for student stories to inform organizational identity may support this form of strategy (Chaffee 1985a, 1985b).

An additional element of the central character of each of the four universities concerns their regional identities. The first place this can be found is in the names of the universities, all drawn from features of the regions in which they are located. Academic programs created to fulfill specific regional needs are also important shapers of the organizational identities of the four universities. For example, River State's president, in describing her university invoked one such signature program, saying that it is "very tailored to meeting the needs of our region." The desire of the four universities to be seen as forces for positive change within their regions is another way in which the region influences their identities. For Inventor State, an important cultural touch point for this element of identity is captured in its founding story. The university's timeline, emblazoned on a wall of a prominent building on campus, tells a story of a university springing to life from the grassroots effort of the local community who wanted their children to have access to higher education. On its website, River State describes one of its programs as being "a reason for hope" in a region experiencing poverty. Before it was dismantled, River State's center focused on facilitating access to higher education for Appalachian students was another important contributor to the university's identity, especially because for a time, the university became known nationally for this work.

Although the identities of each of the four universities are tightly connected to the regions they serve, the way this identity exerted influence in determining the style of strategy enacted in response to the neoliberal public policy context varied. For Inventor State, City State and Thunder



State, an identity connected to the region was most influential in determining the use of interpretive strategy with regard to their regional engagement mission (Chaffee 1985a, 1985b). Interestingly, this regional identity did not prevent the three universities from enacting adaptive change with regard to their access mission as all have expended efforts to recruit students from outside the region. Alternatively, the regional identity of River State had a strong influence on its commitment to providing regional educational access however it did not dissuade the university from enacting adaptive change that resulted in the erosion of its regional civic engagement mission in response to neoliberal demands for workforce development.

To varying degrees, the four universities also conceptualize their central character as being teaching institutions. Being teaching-centered is a particularly salient element of the identities of Thunder State and River State, and is used to explain an emphasis on teaching instead of research, as is expressed in this quote by a professor at Thunder State: “Keep in mind Thunder State University is a teaching institution, so if you don't apply for [research] grants, you're not necessarily penalized.” Alternatively, Inventor State and City State have dual organizational identities that are related to their status as teaching institutions that also engage in research. While all four universities think of themselves as emphasizing teaching, they have also reacted to the external policy context and declining student enrollments in ways that counter this identity through enlarging class sizes, encouraging greater faculty research, and increasingly relying on nontenure faculty members (Chaffee 1985a, 1985b). Nonetheless, the phrase “as a teaching university” is frequently invoked by campus stakeholders on all four campuses when describing their institution, underscoring this element of their identities.

### **Member Identification with Institutional Characteristics of Regional Comprehensive Universities**

At times, the central character of an organization leads to sensemaking on the part of individuals who feel a personal connection to the organization's identity (Albert & Whetten,

1985; Dutton, Duckerich & Harquil, 1994; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006a). This process is called member identification (Scott, Corman & Cheney, 1998). For interpretive organizations, member identification is particularly important because the organization's identity is directly tied to the social contract created by participants concerning its primary purpose for existence (Chaffee, 1985b). Member identification involves attachment to elements of the institution's identity (1998). In organizations that have a strong organizational identity and a tendency to enact interpretive change, this attachment can produce feelings of member belonging as well as behaviors that are congruent with key elements of the organization's purpose and mission. Attachment can also occur after a member has joined the organization and finds that the values and character of the organization resonate with her own identity (1994). While all four universities evidenced member identification with elements of organizational identity, the degree to which this process shaped institutional responses to external threats depended on the style of strategy being enacted.

Members of the four campuses often chose to work at their university because of the types of students served. The president of Thunder State shared how her father's experience with racial discrimination made her passionate about HBCUs, saying:

You say what motivates? You ask me about who I am? I was old enough to know that my father had a Master's Degree in Psychology but was not allowed to practice. He went to a Predominantly White Institution to get his graduate degree and they would not allow him to march in the commencement.... It was always about moving [his] kids from picking cotton to the next level of growth in their life. He did that and that's his legacy to me, and that's what I'm trying to do ...

As this quote demonstrates, member identification with the student body of the four universities also compels university stakeholders to commit to the university's identity of being an access institution. The presidents of River State and Inventor State were first generation college graduates and have made this aspect of their identities central to their leadership. The provost of River State shared that he chose to join the university because the students reminded him of himself in college, saying,

I was not a silver spoon, Ivy Leaguer type. I really struggled in college. I was a lot like the typical demographic profile of students here. I wasn't prepared when I was an undergrad ...

There is a sense by these stakeholders, particularly faculty, that it is the resonance they feel with the backgrounds of students that allow them to relate to students and be effective teachers and mentors.

In addition to sharing demographic traits with their students, a large number of administrators and faculty were educated at regional comprehensive universities themselves. As such, many chose to work at their current institution because they believed in its mission and values. A number of professors were drawn to each university because they were passionate about teaching and thought of the institution as a place that valued this work. They made this assessment in light of high teaching loads, reduced expectations around producing research, and messages sent during interviews. At City State, a number of administrators and faculty chose the university for its identity of being an urban research university engaged with the economic and community development of the city, as is described by this professor:

I was much more interested in doing engaged work, and even if you don't get tons of support for it, what you don't get here is the pressure to publish so much in the prime time journals that you have no time for anything else.

In the case of River State, a number of people were drawn to the university because of its rural setting and the opportunity to serve Appalachian students. Members of all four institutions often rankle at the perception that people employed at regional comprehensives were unable to gain employment at more elite institutions. These members feel that this assumption does not reflect what was an intentional decision on their part to work at an institution that reflected their values, identities and experiences.

Not all campus members came to the universities because they felt strong identification with its mission or culture, though. Instead, some took jobs on campus because of tight labor markets with plans to leave after a few years. One such professor from City State had an

interview at Princeton and one at City State. When he did not receive an offer from Princeton, he came to City State with plans to leave. Eventually he grew to like the university and decided to stay, as he described:

I wasn't planning on staying here, but ... I like the school. It's different from what I was used to, but I love the students that we get here. They have some challenges in terms of their preparation and all, so just in terms of the commitments outside of class. But, I just really like it.

A Thunder State professor also had planned to work at the university for just a few years but stayed because she came to love the students and the university's mission:

I love this place. I've totally fallen in love with [Thunder] State and I got the job straight out of school. I said three years and then I was going to move to the "better gig" and that never happened because I have no desire for anything else. I'm professionally fulfilled in this institution. But personally fulfilled, including all of the challenges that you mentioned. It's part of ... it's part of what we do and it's ... it's a great place to be.

The preceding quotes evidence the sensemaking some faculty members undergo that leads them to identify strongly with the university (Pratt, 2000; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006).

### **How Regional Comprehensive Universities Distinguish Themselves Among Their Peers**

In addition to communicating the essential characteristics of an organization and compelling members to commit to this identity, Albert and Whetten asserted that organizational identity also serves to distinguish institutions from their peers (1985).

Institutional comparisons made by members at the four institutions were tied to the types of students they served, the level and form of funding allocations administered by the state, university research activity and institutional size. When identifying peer institutions, River State and Thunder State see themselves as related because they receive the state supplement in recognition of the high number of "at-risk" students they educate and because they are the smallest universities in the state. This was expressed by the chief financial officer of Thunder State:

[O]ne of the things that River and Thunder State has in its niche is to provide an opportunity for minorities to acquire a college degree ... So, as a result of these two

schools pursuing a different population who may not have had the K-12 development like most schools here in the system, we both get a supplement from the state.

Stakeholders at City State and Inventor State recognize the institutional comparison created by the state supplement and the small size of Thunder State and River State, hinting at this institutional distinction within the broader higher education context. City State and Inventor State think of themselves as being urban research and teaching universities with an access mission within the state. This comparison between City State and Inventor State is shared by members at Thunder State and City State. Members of all four universities also know their institution's ranking among other higher education institutions in the state in terms of the cost of tuition, and in describing their university, invoke this rank, as is demonstrated by this quote from the dean of the University College at Thunder State: “[Thunder State] is the only institution that, I would say more than any place else in the state, has the cheapest tuition.”

Albert and Whetten found that organizational identities can lead to the creation of a taxonomy of institutions based on their central characteristics (1985). For the four institutions in this study, specificities related to their access missions contribute to their identities and create a taxonomy drawn from the critical mass of students found on each campus. Inventor State distinguishes itself as being the university in the state that is most accessible for students with physical disabilities. River State sees itself as being the university in the state best positioned to educate students who are low-income and/or Appalachian. River State also distinguishes itself within the state as being one of a few remaining universities that are truly open access. Thunder State distinguishes itself on the basis of its status as the only public HBCU in the state. City State sees itself as being the university within the state that serves low-income, urban students. Albert and Whetten found that creating taxonomies among organizations can be a political-strategic act. This was true for the four universities as campus administrators invoke these specific access missions when addressing lawmakers. There is support for this taxonomy at the state level, as it is

recognized in state policy documents and among high ranking staff members in the SHEEO office, as is demonstrated by this quote from the SHEEO's public policy director:

All of our institutions have pretty unique missions and people that they're trying to serve. Depending on ... the region or the heart of the state or just the overall mission of the university or community college.

Although all four institutions incorporated underlying values and public purpose into their identities and comparisons with peer institutions, the identities of Thunder State and River State relate strongly to institutional features such as size, organizational efficiency, and level of funding. This basis of comparison of themselves with peers may in part be why these two campuses tended more toward adaptive change (Chaffee, 1985b). An acute awareness of a university's position within the broader landscape coupled with a sense that it is competing with peers for students and resources can inspire behavior aimed more toward survival than embodying purpose.

### **Organizational Identity Over Time at Regional Comprehensive Universities**

While the final component of organizational identity is that it be sustained over time, as Ravasi and Schultz found, identity is often dynamic and subject to change as members engage in sensegiving and sensemaking, and as identity threats are introduced (Albert & Whetten, 1985; 2006a, 2006b). This is particularly true for adaptive organizations that evolve and change as external contexts and clients change (Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b). The dynamic nature of organizational identity was found to be true within the four universities of this study. Given the disparate ways each was founded – as either a branch campus, a department of teacher education, a community and technical college, and an offshoot of the YMCA – it is not surprising that each institution's identity has evolved greatly over time.

For the oldest university, Thunder State, its identity has historically been related to the view of itself as a place of opportunity and second chances for African Americans. The university's legacy as a land grant university is taking more of a central place within the

university's identity and as such, is causing the university's identity to evolve. These two elements of identity contribute to interpretive change aimed at preserving the institution's long-standing identity as a regionally engaged HBCU.

Inventor State's identity has long been tied to its founding goal of providing access to working class students and people with disabilities. Indeed, the founding story of the university serves as a guide and ballast for the university as it evolves, as is described by the president:

I think it starts with the way we started - by a grassroots group of blue collar people saying: We need you. We've never lost track of who we were designed to serve. We've had great leadership, not just presidents but provosts - people who have really maintained that sense of purpose.

The university has also had a long history of research even as it thinks of itself as having a teaching identity. As the university has added new elements to its mission and culture that capture the goals described above, its organizational identity has evolved to embody each new element.

City State was also founded through a grassroots effort to provide night classes to working adults and commuter students. Over time, a growing number of traditional students have enrolled, contributing to a shift in its identity away from being primarily a commuter campus. In addition to changes in the student composition of the institution, there have been changes to the university's identity as it relates to its place in the region. As the university engages in a growing number of community partnerships, it has begun to see itself as both educating the region and providing service to the region. The university has also expanded its research activities since the 1960s. These efforts culminate in a widely used descriptor for City State as an "urban research university." In these efforts to shape member understanding of the university, university members evidence interpretive strategy aimed at employing underlying institutional values in gaining member support for various initiatives (Chaffee, 1985b).

River State, the youngest university in the study, has experienced fluctuation in its identity over its short life, particularly given its early days as a branch of an elite university and a community college. Similarly to City State, River State has enrolled a growing number of

traditional age students and in doing so, its identity is beginning to change from being a commuter university to that of a traditional university. An enduring element of the university's identity that is often invoked by institutional leaders is its status as a truly open access university.

### **How Regional Comprehensive Universities Are Viewed by External Audiences**

Organizational identity is not only felt internally but is transmitted to and, in some cases, co-created by external audiences (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Dutton, Dukerich, 1991; Dutton, Dukerich & Harquil, 1994). External stakeholder perceptions of the identity of institutions can reinforce institutional differences within a system, as is evidenced by state policymaker support for the taxonomy of access institutions. As such, the view held by external audiences such as policymakers, peers at more elite institutions, and the surrounding community can influence an institution's sense of itself (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006a). This is particularly true for interpretive organizations that seek external credibility and legitimacy through aligning organizational operations with conceptions of purpose (Chaffee, 1985a). Not only can the way external audiences view an institution affect its identity, so can member perceptions of their institution's reputation. When an organization perceives itself as having a negative reputation, institutional leaders may feel compelled to broadcast the identity they hold of their organization to outsiders with the hope of changing this opinion (Gioia & Thomas, 1996). These dynamics were at work at the four universities.

Aside from current and prospective students and alumni, there are two external audiences to which the four regional comprehensives are best known: state policymakers and legislators and leaders and stakeholders within their regions. The four universities consider the opinions of these constituent groups to be of great importance and as such, engage in efforts to improve their reputation with these two groups. The first perception held by some in each region is that the university educates students who will not be accepted elsewhere. This view is shown in this excerpt from a community post about River State: "There are no entrance requirements and there



are as many remedial classes as there are regular classes.” Low barriers for admission are accompanied by a regional perception that the university is low quality. Another negative regional perception that has existed at times is that each university was not full-fledged, as is demonstrated by this post from another community forum: “What a joke. River State actually thinks its [sic] a real university. It's just the last chance for the students who can't make it any where else.”

There are also positive perceptions held by community members. The first is a sense of gratitude for the university's existence as it provides jobs and improves local community life. The mayor of the town surrounding River State stated her belief that if the university did not exist, the town would be in serious economic trouble because it creates jobs and ensures that local businesses have customers. Additionally, the universities are seen as important access points to higher education for those who are not able to leave the region. Related to expanding educational opportunity, regional stakeholders also point to each university's role in ensuring that there is a supply of educated teachers for area schools.

In addition to negative and positive perceptions, there is a lack of knowledge about the four universities within their regions. This is a common frustration felt by members of the four campuses. Although they educate a large number of students from the region, engage in service, and prepare schoolteachers, they still remain semi-anonymous institutions to residents in their region. In describing this perceived anonymity, people call their institution a “well kept secret.” Indeed, community members sometimes have no knowledge of the university before establishing a community/university partnership or enrolling at the university.

At the state level, the construed external images held by members of the four institutions vary (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquil, 1994). An important contributor to the construed external images held by members is drawn from the level of funding each receives from the state and the types of students each enrolls. These two elements contribute to a sense on the four campuses of a

middling status when compared with other higher education institutions in the state. When it comes to voicing their opinion in public policy debates, the universities are well aware that while they may have a say (most often because of personal relationships between senior university administrators and policymakers), their voice is not as loud as that of elite public universities. This middling status can become conspicuous when one of the universities is attempting to create a new degree program, particularly at the graduate level. An example of how this status affects the institution's ability to advocate for the creation of a new degree program can be drawn from River State. The university's administrators and faculty wanted to create a new master's of teacher education degree with a math emphasis in response to a state policy that allows students to receive college credit while in high school if their teachers have a master's degree. To gain approval for this program, campus members from River State interfaced with an approval committee at the state level. A number of powerful institutions already had similar programs and state policymakers were initially unsupportive of the proposal. After a great deal of lobbying, River State was approved to offer the program. One professor who was instrumental in gaining approval for the program called the process an "ordeal," saying she chose that word intentionally because the university experienced such difficulty through the process. Regional comprehensives also experience a set of "unwritten rules" within the state that limit their autonomy, as is explained by a senior administrator at City State:

There have been these, sort of, unwritten rules around, rules of engagement, boundaries to, you know, a four-year university won't put a program within so many miles of competitive area or what have you.

These unwritten rules are most intractable for regional comprehensives in the state, with better-funded, elite peers enjoying greater autonomy to evolve as they wish. Members of these institutions acknowledge the wisdom in preventing unnecessary program duplication, however they attribute their own institution's lack of autonomy to their middling standing in the state. This lack of autonomy can also contribute to a feeling on campus that compromises must be made in

order to respond to state policymaker demands. At times, these compromises come at the cost of conceptions of the university's purpose as adaptive strategy takes place focused on securing resources and legitimacy from the state (Chaffee, 1985b).

Given chronic underfunding and enrollment shifts, River State and Thunder State in particular have struggled with reputations and construed external images of being poorly managed and inefficient (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquil, 1994). This negative perception has been particularly difficult for Thunder State to overcome as the university has had to rebound from the brink of multiple natural and financial disasters. Because the state supplement causes these two institutions to be grouped together at times the challenges facing one, such as mismanagement, are assumed of the other. This grouping effect is demonstrated by a quote from the Director of Institutional Finance at River State:

It [the state supplement] also groups us together. So if [Thunder] State has operational problems, people associate their same problems, issues with us which has been a challenge.

The supplement also engenders a statewide perception that these institutions are wholly dependent on the state for their functioning which exacerbates the sense that they are not fully autonomous members of the higher education system and must focus on institutional survival. Prior to the recession each institution devised plans to wean themselves off of the supplement. However, when the recession hit, these efforts were abandoned and ironically each institution became even more reliant on this budgetary allocation as the state share of instruction allotted through performance based funding fluctuated. There have also been long-standing efforts at each institution to broadcast their efficiency to external audiences and demonstrate that they are making good use of state resources. Pressure to demonstrate accountability with the use of state resources has further contributed to the four universities enacting adaptive change as efficiency is a key criteria for organizational success in this form of strategy (Chaffee, 1985b).

Construed external images have been shown to inform the personal identities of members (Dutton, Dukerich, 1991). This was the case for the professors at River State and Thunder State in particular. Professors at these two institutions are aware that they are paid the lowest salaries in the state and have high teaching loads when compared with their peers at other institutions. This feeling is illuminated through the following quote from a professor of English at Thunder State who said that her institution and River State “vie for being the lowest paid faculty in the state ... we flip back and forth, but we're always in the basement.” Construed external images were also found to inform the identity of some senior administrators. For example, the president of Inventor State related his university’s middling status to his belief that his discipline was not well respected and that he has always felt like an “underdog” which was why he belonged at the university.

