Pragmatism or Prestige? Recessionary Strategies of State Comprehensive Universities

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Higher education institutions face growing challenges including declining state appropriations (State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, 2014), a decreasing number of high school graduates (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2012), and increasing competition in the form of online and for-profit education providers (Bowen, 2013). State comprehensive universities (SCUs), as institutions often considered to be "stuck in the middle" between major research universities and smaller niche colleges, are particularly susceptible to these challenges (Henderson, 2009; Skinner & Miller, 2013). This has led many scholars to indicate that colleges and universities can no longer be all things to all people and that focused strategies are needed to ensure long-term viability (Selingo, 2013; Skinner & Miller, 2013). If dire warnings of an unsustainable future hold true, one might expect that colleges and universities would identify new operating models. However, many higher education institutions historically do not maintain strategies of seeking distinction, but instead emulate their most highly ranked peers (Christensen & Erving, 2011; Toma, 2012). This paper explores what strategic actions SCUs took during the recent recession and reasons for pursuing those strategies.

The Plight of SCUs

In recent years, specifically since the beginning of the Great Recession in 2008, SCUs have faced a myriad of challenges. State funding for higher education decreased by 10.8% between 2008 and 2012 (Center for the Study of Education Policy, 2013). Although states collectively increased higher education funding each of the past two years, funding levels remain below 2008 levels (State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, 2014). Although tuition increases often offset declines in state funding, public institutions face increasing pressure to hold tuition levels constant even in the face of declining appropriations as concerns grow about rising student debt loads (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2013b, 2013c). This combination of declining appropriations and pressure to limit tuition increases often leaves public universities with constrained budgets. Further ex-

acerbating these challenges at SCUs is the fact that these institutions historically are not as successful as their flagship/research university counterparts at supplementing revenue through private fundraising or external research grants (Brewer, Gates, & Goldman, 2002; Gladiuex, Hauptman, & Greene Knapp, 2010; Skinner & Miller, 2013).

Additionally, SCUs face intense competition for students as the number of high school graduates declines. The number of high school graduates in the United States is projected to decline annually through 2018 and even when growth returns, not reach the peak levels from 2011 again until 2025 (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2012). Since recent high school graduates constitute the majority of students at SCUs, a decline in this population could significantly impact these institutions (American Associate of State Colleges and Universities, 2013a).

Along with a decline in traditional-aged college students, a rise in the number of postsecondary education providers contributes to an increasingly competitive market for recruiting students (Rosen, 2013). This competition may only continue to increase as community colleges increasingly offer bachelor's degrees (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2011), for-profit institutions cater to non-traditional students with flexible schedules and a career-oriented focus (Rosen, 2013), and online and distance education offerings from elite universities threaten to steal students from SCUs (Bowen, 2013).

Despite the challenges facing SCUs, they continue to play a vital role within higher education. Collectively, these institutions enroll approximately four million students (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2013a), are often most focused on undergraduate education (Lyall & Sell, 2005), and are the most "in-tune" with the needs of the workforce (Rowley & Sherman, 2001). Flynn and Vredevoogd (2010) argue that the complex challenges facing this sector likely require institutional actions driven by a clear, compelling, focused, and distinguishable strategy. Therefore, it is vital to examine the actions of SCUs during the recent recessionary period and seek to understand not only their actions, but the reasons behind those actions.

Examining Institutional Behavior

Institutional diversity is a long-valued part of the American higher education system, helping provide access for a variety of students and fulfilling important national economic needs (Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1973; Stadtman, 1980). Despite the wide variety of institutional types within the United States (e.g., public and private, two-year and four-year, liberal arts and research), there is a

general consensus among many higher education scholars that there is an increasing lack of diversity among higher education institutions (Birnbaum, 1983; Morphew, 2002; Morphew, 2009). Toma (2012) argues that despite the United States higher education system's historical institutional diversity, "segmentation invites mission creep as institutions seek the advantages they perceive are at the next level" (p. 141). This often leads to institutions mimicking the behaviors of more highly ranked institutions (O'Meara, 2007; Toma, 2012).