### **Stakeholder Involvement in Identity Formation**

Ravasi & Schultz argued that organizational identity is both sensegiving and sensemaking with members playing different roles depending on their positions (2006a). Some, often senior leaders, send messages about an organization’s identity, called identity claims, with the goal of enacting sensegiving. The role of administrators in making identity claims and shaping organizational identity is derived from their responsibility for aligning the essential values and purpose of the institution with institutional behavior (Voss, Cable & Voss, 2006). These leaders are important in formulating identity because they can convene organization-wide conversations that seek to answer the questions: “What are we doing?” “Who are we?” and “Who do we want to become?” In interpretive organizations, the goal of sensegiving is to solidify the social contract guiding the organization and encourage members to identify with this contract (Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b). In adaptive organizations, the goal of this process is to help members recognize their role in ensuring the organization’s survival. Organizational members, often faculty and staff on university campuses, engage in sensemaking while incorporating what they

know of the university's culture, purpose, processes and essential character with identity claims being made by administrators. Given their longevity on university campuses, faculty are particularly important shapers of a campus's identity and as such, if the identity claims sent by senior leaders fail to resonate with how they view their university, they will ultimately be rejected (Rosovsky, 1991). This section explores the interaction of sensemaking and sensegiving as it relates to the facilitation of organizational identity during a time of external challenges.

Administrators of the four campuses have engaged in sensegiving through making identity claims in a variety of ways (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006a). As Chaffee found, a primary way in which interpretive strategy unfolds is through the manipulation of symbols and stories that serve to inspire member commitment to an organization's purpose (1985a). In the last five years, the administration of Inventor State has engaged in sensegiving through connecting its inventor namesake to the growing entrepreneurial, nimble culture on campus. Administrators point to this identity as an important force in shaping the institution's responses to the challenges it is facing. As the leaders of Inventor State engage in sensemaking tied to institutional purpose particularly in their responses to the neoliberal public policy context, interpretive strategy is evident. Many of the faculty on campus have engaged in sensemaking and adopted this view of the university in large part because it matches with the founding history of the university and their own member identification. An example of faculty sensemaking with regard to the university's identity as being experimental is captured in the following quote:

That's the whole innovation thing. It informs campus life everywhere. Everybody knows. You can't come to Inventor State without understanding very quickly that the [inventor] was a great innovator. That's what we're supposed to be doing.

The president of City State has engaged in sensegiving efforts through promoting a view of the university as being not just "in" the city, but "of" the city, the preposition in this description serving to situate the university's identity within its work to improve economic and civic life in the region. Additionally, administrators continually make identity claims about the

university's regional, urban focus as is evidenced by this quote from the provost: "[I]t clearly has an urban mission which differentiates it from most. It's wedded, highly collaborative ... with that city and with the region." Given its legacy as an access point for adults from the city, faculty and staff resonate with this view of the university, as is described by this professor:

It's interesting going out, again, in the community and discovering how many of the people we work with, the mayor and folks like that, either went here or went to law school here or have kids going here, or whatever. There really is some meaningful sense of that regional identity.

The willingness on the part of the administrations of City State and Inventor State to engage in sensemaking in this way likely predisposes the two universities toward engaging more in interpretive than adaptive change.

At Thunder State, administrators are working to conceptualize the university as a place that adheres to policies and procedures, as is described by the president:

We want them to understand and practice protocol which is structure and best practices in everything that they do. And we want them to be civil and respectful to themselves, the university and the nation and the community they serve.

While each administrator that participated in this study invoked this identity, faculty members tended to question the efficacy of promoting this identity on campus, as is demonstrated by this quote from a professor:

I don't see protocol improving ... I don't see a palpable "We're better at service. We're better at the way we treat each other [with more respect]. And we're more ... we're more about the rules and less about the exception to the rule."

As this quote demonstrates, administrator efforts to make identity claims are not always adopted by the faculty. In the university's efforts to reshape the university's identity and culture, adaptive strategy is evident as a focus of this work is demonstrating efficient use of state resources and efficient organizational processes (Chaffee 1985a, 1985b). The university's administration has also engaged in sensegiving about the importance of Thunder State's HBCU and land grant mission. These sensegiving efforts have contributed to the interpretive strategy enacted with

regard to the university's access and regional engagement missions, although as was described, on the whole the university's approach to enacting its access mission has been adaptive.

In the case of River State, the administration's primary identity claim concerns the university's status as one of the few truly open access institutions in the country, as was described by the president in an earlier quote. While there is widespread acceptance of this mission on the part of faculty, there is less of a clear understanding of how it directly connects to the university's identity. Instead, faculty tend to see the university more as a leanly staffed teaching institution, as was described by this senior faculty member:

I think because we're open enrollment, I would say that we share this mission with other open enrollment institutions in [the state] to provide access to underserved populations or economically depressed areas ... I'm sure that there is some sort of identity. May be hard to put my finger on it. ... I kind of see us as a lean, as far as faculty is concerned, a really lean, operating sort of machine that we're focused on teaching.

Likely due to its young age and lack of institutional resources, the administration of River State has yet to engage with these questions in a systematic way through sensegiving, as was described by the provost:

As the institution contemplates how it wants to brand itself and strategically position itself - there haven't been those community campus wide conversations since I've been here so hard to say how some people would characterize that, how they would describe that. I don't know.

There is widespread hope on campus that when the new president assumes office, he will engage the campus in a process of sensegiving that will solidify an identity for the university. Perhaps if this takes place, the university will be less prone to enacting adaptive strategy with regard to its public purpose (Chaffee, 1985b).

As these examples show, the administrations of Thunder State and River State have engaged in less sensegiving focused solely on questions of purpose than those of Inventor State and City State. Perhaps the reason for the varying degrees of engagement with purpose as it relates to identity has to do with the resources at each institution's disposal. For River State and Thunder State, institutions that are seen as financially dependent and precarious, opportunities for

deeper questioning about who the institution is may be more elusive. This was articulated by a senior faculty member:

I feel like we go from crisis to crisis. Rather than there being a vision for "Yes, there is a fire right in front of my face but until I look at the bigger picture there is always going to be a fire in front of my face unless I start to change the way I act day to day" so there are less fires and more opportunities to think long-term.

Another reason could be that these institutions have been forced to compromise more elements of their public purpose than City State and Inventor State. As these Faustian bargains have been foisted on the institutions, members are forced to confront dissonance between what their institution claims to value and the ways it is changing to address challenges posed by a neoliberal public policy context and declining enrollments. Alternatively, leaders who have the luxury of resources and relative institutional stability are better positioned to engage in sensegiving efforts focused on embodying purpose as opposed to ensuring survival. In this way, institutional resources may serve as a commitment mechanism that compels administrators to engage with these questions and enact more interpretive than adaptive change (Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b; Kanter, 1972). Another potential commitment mechanism is member identification with the values of the institution (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquil, 1994). As an institution is confronted with difficult decisions about which aspects of its purpose to preserve and which to let go of, strong member identification with public purpose coupled with administrative leadership may better position it to enact interpretive strategy that preserves its purpose. High levels of member identification with the identities and purposes of the four campuses likely contributed to instances of interpretive strategy.

### **Dualism of Identity at Regional Comprehensive Universities**

As the organizational identities of these universities have evolved over time, a variety of dualisms have developed (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Dualism in organizational identity is the presence of two or more competing identities within a single organization. Dualism is often in the DNA of multi-purpose institutions as they strive to respond to external challenges and



opportunities while meeting a variety of demands. Dualism can also arise because an organization has had success in solidifying one identity for itself and decides to add a new set of goals to its purpose or strategic direction. Albert and Whetten wrote “universities typically present themselves as the realization of different but harmonious purposes, such as teaching, research and service, rather than organizations torn between conflicting objectives” (p. 27). The preconditions for dualism as well as stakeholder desire to give the impression that this dualism was well balanced was evident in all four cases.

Reflecting the tension between the normative and utilitarian aims of a university, or put another way, its public and private purposes, the four institutions had dualistic identities around the value proposition created by the education they provide. Some think of this value in terms of their tuition being a smart consumer investment, as is demonstrated by this quote from the chief financial officer of Inventor State University:

That's what we truly, really view the brand of Inventor State. It's that value proposition of what you get for your effort, energy, the resources you're committing to, in terms of those credentials and being prepared for success in the workforce.

Adaptive strategy is seen in this conception of the university needing to secure and serve clients in order to ensure its survival (Chaffee, 1985b). Incidentally, this conception of the university also reflects the neoliberal concerns of state policymakers. In this way, the utilitarian function of the university ensures that, for a low cost, students will gain credentials that will ensure a life of economic prosperity. Alternatively, other campus stakeholders on the four campuses couched the value of their university in terms of its transformative power. This is particularly poignant as first generation and low-income students attend these universities and gain skills and efficacies that are not only marketable but also allow them to discover their dreams while enhancing their overall wellbeing and that of their families. A quote from the president of River State is illustrative in showing this identity around being an institution of transformation:

River State students and graduates become new people. What they have learned and experienced at the University means a new life for them and for those with whom they

live and work. Our faculty members work hard to help students build upon their hopes, dreams, and abilities.

In this conception of the university, interpretive strategy is evident as the university's identity of being a place of transformation relates to its public purpose.

Another way in which these universities occupy a dualism in their utilitarian and normative identities concerns the presence of both liberal arts and technical, industrial curricula. The founding histories of all four institutions have contributed to this dualistic identity because all developed to address the very real needs for workforce development of people within their regions. At the same time as these workforce needs were being fulfilled, a suite of liberal arts curricula were created. While this dualism is often the natural order of things within colleges and universities, it creates a special set of tensions within River State. The university has three colleges: one devoted to remedial education, one devoted to professional education and vocational degrees, many of which are associates degrees, and one devoted to classical liberal arts disciplines. Because of its history and current configuration, the university maintains a dual identity as a vocational and remedial school that looks and acts similarly to a community college, and a classical liberal arts university. A professor described the university's dual identity this way:

The College of Arts and Sciences is like the old [branch campus of the public elite university], and the [College of Professional Studies] is the old technical college. I think what that ultimately has meant is that the culture here did not develop simply as a university culture.

The bifurcated culture of the faculty came into sharp focus as doctorate-holding professors within the liberal arts college organized to create tenure and promotion guidelines, while a majority of faculty members in the other two colleges hold masters degrees. This bifurcation has also meant that faculty life looks very different depending on the college in which a professor resides, as is demonstrated by this quote from the director of the university's development foundation:

We still have a lot of those throwbacks from the community college time. You still have faculty who teach, instruct, and lead those programs that are somewhat unlike what you would find at universities.

This dualism in identity may be another reason why the university's administration has engaged in less sensegiving aimed at preserving the university's public purpose. It is difficult to communicate a coherent identity for a university tied to its purpose when individual units embody radically different missions and operating strategies.

All four institutions have large student populations who require remediation as well as large populations of students who are high performing. There are some members on each campus who believe the institution should suspend with offering any form of remediation and associates degrees and instead focus solely on enrolling college-ready students. Doing so would constitute a shift in the mission of each institution. These institutional members, often faculty who do not experience member identification with the university's identity and are highly cognizant of the negative perceptions about the university held by external stakeholders, reflect another dualism common in the organizational identity of these institutions. This dualism is perhaps best typified by the presence of honors colleges and curricula that mimic the practices of selective, elite institutions within institutions that have a majority of students who require remediation. This tension is also illuminated in the way institutional members make sense of the elevated admissions standards of the university. City State provides an example of how this plays out. A professor at City State reflected positively on elevated admissions requirements, saying:

I'll give him [the previous president] credit, made the decision to go off of open enrollment, where everyone is admitted who can fill out an application basically, and went toward a more selective enrollment or admission, and I wouldn't say we're highly selective, but I think we turn away probably 3 in 10 or 4 in 10 applicants now.

Alternatively, the provost described her support of the university's identity of educating students who may not be well prepared, saying,

You'll wait for hell to freeze over for the schools to get better at this or whatever it is. That's the population, let's figure out how we educate them. They're not stupid. They're

bright and they're hard working. They may not have had all of the advantages but they're good students and we got to figure out how to make them succeed, as simple as that.

These two perspectives illuminate the dualism of identity that exists and contributes to the university's tendency to enact adaptive change with regard to its access mission.

City State, Inventor State and, to a lesser extent, Thunder State also experience dualism in their identities of being teaching institutions that conduct research. As has been documented by higher education scholars, this form of dualism is common in universities with faculty often bearing the brunt of a university's indecisiveness over its identity (Gardner & Veliz, 2015; O'Meara & Bloomgarden, 2011). For these three universities, this dualism expresses itself in faculty assignments as "teaching professors" versus "research professors," each charged with different sets of responsibilities depending on their designation, and in the requirement that faculty teach a large number of courses while also conducting research. A picture of how this plays out is illuminated in this quote from a professor of history at City State:

What's happening is we're doing both because we're turning into a bifurcated faculty... There are people like me who are bringing in external funding, that are as a result, I think, we're protected from the teaching load increase because we're productive, and we're - it's probably the minority of faculty who are doing more and more well-funded research that gets external funding, and meanwhile many of our peers are slipping further and further into becoming teaching faculty.

As this quote shows, some faculty identify as researchers and pursue grant funding to support their research while others teach more classes and do not pursue research. Dualism between each of the university's teaching and research identities is also present within promotion and tenure decisions with scholarship – not teaching – being the most important element of a tenure dossier. While this is not a novel form of dualism in organizational identity for universities, given the resource scarcity experienced by these three campuses, it can create a special set of tensions. A professor at City State described the conundrum created by these dual identities in the following way:

There's a fork in the tunnel so to speak, there's light at the end of both tunnels... But it's hard to go down one tunnel, you can't go down two tunnels at the same time very well...

On the one hand if you listen to the state, everything is based on student success, well you'd better spend more time with students. On the other hand, the state, always trying to starve you for money, more and more each year it seems, and so part of you then thinks, well then, R&D is the way to go because if you can get enough funding you can offset the loss of state funding. ... The short answer is probably certainly true is that we can't not do both well. So there's a tension between the two and we're fumbling our way along.

This quote demonstrates how the state's policy climate exacerbates the dual identities on this campus and contributes to adaptive change as the university strives to respond to state policy demands.

The student recruitment practices of the four institutions have also given rise to a variety of dualisms as these institutions grow their traditional student populations. This change in recruitment practices has created tensions within the universities, as is described by an associate provost from City State:

There's been this tension between are we a degree completion place [for adult learners], or are we serving a more traditional population? I think since I've been here, in the last twenty-five years, I think we've shifted the balance a bit towards traditional age college students. You know, that may have been partly a choice, with the residences.

Another way in which student recruitment gives rise to dualism in organizational identity concerns efforts to internationalize the student body. As regionally focused universities that see themselves as access points to higher education for place-bound students, this creates a dualism in how the university views itself. It also creates conundrums as institutions decide where to expend scarce resources – on supporting international students or first generation college students.

Interestingly, campus stakeholders do not perceive a tension between these two identities, as was described by this professor of City State:

They're [international students] paying their way, and if they pay their way, then they're helping to pay for the others ... There shouldn't be any tension in that sort. It's more a question of if you have to devote additional resources to re-mediate something or if you have to provide special services. Yes, they do get special services as international students, but there's no reason to think that those special services are more costly than special services that other students get for some other reason.

Nonetheless, an identity that is increasingly international begets greater efforts to grow this student population, further contributing to adaptive strategy with regard to the access mission of the university.

A final dualism in identity has been created as three of these institutions reinterpret their access missions. In the case of Thunder State, this has meant recruiting well-prepared African American students as opposed to being completely open access. Relatedly, as Inventor State and City State have raised admissions requirements, they have become less accessible but their student bodies have become more ethnically diverse. As a result, when describing their access mission, these institutions are beginning to couch it in terms of a diverse student body, as is demonstrated by this quote from a former chief financial officer of Thunder State:

The institution does see itself as the state's access institution by traditionally serving the population underserved. Thunder State has begun to move away from just targeting African Americans and trying to do more to serve. And it has always been open, but now it is trying to move towards direct recruitment of individuals of color ...

This has created a conflation between institutional identities around providing access and recruiting a diverse student body. To be certain, both are important educational and democratic goals that underscore each institution's public purpose. In conflating these two sets of goals and identities, though, these institutions are able to continue thinking of themselves as facilitating access, as is shown in the preceding quote, with the chief financial officer asserting that the university is "open" even as it has become more selective and enacted adaptive change.

Chaffee asserted that interpretive organizations can be understood as networks of individuals bound by a social contract about the purposes and values guiding the organization (1985b). While creating this contract is a fluid process that is often disjointed and dispersed, the basic assumptions about the purpose of the organization are often shared. The four universities have experienced difficulty in creating a widely agreed upon social contract in part because of the dualism of identities present. This has contributed to lack of member agreement on such questions as the types of students that should be admitted, the responsibilities that faculty

members should embody, and the types of instruction that should take place. Thus, the presence of dualism of identity in so many facets of university life contributes to the inability of the four universities to enact interpretive change along all three domains of their public purpose.

### **Conclusion**

As is clear, the organizational identities of the four universities can predispose them to enact *both* adaptive and interpretive strategy (Chaffee 1985b). External pressures and identity threats provide an opportunity for members to ask questions that concern organizational identity such as, “Who are we?” and “Who do we want to become?” (Kotter, 1995; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006b). Dualism in identities can give rise to a variety of tensions that make progress towards enacting interpretive strategy aimed at preserving public purpose in the face of neoliberal identity threats difficult. Dualism can also lead to mixed messages for institutional members about what types of work is valued and will be rewarded (O’Meara & Bloomgarten; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006a, 2006b). One participant described the tensions created by dualism of identity in terms of the university not being willing to “own up” to what its identity truly is. What is clear is that leveraging organizational identity in order to embody public purpose is no simple matter for the four institutions. As these universities grapple with the contradictions inherent in the way they were founded and a public policy context that seeks to redefine their public purposes in purely economic terms, they become particularly susceptible to various forms of striving. The following chapter illuminates the complexities and institutional variations of this phenomenon.

## **CHAPTER 10: BEYOND STRIVING: PRESTIGE AND LEGITIMACY**

### **SEEKING DURING TIMES OF STRESS AT REGIONAL COMPREHENSIVE UNIVERSITIES**

According to institutional theorists, organizations aspire to resemble the most elite in their system (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Morphew, 2009; Morphew & Huisman, 2002). Scholars have pointed to this striving as one of the dominant forces shaping organizational change in higher education. Given the “muddled legacy,” of regional comprehensive universities and lack of traditional markers of prestige including institutional longevity, selectivity and high research output, it would seem that that they would be prime candidates for this kind of behavior, particularly during times of stress (Clark, 1987; Henderson, 2007). Yet, the striving taking place on the four campuses was more complicated than what institutional theory would predict and was largely shaped by the style of strategy being enacted (Chaffee 1985a, 1985b). When a university tended more toward adaptive strategy, it strived to be responsive to the external environment with the goal of ensuring survival and developing a competitive edge when compared to other higher education institutions. Alternatively, when a university tended more toward interpretive strategy, this striving had as its goal being seen as legitimate through aligning institutional operations with purpose. Chaffee asserted that enacting interpretive strategy depends largely on a clear sense of organizational identity tied to purpose that compels members to embody this identity. This was found to be true within the four cases.

The striving that was present often had the goal of obtaining legitimacy as full-fledged universities through embodying signifiers of university status including geographically defined campuses, formalized enrollment management functions and tenure and promotion guidelines. The four institutions also situate their identities in opposition to the dominant model of legitimacy and prestige provided by the flagship and elite universities in their state. In doing so, the universities intentionally eschewed many of the practices of the dominant model in favor of



fulfilling their own unique mission and purpose. Given the high cost of striving for prestige, this seems a logical response (Henderson, 2013; Iglesias, 2014; O'Meara & Bloomgarden, 2011). Indeed, the expense implied by striving was not lost on stakeholders at the four universities, as is clear from this quote from the provost of River State:

[B]ecause of the teaching mission of the institution, because of financial pressures. I mean, to release faculty for research time, effort – costs money. [River] doesn't have the flexibility to do that to any big extent. It's really not much on the radar screen here.

While the administrators of the four institutions well understood that efforts to mimic the behavior of better-resourced peers requires scarce resources, there was striving focused on selectively adopting some of the behaviors of these universities. In this way, all four institutions evidenced prestige-seeking behavior. In this form of striving, adaptive strategy focused on securing resources is evident.

In addition to striving for legitimacy and prestige, there was a third type of striving evident on two of the campuses, City State and Inventor State, that had as its goal the creation of an alternative model of legitimacy. This alternative model of legitimacy was centered on embodying elements of the public purpose of the two institutions. One goal of this form of striving was to obtain credibility from external stakeholders about the university's ability to embody its purpose while responding to external threats and challenges. Due to the Faustian bargains each institution has been forced to make, there were compromises made about which aspects of their public purpose they could afford to promote, though. Despite these forced tradeoffs, the two campuses' efforts are resulting in the creation of a culture of distinctiveness, an elusive institutional trait (Townsend, Newell & Wiese, 1992). The three types of striving taking place are explored and a description is offered of the cultures of distinctiveness that are being created or sought on the four campuses.

### **Becoming Full-Fledged: Striving for Legitimacy**

As Ravasi and Schultz found, when an organization is uncomfortable with the way it is viewed, it will engage in efforts to change externally held views (2006a). Given the varying ways regional comprehensives were founded, they have often struggled with solidifying an identity and reputation as being full-fledged universities (Clark, 1987; Henderson, 2007; Thelin, 2004). This struggle to look like a 'real' university was particularly evident on the three youngest campuses. These efforts were guided by perceptions about what constitutes the 'real' work of full-fledged universities through comparisons with well-established universities. When an organization is striving to resemble its peers, adaptive strategy is evident as the external context and desire to remain competitive determines institutional behavior (Chaffee, 1985b). Interpretive strategy was also evident as the four institutions have missions to embody the features of university life and desire legitimacy as such. Campus members regard this process as part of a natural evolution. As each institution evolves, they are undertaking a variety of efforts to demonstrate their status as legitimate universities.

The first way in which the four institutions are attempting to gain legitimacy is through creating physical structures on campus. This has included building a variety of student amenities including dormitories, student unions and exercise facilities. These student amenities help each university demonstrate that it has just as much to offer prospective students as the more established flagship and private universities in the state. University buildings were also constructed or renovated with the goal of creating a campus-like atmosphere. In the physical spaces between buildings, the grounds have been improved to include outdoor gathering places, courtyards and sculptural elements, further solidifying a feeling of the campus as a bounded and distinct space. Inventor State has grown from being a few buildings in the middle of farmland into a campus with buildings and roadways similar to that of a rural land grant university. City State, the largest landowner in the downtown area of its city, has added university insignia to its

tallest building to become part of the skyline while creating sky bridges and green spaces between buildings to define its boundaries. River State lobbied to close a street adjacent to the university to create green spaces between its buildings. As a defined university landscape has taken shape, community members have taken notice, helping improve the reputation of the institutions. By contrast, due to a chronic lack of funding for capital improvements, the out-of-date campus grounds and buildings of Thunder State remain a challenge to the university as it seeks legitimacy within the higher education context of the state. Recently Thunder State received funding to improve its grounds, which stakeholders believe will make it easier for the university to recruit students and appear more like a modern university.

In addition to improving campus grounds, universities have changed key university policies to match that of other universities. One way this has unfolded has been through requiring that students submit ACT or SAT scores. These scores are used to place students in appropriate coursework and to resemble the practices of other universities in the state. In all four cases, institutional leaders have professionalized student enrollment and admissions and separated enrollment from registration. As each university has aligned admissions and enrollment processes with that of other universities, they also created cabinet level positions to oversee enrollment management. The Vice President for Enrollment Management, in describing her attraction to the university, sheds light on the evolution taking place at the university.

So I thought, "Well this will be interesting just to see how they're doing enrollment." It sounded like they had really not been doing enrollment management... Well when I came in there was no planning... You're trying to bring people in and since nobody believed in enrollment management, because they really had somebody that wasn't even a professional in the field.

Formalizing enrollment management has also coincided with the four universities raising admissions standards and expanding recruitment efforts to include out-of-state and international students. In these changes, evidence of adaptive change can be found.

River State also created faculty tenure and promotion guidelines to ensure that the promotion process resembled that of other peer institutions.

River State, Inventor State and City State have been working to build a feeling of school spirit and create traditions. The process of building school spirit looked slightly different on each campus but had the same goal: to help students, staff and professors develop pride in their institution as a full-fledged university. At River State, the university recently identified a Spirit Rock for students to paint. It is hoped that the rock will build school spirit while also creating a new student tradition of painting it. Inventor State has been attempting to inspire a sense of tradition through visual reminders of the university's connection to its inventor namesake displayed on campus and within university public relations materials. The president of Inventor State described this work, saying,

[W]e do need to have traditions. Traditions that people will look back and say they were part of. You don't just act like you don't want any. You don't want the kind that make you become stagnant. We're creating traditions here as we go along.

The administration hopes that these visual reminders will reinforce a spirit of entrepreneurship and innovation on campus. These efforts involve interpretive strategy as the university invokes symbols of its founding legacy to encourage school spirit. At City State, the president that held office before the current one stated his goal to build school pride. One way he measured the university's progress towards achieving this goal was in counting the number of students who wore City State t-shirts. A professor expressed the results of these efforts, saying,

I think it's gone from being a place that was kind of stigmatizing to be here ... My measures of that are kind of weird. One of them is just looking at the number of our students who walk around in [City] State gear ... It's dramatically changed ... I think it's an indication that the feedback people get in the community when they tell people they come here is different than it used to be.

Alternatively, Thunder State alumni are very active in university life and have clear connections to the identity of the institution. An example of alumni engagement is found in this quote by a professor of manufacturing engineering: "They're [the alumni] proud of their education, and it

makes them want to come back after they graduate and it makes them want to refer students to [Thunder] State University.” This alumni support and pride is a brass ring that campus leaders are reaching for in their efforts to attain legitimacy.

The four universities have also felt pressure to distinguish themselves from community colleges. Specifically, institutional stakeholders are eager to communicate to external stakeholders and prospective students the ways their university more closely mirrors a full-fledged university than a community college. The goal of these efforts is to secure resources in the form of student enrollments, research grants and recognition. The following quote from the director of a teaching center at City State illuminates how this positioning unfolds:

Being a commuter campus you want to pull away a little bit from being the extension of [a community college]. You want to be seen as more of a credible spot in terms of attracting the best faculty, attracting research grants, there's a whole lot of reasons to shift that mission a bit ...

As Chaffee found, changes like this can be spurred on by crisis created either by concerns over an interpretive organization losing its credibility or an adaptive organization losing resources (1985b). In the desire of the four universities to be seen as distinct from community colleges, these two impulses are evident.

### **Islands of Excellence and Incremental Change: Striving for Prestige**

Although not as rampant as might be predicted by institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Iglesias, 2014; O'Meara & Bloomgarden, 2011), prestige seeking, often incremental in nature, was evident on each campus. Chaffee posited that adaptive organizations will concern themselves primarily with developing products and services that will have market appeal so that institutional resources are secured (1985b). In striving for prestige, the four universities created new units and functions with the hope of securing resources of various kinds.

At City State, Thunder State and Inventor State, university officials and professors are striving to increase research output. The dean of the college of liberal arts at Inventor State

described increasing faculty research productivity in her college as a way to take the university “to the next level.” At all three universities, administrator desires for an elevated research profile butt up against high faculty teaching loads, as is demonstrated by this quote from a professor at City State:

We're raising teaching loads but not from 2-2 to 4-4. We're raising them incrementally, so I think the university is trying to be in the middle as much as possible and not go down either one of those tunnels [teaching or research].

In light of high teaching loads, these institutions are providing incentives, often in the form of mini-grants or merit salary increases, to increase faculty research. Another strategy being used is to identify certain faculty who will be primarily “research” faculty and others that will be primarily “teaching” faculty. The bifurcation of the faculty at City State has led to differential salaries with faculty engaged in research earning higher salaries. There is hope on the four campuses that increased research will confer status that will attract students and high-profile academics as well as research grants that will alleviate budget deficits. As such, adaptive strategy is apparent as a search for resources guides this behavior (Chaffee, 198b).

Prestige-seeking behavior is also present as the three universities change admissions policies and become more selective. While institutional stakeholders are quick to express pride in their institution’s role in expanding educational opportunity through low barriers for admission, these admissions policies can create the perception, both internally and externally, that the university is for “bad” students and that “anyone can get in.” Campus members are often eager to counter this reputation, as was described by the Vice President of Enrollment Management for Thunder State:

I think a part of that is an image. What is our image in the community? How do people view us? That's also going to be a key with recruiting a higher caliber student. Are we considered an institution that higher caliber students would want to attend?

In this way, prestige seeking through becoming more selective is a cyclical process aimed at building the institution's reputation which improves its competitive edge among other institutions and attracts higher caliber students.

River State, Inventor State and City State have also worked to establish a residential and traditional student population. The goal of these efforts is to change the perception of the university as a commuter school. While not all institutional members share a desire to shed the commuter identity, institutional actions such as tearing down parking garages that were used most by commuter students to build dormitories sends a clear message about the direction in which university priorities are moving. As a result of these efforts, the number of commuter and nontraditional adult students has decreased at all four institutions as the number of traditional and residential students has grown. The president of River State couched this shift in the student population as a way of promoting university legitimacy:

We started as a commuter college. It's only been in the last 12 years that we've had significant number of residents ... So, I think it's a development and maturation process. I think we're growing predictably appropriately.

It would seem that attempts to shed a commuter identity have more to do with desires to increase prestige than legitimacy, though, and to ensure that students who are enrolled are easier to graduate.

Given their histories of open admissions policies and tendency to enroll large proportions of students from the region, the four institutions have also struggled with a reputation for being universities of "last resort" for those who may not fair well in the admissions processes of more selective institutions. As such, they have expended university resources to become seen as "destination" institutions. A vice president at City State described the university's insecurity with its status as an institution of "last resort" in the following way:

[City State] had historically been perceived as kind of the place where you went because you couldn't go anywhere else ... Kind of a completion school for students who had bombed out of other places or started at one of the community colleges.

The recruitment videos used by the university demonstrate how this aspirational behavior manifests itself. In a number of videos, the university shows current students, many of which are international or out-of-state, stating why they *chose* the university. The president of City State, in a recent university address, said that the university was in the process of becoming a “university of preference,” further demonstrating its desire to be seen as a destination rather than a last resort. As enrollment declines take place, being viewed as a university students choose is seen as important way to recruit more students. In these efforts, adaptive strategy aimed at securing institutional resources is evident (Chaffee, 1985b). By having success with recruiting out-of-state and international students, these institutions are also able to convey to external stakeholders that the university’s quality is recognized and sought after by those outside the region. The four institutions are also experiencing isomorphic pressure to grow international student enrollment, as is evidenced by this quote from the special assistant to the president of City State: “Everybody wants to increase their international enrollment, so we do too.”

Another way in which prestige-seeking manifests itself is through the tendency of institutional stakeholders to highlight distinctive or highly-ranked programs that they believe confer prestige onto the entire institution and attract students. In creating and highlighting programs in this way, adaptive strategy is evident (Chaffee, 1985a). A quote from the vice president of enrollment at City State is helpful in showing the role of distinctive programs in prestige seeking:

If we have a very strong news report theater program, which we do, and City is second to New York in terms of theater... We could go after the students that are showing an interest in that all over the United States. You can't just do it with the entire university. You have to find what you have that is unique and can't be found elsewhere.

Because the programs are often the only one of their kind in the state, they are able to attract students from outside of the region which contributes to building the reputation of the university as a destination, as was articulated by the president of River State, “I think for the last 10 years, our academic reputation - particularly at some programs - it just soared...”



As has been described, the four institutions cannot easily compete with flagship and elite institutions for highly prepared students. While the bulk of the student body has academic credentials that are considered average or below average, each year the four institutions enroll a larger share of high-performing students. To attract these students, the universities offer merit scholarships. To accommodate them once they enroll, the universities have established honors programs that have admissions policies that mimic those of selective institutions. These two efforts – the creation of Honors Colleges and the use of merit-based scholarships – ensure the institution is able to attract students that will be more likely to graduate while also raising the university’s profile. Honors curricula implement the best practices for teaching and learning as well as high-touch advising, cultural and arts programming, small class sizes and academic and social supports for students. An argument can be made for transforming the entire university curricula so that it has the features of excellence found in the honors program. Doing so would be resource intensive, though, and so it is usually only economically feasible to offer this programming to a smaller number of students. Having honors programming is also a way for each university to add an element of selectivity that adds to its reputation of attracting not only average students but also the “best” students. The presence of these honors programs, similar to the distinctive programs described above, is believed to extend prestige to the rest of the university. This perceived halo effect was described by the vice provost for academic affairs at City State:

It created an honors college because the university was seen as a place that people went when you couldn’t go anywhere else. ... The then president wanted to try to make it more of a school choice, or at least for some students, and so they created an honors program with a fairly hefty scholarship program associated with it to try to recruit some really top notch students to [City State]. The theory was that that would help change the perception of the school, which is partly done.

Sometimes prestige-seeking behavior is rejected by the institution, even when it is emanating from the university president. In the case of City State, the president who was instrumental in helping the university adopt an engaged learning focus, build dorms and grow the traditional-age student population also advocated for changing the name of the university to the

University of [name of the city in which the university is located] and creating a football team. These two actions would help the university look more like its elite peers and grow its prestige. Ultimately these two ideas were rejected by the campus community because there was concern that the name change would affect the ability of alums to relate to the university and because football programs are costly. Ultimately, university stakeholders chose to build the brand of City State on its commitment to engaged learning, evidencing interpretive strategy through striving to embody mission. Nonetheless, there are some faculty on campus that were supportive of these changes because they believed it would make the university appear more prestigious, as is described by this professor:

I would love for it to be University of [name of the city] because then we would have the sound at least of being a University of Chicago... and then there was talk of even starting a football program, which would've been certainly crazy but it also probably would've raised our profile.

#### **Preeminence on Our Own Terms: Striving to Create Alternative Models of Legitimacy**

Institutional theory suggests that low-prestige universities tend to mimic the behavior of more elite institutions within their systems (DiMaggio & Powell, 198). While there was clearly mimetic behavior taking place at the four institutions, there were also efforts to create alternative models of legitimacy that stood in opposition to the dominant notions of prestige in higher education. Albert and Whetten found that when an organization is pursuing distinctiveness, they often identify organizations that are dissimilar to them (1985). Stakeholders at the four universities define their institutions in direct opposition to the elite flagship in the state. In doing so, the messages that institutional leaders and stakeholders frequently convey is that their institution is *not* Flagship State University (assigned moniker for the flagship in the state), even if it has islands of excellence and behaviors that embody certain aspects of the more prestigious

institution. There were three primary ways in which the four institutions draw contrasts between themselves and Flagship State University. The first is in terms of the resources their institution has when compared to Flagship State. This resource disparity is particularly evident when one of the four institutions is considering hiring a new faculty member or constructing a new center or building on campus. Because monetary resources are scarce, these institutions require a great deal of planning, saving and fundraising to undertake new projects and hire new people. Interestingly, resource scarcity at times draws staff and professors to the institution because there is a sense that working at this institution would have more impact. This was described by a professor who cited the clear resource disparities evident in the physical structures between Flagship State, where she had interviewed, and Thunder State, where she ended up accepting a job:

The final straw for me was a doorstep. The fact that a faculty member had a small wooden door stop instead of an approved rubber door stop, and I want to go some place where we're dealing with real problems that really matter to students, not door stops.

Institutional leaders at River State point to resources as a reason for preserving the teaching emphasis of their institution, as is demonstrated by this quote by the chief financial officer: “Poor teaching schools like us, that really does try to provide that service, not research. We're not a research institution and there are legitimate issues with research.”

Even as the four institutions incrementally raise admissions standards, each university defines itself in opposition to the flagship on the basis of the types of students educated. The types of students who tend to enroll is most often invoked when campus members are critiquing the performance based funding formula that does not adequately account for the resources needed to support and retain these students, as was described by the former vice president for administration and chief financial officer of Thunder State, “So to compare us to Flagship State ... one size formula does not fit all.” There is also concern that despite what these institutions might

want for themselves, the performance based funding model exacerbates mimetic pressures universities and colleges experience, encouraging them to remake themselves in the image of Flagship State. The pressure campus leaders feel to mimic the flagship is demonstrated in this quote from the Chief Financial Officer of River State:

I don't think a teaching institution should be measured or should be supported in the same way as a research institution. And we're losing those distinctions of mission in [the state] in my opinion.

Others within these institutions believe that the funding model also incentivizes becoming more selective and curtailing access. In these impulses, adaptive strategy aimed at institutional survival is present (Chaffee, 1985b).

A final way in which these institutions think of themselves in opposition to the flagship is in terms of the geographic reach of the institution's student recruitment efforts. Specifically, the flagship has built its name on being an international university that recruits students from all over the world. While there are efforts at the four campuses to be viewed as institutions that students choose, there is also a sense on the four campuses that the majority of students are drawn directly from the region and that they will stay in the region upon graduation, a set of circumstances that is distinctly different from the flagship in the state. The provost of City State compared her institution's recruitment base to the elite institutions in the state, saying:

If you look at some of the other universities, clearly the [flagship] is like Penn State or any other big land grants. It's just a huge university that teaches people from all over the country. And they're disbursed all over the country. Then you have sort of ... [the] small liberal artsy kind and they're highly selective and they're more expensive and they're for students of a certain background ... We're producing the people who will stay here in the region.