The concept of institutional similarity is not new within higher education, and there are several theoretical explanations for such action. Institutional theorists describe the concept of isomorphism as one where organizations within a certain industry closely resemble their peers (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). DiMaggio and Powell (1983) identify three types of isomorphic behavior: coercive, mimetic, and normative. Coercive isomorphism posits that external expectations force organizations to behave in largely similar manners. Mimetic isomorphism explains imitation through ambiguity. Organizations facing an uncertain environment seek legitimacy by imitating their most well-respected peers. Normative isomorphism stems from the concept of professionalization and explains imitation as driven by professionals within a particular national industry driving expectations for all organizations within that field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Since higher education institutions often maintain numerous and ambiguous goals (Cohen & March, 1974), and with significant faculty autonomy on many academic matters (Birnbaum, 1988), they are often viewed as susceptible to isomorphic forces, specifically the quest for legitimacy through imitation (Toma, 2012). SCUs may face particular pressure to emulate research universities as they seek legitimization among their peers during uncertain and challenging times (Hall, 2009; Henderson, 2009).

An additional explanation for institutions' mimetic actions is related to monetary resources. Organizations depend on resources from a variety of sources and those dependencies often influence the decisions and actions of organizations. When resources are centralized among a few providers, greater power accrues among those providers over the organizations to which they provide resources (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). As resource providers influence institutional actions, organizations often pursue similar initiatives. For example, Toma (2012) found that in Georgia, a state funding formula that rewarded institutions for offering graduate programs contributed to institutions inflating their institutional missions. Similarly, institutions often engage in a market-like competition for resources that prioritizes activities with high revenue potential over those with less direct monetary value (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

In recent years, institutional homogenization has been explored through the concept of striving behavior or the "pursuit of prestige" (Brewer, Gates, & Goldman, 2002; O'Meara, 2007; Toma, 2012). Although there is not a universal definition of what it means to pursue prestige, it generally refers to institutions emulating flagship, research universities (Morphew & Huisman, 2002). This often results in institutions recruiting top students by increasing financial aid, increasing faculty research expectations, adding graduate programs, entering an arms race for building the newest and best facilities, and developing a message of being "on the move" (Ehrenberg, 2002; O'Meara, 2007; Toma, 2012). The end goal of such pursuits is often moving to the next level within higher education rankings or classifications and ideally obtaining the resources perceived to be waiting at the next level (Ehrenberg, 2002; O'Meara, 2007; Toma, 2012). Such pursuits are viewed as common within higher education. Morphew (2002, 2009) identifies examples of colleges becoming universities and universities maintaining explicit goals to improve their national rankings. Toma (2012) even argues that "prestige is to higher education as profit is to corporations" (p. 119); it is inherently part of the system.

Isomorphism, resource dependency theory, and the pursuit of prestige all offer explanations for institutional behavior. There are not always clear distinctions between these explanations as the concepts of legitimacy, resources, and prestige often intertwine with one another. For example, institutions often pursue activities to appear legitimate because legitimacy may lead to prestige and prestige may lead to more resources. Sorting out which factor was the first or main driver of institutional action can be difficult. In fact, Morphew and Huisman (2002) indicate there are likely many different causes of institutional behavior and that different causes can operate together or some more powerfully than others at different points in time. Additionally, Tolbert (1985) argues, "organizational phenomena are much too complex to be described adequately by any single theoretical approach" (p. 12).

While acknowledging the complexities of institutional behavior, this study focuses on exploring whether the pursuit of prestige or other factors drove the decisions of two SCUs during the recent recessionary period. This dichotomy serves as the main framework for this study because of the increasing attention given to the concept of the pursuit of prestige, specifically through several recent higher education books bemoaning institutional striving and institutions' efforts to climb national rankings (Christensen & Erving, 2011; DeMillo, 2011; Ehrenberg, 2002; Rosen, 2013; Selingo, 2013). When SCUs mimic the behavior of research universities it is often attributed to the pursuit of prestige

(O'Meara, 2007; Toma, 2012). This study of two SCUs from 2008 to 2014 specifically explores (1) the extent to which two universities behaved in a manner typically associated with higher ranked institutions, and (2) why those universities behaved in that manner.