In distinguishing the university from the flagship on the basis of an important element of its purpose, specifically its access mission, interpretive strategy can be seen.

### Towards an Alternative Model of Legitimacy

While all four institutions think of themselves in opposition to the flagship in the state, the way they treat the differences between themselves and the flagship varied. For the two least-well-funded institutions that tended toward adaptive change, Thunder State and River State, there was a tendency to view these differences as institutional deficits. For example, while members overwhelmingly believe in the mission of the institution as being accessible and creating opportunity, students were seen as being “at-risk” and difficult to educate. As such, these students are thought of as posing a unique challenge particularly as expectations around retention and graduation mount. One reason institutional stakeholders at Thunder State and River State held this view was because significant institutional resources are required to help these students succeed. As funding levels decline these resources are ever more scarce.

For River State, an institution that is almost 30 years old, the young age of the university is regarded as a liability to its survival. The institution’s young age has meant that it lacks traditions and current students do not feel as much pride in the institution as they might at Flagship State. Additionally, the institution does not have an established alumni base that would act as spokespeople to external audiences, recruit students and donate money. Related to River State’s young age is the perception among stakeholders that the university has less influence and autonomy at the state level because, in the words of the Dean of the University College, the university is “the new kid on the block.”

At River State and Thunder State, there is a sense by many campus stakeholders of their university being the “stepchild” of the state. Institutional members perceive this lowly status because of historic funding inequities between these two institutions and other more elite institutions in the state. Being both a stepchild of the state and highly dependent on state appropriations creates a feeling on the campuses of being at the mercy of the state in terms of policy decisions. While evident on both campuses, the tendency to focus on the deficits of the

institution was particularly strong at River State, the university whose organizational identity was most tied to institutional features (small, young, affordable and underfunded).

By way of contrast, the same institutional features that are pointed to as liabilities at River State and Thunder State are more often conceptualized as unique assets of, and opportunities for, City State and Inventor State. Indeed, these characteristics are thought of as distinctive features tied to each university's unique mission and purpose, evidencing interpretive strategy (Chaffee, 1985b). University leaders at both City State and Inventor State invoked the university's young age as an asset that allowed the university to be "nimble" and "experimental" when responding to challenges. It is believed that being young has meant that the university is not afraid to try new ideas that may improve student outcomes or add a new dimension to scholarly or regional engagement efforts. This nimbleness is also believed to exist because the university has yet to develop traditions or a strong culture that may prevent these kinds of innovation, as is described again by the president of Inventor State:

We really have created, I think, a culture of innovation here. Being a young institution, we're not afraid to try things. Ah, we make mistakes. We fail, but we are typically an institution that's not afraid to be on the front edge of things.

Institutional leaders believe that being young yet having the features of a full-fledged university is an enviable position that creates a feeling on campus of possibility and growth.

While all of the stakeholders at City State and Inventor State would appreciate better funding from the state, there is less of a sense of the university being a stepchild and more of a sense of the institutions as being an intrepid "underdog." Institutional leaders also believe that the state policy context created a unique set of opportunities to be innovative and entrepreneurial in seeking other funding sources, improving student supports and creating unique programs that are in demand in the region. In finding ways to respond to the external environment that embody each university's public purpose, interpretive change is evident. This sentiment is articulated by the president of Inventor State:

The other challenge ... I think they're just opportunities. I actually love them. I *love* them because I think it puts us in the limelight. Everything that the state wants us to do, we want to do.

Similar to Thunder State, institutional stakeholders at City State and Inventor State also think of their institutions as being gritty and resilient. Professors, administrators and staff at these two institutions compare this institutional resilience to the grittiness and resilience of their students.

This comparison is shown in this quote from the Vice President for Civic Engagement and Multiculturalism at City State:

The other thing we hear a lot is sort of grit. Most of our students already work. They have a strong work ethic. They work hard. In some ways they're forcing on us a kind of identity.

The gritty identity is often shared with institutional stakeholders who often have similar backgrounds and stories to their students.

Beyond simply recognizing and claiming the grit of their students, leaders from City State and Inventor State are working to change the way their students are viewed by internal and external stakeholders that rejects the “at-risk” paradigm dominant at the state policy context and at Thunder State and River State. To do this, institutional leaders are celebrating the unique stories of students who may be parents, or are minority, low-income or first-generation students. These efforts have as their goal claiming students as unique assets of the institution that contribute to its strength and evidence its commitment to access instead of potential impediments to the institution’s financial security. One stakeholder in the senior administration at City State described these students as being “ideal” for the university. The notion that the students already enrolled are a perfect fit for their university was shared by institutional stakeholders at various levels. In promoting this idea within the cultures of City State and Inventor State, institutional stakeholders at each institution communicate their rejection of the assumptions that are often made about first-generation, minority, low-income, and nontraditional students: that their families are unsupportive, that they are unmotivated and distracted and that they are less likely to be

successful. Echoing the idea that students attending the two universities are gritty and resilient, institutional leaders convey their belief that their students are savvy and able to persevere *because of*, not in spite of, their life circumstances.

### Creating an Alternative Model of Legitimacy

As Chaffee described, the pursuit of legitimacy with regard to an organization's ability to embody its mission is of great importance to enacting interpretive change (1985b). As City State and Inventor State have worked to offer a counternarrative in response to how prestige and legitimacy in higher education is defined, they also lay the groundwork for alternative models of legitimacy that embody the three dimensions of their public purpose: regional engagement, access and student-centeredness, and further solidify their efforts to engage in interpretive change (Chaffee, 1985b, Iglesia, 2014; O'Meara & Bloomgarden, 2011). Institutional leaders have employed the occasion of their 50-year anniversaries (either recently passed or pending) to solidify efforts to create an alternative model of legitimacy through using language that is specific to each institution's conception of its purpose. The presidents of both universities are using the bully pulpit created by their office to advocate for this alternative model of legitimacy and have charged their administrative cabinet with aligning institutional operations with this vision. The way this vision is promoted is demonstrated in this quote by the president of Inventor State:

Our preeminence will not be a 20th-century metric ... We're going to create a new type of preeminence. A new type of preeminence that's focused on opportunity, focused on affordability and true impact and outcomes that's much more needed today.

As was described, the four institutions defined themselves in opposition to the flagship in the state. At City State and Inventor State, this oppositional identity formation extended beyond simply describing what the institution was *not* into creating markers of legitimacy that institutional leaders conceptualized as being not only different than the flagship - but *superior* because they embodied the public purpose of the institution. While this vision represents a set of



values that embrace the distinct institutional features of the two institutions, as was described, they have entered into Faustian bargains about which of the three aspects of their public purpose they are able to maintain. The alternative models of legitimacy operating on the two campuses reflect these forced choices. Nonetheless, Inventor State and City State are attempting to define their excellence in terms that embody aspects of their public purpose. What follows is a description of the ways these alternative models of legitimacy are being conceived.

#### Defined by Who We Include, Not by How Many We Exclude

The first dimension of the alternative model being promoted at these two institutions concerned their mission of providing access to higher education. At Inventor State, the vision of providing educational opportunity was illuminated through invoking the image of the university as the Statue of Liberty – with its arms extended wide to all seeking higher learning. In calling on this symbol to communicate the essential character of the university, interpretive strategy is evident (Chaffee, 1985b). Institutional leaders at City State and Inventor State also described their belief that the nation had a sufficient number of selective institutions and that they were exactly the type of institutions that the country needs. Some describe their university as one “for our time.” The presidents and administrators at both institutions, in public addresses and institutional documents, often advocate for an understanding of institutional excellence that was not drawn from how many people were excluded but instead by the number and diversity of students educated.

Each institution has identified populations that have too often been underserved by higher education that it sees itself as educating, including students with physical disabilities, veterans, minorities, and most of all – first generation college students. This set of values was promoted in university promotional documents. Inventor State described itself as being “known for opening doors to a diverse range of students” and City State described its entering freshman class as record breaking – not in terms of the educational merits of these students but in terms of its sheer

size and diversity. While institutional operations are not completely in line with this vision for the university as admissions standards have been elevated, the language used by institutional stakeholders has a goal of solidifying an alternative model of legitimacy.

#### Defined by How Well We Teach and Support Students

Resonant with their attempts to disrupt the “at-risk” narrative often promoted about the types of students that tend to enroll at their institutions, leaders at City State and Inventor State are also working to change the way institutional stakeholders see their role in educating these students. These leaders are charging professors, staff and administrators to suspend their blame of students for the institution’s low retention and graduation rates and instead claim and celebrate these students while reconfiguring the institution to support them. As the Vice Provost of Academic Affairs at City State said, the new accountability regime creates an opportunity for institutional stakeholders to “say that it's not okay to have a 40 percent graduation rate... If the students aren't graduating, it's on us.” In this way, although the policy context is inspiring institutional change, this change is connected to the university’s student-centered mission and evidences interpretive change. As part of promoting an alternative model of legitimacy, the two institutions want to be on the forefront of experimentation and innovation with the goal of better supporting students. The Vice President of Community Engagement at City State described the challenge that the institution has accepted in the following way:

Someone is going to capitalize on having success among students who have been labeled hard to educate. As they do, in higher education we’re all going to rush to mimic and copy and do it ... Really there are some evidence to that in fact and it’s usually changing things structurally that this is less about [blaming] students who aren’t equipped for us, but [saying] we aren’t equipped for certain students and you can get equipped for certain students.

While these two universities had the largest research output of the four in the study, they also stated their desire to ensure high-touch support for students as a way to distinguish themselves from research-intensive peers. Similar to Thunder State, stakeholders at these two

institutions think of the mission of the institution to involve *some* research but to be primarily focused on the student experience. One way that the research and teaching aspirations of the institution combine is through undergraduate research. At Inventor State, Thunder State and City State, undergraduates are heavily involved in research activities, countering dominant notions of prestige that promote an ideal of research being something that senior scholars do. Along with this goal of reimagining how research is conducted is the desire to create an alternative model of excellence for faculty members to embody. While research will still tip the balance in determining tenure and promotion decisions at these two institutions, there are also efforts to define faculty excellence by their ability to offer transformational experiences and robust support to students. This new model of the professorate encourages faculty members to gravitate first toward helping students succeed and then toward building their own research agendas. These sentiments are shared by the other two campuses as well but they as of yet are not connected with a comprehensive effort to re-define legitimacy.

#### Defined By Our Engagement with Our Region

The final way that these alternative models of legitimacy are being imagined and interpretive strategy is evidenced concerns the regional engagement mission of the institutions (Chaffee, 1985b). City State evidenced a stronger orientation towards the civic dimensions of regional engagement than Inventor State, but this thrust of regional engagement is present at both institutions. Local boosterism led to the creation of each institution and as each institution has experienced various forms of difficulty or crisis, boosterism has been an important ingredient in the university's elixir for success. In this way, some university officials think of their university's engagement with the region as what is "owed" to the place that gave rise to its existence and helped guide it through turbulent times.

In describing their engagement in the region, City State and Inventor State employ language that relates the current and hoped for excellence of the university with its status as a

regional asset. This rhetoric, often first used by the president or provost, was also employed by faculty and staff members, evidencing sensemaking, as is demonstrated by this quote from a professor at City State:

It did I think focus in a different way, it wasn't so much that we were going to be an urban public university but that we were going to engage on all levels, locally, regionally, nationally, internationally. And we were going to involve students in work that exploded the walls of the ivory tower. So I think that it's a broader vision and even though it's less original, I like "The city is our campus" ...

In a recent speech, the president of Inventor State described the university as being “a part of the world and not apart from it,” and some version of this phrase is often repeated by faculty members. Stakeholders on these two campuses believe regional engagement makes the university unique among its peers, as is demonstrated by this quote from the provost of City State: “I think it's our, it clearly has an urban mission which differentiates it from most. It's wedded. It's highly collaborative with [the] city and with the region.” As these quotes demonstrate, in rejecting the motif of the ivory tower, campus stakeholders are promoting a view of the university as metaphorically extending beyond the walls and buildings of campus. In the case of Inventor State, the university has branded the counties it sees itself serving using the university's mascot: “Cougar Country.”

In creating a model of legitimacy tied to regional engagement, the two universities conceptualize their success and excellence as being directly tied to the economic and civic health of the region. This sense of responsibility is expressed by the dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Inventor State:

It's all about changing the lives of our students and the communities we serve ...Inventor State makes a huge difference in this community. If we weren't here, I think, this community wouldn't have a lot of the services and interactions and growth and development and research and everything that Inventor State brings.

There is also a growing understanding that the university's excellence is in part defined by its ability to marshal the university's resources in improving the local community. On all four campuses, this has meant tailoring teacher education programs to adhere to unique regional

needs. The radio stations hosted by each university are seen as another way for the university to transmit its investment in the region through the radio waves. This understanding of institutional excellence has also meant that applied research has become an important marker for the university's ability to address regional needs using university resources, which reinforces the university's view of itself, as is demonstrated by the president Inventor State: "[W]e want to be known and admired for this new breed of American higher education. One that's focused on ... *applied* research. It's focused on community engagement."

### **Realizing the "Impossible Dream": Creating Distinctiveness**

Chaffee found that interpretive organizations are able to communicate undergirding values and mission in ways that elicit member support and excitement (Chaffee, 1985b). Through growing member enthusiasm for the purpose of the institution, a culture of distinctiveness and broader recognition from external stakeholders often results. This was found to be true of City State and Inventor State. Efforts on the part of the two universities to redefine legitimacy have resulted in broader recognition. It has also led to a regional perception that each university is "up and coming." As the former president of a major philanthropic foundation in the region described, these efforts have created a sense of pride at City State that has transitioned the university from thinking of itself as a lowly, poorly-funded public institution into thinking of itself as something novel when compared to elite universities:

Some of the private schools are out in the rural areas. City State took a pride factor by saying, "We're in the middle of the action of the city" ... it's a sense of ownership and prestige that ramps up everybody's attitude about an urban university, which countered this "woah is us, we're just this public institution that's here, serving the needy." It has morphed their mission, and their attitude, and their self-prestige.

He went on to describe how the growing sense of "self prestige" as an urban university has been matched with strategic planning and focused leadership that has translated university rhetoric into reality. At both institutions, there is a commonly held perception that a university that was once dormant has awoken and is embodying a new standard.

Not only have these efforts been noticed by external stakeholders, but they are also being felt by campus members at all levels. At these institutions, participants tended to use the words “unique” and “niche” frequently without being prompted. When stakeholders described their university’s purpose, they invoked elements of the public purpose and the alternative model of legitimacy being promoted. As this feeling of uniqueness spreads on campus, City State and Inventor State begin to give shape to the realization of a dream held by many higher education institutions: that of distinctiveness. The literature about distinctiveness describes this organizational trait as being rare and difficult to cultivate and is often the result of a clear sense of institutional purpose (Hartley, 2002; Townsend, Newell & Wiese, 1992). When distinctiveness exists within an organization, it “stands out as being not only different, but better; excels in serving an obviously desired need; is more effective in achieving its end; and has a style or process that is not used by others” (1992, p. xv). As these two institutions attempt to embody an alternative model of legitimacy that is different than that of the state flagship, they are becoming distinctive by fulfilling their public purpose. This feeling of distinctiveness is captured in this quote from the Vice President for Enrollment Management at City State University:

Which is really what our brand is, which is engaged learning at its best: We will engage ... We will engage you, so that's really what sets us apart. Truly, it's a unique university, because I've been to three other universities, and this is truly urban, and this is right in the heart of the city.

This feeling was also captured in a quote from a professor at City State:

We are devoted to urban education, and improving [the name of the city], and with its unique population and needs. I think that's probably something that's come across very strong. To me, being part of different organizations, that is one of the most clear purposes that I've seen in an organization in a while.

Not only have regional and campus stakeholders taken notice of these universities, so has the nation. Each university has received national media attention for their efforts to improve student outcomes and engage with their localities. Perhaps one reason why these institutions are enacting alternative models of legitimacy is that there have been national efforts to create alternative

models such as that advanced in the *Stewards of Place* framework offered by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (2002). The drafters of this framework had the goal of conferring a status that was more than being institutions “caught in the middle” for university members within the association, all regional comprehensives (Henderson, 2013; Morphey, 2009, p. 246). *Stewards of Place* offered a clear picture of what a regional comprehensive might be.

Distinctiveness is difficult to create and maintain over time, particularly for multi-purpose like regional comprehensive universities. To create distinctiveness, organizational members often enact interpretive change and scan the university’s history for interesting sagas, stories or features to highlight (Chaffee, 1985b; Townsend, Newell & Wiese, 1992). This has taken place most at Thunder State, Inventor State and City State. Another step in creating distinctiveness through interpretive change is by defining a vision for the university that embodies the values on which the institution was founded. As is described, City State and Inventor State have both identified a vision for themselves and are working to align most (but not all) university processes with this vision. As this process of alignment takes place, campus leaders and stakeholders seeking distinctiveness must also communicate this vision internally and externally.

There is a delicate balance between espousing rhetoric that embodies a set of values and matching institutional practice with rhetoric. Once elements of this balance are struck, though, as was evidenced at City State and Inventor State, external stakeholders take notice and the institution’s reputation grows. Because it is difficult to strike this balance, many institutions find it easier to create distinctive programs (Townsend, Newell & Wiese, 1992). All four institutions had unique programs that did not exist in other institutions in the state. What was different among the four institutions is how these programs were regarded by institutional stakeholders. At Thunder State and River State, there was a tendency to highlight distinctive programs with the

hope that these programs would lend the larger university distinction. While distinctive programs were also highlighted by City State and Inventor State, the university's sense of its excellence extends beyond these programs. The way these programs are regarded within the university's identity at the two institutions is illuminated through this quote from the president of Inventor State:

We've got faculty who believe in our mission here. Sure we have great students. We have high quality programs. We have a school of medicine. We have high quality programs of all kinds. We are nationally known for our theater program ... We have those. But that's not the heart and soul of this institution.

Townsend, Newell and Wiese found that those organizations that are engaged in interpretive change as opposed to adaptive change (Chaffee, 1985a) are more likely to create distinctiveness because they keep the values with which the institution was founded in their sights as they navigate challenges and opportunities (1992). For this reason, perhaps it is not surprising that City State and Inventor State have had success in creating alternative models of legitimacy for themselves that are contributing to a sense of institutional distinctiveness. Another potential reason for their success in this regard could simply be because they are better funded than Thunder State and River State. Townsend, Newell and Wiese found that a feeling of distinction was more common at private, selective institutions, which could point to the need for institutional resources to create this culture. While City State and Inventor State have undergone budget cuts, they also have larger enrollments and a diversity of revenue streams that may afford them greater breathing room to match rhetoric to institutional practice.

Another potential reason why Thunder State and River State have had more difficulty in creating an alternative model of legitimacy or a feeling of distinctiveness is that the administrations are not as far along in giving shape and language to a vision of their institutions and mobilizing resources to realize this vision. Turnaround sagas like that of Thunder State have been shown to contribute to distinctiveness (Townsend, Newell & Wiese, 1992). Thunder State has elements of what is required for a distinctive culture through its identity as a resilient



institution that has survived financial and natural disasters, and through its status as the only public HBCU in the state. As the previous president stated, though, perhaps it is “no longer enough to be the only public HBCU” in the state. There are members on campus who believe the institution should move away from a deficit-oriented view of their students into seeing them as a strength of the institution, as is evidenced by this quote from the associate dean of university college: “We have to find our strength, where we're good and provide all the support that we can. I think our strength is in recruiting those students that nobody else would accept.” A professor of resource management echoed these sentiments saying the university’s strength came from its service to its region and its accessible education. Perhaps with better funding, Thunder State may be able to create distinctiveness for itself as well.

### **Conclusion**

As the literature shows, achieving distinction as an organization is a slow and methodical process that requires enacting interpretive change (Chaffee, 1985b; Townsend, Newell & Wiese, 1992). For the four institutions to achieve distinction, they would need to continue to batten the hatches and respond to external threats in ways that maintain fidelity to the public purpose with which they were founded. Although this is the aspiration of institutional stakeholders on all four campuses, neoliberal forces and enrollment declines create a perfect storm that threatens each institution’s ability to embody its public purpose. The final chapter explores the implications of neoliberal public policy for these four institutions as they attempt to remain viable while fulfilling their public purpose.

## **CHAPTER 11: NEOLIBERALISM'S DISCONTENTS: THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES AND HIDDEN COSTS OF NEOLIBERAL PUBLIC POLICIES FOR REGIONAL COMPREHENSIVE UNIVERSITIES**

Neoliberal public policies that reduce higher education's purpose to its role within the market raise a number of implications for the future of regional comprehensive universities (Berman, 2012). These implications can be conceptualized as a set of unintended consequences and hidden costs. To demonstrate how this climate creates implications for regional comprehensives, it is illustrative to hear the words of policymakers from the state under study. When asked if they believed that there was a role for higher education in improving democratic and civic life in the state, one of the two senior policymakers interviewed, after a long pause, responded in the following way:

I'm sure the answer is yes but I'm not sure that's something we focused on from our state agency's perspective. I'm sure the more education you have, the more engaged you are in your community, in your government, in society. That would be one of the things that would follow but I wouldn't say that that's necessarily been a major focus from the state agency perspective.

When asked if there was a role for higher education in improving the economy, without hesitation, both policymakers responded affirmatively by enumerating the public policies designed to ensure public colleges and universities are improving the economy. What is notable about this exchange is that the people charged with governing higher education have an orientation to its public purpose that is purely economic and fails to consider its civic and democratic purposes.

Policymakers enacting neoliberal public policy employ strategies borrowed from the private sector to incentivize institutional behavior (Giroux, 2004). Performance based funding can be understood as neoliberal because it attempts to motivate institutional behavior through

financial rewards (Dougherty et al., 2014; Ellis & Bowden, 2014; Lahr, et al., 2014). In states around the country, performance based funding is intended to incentivize improvements in student retention and completion, institutional mission differentiation, degree production in economic growth areas and demographic disparities in student success. In creating formulae, policymakers use weights to assign value to specific state goals. In the state under study, weights are in place for course and degree completion, with institutions receiving additional funding for educating “at-risk” students, and graduate education and degree production within state-identified economic growth areas. There is growing evidence that this style of higher education funding has a number of unintended consequences including the incentivization of grade inflation, the weakening of academic standards, the elevation of admissions standards, and the lessening of collaborations between higher education institutions (Lahr, Pheatt, Dougherty, Jones, Natow & Reddy, 2014; Tandberg & Hillman, 2013). These unintended consequences have profound implications for college access and academic quality. Performance based funding and neoliberal ideology are reshaping campus life within the four universities resulting in unintended consequences that mirror the ones found by these scholars (Berman, 2012).

A prominent goal of the state public policy context is for institutions to continually improve efficiency, accountability and assessment. In these demands for improved efficiency using monetary rewards, incentives to enact adaptive change focused on institutional survival are present (Chaffee, 1985b). As these institutions respond to the neoliberal policy context, an audit culture is being created (Apple, 2009). In an audit culture, policymakers require data use and evaluation strategies borrowed from the private sector. At the heart of an audit culture is creating norms that ensure that higher education is making good use of state resources while enhancing economic productivity. A feature of the audit culture developing on the four campuses are surveillance structures intended to allow the state to monitor the institutions, administrators to monitor faculty, and faculty, staff and administrators to collectively monitor students. Foucault

asserted that the surveillance of public institutions within political life is a key strategy of “governmentality”, with the goal of surveillance being monitoring and controlling citizens through assessment (2010). While an underlying goal of surveillance is more efficient compliance with state demands, as the findings show it is unclear if this actually takes place as institutions are required to create new administrative positions tasked with reporting, effectively burying some units in red tape. Albert and Whetten described the differences in evaluation practices found in normative organizations such as schools and utilitarian organizations such as businesses, asserting that normative organizations should be evaluated using values and ideologies while utilitarian organizations should be evaluated using information and data (1985). Given the twin aims of higher education, it would make sense for both styles of assessment to be used. Universities are responsible for assessing student learning and skill acquisition, advancing human reason, measuring the efficacy of public outreach efforts and commercializing knowledge. These diverse activities reflect the historic balance between the public and private aims of higher education (Bose, 2012; Labaree, 1997; Thelin, 2004). This balance has been lost with the private purpose beginning to dominate, particularly as universities are subject to a neoliberal public policy context that narrowly promotes neoliberal assessment strategies and surveillance.

Regional comprehensive universities as a sector have long struggled with low retention and completion rates (Henderson, 2007, 2009; Schneider & Deane, 2014). As the state demands better performance on these measures through the use of performance based funding, the four institutions have been forced to grapple with student outcomes. Institutional members are well aware of their need to improve. While there is growing awareness of the need to improve student outcomes, there have been a number of unintended consequences and hidden costs to these efforts. These implications concern not only higher education’s public purpose but also the rise of audit cultures on the college campuses that threaten member identification (Hartley, 2002; Scott, Corman and Cheney, 1998). What follows is a description of the unintended consequences and

hidden costs of neoliberal public policy. At the conclusion, a set of recommendations is offered to policymakers and institutional leaders for protecting the public purpose of regional comprehensive universities.

### **Incentivizing Isomorphism and Competition Among institutions**

One of the guiding beliefs of neoliberal ideology is that increased competition will improve the quality of institutions within a system (Brown, 2003; Giroux, 2002). The director of the development foundation at River State expressed his concern that as colleges and universities compete within the state for shares of an ever-shrinking pie, institutional relationships might be strained:

In every case that scarcity brings out the competitive necessity ... if you're truly looking at it from that market perspective, things are actually working pretty well. Globally, you've just got some winners and losers in there. I believe the institutional relationships will become more strained just because of scarcity.

There was evidence of nescient competition among the four universities. Increasing competition has implications for institutional partnerships such as articulation agreements between institutions that allow students to transfer as they wish. Competition also has implications for information sharing as institutions experiment with strategies for supporting and graduating students. Given the growing feeling of competition, institutional leaders may be incentivized to keep their successes to themselves so that they perform better than their institutional peers within performance based funding allocations.

Another reason why the funding formula may drive competition is that it increases the inequality in state appropriations among institutions depending on their relative success in retaining students. For institutions that enroll students with lower academic qualifications, they will receive less funding than those that enroll better-prepared students. Another implication created by institutional competition concerns the differentiation that has developed among the four universities with regard to the specific students they see themselves serving. With

institutions adopting recruitment and enrollment practices of elite institutions, this institutional differentiation could be eroded. Moreover, the weighting in place for “at-risk” students creates incentives for institutions to compete for the same students: well-prepared minority and low-income students. This growing phenomenon is described by the director of government relations and civic engagement at Thunder State University:

Because the formula is now based on performance, colleges like [the flagship and elite public universities] are going after the academically talented Black kids when in the past, they used to come to Thunder State ... But now, we have to compete with [the elite publics] of the world.

While this is a positive development for these students as it expands the options they have, it has also meant that there is a growing concentration of high-needs students within the four institutions (Rodriguez, 2013). Implications for peer effects are raised by this phenomenon (Bartolome; 1990; Coleman et. al., 1966). Peer effects exist when there is a mix of high-performing and high-needs students in the same academic setting. Scholars have found that when this blend is present, learning outcomes are higher for all students. As each of the four institutions experience difficulty recruiting high-performing students, members are concerned about how peer effects will be changed.

### **Institutionalizing Governmentality: Surveillance, Data and Measurement**

As the four institutions respond to state demands for accountability and assessment, a growing emphasis on surveillance and assessment is taking shape (Apple, 2006). With this rising emphasis on surveillance there has been a growing number of performance metrics and data gathering practices (Colyvas, 2012; Lipman, 2006). The culture of surveillance has meant that university administrators feel as though they are being watched by state policymakers. The chief financial officer of Thunder State described this surveillance in the following way:

We have to report to the state ... The board of regents, they've got their thumb on our pulse all the time just checking to see how we're doing when it comes to enrollment, how we're coming to as far as liability through loans and other things out there that has a bearing on our performance measures.

Universities are also increasingly monitoring student progress. Faculty members are being asked and, in some cases, required to monitor and report their students' attendance behaviors and academic progress. A professor at City State described how his campus is using an online student tracking software to monitor students:

[W]e're being encouraged, really pushed into putting as much into that [software] as we can - our office hours, take role on it, whenever a student doesn't show up to class or is in any way having any kind of problem, we're supposed to flag them ... it sends a message to the student and to his or her college advisor.

The form of surveillance is intended to create an early alert system that notifies university members when students are at risk for stopping out. The Dean of the University College of River State described this process, saying,

If someone is not attending or are not doing what they should, I get an email the dean of students and student affairs and I discuss it. Is it academic? Is it behavior? What is it? Then we find support and we send and try to get the student in.

As a result of the use of these systems, there is a growing feeling on campus that students are being "being called out" or "slapped on the wrist." At City State, the campus is also considering requiring students to swipe their identification cards to enter buildings, effectively collecting student building use data which would further institutionalize student surveillance through tracking when they are physically on campus.

Student monitoring systems are beginning to change the dynamic between faculty and students. Whereas in the past, when a faculty member felt compelled by her care for students to reach out and express her concerns directly to the student, now faculty members are being required by the university to report their students' progress. At times, students are reticent to seek help when they are experiencing difficulties because they are embarrassed or fear being stigmatized, as was described by the dean of the University College of Thunder State who offered an example of a student with a learning disability: "He had to have a couple of math courses but he's been afraid to come and let us know that he has had all of his life, can you imagine, a learning disability." For first-generation students, these feelings can be particularly pronounced

(Cox, 2011). A number of faculty at the institutions feel as though they have developed the ability over the years to identify students who may be embarrassed to approach them and who need prompting to seek help. One faculty described these efforts, saying,

If I think there's a problem and often it's one they were too embarrassed to talk about and once they see that I care ... I reach out if I sense there's a problem, but I don't really coddle them either. I stop short of coddling, but sometimes if I see someone suddenly stop coming, if I think of it, I'll try to send them an email and say, "Hey, I've noticed you're missing. Is everything okay?"

Centralized student-level tracking and advising removes the follow-up from faculty members and places it in the hands of academic advisors. Considering the large proportion of nontraditional students at the four universities, one has to wonder how adult learners experience being watched in these ways.

Another hidden cost of reporting requirements is the rapidity with which universities are expected to respond to new state priorities. An example of this took place when the governor issued a mandate that each institution submit campus-wide plans for redoubling student career advising just days before they were scheduled to adjourn for winter break. This meant that institutional leaders were unable to convene campus meetings with multiple members to gather ideas for what will be now a yearlong plan. This anecdote is important to consider alongside the common perception that higher education is slow to change (Kegan & Lahey, 2001). While this may be an apt criticism, as the anecdote above demonstrates, there are hidden costs to mandates for hyper-responsivity and state surveillance. One hidden cost is that shared governance is harmed as faculty members are not consulted. With limited time to plan and strategize, another hidden cost is to the quality of the program being created.

Institutions have also been required to submit strategic plans for improving student completion to the state. While this exercise was beneficial because it helped the four universities deepen commitments to student success, it has also meant that policymakers are overseeing



campuses' daily operations, raising questions about university autonomy. A City State administrator described the added oversight, saying,

The process of assessment ... [Before] it was between the institution, the board of trustees and every ten years the [accrediting body]. Now it's, the [state board of regents], the board of trustees. There's a whole bunch more people involved in it that weren't involved with it before.

As institutions have to answer to more parties, they have less autonomy to experiment with strategies and address challenges. Another hidden cost relates to an institution's ability devote time evaluating the success of pilot initiatives before they are institutionalized, as is described by the president of River State:

I think it's more just a general description of the culture, the kinds of things that we're trying to address with performance based, you don't get the results quickly. American culture wants it now. There's tremendous pressure to do new things when you haven't had the chance to see how the old thing works. I think that's an unintended consequence.

When enrolling a majority of students who have high needs, meeting expectations for retention and completion requires resources, yet state appropriations have continuously decreased. This makes demand for hyper-responsivity particularly difficult.

### **Data Collection and Use at Regional Comprehensive Universities**

As each of the four universities responds to state demands, data are being collected. This data includes student survey data about barriers to completion, admissions data about non-cognitive attributes of students and financial aid data about how students use aid. Data are also being gathered to determine which faculty members teach courses in which students tend to do well, which programs and majors are most popular with students and with what frequency students use academic support services. Once data are collected, they are communicated to faculty members and staff so that they understand the realities of the student experience and the university's success in elevating its retention and completion rates. A professor described the forums used to transmit this data at Thunder State, saying,

It's all of the chairs, all of the deans, the faculty senate president, the associate vice president ... there's like an information clearinghouse where the provost just shares information. Where he makes presentations. Where he pitches ideas before he takes them to the faculty to get feedback first. Our chair will report off that provost council meeting and say like, "Guys, here's what's going on. We really need to make sure that we're doing everything we can to graduate our students.'

Data are sometimes used to dispel myths about student behaviors, such as the myth that transfer students perform poorly. Data are also used to drive institutional decision-making. For example, data are being used to determine which prospective students will be most successful, as is shown in this quote from the president of River State:

As we looked at the new data that we've been developing, we know what kid is going to succeed here and I can pick a small high school and we can, probably, even pick the kid that will succeed here. Our institutional research office is developing some interesting models.

Additionally, data are being used to demonstrate which units on campus have had success in retaining and graduating students to make decisions about which to cut. The vice president of enrollment at City State described this process at her university, saying,

Then there should also be performance-based budgeting throughout universities so that everybody performs and knows the consequences of when they are not performing. If an academic unit doesn't bring in the amount of students that you are expecting them to do based on their cost, then that remains like that for a while, then you need to cut back.

Data are also being used in Inventor State's transition to responsibility centered management, a budgeting model that employs data to distribute resources to individual units on campus, rewarding those that generate their own revenue (Zemsky et al., 2005).

While information about students and programs is the dominant form of data collection taking place, data are also being used to assess and demonstrate the university's engagement within the region. These data include economic development indicators such as employment growth, goods and services consumed by university members and capital improvements contracted by the university. The civic engagement indicators collected primarily include student volunteer hours and, in the case of the three universities that engage in applied research, information about the impact of applied research. While civic engagement data are being

collected, economic and workforce impact data are more systematically gathered, touted and used by all four universities. In the case of City State, the economic impact reports issued include a statement about how state appropriations are being translated into economic impact in the region.

While the intention behind these data collection practices is logical – to ensure students are successful and that the university is providing value to the state, they are not without unintended consequences. A commonly noted dynamic on college campuses is that there is often tension between faculty members and administrators (Bess & Dee, 2014; Mortimer & Sathre, 2007). The audit cultures developing on the four campuses is at times exacerbating the “us” versus “them” feeling between these two constituent groups. Faculty members report the general feeling that while administrators are not telling them directly what to do, faculty are being closely watched and assessed. This feeling is captured in this quote from a professor at City State:

I think our administration feels the pressure from the state and in turn thinks, "Well, we've got to be tough with the faculty ..." We're moving very quickly toward online student evaluations and I've heard several faculty say that, "Oh that's going to give them more data that they can use against us, they're going to try to do this or that"...

Data reporting requirements mean that all four institutions have had to devote scarce resources to creating administrative positions to handle reporting (Zemsky et al, 2005). This has created tension between faculty and administrators as administrative positions are growing and faculty positions are decreasing. A professor at River State expressed this feeling:

Reporting requirements over the years, they just go up, up, up, up, up ... You have to have more staff to do that, you're not getting more funding, then you can't have as many faculty. If you don't have as many faculty, you don't have the kind of attention the students need, and it just becomes a really vicious cycle ...

As this has happened, administrators are being required to act more and more like middle managers who process and assess data instead of academic leaders (Giroux, 2002). All four universities have created middle management administrative positions to respond to data reporting requirements. For example, River State created an office of institutional research to collect, analyze and report data. Thunder State created a position within the president's office to

oversee government relations and state reporting requirements. Inventor State's use of responsibility centered management has increased the amount of middle management taking place within individual colleges as academic units track revenue and costs to report to the central administration. These changes effectively reshape the administration of each institution, creating a strong central administration responsible for data management and data-driven decision making and threatening shared governance.

Not surprisingly, issues around administrator salaries and the loss of faculty lines are intensified during contract bargaining and budget cuts. The following quote from a professor at City State demonstrates this difficulty:

Faculty get smaller and administrations get bigger and paid better. So there is a real mismatch there that makes it difficult to come to the table as partners. It becomes very much the boss and the help basically. I think it just creates an environment that's not conducive to collaborative resolutions to problems that affect all of us.

Administrators on the campuses have hosted budget hearings when funding cuts are required and, to varying degrees, attempted to enlist faculty in these decisions. However, administrators note that faculty do not always avail themselves of these opportunities, causing administrator frustration with faculty complaints about transparency. At the same time as some faculty members desire more involvement in budgetary decision-making, a number remain intentionally disconnected with the financial governance of their institutions. Whether due to faculty inactivity in budget forums or administrator reticence to allow faculty involvement, these circumstances have exacerbated faculty feeling that the administration is becoming more authoritarian. Faculty members have also perceived an increasing number of academic decisions to be top-down. An example of how this feeling manifests itself is expressed by this professor at City State who reflected on a change to the course credit model for the university:

It was done in a very abrupt and top-down manner that prevented it from being useful. In other words, even if we didn't really, really like it, given time we could have implemented it in a way that would let us do some creative things with the curriculum.