This study limited its scope to focusing on student enrollment profiles (e.g., number of students and their credentials) and academic program offerings (e.g., discipline and level). These characteristics were chosen since the students who attend a university and what they study are at the core of institutions' missions. O'Meara (2007) argues there is not a definitive list of what set of activities constitute mimetic or striving behavior, but does list several characteristics that may indicate institutional striving, including increasing admissions selectivity, enrolling fewer Pell students, and adding graduate programs. These characteristics of striving are reinforced by Toma (2012) and Ehrenberg (2002) who also describe institutions increasing financial aid and recruiting more out-of-state students as indicators of emulating research universities. Collectively these types of activities provide a framework for examining striving activities within particular segments of two universities.

Methods

The study design was a multi-site qualitative case study (Merriam, 2009). Since institutional behavior and what influences behavior are broad and often ambiguous topics, it was important to develop a deep understanding of the intricate details of what occurred within each institution (Yin, 2008). Additionally, in studying institutional actions and instances of striving behavior, numerous scholars (e.g., Morphew, 2002; O'Meara, 2007; Toma, 2012) call for greater work in this area, particularly qualitative work that can more deeply examine reasons behind institutional actions not always possible through quantitative studies.

I selected the two case study sites based upon a combination of a criterion-based approach and an expert nomination process (Dexter, 1970; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). The institutions selected reside in the same state to ensure they faced the same general environmental factors as each other. Additionally, the state needed to be experiencing many of the challenges outlined at the beginning of this paper, specifically declining state appropriations and a declining number of high school graduates during the recent recessionary period. Once I selected a state to choose institutions from, I reached out to a representative of a statewide higher education organization for recommendations of universities that would be strong case study sites. I explained that I wanted to study SCUs that appeared to be mimicking the behavior of higher ranked institutions. This individual recommended multiple sites, and

I reached out to several, ultimately selecting two for the study based upon my ability to gain an appropriate level of access necessary to conduct an in-depth qualitative study.

For each of the case study sites, I reviewed their organizational structure and identified potential interview participants. I shared my list with a main point of contact at each institution who suggested which individuals were most involved with setting institutional strategy. Ultimately I interviewed nine individuals at one of the sites and eight at the other. At each institution, I interviewed the president, chief academic officer, chief financial officer, chief advancement officer, chief enrollment officer, chief public relations officer, and two faculty members in leadership positions within their institution's faculty shared governance structure. At one institution I also interviewed the president's chief of staff. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and all were fully transcribed.

Since this was part of a larger study on SCUs, questions covered a range of topics related to institutional strategy, changes in strategy, and influences on strategy. Most pertinent to this paper were questions focused on institutional striving behaviors and reasons behind those actions. Additionally, I reviewed institutional documents such as strategic plans, budget documents, marketing and branding plans, enrollment management plans, and state of the university addresses in both their current versions and dating back six years to the beginning of the Great Recession. This allowed me to triangulate data across multiple sources (Merriam, 2009).

In keeping with standard qualitative research practices, I began preliminary analysis of data throughout the collection process (Merriam, 2009). I reviewed documents prior to conducting any interviews and began recording general notes and observations about the institution. Once I began interviews, I reviewed field notes after each interview to look for emerging themes and points of contention across interviews. This preliminary analysis throughout the data collection process allowed me to develop and explore tentative themes and ideas with participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Once all data were collected, I coded data from each institution separately, following a thematic analysis process "searching through the data for themes and patterns" (Glesne, 2011, p. 187). I began with an open coding process of the transcribed interviews, trying to be as expansive as possible in highlighting pertinent information and assigning a code to each piece of highlighted data (Merriam, 2009). Documents were analyzed in a similar manner. I specifically focused on parts of the documents related to institutional strategy. For example, marketing and branding plans often included information about color

schemes and the use of logos that was not particularly relevant to a study of institutional strategy. These sections of the documents were not coded. Additionally, budget documents did not lend themselves to coding in the same manner as textual documents. In analyzing budget documents, I made observations about trends in monetary allocations and coded those observations.