The audit culture developing on the four campuses also creates implications with relying on data to drive decision-making. An underlying value of most educational organizations is that they assess student learning. As state policymakers monitor universities to determine how well they are retaining and graduating students, an incentive is created to inflate student grades so that students seem more successful (Lahr et al., 2014). A professor from River State reflected on this temptation, saying,

Because of the change in the funding, there's pressure not to fail these students ... I'm not saying that we consciously are passing students that we shouldn't be. I don't think faculty are saying, "I'm not going to fail this person because that means that the funding for the university is gonna to go down." ... I think that there's pressure even from the administration on these things.

While grade inflation may not take place, the idea that faculty are incentivized in this way is troubling and highlights the tensions created by a university relying on data and assessment to drive decision making.

Another tension created by data-driven decision making concerns the incentives created by performance based funding for institutions to use data to determine which students to admit with high performing students being most lucrative. Data are also being used to identify students considered “at-risk” of dropping out. A final consequence of a reliance on data to drive decision-making is that numbers often speak more loudly than individual student stories. When a university’s contributions to the state are assessed solely in terms of economic impact and student retention data, institutional messages sent to external audiences becomes more about data and numbers and less about the lives changed and regions served. One reason for this style of institutional data collection is that these data are easily accessible. It is difficult to assess the institution’s progress towards meeting public good goals of serving the region and providing transformative opportunities to students. The old adage that not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts rings true when considering the

implications for leaders of public universities that over rely on numbers to drive decision making without also considering these forms of qualitative data.

### **Eating the Seed Corn: Being Uncertain and Underfunded**

In addition to hidden costs, there are a number of hidden costs that arise from neoliberal policy demands for greater efficiency and accountability. These costs are particularly pronounced at public universities as state appropriations diminish and expectations grow. To respond to these challenges, institutions are having to make decisions that may harm their long-term functioning. A professor at Thunder State invoked an agricultural metaphor of “eating the seed corn” when describing a state policy context that requires universities expend institutional resources meeting state demands:

[Thunder] State has a difficulty getting ahead because we're always eating our seed corn ... You save enough of the crop to plant the crop for the next year, but when you don't have enough crop this year to save seed for next year, you have to eat next year's corn this year. You're always going to be at a deficit. As a matter of fact, it gets somewhat worse every year. Because you have to dip into next year's portion to get through this year, and next year you're already short where you should be and it's a vicious cycle.

Within any organization, there are resources that must be replenished to ensure organizational success. Financial reserves, member buy-in for proposed solutions and member commitment to addressing challenges require careful stewardship. As institutions are forced to eat their seed corn, these vital institutional resources - monetary and ideological - are diminished. Eating the seed corn takes place on the four campuses in a variety of ways. The first concerns the need to dip into reserves to balance the university budget and ensure basic operations take place. For institutions that already have small reserves, dipping into these resources means that there is a smaller balance to accrue interest and create a cushion for financial crisis. The second way institutions are eating the seed corn is in the difficulty they experience in growing programs that would potentially be profitable. Given a perpetual state of funding cuts, these institutions have difficulty expanding programs that may attract more students. This was particularly true for River

State whose pre-medical program enrolls a limited number of students due to resource constraints despite the high demand within the region for this program. Resource scarcity also makes it difficult to recruit faculty and administrators. Because there is uncertainty concerning the amount of institutional resources available to support new faculty lines, approval of these positions is often given late in the year, delaying recruitment. This in turn affects the quality of faculty and administrators that the institution can attract. For example, Thunder State rarely has the resources to bring prospective professors to campus to interview them in person and instead relies on phone interviews when interviewing. A professor reflected on these circumstances, saying,

We seldom are recruiting on the same schedule as major institutions who typically will start advertising in the fall and interviewing in early spring term and making decisions by mid spring term. We're still struggling to get permission to advertise for full time positions for fall.

The funding formula also creates a great deal of uncertainty over the size of appropriations each institution will receive each year. Indeed, there is widespread confusion over how the funding formula works. As an example of this confusion, the chief financial officer of River State described the formula in the following way:

They've got it so complicated that I could not tell you today, no one on my staff could tell you what our formula amount will be in the next year based on any number that we could come up with. That's how complex it is.

The only certainty that often exists on the four campuses about the funding formula is that each will likely receive less than the year before as state appropriations continue to diminish. The dean of Thunder State expressed this lack of certainty saying, “[n]obody knows exactly what the funding formula is except that we get a limited number of dollars.” For River State, uncertainty over funding has meant that each division submitted plans for budget cuts to the administration depending on one of three eventualities: two, five or 10% across the board cuts. At times, uncertainty over the amount received can also lead to unnecessary staff cuts, as was the case at River State. As a result of these challenges, administrators feel as though they are losing credibility with faculty.

These circumstances also raise implications for an institution's ability to grapple with deeper values and vision for the future. The psychologist Abraham Maslow's theory of a hierarchy of needs is instructive when considering how financial uncertainty affects an institution's ability to engage with its underlying values (1943). Maslow posited that only when a person's basic needs for food, water and shelter are met can they begin to fulfill higher-order needs for love, communion and knowledge. At times a leader can seize a moment of crisis to encourage institutional members to revisit deeper values (Kotter, 1995; Wallace, 1956). At Inventor State, the upper administration has succeeded in shifting the narrative so that the focus is not entirely on resource scarcity. When there is a feeling that crisis is perpetual, however, leaders may lose their ability to employ these moments for inquiry and instead are forced into survival mode, as is the case for Thunder State and River State. Administrators have not been able to seize moments of crisis for inquiry likely because of how dire the resource situation is for each institution. This set of circumstances is articulated by a professor at Thunder State:

You've got to pick out what you're going to address. I think that there's a lot of things that prevent us from having kind of that bigger picture. But I also think that at some point that's not an excuse anymore. You've got to make time for figuring out how to be better. Strategically. Overall and not just how to deal with the very next thing.

Financial uncertainty also harms an institution's ability to innovate. While there is administrator ideological support for faculty innovation, there is often a lack of resources to realize these ideas. The director of institutional finance at River State described what she called a "perfect storm" of declining state funding and enrollment at the same time as they are being expected to improve student outcomes, saying, "It's really been challenging to go back to a budget manager year after year and say, 'Cut.' They're saying, 'Well, how do we innovate? Where are we investing?'" In these ways, eating the seed corn means more than expending financial reserves – it means expending ideological reserves that might have been used to improve the university and protect its public purpose.



## **Doing More with Less: The Hidden Costs to Faculty Culture of Efficiency and Budget Cuts**

As neoliberal public policy insists that institutions be more efficient with resources, there are hidden costs for faculty culture. Specifically, the professorate at each institution is being required to take on more responsibilities (Parker & Jary, 1995). These costs are captured in a constant refrain of professors that they are being asked “to do more with less.” For organizations that are already lean, responding to calls for efficiency is particularly difficult. The chief financial officer of River State described her pride in the efficiency of her university in the following way:

I would put our efficiency up against any other school. *I would*. Whether it comes to technology or whether it comes to how we do things. We're on a shoestring.

As there is debate at the state level about encouraging public universities to be more efficient, administrators often question where this additional efficiency will come from given cuts that have already been made. Nonetheless, faculty members have experienced higher teaching loads, larger class sizes and requirements for increased research, committee service and grant productivity. Thus, there is a sense that maintaining elements of the university’s mission while responding to funding challenges is happening on the backs of faculty members, as is shown in this quote from a professor at Thunder State:

That's a reality here at Thunder State University that we do whatever is necessary to help move the program forward and move the university forward. We do more with less. I wish it was different, but that's our reality. We have to just live with the reality and adjust and make things work out.

While faculty at Thunder State and River State have been required to teach the most classes and arguably have the greatest responsibilities of the four universities, each campus has pressed its faculty to “do more with less.” A cartoon of a person being fed into a copy machine with the caption: “[ISU] faculty: sacrificed to penny pinching” on a faculty office door at Inventor State is symbolic of this pressure.

Faculty morale has suffered to varying degrees on the four campuses in light of these circumstances. As faculty members are asked to do more with less, there is a growing sense that

faculty work is not valued by the administration or state policymakers and that faculty members are not working hard enough. For the two smallest universities that have worked to create a “family feeling” on campus, as staff members are furloughed and tenure lines disappear, there arises a feeling of survivor’s guilt that hurts faculty morale. A quote from the director of institutional finance at River State speaks to this feeling:

We had our first lay off last fall in 20 years. That’s this culture of ‘we’re all family and we want you to be here and feel part of it and stay for your whole career.’ That contract feels broken for some people. It’s probably not a culture we can continue really because we’re going to need to be more adaptable than higher ed. has been in the past.

Students at these two institutions have pointed to the family feeling on campus as being a reason they chose these universities. Erosions to this culture will likely have implications for student outcomes.

With growing demands for faculty efficiency and the use of management strategies borrowed from the private sector such as responsibility centered management and program retrenchment, faculty members believe collaboration is harmed. A faculty member from Inventor State described this sentiment, saying:

Really the kiss of death to collaboration is ... the university coming up with an alternative funding mechanism based upon retention, how many students graduate and they’re basically looking at productivity numbers. How productive are your faculty in your units? How many credit hours are they teaching and all that. So it becomes this game ... and what I’m going to argue is now the university is going to go to silos.

At Inventor State plans to create an interdisciplinary major that would have met student demand were suspended because it was unclear which academic units would receive credit for enrolling students. There is also a sense that bifurcated faculty positions and institutional resources devoted to teaching and research can create a Darwinist view of faculty life. A faculty member from City State reflected on this set of circumstances, saying:

This idea that only the strong survive, it's very social Darwinistic, that there's some people who are more fit therefore we should invest in them and others are less fit and therefore we should cut them off.

Faculty members are not the only ones being asked to do more with less. With reductions to support staff positions, staff members are also being required to work longer hours and assume additional responsibilities which harms morale for staff members as well as faculty who are asked to perform support functions for themselves. The vice president for Enrollment at Thunder State reflected on this set of circumstances, saying,

We're pushed to do more with less. That can be, after a while that can run on your staff which then when you don't have high morale, that can affect students which then affects your retention and graduation. It's a snowball effect but I don't think many times we look at all of those different factors.

Staff members are on the front lines of student services such as financial aid and registration, performing important functions that help retain students. When students interface with harried and overburdened staff members, these interactions can have an effect on student retention. Additionally, due to staffing shortages, dorm rooms and classrooms are not cleaned as frequently, circumstances that affect the student experience. Another hidden cost created by efficiency and reductions to staffing is for the workforce in the region. Given River State's position as one of the largest employers in an economically depressed region, continued cuts to funding could have a broader economic impact - ironic given the state's emphasis on economic development.

### **Building the Workforce: The Hidden Costs of Neoliberal Public Policy for Students**

Students also experience hidden costs due to the neoliberal public policy climate. With elevated admissions requirements, student choices of higher education institutions are becoming limited. Nontraditional and part-time students have been the first to experience a reduction in choice as the state funding model discourages universities from enrolling these students. The president of River State described this reality on her campus, saying, "Students in this culture drop in and out, they work full time, they do things that make sense for them. None of the accountability models take that into account." In addition to failing to account for nontraditional students, the performance based funding model incentivizes four year institutions to direct

students to community colleges if they require remediation or intend to enroll part-time. Another consequence for the student experience at the four institutions is that the neoliberal public policy context perpetuates the “at-risk” label for students that carries pejorative undertones. The label “at-risk” can be extended to describe a student who puts the institution at financial risk because they may be unlikely to persist. Education research has shown the importance of expectations in determining academic success (Oakes, 1985; Redd, Guzman, Lippman, Scott, & Matthews, 2004; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). By labeling students “at-risk,” a certain set of expectations is created about their ability to persist.

With the state’s emphasis on degree production in areas of high demand within the economy, another hidden cost to student life is a denigration of the liberal arts. In many ways, a liberal arts curriculum embodies the ideals of inquiry, critical thinking and diversity at the heart of university learning and democratic engagement (Kirlin, 2003; Scott, 2006; Thelin, 2004). While leaders at City State have been working to communicate to business leaders in their region the utility of liberal arts degrees to a variety of fields, there remains concern that the state’s emphasis on science, technology, engineering and health sciences will hurt the liberal arts core of each institution. This worry was expressed by a professor at City State:

Community colleges are very flexible ... They serve a need that has come up and those individuals that they train for those positions may be back in five or six years to be trained for something else ... We don’t do that. ... We train people to think. And write and communicate and solve problems ... We're becoming more of a service institution within the university. We're here to give a little bit of a liberal arts dusting ... One of my professors used to say, a 'cultural suntan' to the people who are doing the real work.

The potential for diminishing the liberal arts is ironic given the results from national employer surveys that have found that the majors of graduates are less important than the soft skills they develop including the ability to think critically, communicate effectively, work in diverse settings and problem solve – all proven outcomes of a liberal arts education (Hart Research Associates, 2013). City State’s response to the state’s efforts to encourage increasing economic engagement provides an example of how this disconnect can present itself. The university convened a

committee with representatives from the area community college, industry leaders and government officials to examine ways to align the university's offerings with industry needs. A professor shared what he learned during these meetings:

What I heard from the businesses was that you need to teach students to think ... We want students that have a good work ethic but we want them ... to have a fundamental set of skills ... Some fields need mathematics and engineering and others need other types of skills but they need to be able to communicate, think critically ... work with people who are different than themselves for that good reason.

The employers in this example stated their belief that these types of skills inspire innovation, and the results of the national employer survey echo this belief.

Parker and Jary asserted that one of the primary concerns of the neoliberal state is to ensure that university knowledge is transferrable to industry (1995). For state policymakers, transferability of student knowledge into degrees in high-needs industries is of paramount importance. Performance based funding that awards institutions for degree production within areas of economic growth reflects this impulse. The first major implication for students created by this emphasis is the potential to erode student autonomy and choice of majors and career paths. As universities respond to demands for degree production in these fields, student interests and aspirations are subsumed under state economic priorities. The problems created by pushing students into these majors were described by the vice president for Enrollment Management at Thunder State:

If we push students in an area that they are not comfortable ... If they're not good in math, they're not good in science. They're *not passionate* about it ... If we're pushing our resources in a particular area such as STEM and we know that grants and scholarships are coming via STEM and students may try to go into a STEM field and then if they don't do well academically they're on probation, then they're suspended bumped back, you hit my retention rate.

This emphasis also has long-term implications for students' careers. An emphasis on these majors responds to jobs currently available. As the tech boom and industrial and manufacturing history of the U.S. have shown, current jobs are not always a good predictor of the availability of future jobs (Seavoy, 2006). National and state economies can be volatile, and with changes to the

economy come changes to the jobs available. Driving students into these majors could also saturate certain fields while other industries experience shortages of employees. Albert and Whetten articulated a final risk associated with emphasizing the credentialing nature of education over its status as a rite of passage (1985). While City State has mounted an offensive of sorts through its degree pathways initiative, the other three universities have yet to counter this influence from the state. As these institutions become economic engines producing workers, one has to wonder what will happen to the status of colleges and universities as a rite of passage, and in turn, how this will affect student satisfaction and persistence.

### **Who are We? Who am I? Hidden Costs for Organizational Identity and Member Identification**

A final hidden cost of neoliberal public policy for the four universities is their ability to solidify or maintain an organizational identity that is tied to their public purpose (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Hartley, 2002). For the two universities that are least well funded, it is difficult to encourage members to ask questions such as “Who are we?” and, “Who do we want to be?” – questions at the heart of interpretive strategy – when the questions at the fore are “How will we survive?” and, “What else can we cut?” – questions that drive adaptive strategy (Chaffee, 1985b). A neoliberal public policy context presents challenges for organizational identity as admissions standards are slowly increased and regional engagement efforts are either curtailed or changed to emphasize economic development. When an organization’s mission drifts, it becomes less effective and organizational identity often changes to accommodate this shift (Davies, 1986; Simsek & Louis, 1994; Scott, 2006). As these campuses continue to evolve and change, institutional members may begin asking themselves questions such as “Who are we if we are no longer open access?” and “Who are we if we are no longer civically engaged?” In light of the Faustian bargains these institutions have been forced into, the final question becomes as public purpose loosens, what organizational identity will remain?

These questions also create implications for member identification with the universities in this study (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). When a member identifies strongly with their organization, the traits of the organization come to define them (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquil, 1994; Kanter, 1972). People are sensemaking creatures and often make sense of their experiences retroactively (Pratt, 2000). This process of sensemaking can compel members to identify with an organization and commit to its goals (Kanter, 1972). An important building block of sensemaking is stories and myths that communicate the essential character of the organization. In an audit culture that strives to emphasize numbers and data, the stories could become lost and sensemaking potentially threatened. As professors and administrators are being monitored by their institutions and the state and receive cues about what is valued, they change their practices. Often, these changes in professorial behavior are made to meet state demands and protect the financial solvency of the university. As people change behavior, they later make sense of these changes and are forced to square them with their own sense of identity and identification with the organization. Through this process, a new ideology is created that supplants or modifies existing identity. In the case of the four universities, the creation of a new ideology that embodies the demands of the neoliberal public policy context has profound implications for member identification with each institution's public purpose.

Many of the staff members, professors, and administrators of regional comprehensives chose to work at these universities because they felt a personal connection with the mission and types of students served. These members draw salaries lower than that of peers in prestigious institutions and are motivated to stay at their current university because they receive benefits that are not strictly monetary. These benefits concern the personal satisfaction they experience when they are able to help underserved students overcome personal and academic challenges. As the following quote from a professor at Thunder State portrays, faculty members often persist despite these challenges because they feel a personal connection to the mission of the university:

The reason why is in an era of funding challenges at the state levels, we are called as faculty members to do more with less, therefore we're called to take on a higher load than we ordinarily would have cared to take on, but then we do it because we love to make things work out and we love to be able to serve our students ... our most valuable customers ... so we do it gladly.

While it may be true that prospective faculty members will continue to be drawn to these institutions despite being underpaid because they believe in the mission, this may not always be true if the mission drifts, the types of students change and the what is expected of faculty involves less community engagement.

River State as an institution that has yet to create an organizational identity for itself beyond being small, affordable and open access is faced with potential challenges in ensuring member identification. Being the most affordable university in the state is not necessarily a rallying point and it certainly does not fill institutional members with passion for the enterprise. In this version of organizational identity, the way to convince students to attend is by promising a high return on investment. While there has been a shift in the motivations that undergraduates cite as reason for attending college with more identifying professional aspirations, many others, especially those from low-income and diverse backgrounds, go to college to make a difference (Guiffrida, Lynch, Wall & Abel, 2013). The dominant narrative of college being a good return on investment will likely fail to appeal to these motivations.

Perhaps the most important implication of these changes concerns the costs to the psyche of institutional members as their institutions change. Faust experienced pain at losing his soul in his pursuit of worldly knowledge. Applying this metaphor to the institutions in this study, there is real potential for socio-emotional costs to neoliberalism. While being shaped by neoliberal forces that emphasize efficiency, profit seeking and a client/service-provider model of education, these institutions have had to compromise their commitments to deeper values of educational equality, elements of student support and regional stewardship. While this has not been a full sale loss of all aspects of public purpose, there has been a chipping away at aspects of what these institutions



stand for. As such, faculty and administrators reflected on their sadness at these changes, as is demonstrated by this quote from the chief financial officer of River State: “We're certainly not incentivized to support that kind of message or role that we're playing. And I think it's very sad. I think it's just a shame.”

Another implication for member identification is that the audit culture demanded by neoliberal policy “interprets the intellectual and emotional labor of those who are engaged in educational work through the lenses of standardization, rationalization, and auditing” (Apple, 2006, p. 184). It is in this assessment of desired professional behavior that new norms for institutional life are created. Marquand described how this process of standardization and motivation through financial incentives and punishments challenges the service ethic felt by institutional members (2000). The emotional labor performed by members of the four universities is reflected in their devotion to serving students and the region. As institutions become data-driven, they may lose the motivation and identification of their faculty, staff and administration. An audit culture can also cause members to feel as though they are being criticized as they are being continually assessed (Apple, 2006). This feeling of being criticized was reflecting in the earlier quote by a professor at City State who said that faculty felt that data was being used against them, a feeling that has been shown to hurt member identification with an organization.

To varying degrees, each campus conveyed to faculty the importance of retention efforts because of the risk of losing financial resources not because of deeper values of helping students succeed. In citing the university’s financial survival, the campuses reflect adaptive strategy (Chaffee, 1985b). The chief financial officer of Thunder State expressed his belief that the overall goal of the university was to recruit, retain and graduate students, saying:

It’s important that we motivate, not only the students, but the university on getting these kids out in a timely manner and that’s why I like the performance based model ... it’s working for Thunder State and this is the reason why, Cecilia, it has now gotten the entire university involved in catering to our clients.

This emphasis on retention so that the university remains in good financial standing creates a motivation structure for faculty that does not relate to transforming the lives of students. Yet, changing the lives of students is a frequently cited motivation of faculty for working at these institutions, as is described by this professor from Thunder State, “The work's too demanding. Like I wouldn't do the amount of work I do if I didn't love this place. Love my students and really feel lucky to have these colleagues.” Attempting to motivate people based on financial incentives undermines the very same ethic of care that compelled many to enter higher education (Apple, 2006). Furthermore, this motivation structure further institutionalizes the idea of students are customers instead of learners, and that learning should take place as one way to appease these clients (Giroux, 2002). This shift in motivation structures can also create the feeling that professors are playing a game on behalf of their institutions, as was described by a professor from City State:

We've got to meet some new quotas. We've got to raise the number of graduates and we're going to do anything we have to do to do it. Otherwise we're going to lose funding. I think it's just being, this is the game, here are the rules, you have to play the game.

While the funding formula is a pervasive preoccupation of institutional members at all levels, at City State there are growing efforts to create a motivation structure that inspires faculty to improve retention and completion because it is a way to fulfill the public purpose of the institution. These attempts are captured in the following quote from the special assistant to the president of City State:

Yes, it is motivating people, but it's a little silly ... We should be trying to improve retention if we were just callous and cared only about our bottom line because those students are paying tuition. If we were good people and cared about the students, then we should be trying to increase retention. Under either of those scenarios, which are much more related to our bottom line and to our mission than what the state does, we should be trying to improve retention.

Thus, if member identification is changed to cause institutional members to commit to the neoliberal agenda, the motivation members feel to work long hours for low pay and the satisfaction they feel in their roles on campus may be threatened.

In addition to member identification, there are implications for regional engagement. As these institutions think of themselves more and more as economic engines, community engagement could suffer. In all four instances, community engagement efforts have either been combined with economic development efforts or abandoned to emphasize economic development. This could mean abandoned community/university partnerships, less faculty time devoted to community engagement and research, and fewer opportunities for students to engage in the local community. If the neoliberal agenda continues to dominate public policy, regional civic life could suffer as an important civic hub is transformed into an economic engine. These changes also risk reducing the size of the next generation of volunteers and civic leaders because they are not being socialized by their colleges to be civically active.

### **Conclusion**

During City State's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, institutional leaders surveyed alumni to document their feelings about the institution. One alum was quoted saying: "Why am I passionate about this school? Because it changed me." This student could not afford to attend college full-time and was able to take part-time while he worked. Versions of this story of transformation are often shared widely throughout the four institutions. These stories help create a sense of the identity and purpose for the universities. In a state policy context that fails to provide incentives for institutions to support part-time, nontraditional students and other underrepresented students, the question becomes: how long will this story be possible? A professor from Thunder State articulated what would be lost when institutions are no longer able to create stories of transformation:

As we develop plans for students to succeed and improve their completion rates and retention rates ... they have to think about this human talent waste that happens. What is the plan for improving this talent? What is the pathway for all these failed students as we go down the pike? People say they end up in jails and what-have-you.

Accountability as an ideal is meritorious. Universities should be held to account for their ability to create stories of transformation and progress toward fulfilling their public purpose. As this study demonstrates, where society runs into difficulty is when public institutions are forced to be accountable to private sector metrics and logics through neoliberal public policy (Apple, 2006; Foucault, 2010; Lipman, 2006). In the neoliberal university, public accountability is traded for private accountability and the university is forced to ‘prove’ its value to the market.

Alternatively, institutions should be held accountable in ways that help them protect and enact their public purpose (Apple, 2006). Indeed, public accountability could be indispensable in ensuring public institutions are embodying their public purpose. To promote public accountability that inspires regional comprehensives to embody their public purpose, a different “logics of accountability” as described by Apple must be created. While organizational identity is internally generated, it also responds to external forces such as neoliberal ideology (Albert & Whetten, 1985). As policymakers and the public narrow higher education’s purpose to its role within the market, this study points to how this view creeps into university life, even for institutions that are actively working to protect their public purpose. If the image of the university as an economic engine becomes further solidified, the view of the university as a public good may be lost.

There are administrators and faculty on all four campuses who believe that their universities should wean themselves off of state support so that they are no longer whipsawed from one set of priorities to the next – a process these leaders often call “taking control of our own destiny.” To that end, City State and Inventor State are engaged in capital campaigns with the goal of becoming more financially autonomous, and all four institutions are attempting to commercialize and seek alternative revenue streams, further institutionalizing neoliberalism as these funding streams are derived from commercial or private donors who exert private control over the university. As public institutions become more financially independent from the state

and yet beholden to private sector funders, there could be further consequences for the ability of the public to hold them accountable for fulfilling their public purpose.

Administrator efforts to wean their institutions from state support create a final parallel with the fable of Faust. There was a limit to the time Faust was able to enjoy his worldly knowledge before being damned to hell. Albert and Whetten, in describing the challenges faced by a normative organization in times of financial stress, wrote that a

normative organization may rightly fear the ironic truth of the slogan that it may be necessary to destroy the organization in order to save it ... thus, a normative organization under attack can be expected to prepare a utilitarian defense (1985, p. 279).

In pursuing goals that have purely economic aims, the public purpose of higher education is lost and the Faustian bargain remains in place, with the clock ticking toward a potential future in which public universities no longer act as engines for democracy. Thus as the neoliberal public policy context intensifies, not only is educational opportunity threatened, so is democratic life in the United States, as regional comprehensive universities – our “democracy’s colleges” – struggle to survive (Henderson, 2007).

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

As public higher education responds to the immense and unprecedented challenges facing the sector, individual colleges and universities are forced to reckon with how these responses affect their mission and founding purposes. The recommendations that follow are offered in the spirit of preserving the public purpose of regional comprehensive universities. Because institutional stakeholders and public policymakers are the primary shapers of higher education institutions, these recommendations are offered with these two constituent groups in mind. For institutional leaders, recommendations are offered that concern both internal operations and external interfacing with policymakers, as well as economic and civic leaders in their region. For policymakers, recommendations are offered that aim to create public policies and funding structures that will encourage higher education institutions to maintain their public purpose.

Ultimately the ability of regional comprehensive universities to preserve their public purpose will rely on the ideological and strategic leadership of these two groups.

### **Recommendations for Enacting Interpretive Strategy**

Preserving the public purpose of regional comprehensive universities through enacting interpretive strategy will require proactive, intentional and ideologically based leadership (Chaffee, 1985b). As such, the first priority facing senior administrators is convening member conversations and debates over the founding purposes and mission of the university so that these ideals are not simply written in mission statements but continually on the lips and minds of institutional members. During large university events such as convocation, graduation, and new student and faculty orientation, senior leaders should use the “bully pulpit” created by their offices to grapple with the university’s public purpose (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000; Percy, Zimpher, & Burkhardt, 2006; Votruba, 2005). Additionally, university leaders should use institutional milestones such as 50-year anniversaries, record-breaking enrollments, or the creation of new university processes such as tenure and promotion to celebrate and re-engage with the public purpose of the university.

In compelling institutional members to grapple with the deeper values concerning educational opportunity and regional stewardship, institutional leaders uncover fodder to motivate members to respond to these challenges (Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b). Engaging with these values help institutional members in all roles, from professors to registrars to groundskeepers, see a larger purpose to their work (Hartley, 2002). Because many first-generation, low-income and minority college students are compelled to attend university because they want to make a difference and elevate their families, they should be involved in these conversations about the larger purpose of the university (Guiffrida, Lynch, Wall & Abel, 2013). Helping students connect with these deeper values may also convince them to persist despite financial and personal challenges. Relatedly, with regional comprehensives being underfunded, staff, faculty and

administrator salaries are low in comparison with their peers at flagship universities. Ultimately people will work tirelessly to accomplish goals in spite of enormous difficulties if they believe there is a larger purpose to the struggle. Thus helping connect the work that these faculty and staff do to the values of the institution motivates them to remain committed to the university's public purpose (Kanter, 1972; Pratt, 2000).

As was done at City State and Inventor State, university leaders should consider ways of claiming institutional features that some may view as deficits and holding them up as unique distinctions. These "deficits" could include being less selective, enrolling commuter students and focusing on teaching instead of research. In claiming these attributes as distinctions, university leaders might strengthen member identification with the public purpose and identity of the university (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquil, 1994). One way that these two universities have done this was through involving stakeholders in creating specific language that captures the spirit of the university's identity as it relates to its public purpose. While at first this language may feel like an administrative public relations effort, over time with intentional leadership that matches the rhetoric being espoused with institutional practice, this language could come to signify the uniquely important role of regional comprehensives (Gamson, 1992). Universities might also look for regional cultural elements to inform their identities. For example, City State thinks of itself as its city's university and River State thinks of itself as a university uniquely suited to serving Appalachia. Universities might also employ student stories of success in communicating their identities (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Chaffee, 1985b). Connecting a regional engagement mission to the university's identity will not only communicate a brand but will also further embed the public purpose of regional comprehensives within the psyches of stakeholders.

University leaders should also look for "public purpose" champions in all areas on campus who will interface with offices and departments so that they continually translate the message about the university's public purpose into decision making at all levels (Duck, 2000;

Furco, 2002; Votruba, 2005). Presidents should also educate new and existing boards of trustee members about the university's public purpose and their role in helping protect it, as River State has done (Jacoby & Hollander, 2009).

In responding to challenges, institutional leaders should use external threats, challenges and opportunities to remind institutional stakeholders about the values guiding the institution (Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b; Wallace, 1956). To enact interpretive change in the face of external challenges, institutional members should continually ask questions such as, "How does this response help us fulfill our mission as a regional steward?" "What will happen to our access mission if we go down that road?" and "How might we preserve our focus on teaching if we choose to engage in this new activity?"

Regional comprehensives should also leverage data collection, use and performance metrics for deepening their public purposes (Filkins & Doyle, 2002). The first way to do this would be to tailor data collection practices so that they satisfy state demands while also gathering information that will help the university assess how well it is preserving its public purpose (Kinnick & Ricks, 1993). Data collected about students should be used to help institutional leaders grapple with the grand questions of university learning including: "How do students learn best?" "What motivates them to persist?" and "What are their passions and values as they relate to education?" Universities could use motivational surveys, civic skills inventories and national surveys such as NSSE to garner information about these questions. When students drop out, whenever possible universities should contact them and conduct exit interviews to uncover the specific reasons why they left. Stories about students overcoming academic, financial, social and personal barriers could be collected to give institutions a nuanced understanding of the student experience and to give policymakers a better picture into the work of regional comprehensive universities. Ultimately, all data collected, be it to fulfill state requirements or to better understand student life, should be leveraged to fulfill the university's public purpose. Required



statewide reports should be written with language about the public purpose of regional comprehensives. Creating these reports could also be an opportunity to convene conversations about the university's public purpose.

As has been described, the four universities have all conducted economic impact studies. They should also conduct civic impact studies (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000; Gelmon, Holland, Driscoll, Spring & Kerrigan, 2001; Maurrasse, 2001). Doing so would demonstrate to policymakers that the contributions universities make are more than economic. This data could also be used to improve the university's regional civic engagement efforts. Data sources include Memorandums of Understanding created to facilitate community/university partnerships, surveys of community partners, the number of faculty teaching service learning courses, the number of community/university research projects underway and the number of student volunteer hours conducted. Universities could also adapt the indices of the National Conference on Citizenship's *Civic Health Index* to measure the civic health of their regions (2009). By conducting Civic Health Indexes, regional comprehensives would have another dataset to draw from in making the case to policymakers that their purpose is more than simply economic. Indeed, David Weerts found that universities that were involved in their communities tended to have higher state appropriations and so finding ways to communicate this engagement may also help the university's bottom line (2014).

Regional comprehensive universities have long been involved in the economic development of their regions (Henderson, 2007). These activities should continue. Universities should also consider changing the way they interface with businesses and employers with the goal of educating these leaders about how a variety of degrees and experiences prepare students for jobs, as City State did (Hartman Associates, 2013). Universities should create career pathways maps that help students and prospective employers see how liberal arts degrees and liberal learning have wide application to a variety of fields. Additionally, universities should educate

employers about the skills and knowledge gained through service-learning and community-based experiences so that they understand their value (Astin & Sax, 1999; Colby et al., 2003; Ehrlich, 2000). A finding from the National Conference on Citizenship demonstrates that the economic health of a region is directly tied to its civic health (2009). As such, universities are presented with a false choice in determining which aspects of their regional engagement to preserve: both need to be protected because both matter to one another. As such, universities should continue to engage with their regions civically as well as economically.

Universities must also take steps to ensure that community/university partnerships are mutually beneficial and co-created (Maurrase, 2001; White, 2008). A few strategies can be used to ensure mutuality is achieved. First, universities stakeholders and community members should meet and discuss the goals and self-interests of both parties to determine overlapping goals. From this discussion, memorandums of understanding should be created that detail how both parties will benefit from the relationship, as well as the strategies for engagement. These partnerships should also be assessed annually so that community partners are able to offer feedback to the university. These surveys should be short and focused in recognition of all the ways in which nonprofit leaders, school representatives, and government employees are also asked to do “more with less.” Universities also need to rethink the academic calendar guiding their engagement (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009). Universities should devise ways to remain involved during the summer be it through offering incentives to students to remain involved or maintaining open lines of communication during these breaks. Finally, having university officials participate in town hall convenings, school board meetings and other community events is an important way to network with regional leaders while communicating the university’s commitment to the region. With this in mind, university stakeholders should be apprised of these events and encouraged to attend as time and personal interest dictate.

Regional comprehensive universities have long enjoyed relationships with K-12 schools (AASCU, 2012; Henderson, 2007). The universities are at the mercy of these schools when it comes to how well their incoming classes have been prepared for college level work. For these reasons, regional comprehensives have built-in imperatives for engaging with these educational institutions. As Inventor and Thunder State did, regional comprehensive universities should facilitate stronger relationships with K-12 schools through creating an alumni directory of local schoolteachers who received their degrees from the university. These teachers can be key advocates for the value of attending regional comprehensives as well as partners in improving curriculum so that incoming students require less remediation. These teachers could also be important informants about the characteristics, needs and motivations of prospective students so that regional comprehensives are able to continually adapt to serve students from the region. Finally, universities should partner with these teachers to bring university resources (in the form of students and faculty) into the schools to help improve educational outcomes for students.

Finally, in the words of a professor at Inventor State, regional comprehensives need to become more adept at “flexing and bobbing” to state demands. Instead of being reactive to state policy demands, regional comprehensives should become more strategic about asserting themselves into policy debates. While the influence within these debates of older and more prestigious flagships cannot be underestimated, it can also be countered with compelling stories about what regional comprehensives do. One way to do this would be to leverage a mix of qualitative and quantitative data about regions and student lives changed in communicating the important role of these institutions. These universities could also create lobbying bodies composed of current students, alumni, regional civic and economic leaders and students who could advocate for the public purpose of regional comprehensives to state leaders. University leaders should also find ways to communicate to policymakers the value of non-technical college degrees and student civic engagement within civic life and the economy and the connection

between civic and economic health. These recommendations amount to a public relations campaign of sorts and should make use of social and print media and in-person testimonials so that the stories of regional comprehensives are told in a variety of formats. If these strategies are used, not only will regional comprehensives effectively respond to external challenges, they will strengthen their public purpose in the process.

### **Recommendations for Improving Student Retention and Completion Rates**

Improving retention and graduation rates is an important goal for regional comprehensives because they have long struggled in this regard (Schneider & Deane, 2014; Henderson, 2007, 2009). Institutions should first relate the challenge of improving retention and graduation rates to deeper values of educating students and helping them become upwardly mobile and civically engaged (Campus Compact, 2010; Kuh, 2008; Tinto, 1987). Once this connection has been established, university leaders should encourage campus stakeholders to strategize to better support students so they will graduate. An important step in this direction is changing the dominant narrative about the types of students that tend to enroll at regional comprehensives as being difficult to educate and likely to fail. Doing so would mean first changing the language used to talk about these students. Instead of labeling them “at-risk”, institutional leaders should focus more on touting the positive attributes of these students including grittiness, resourcefulness and passion. Doing so will involve dispelling myths and educating campus members about the unique challenges faced by students while recognizing that there will be times when students leave the university for personal reasons that are unconnected to anything that happens on campus (Cuseo & Farnum, 2011). Relatedly, campus stakeholders should resist seeing the family responsibilities and demographic backgrounds of students as hurdles to be crossed and instead see them as unique student assets. For example, for Latino students, family involvement is often an important element of college choice and success

(Auerbach, 2004). What if universities were to engage with the families of Latino students in efforts to retain and graduate them?