Following my initial analysis, I condensed codes into groups or categories using an analytical coding process. Categories encompassed multiple individual codes and began to provide an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data. I sought to limit the number of categories to ensure they were more broad-based and analytical than overly detailed and descriptive, but I did not set a pre-determined number of categories to utilize (Merriam, 2009).

To ensure the validity and reliability of this study I utilized an audit trail to track decisions about my case study sites and methodological approach throughout the process, triangulated data across multiple interviews and institutional documents, and utilized a peer reviewer to ensure my interpretation of findings were congruent with the raw data collected (Merriam, 2009). Still, as in any qualitative study, there are some limitations to this study that are important to acknowledge. This study explored the behavior of two SCUs out of approximately 400. Although large extrapolations from the data cannot be made, an in-depth study of two institutions was important to undertake to add to the nascent literature on this understudied sector of higher education (Henderson, 2009) and the lack of qualitative work on institutional striving behaviors (Morphew, 2002).

Additionally, in order to gain access to high-level university officials and review key institutional documents, I promised confidentiality to study participants and the larger institutions at which they are employed. As a result, I am only able to provide broad narratives for each case study institution as opposed to detailed descriptions and specific facts. This may limit readers' ability to fully understand the activities of each institution, but I believe my portrayals are sufficient for understanding the institutional phenomena at each site. Furthermore, to mask participants' identities, I refer to individuals by generic titles such as "administrator" and "faculty member" throughout the remaining sections. Although it may be beneficial to understand exactly what participants made certain comments (e.g., what quotes can be attributed to an institution's president), that would violate confidentiality agreements. Since this study is concerned with institution and not individual actions, I do not believe this lack of exact attribution of quotes detracts from the study. Still, this is noted as a potential limitation.

Case 1: Community-Driven University

The first case study site, labeled Community-Driven University (CDU), enrolls approximately 10,000 students, mostly from the immediate surrounding region. It is a high-access institution serving many first-generation and Pell-eligible students, but still maintaining an entering student academic profile on par with one of the flagship research universities in the state. CDU's enrollment is 75-85% at the undergraduate level, but also offers more than 40 graduate programs, mainly at the master's level in professional fields (e.g., business, education). The university prides itself on its relationship with the surrounding community, regularly partnering with business and community organizations on academic and research projects.

Student Enrollment Profile. One major goal and aspiration of CDU is enrollment growth. Although enrollment growth is widely viewed as an institutional goal, the ideal enrollment number and how to reach that size is more contentious. During the past several years enrollment grew slightly but not to the full levels many believe the institution could sustain given its physical infrastructure capacity. Undergraduate enrollment rose, but was countered by a decline in graduate enrollment, largely attributed to the recession causing employers to reduce employee reimbursements for graduate programs. With the recession showing signs of ending, some administrators are hopeful that greater enrollment growth may be possible. "There's been a target enrollment number for a number of years, going way before I arrived a year and a half ago. There's been incremental slow progress toward that goal, but first we had to survive the decline from the deep recession and the impact that had on enrollment," said one administrator.

The impetus for growing enrollment is largely driven by the need for securing the long-term sustainability of the institution. One administrator argued, "The reality is we are tuition dependent, so enrollment growth is a financial imperative for us." Furthermore, administrators believe there is the capacity to grow by at least another 1,000 to 3,000 students beyond its current enrollment of approximately 9,000 to 11,000 students. "We understand if we do increase enrollment that leads to a healthier budget here at the university and allows us to do more with those funds," said one administrator. Another individual added, "So in our budget planning we know that to have more financial resources we have to keep growing enrollment and for an institution our size that's really important to be more financially efficient."

In terms of the profile of CDU's students, CDU is committed to providing access to a wide variety of students. Due to the majority of its students being transfer students and/or Pell-eligible students, CDU has

made efforts to keep costs low and provide financial assistance to remain an affordable option for prospective and current students. "It [financial aid investments] helps us keep our tuition increases lower. It helps us provide access to individuals that wouldn't normally be able to come here and that's an important part of our vision," said one administrator. This has been particularly important since several individuals mentioned the increasing arms race among institutions in the state of offering larger financial aid packages to be more attractive to prospective students.

While CDU is proud of the access it provides to a wide range of students, it also wants to be considered a first-choice institution within its region. Its entering class profile is on par with one of the flagship institutions in the state and markedly higher than other SCUs within the state. Although some individuals readily acknowledge that enrollment growth would be easier by lowering the quality of incoming students, CDU "never had the appetite to grow by lowering the admission standards. The faculty has always been very opposed to that and administration has supported that," one faculty member stated. The directive from senior leaders at the institution has always been to grow, but maintain quality, which has been possible with increased investments in merit-aid to attract high quality students. Part of CDU's growth efforts include expanding recruitment of international students, many with the ability to pay full tuition without discounts. This recruitment expansion strategy also includes targeting a greater number of older, non-traditional students, some looking to obtain advanced degrees and others who began college but never received a bachelor's degree.

Academic Programs. During the past several years, CDU's academic programs expanded in alignment with the needs of the region and to attract students interested in programs in high-demand fields such as engineering and the health professions. This included growing both undergraduate and graduate programs. "I think there's a lot of development right now of graduate programs. Graduate enrollment is beginning to come out of its recession-era slump, more so than undergraduate actually," said one administrator. Another individual added, "More and more the master's degree is the new bachelor's degree. You need that kind of specialization. So to me, in this state, it makes complete sense that we are building robust graduate programs."

CDU is consciously aware of the employment outlook in its region and regularly relies upon market surveys in determining programs to add, expand, or contract. As one administrator noted, "we've been responding to business and industry from the beginning, and the programs have grown to meet that need . . . all of the new programs we're doing are deeply market researched." This helps CDU meet its goal of

serving the region and developing a future pipeline of talent for the region. One administrator argued:

> We have important graduate degrees that are important
> to the region and the economy. . . . Our engineering PhD
> programs are relative to what's needed in the region.
> Our undergraduate graduates and our graduate gradu-
> ates in master's and PhD programs are doing research
> in really relevant economic growth need disciplines. So
> it wasn't prestige-driven, it was market-driven. It's a
> need for the region. It's not a want or a desire. It's some-
> thing that's important to our region.

A faculty member added, "In engineering we're very oriented to the auto industry whereas engineering at research universities is probably interested in some other areas . . . . The college of business . . . that's also oriented towards the auto industry." Similarly, the creation of a wide variety of health professions programs is in response to regional needs. These programs were emphasized "to contribute to the improvement and build out of the healthcare industry in our region" and to "really honor what's needed in our region for education and health and human services," two separate administrators indicated.

Although CDU is responsive to market and employer needs, it does not do so blindly. In fact, CDU prides itself on not creating niche programs that are so specifically tailored as to risk future low enrollment if demand changes. Additionally, CDU always vets major programmatic decisions through university committees to consider feasibility and institutional fit. One example is avoiding expansion into a nursing program despite external pressure to create an RN to BSN nursing completion program. One administrator explained, "We had been assured there's a huge growing need for it and thousands of people out there who want it and [told] you could really have a very strong program. Then at the end it seems that is one of those things, which has a hump of demand, but maybe not such sustained demand." Market forces are a factor in determining strategic directions at CDU, but are not followed blindly without consideration of the short and long-term feasibility of such programs and fit with the institution's capabilities.

Finally, CDU monitors competitor institutions while determining what academic programs to offer. However, most individuals indicated decisions are largely driven by employer and student demand with less emphasis on mimicking competitors just for the sake of imitation. One administrator captured particularly well the balance between being aware of the competition while at the same time focusing on the institution's own strategy.

> If we're focusing on what the students need and our re-
> gion needs and focusing on that as the primary focus
> and aware of what our competitors are doing, I think
> that's the right type of strategy. Then we have to be less
> aware of trying to one-up the competitor, but if we have
> a strategic vision on what does the student need, what
> does the marketplace need, and what does the state and
> region need . . . that's different than thinking about what
> is X competitor doing and what is B competitor doing,
> and let's go do what they're doing.