Given the particularities of the students attending each of the four universities in this study, it is clear that there is no single approach that will effectively address the diversity of student needs. For example, a student from Appalachia attending River State will need far different supports and encouragements than a student with disabilities attending Inventor State or a student who is a single mother attending Thunder State. This is all to say that students know best what helps them succeed and what causes them to drop out. As such, students should be involved in the design of student success initiatives. To bring students into these efforts, university leaders could survey students about the challenges they face as City State did. Universities could also convene student focus groups and interviews to gain a qualitative understanding of these issues. The provost's office could employ work study students as special assistants in designing and evaluating programs and initiatives. Finally, universities could convene student advisory committees that would offer advice about various proposed initiatives. Given all that students juggle, they should be compensated for their involvement, be it through free lunches or bookstore gift cards or small stipends. By involving students in institutional responses to retention and graduation challenges, not only are universities able to receive guidance in effective strategies but they are also embodying their student-centered mission.

Given the lack of knowledge many low-income and first generation students bring to their first year of college, universities also need to communicate what it takes to be successful early and often (Perna & Jones, 2013; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996). While doing this, university stakeholders should connect success in college to questions about what has inspired students to attend college. In doing so, students can make connections between the larger values and goals guiding their lives and success in college. Universities should also consider strategies that enhance student learning in the civic and democratic domain as these

strategies have proven to enhance retention (Campus Compact, 2010; Kuh, 2008; Finely & McNair, 2013). These strategies involve students in activities that improve their critical thinking and problem solving skills as well as their ability to work in diverse settings, skills needed both in the workplace and in democracy (Hart Research Associates, 2013). Thus, high impact practices can be important vehicles for embodying the university's public purpose while also improving retention. Universities should also allow students to register for classes for the entire year and provide financial incentives for students to persist into their second year, as City State did.

### **Recommendations for State Policymakers**

State policymakers must come to terms with the public purpose of public higher education. Using the strategies outlined above, regional comprehensives will be instrumental in helping policymakers understand this work. To preserve higher education as a democratic institution, policymakers must modify legislation and allocate appropriations in ways that will protect the public purpose of colleges and universities. Indeed, policymakers are perhaps the most influential constituent group in determining how well we are able to keep higher education's status as a public good alive (Giroux, 2002). First and foremost, policymakers must re-invest in public higher education. That means recommitting state resources to funding colleges and universities so that they are able to structure themselves in ways that support students and their regions. Doing so will alleviate the desperate search for resources and feelings of having to glide from financial crisis to crisis while allowing these institutions to engage in long-term planning and strategy about how they might better fulfill their public purpose.

Not only should the amount of funding delegated to higher education change, so should the mode for dispersing it. Most higher education funding models throughout the country fail to account for market fluctuations (Callan, Perna & Finney, 2014). Thus, when state coffers fluctuate, so do the budgets of universities. To alleviate this, policymakers should stabilize funding year to year so it is more predictable, creating a "rainy day fund," in good years that can

be drawn on in bad. Funding allocations should also recognize differences in mission and the unique state context. Universities that enroll high proportions of students that require remediation from underrepresented backgrounds will require more resources to ensure these students succeed and should be funded accordingly.

More importantly, as this study has shown, performance based funding, while seemingly an innovative and compelling idea, clearly has serious drawbacks. Moreover, the first round of performance based funding that has accounted for significant state appropriations has failed to produce the results desired by the state (Tandberg & Hillman, 2013), making the model's effectiveness dubious. For this reason, performance based funding should be abolished. If states insist on maintaining this funding model, they must find ways to account for the public purpose of institutions (i.e., community engagement, student-centeredness and educational access). Formulae should also be simplified so that institutions are better able to predict the amount they will receive. Policymakers should create dashboards that will allow institutional leaders to input institutional data that will help them predict their funding levels. Minding Apple's admonition that a different "logics of accountability" are required (2013), policymakers should also devise performance metrics that embody both the public and private aims of higher education institutions. In creating performance metrics, though, policymakers should heed the old adage that what can be counted does not always count. Thus, qualitative data could be better used to assess university progress toward meeting state goals. One strategy for collecting this data could be through conducting forums and focus groups of regional and state residents who could speak to the university's involvement within their communities.

Policymakers must also consider how opportunities are structured in their state and the role of higher education in equalizing opportunity. Regional comprehensive universities, given their regional focus and relatively open enrollment policies, are important state assets promoting opportunity. One way that policymakers could help regional comprehensives promote

opportunity is to incentivize enrolling and supporting adult and nontraditional students. Policymakers should also encourage public universities to create closer relationships with K-12 schools through grants that improve curriculum alignment between colleges and high schools. Grants should also be made available to support teacher professional development. Policymakers can create grants for public works projects and community development efforts co-led by higher education institutions, public schools, local governments and nonprofit agencies. Policymakers should also consult public and university stakeholders in designing policy through university student, faculty and administrator advisory committees that review state policies and make recommendations on them. Policymakers should also convene higher education scholars from around the country to vet policy proposals.

The proposals offered obviously require resources. Specifically, for policymakers to become stewards of the public purpose of public universities, they must lend both their ideological support as well as the monetary resources at their disposal. As the Truman Commission asserted in 1947, education remains the “most hopeful” of the nation’s enterprises because it can be leveraged to improve economic and civic life. That is, if it is adequately funded and compellingly led to do so.



## APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

### Interview Protocol for Admissions Personnel

#### *Background Information:*

1. Can you tell me a little about your background. What is your official position and title?
2. How long have you been at the university?

#### *University Recruitment Practices*

3. I'd like to talk a little more about student recruitment. Can you describe what this process entails?
  - a. What institutions/schools/organizations do you work with to admit students?
  - b. Do you recruit out-of-state students? If so, what led to these efforts?
  - c. Do you recruit international students? If so, what led to these efforts?
  - d. Do you recruit community college students? If so, what led to these efforts?
4. What directions do you see the university's recruitment efforts going in?

#### *University Admissions Practices*

5. How would you describe your university's overall approach to admissions?
  - a. What kind of students does your university admit?
  - b. Ideally, what kinds of students would your university like to admit?
  - c. What are the metrics you use to make sure you're building the kind of class that you want?
6. As an admissions officer, what kinds of messages are you trying to communicate to prospective students about what XZY University is like?
  - a. What can students expect of XYZ University?
7. What's different now from 10 years ago in terms of the admissions process, do you think?
  - a. Do you think the messages sent to students have changed?
  - b. What are some of the tradeoffs associated with these changes?
  - c. Do you think the types of students the university is trying to recruit has changed?
  - d. Has the university required students to have higher SAT/ACT scores?
  - e. Has the university required students to have higher grades?
8. On your website I see that the overall composition of students is **[fill this in depending on institution]**. I am wondering if the student demographics changed over time with regard to any of the following attributes:
  - a. Race/ethnicity?
  - b. Socioeconomic standing?
  - c. First-generation status?
  - d. Adult learners?
9. What would you say is the most challenging part of your job?
10. What would you say is the most rewarding part of your job?
11. Do you have anything else you'd like to say about anything we talked about?

## Interview Protocol for Community Partners

### *Background information:*

1. Before we get started, I'd love to hear a little bit about you. I understand you're the [Title]. Can you tell me about your role in the organization?
2. How long have you been with the organization?

### *Community/University Partnership*

As you know, I'm trying to understand how universities and community organizations work together. I have been spending time talking with XYZ University folks about this.

3. **[If interviewing member of Chamber of Commerce]:** I'd love to get your perspective as a member (president) of the Chamber of Commerce. How has the Chamber or businesses in the community worked with the university?  
(partner organization): I'd love your perspective as a leader of a community organization. How has your organization worked with the university?
  - a. How did this partnership begin?
  - b. Who were the key people involved from XYZ University? From your organization?
  - c. How would you characterize this partnership overall?
4. Can you tell me a little bit about the current university partnerships that are occurring? What does this involvement look like?
  - a. Do university students volunteer for your organization?
5. When the partnership began, what did you (or the organization) hope to get out of it? What goals does your organization have for its involvement with the university?
  - a. Do you now have or have you ever had a written understanding (like a Memorandum of Understanding)?
6. How would you characterize the relationship overall?
7. Has your organization been involved with any research that the university is doing?
  - a. Tell me about that research work.
  - b. Has it been useful to you?
8. Has your organization's relationship with the university changed over time?
  - a. If so, in what ways?
9. If you could offer a piece of advice to the president of the university about how to make the partnership better or stronger, what would you say?
10. Is there anything else you'd like to say about anything we talked about?

## Interview Protocol for Junior Faculty Members

### *Background Information*

1. Before we begin, I would like to hear about your background. How long have you been at the university?
2. What drew you to teach at this university?
  - a. What were your first impressions of the university?

### *Institutional Identity and Mission*

3. I'd love to hear your thoughts about XYZ University. If you were asked to describe the university to someone who had never heard of it, how would you describe the university?
  - a. What kind of students does XYZ serve?
  - b. What is the university's role within the larger higher education state context? How does it compare to other colleges and universities?
4. What is XYZ University's place in the region?
  - a. Does it work with regional businesses?
  - b. Does it work to improve civic life?
  - c. Are you involved with any of this work? If so, could you briefly describe this to me?
    - i. Whom (community partners) do you work with?
    - ii. What form does this work take? (i.e., service-learning courses, community-based research, student clubs, etc.)
5. Are there any incentives in place to encourage faculty to teach service-learning courses or do community-based research?
  - a. If so, what are these incentives? (Ex. mini-grants, funding for conference travel, professional development to help faculty learn how to do this type of teaching and scholarship, etc.)
  - b. Have you taken advantage of any of these resources?
  - c. Do you feel as though senior administrators are supportive of this type of work?
6. Are there any incentives in place to encourage faculty to broker partnerships with businesses and industry?
  - a. If so, what are these incentives?
  - b. Have you taken advantage of any of these resources?

### *Teaching, Research and Civic Engagement Responsibilities for Faculty*

I'd like to talk now about faculty life at the university.

7. Can you tell me a little bit about the expectations for teaching? What is it like to teach here?
  - a. What's the typical junior faculty teaching load?
  - b. How many classes do you teach?

8. Now I'd like to hear a bit about the expectations for faculty around research. Are faculty expected to do research?
  - a. Are faculty encouraged to pursue grant funding to support research?
  - b. Are faculty encouraged to seek out private-sector partnerships to fund research?
  - c. What kinds of research are valued by the university?
  - d. **[If this question wasn't answered earlier:]** As you're thinking about the next steps in your tenure and promotion process, how are you trying to balance research with teaching and service?
    - i. What messages have you received about how research will "count" in this process?
9. When you were hired, what did you get the sense they (members of the search committee) were looking for in a junior faculty member?
  - a. What have been some of the messages sent to you about what it takes to be successful here?

*Challenges Facing the University*

10. What's your sense of the big picture of the university? What are the major challenges facing the university? Opportunities?
11. Are these challenges and opportunities affecting faculty life?

*Concluding Questions*

12. Is there anything else you'd like to say about anything we talked about?
13. Is there anyone else you think I should talk to about anything we talked about?

## Interview Protocol for Senior Faculty Members

### *Background Information*

1. Before we begin, I would like to hear more about your background. How long have you been at the university?
2. I would like you to think back to when you decided to become a professor at XYZ University. What drew you to the university?
  - a. What were your first impressions of the university?

### *Institutional Identity and Mission*

3. If you were asked to describe the university to someone who had never heard of it, what would you say? How would you describe the university?
  - a. I read that the university was founded as a **[insert specific institutional heritage]**. How does that legacy inform daily campus life?
  - b. Why do you think the university exists? What specific purpose does it serve?
4. I'd now like to hear your thoughts about XYZ's role in the state. Could you tell me what you think is the university's role within the larger higher education state context? How does it compare to other colleges and universities in the state?
  - a. What is the university's "niche" or "place" in this broader context?
5. What is XYZ University's place in the region and local community?
  - a. Does it work with local businesses? Work with the private sector to educate students for jobs?
    - i. Are there any incentives in place to encourage faculty to work with the local business community?
  - b. Is the university involved in the civic life of the community?
    - i. Ex: host town hall meetings, election polls, Educate school teachers, work with public schools? Conduct research to improve community life?
  - c. Are you involved with any of this work? If so, could you briefly describe this to me?
    - i. Whom (community partners) do you work with?
    - ii. What form does this work take? (i.e., service-learning courses, community-based research, student clubs, etc.)
  - d. Are there any incentives in place to encourage faculty to teach service-learning courses or do community-based research?
    - i. If so, what are these incentives? (Ex. mini-grants, funding for conference travel, professional development to help faculty learn how to do this type of teaching and scholarship, etc.)
    - ii. Have you taken advantage of any of these resources?
  - e. Since you've been at XYZ for a while, I'd love to hear how you've observed this work playing out over time. Has the campus's commitment

to (**Note: insert campus-specific language about civic engagement here**) remained constant, decreased or increased over time?

6. What advice do you give to new faculty who are just getting started here?
  - a. What does it take to be successful and fit in with the work of the university?

#### *Teaching, Research and Civic Engagement Responsibilities for Faculty*

I'd like to talk now about faculty life at the university.

7. Can you tell me a little bit about the expectations for teaching? What is it like to teach here?
  - a. How many classes do you teach?
  - b. What kinds of students do you teach?
8. Now I'd like to hear a bit about the expectations for faculty around research. Are faculty expected to do research?
  - a. Are faculty encouraged to pursue grant funding to support research?
  - b. What kinds of research are valued by the university?
  - c. Do you feel as though the expectations around research have remained the same over time? Or are they increasing or decreasing?
9. Have you been involved in any faculty hiring processes?
  - a. If so, can you tell me a little bit about that process? What were you looking for in a new faculty colleague?
  - b. What do you think the larger committee was looking for?
10. Have you sat on any tenure and promotion committees?
  - a. If so, how are people evaluated? What is given most attention within faculty dossier?
11. Can you tell me a bit about your own tenure experience. How did that go?
  - a. What in your dossier was given most attention?
  - b. Do you think faculty tenure and promotion expectations have changed since you went through the process?

#### *Challenges Facing the University*

12. What's your sense of the big picture of the university? What are the major challenges facing the university? Opportunities?
13. Are these challenges and opportunities affecting faculty life?

#### *Concluding Questions*

14. Is there anything else you'd like to say about anything we talked about?
15. Is there anyone else you think I should talk to about anything we talked about?

## **Interview Protocol for Senior Administrators and Staff**

### *Background Information*

1. I'd love to hear a little bit about your background. How long have you been at the university?
2. Can you briefly tell me what drew you to the university?

### *Institutional Identity and Mission*

3. If you were asked to describe the university to someone who had never heard of it, what would you say? How would you describe the university's mission and purpose?
  - a. What kind of students does XYZ serve?
  - b. I read that XYZ University was founded as a teacher's college. How does that shape university life now?
4. What do you see at the university's role and niche within the state relative to other higher education institutions?
  - a. Has this role changed over time?
5. What is the university's place within the local community?
  - a. Does the university host town hall meetings, election polls, work with the private sector to educate graduates for jobs, educate school teachers, work with public schools, etc.?
  - b. Do students volunteer in the local community?
  - c. Do faculty conduct research in partnership with the community?
  - d. Has the university's work with the community changed over time?
6. What kind of research takes places at XYZ University?
  - a. If you think the university should increase its research output, in what ways are administrators making this happen?
7. Now I'd love to hear about your university's role within the region's economy. What do you see as the university's role within the economy
  - a. Can you describe the university's private-sector partnerships?
  - b. Have the number of private partnerships increased or decreased over time?
  - c. How does the university benefit from these partnerships?
  - d. Why were these partnerships established?

### *Challenges Facing the University*

8. As a leader of this institution, what do you see as the most significant challenges facing it over the next 3-5 years?
  - a. Based on the research I've done about your university, it's clear that there have been cuts to state funding. How has this affected how you do business?
  - a. Has your university received performance funding? If so, can you describe this process to me?

9. Do you think that there been any changes that have taken place either at the state or institutional levels to alter the balance between the public and private mission of your university?
  - a. Changing state-level expectations?
  - b. Changes in tuition?
  - c. Hiring more part-time faculty?
  - d. Governance changes or significant deregulation from state control?
  - e. Efforts to increase private sector fundraising?
  - f. Privatizing academic centers on campus?
  - g. Encouragement of faculty to be entrepreneurial? (pursue grant-funded research, broker private-sector partnerships, etc.)
10. What are the most exciting and promising opportunities on the horizon for XYZ University?
11. **[question for president:]** If you could offer some advice to the people in the state legislature/Board of Regents who are paying the most attention to higher education, what would you say?

*Concluding Questions*

12. Is there anything else you'd like to say about anything we talked about?
13. Is there anyone else you think I should talk to about anything we talked about?



## APPENDIX II: SAMPLE CODES USED TO ANALYZE DATA

- LEAD – administrative leadership
  - CTR – center or office on campus
    - CIVEN – center focused on community engagement
    - ECON – center focused on economic development
    - RES – center focused on promoting research
    - RETRENCH – retrenchment of center
  - IDEA – campus ideology
    - PUB – public purpose orientation
    - NEOL – evidence of neoliberal ideology
      - ENTR - desire to increase entrepreneurial activities or embrace of entrepreneurial ideas
      - ECON – mention of university’s place in the economy
      - RCM – responsibility centered management
- CHAL – challenges the university is facing
  - RESP – response to a challenge
    - ADMIS – Admissions
      - RECR – recruit efforts
        - INTL – international students
        - K-12 – recruitment in local high schools
        - MIN – minority student
        - OOS – out of state students
        - SEL – becoming more selective in response to a challenge
    - SS – student supports
      - ACAD – student academic supports
      - AFF – student supports for affinity groups
      - INC – increase in student supports
      - INTRUSIVE – intrusive advising
      - REMEDIATE – remediation for students
      - RETRENCH – reduction in student supports
  - FAC - Responses that affect faculty life:
    - EXPECT – expectations for faculty
      - RES – expectations for faculty surrounding research
      - TEACH – expectations for faculty surrounding teaching
      - T&P – tenure and promotion
      - ENG – expectations for faculty surrounding engagement
        - CIVEN – expectations for faculty surrounding community engagement
        - ECON – expectations for faculty surrounding economic development

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