Despite most participants indicating that CDU watches but does not necessarily copy its competitors, one person felt differently. "Ultimately, I don't think we resist the pressure. The pressure is built into the system. To me the whole system is designed to want everyone to be a research university." Still, the majority of people felt the institution as a whole typically resists pressures to emulate its peers if such imitation would stray too far from the historical mission of the university. One prominent example to this point was mentioned by several individuals who relayed that the university recently changed engineering deans because the former dean was too focused on pursuing a research agenda with less focus on practical graduate education for the region.

Case 2: Balancing Act University

The second case study site, labeled Balancing Act University (BAU), enrolls more than 20,000 students. It offers more than 50 graduate programs including more than a dozen at the doctoral level and recently opened a medical school. Despite its current comprehensive nature, the university's historical roots are as a Normal School and it continues to serve a largely residential, undergraduate population. This dichotomy of regional roots but a growing graduate and research focus often results in the institution being pulled in different directions. Some individuals believe the university is an aspiring national research university, but others believe the university is and always should be focused primarily on undergraduate education. There are also those who believe an appropriate balance between national research and regional undergraduate expectations is possible, but there is a constant tension among stakeholders about what that balance should be.

Student Enrollment Profile. During the past several years, BAU experienced large fluctuations in its enrollment, particularly among its entering undergraduate class. The university went from a record-high number of first-year students to a couple years of sharp declines, with a recent return of an increased number of entering students. These fluc-

tuations led to a re-evaluation of the university's overall enrollment goals. According to one administrator:

> We had an enrollment bump last year. We were down significantly from where we had been before. This fall it looks like we're going to be way up. But what the board has said to us, and what the president wants to do, is to have our institutional research folks look at the demographics going forward and a lot of other data and decide this is about the number of students that we can sustain going forward.

The key for institutional leaders is focusing on what a number of individuals referred to as "right-sizing" the institution and finding the "best" size for the institution that is sustainable. To one individual that number is clear and is lower than previously held on campus. This individual acknowledged that it would not be easy to work toward a steady decrease of approximately 1,000 students from the university's current enrollment. However, this individual indicated, "We're going to keep vetting the number, but we believe it's sustainable in the long term, at a high quality, and this is going to drive it. A quality student body with a sustainable number."

While BAU works through establishing a sustainable enrollment number, one thing is clear and accepted: the university will maintain its same academic standards for entering students. One administrator noted:

> The reality is that we didn't have to lose enrollment in 2012, '11, or '13. And the reality is I found out after the fact and got very pissed about it, that big jump in enrollment in 2010 [was] with some folks in admissions let[ting] people in who shouldn't have gotten in . . . . Our retention rate dropped from 78-79% down to 75%. Students came in the back door of this university who shouldn't have been here. That said, in '11, '12, and '13 if that was allowed to happen, we didn't have to lose any enrollment, but we wouldn't have the quality of students we wanted.

Another individual added:

> I believe that I can get a number of students, but the question is can I get the right profile of student? That's what the question is. Everybody can get numbers. There are people around every day. You can use financial aid to leverage whatever number you want. It may not be a successful model, but you get numbers of students. The question is, is it the right mix?

Although BAU is adamant about maintaining its same admissions standards, it is still taking steps to ensure a sound enrollment number. One way this is being accomplished is with a strategic focus on expanding the traditional recruitment area. With a declining high school population in the state, BAU is looking toward more out-of-state and international students. Another area where the university is expanding recruitment efforts is related to distance and online education. BAU maintains satellite campus locations across the country and enrollment through these distance education centers increased in recent years. A number of administrators think this is an area that can have sustained growth, and that branch campuses in strategic out-of-state areas can pay dividends with recruiting out-of-state students to the main campus as well. "There's some perceived awareness of the institution. You may not be starting from scratch, you just have to define, expand your brand awareness [when recruiting out-of-state]," said one administrator. Along with physical off-campus locations, BAU also expanded its online course offerings. "Online learning is an area where you have seen growth and much more interest on the part of the university in being able to provide some of that," stated one person.

To further attract students during a difficult period, BAU invested in student financial aid. For many years the university did not change its financial aid packages and found itself losing potential students to other universities offering larger awards. "We have for the first time increased the demographics of the students receiving scholarships to be competitive. It's specifically being competitive because we're actually increasing the scholarships amongst those students who normally would have not got a scholarship here," argued one administrator. In keeping true to maintaining the same academic credentials for admittance to the university, financial aid packages were designed with that profile student in mind. One administrator noted, "It didn't so much change the profile of who they [admissions] accepted, it was more scholarship dollars in order to lure students." This point is important because as one administrator said, "Access is very important to us. . . . Where you have universities who are what I would call 'cream of the crop' students only, that is not our mission." As such, the board and administration have made a point to keep tuition rates low and affordable for all types of students, maintaining one of the lowest cumulative tuition increases in the state over the past five years.

Academic Programs. BAU has historically been an undergraduate focused institution with a broad liberal arts curriculum. However, over time, the university expanded graduate programs and increased undergraduate programs in the sciences and professional fields. Current-

ly, there are differing opinions across campus as to whether BAU is and will remain a primarily undergraduate teaching institution or if it is an aspiring national research university. Some individuals in the former camp stated: "we are primarily an undergraduate teaching institution" and "I believe our overall goal is to provide a very strong undergraduate education experience for students . . . probably a special emphasis on undergraduate students."

The goals and aspirations of BAU beyond its traditional regional institution focus is best summarized with the following quote: "I would classify us at this point as an aspiring national university. . . . What you'll see moving forward is the research emphasis that you need to have if you're going to be a major university." BAU maintains a goal to increase the number of graduate students on campus, and it offers a number of high demand graduate programs, specifically in education and information systems. Additionally, the university maintains several high quality health professions graduate programs, which have expanded due to growing demand during the past several years.

One area of graduate education that plays a large role in BAU's institutional strategy is the establishment of a medical school. "I think the medical school drives a lot of this. Because our identity is sort of changing and ebbing with the addition of the medical school . . . I think in terms of positioning. I think BAU is really trying to position itself as one of the more research focused institutions in its area of the state with the addition of the medical school," stated one individual. However, some administrators pointed to the university's development of a medical school as perfectly aligned with its mission of serving a specific regional area of the state since BAU's medical school is focused on training primary care physicians to address a projected shortage in the region.

Beyond the addition of graduate programs, BAU also recently undertook a comprehensive review of all its academic offerings at the undergraduate and graduate level. This review resulted in the elimination of a few dozen programs and investing several million dollars in top-priority programs deemed essential to the success of the institution. Many of the high priority programs were in the health and science disciplines. For example, the university invested significant resources in a new state-of-the art science building on campus. "Biological research has changed and the facility going up is state-of-the art. It will put, not a new face, but a different face on the university as far as scientific research and biological and biomedical sciences. The STEM areas in healthcare, as I said earlier, are the areas that we're really driving here," commented one administrator. Many of the health professions programs continue to expand and are only capped by facility constraints.

In determining academic offerings, the university is consciously aware of needs across the state and develops academic programs appropriate to those needs. As one administrator succinctly stated, "We know from our own enrollment data where the demand is." Administrators and faculty then work to develop programs that respond to student demands. One faculty member argued in favor of this approach, stating, "We have to look at social trends. If social trends are for CSI, NCIS and everybody wants to be a forensics scientist, why would we not think about it? . . . It's kind of dumb to think we're in this bubble that isn't influenced by all these social forces." Given strong student demand in STEM and health professions fields, the university invested heavily in these programmatic areas. This is particularly crucial since declining state support has made the institution more dependent upon student enrollment and tuition dollars, increasing the importance of offering high demand degree programs. However, student interests and market demands do not always align and the institution is careful not to chase programs where demand is more artificial upon closer examination. For example, one administrator indicated there is a high demand for nursing programs from students, but "the market is saturated too because every place has a nursing program." Thus, the institution held off on opening a nursing program.

Discussion

This study first sought to examine to what extent two SCUs engaged in mimetic striving behavior commonly associated with research universities. Both case studies clearly point to the existence of at least some mimetic striving behavior. In terms of student enrollment profiles, CDU and BAU both increased financial aid, specifically merit aid, for incoming students; both universities expanded their recruitment efforts internationally, and in the case of BAU, to out-of-state regions as well; and although neither explicitly increased their admissions selectivity, both were adamant in not lowering admissions standards even when doing so could have helped alleviate budget constraints. In terms of academic program offerings, CDU and BAU both increased graduate program offerings in recent years, with BAU opening a medical school, and both shifted more toward STEM and health programs with heavier research profiles than the social sciences and liberal arts. These actions collectively point toward two universities engaging in what scholars have typically referred to as isomorphic or striving behavior (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; O'Meara, 2007).

However, there are also signs that point toward these universities taking actions in recent years less aligned with mimetic striving. CDU

serves many first generation and Pell-eligible students. BAU prides itself on its low tuition increases during the past several years as a way of providing access to a "different type of student" than those who enroll at the state's research universities. CDU increased efforts to enroll non-traditional students both at the master's level through offering night programs and by seeking students who started but did not finish bachelor's degrees earlier in their lives. BAU maintains a robust distance education program with several locations across the country and continues to increase its online presence as well. Additionally, growth in graduate programs at both universities is often aligned with community and economic needs with programs in professional fields focused more on career preparation than traditional research. These behaviors indicate that not all actions during the past several years at CDU and BAU can be associated with mimicking the setup of a traditional flagship research university.

It is not entirely surprising that the two case study institutions maintain numerous goals and that their actions in the areas of enrollment and program offerings do not provide a clean linear picture of institutional behavior. After all, higher education institutions are known for their complexity (Birnbaum, 1988; Cohen & March, 1974). Therefore, this study also examined what might explain the complicated institutional behavior of the case study institutions.

One can readily identify isomorphic or mimetic behavior at the two case study universities as previously described at the beginning of this section. Resource dependency theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) can help explain institutions' strong responses to market and student demands in shaping the range of academic programs offered and therefore tuition dollars yielded at both CDU and BAU. One could also point toward institutional actions such as adding graduate programs, specifically BAU adding a medical school, as the pursuit of prestige. It is important to recognize this complexity and acknowledge that it is likely that no single theory can fully explain all institutional actions. However, it is also important to dig deeper to explore what may be the main driving force behind institutional actions.

When examining the two case study institutions, none of the theories previously examined appear to be the driving force behind their actions related to enrollment and academic program offerings during the recent recession. Isomorphism focuses on institutions seeking legitimacy and therefore acceptance within their specific industry (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). However, there were no signs of either case study institution feeling illegitimate and in need of peer affirmation. Furthermore, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and Toma (2012), in discussing

isomorphic behavior, indicated that institutions often care less about actual success and more about the appearance of legitimacy. This differs from what occurred at CDU and BAU where, for example, graduate programs were not added simply to appear more like a research university without caring about program success. Instead, graduate programs were added explicitly to be successful in attracting students and helping meet the needs of the universities' surrounding regions.

Similarly, examples exist that suggest resource dependency may not be the main driving force behind institutional actions. While CDU and BAU were both concerned with obtaining resources during the recent recessionary period, each institution also took several actions contrary to a singular drive toward maximizing revenue. CDU chose not to open clinical health professions programs despite a perception of student demand, both institutions increased tuition by lower levels than their peer institutions, and BAU did not loosen admissions standards to alleviate budget constraints during a period of enrollment decline. If resource maximization alone drove decisions at CDU and BAU, one might have expected for those examples to play out in an opposite fashion. Additionally, in terms of the pursuit of prestige, neither institution explicitly maintained or subtly implied a desire to change Carnegie classifications or increase in national rankings.

Isomorphism, resource dependency, and the pursuit of prestige can all help explain portions of actions at the two case study institutions, but there appears to be more taking place than what those theories can describe on their own. Instead, the main driver of institutional action at CDU and BAU during the Great Recession appears to have been acting in a pragmatic fashion focused on institutional survival while remaining within the general confines of their historical institutional missions. On the topic of academic program offerings, one person at CDU argued that the university added graduate programs because the master's degree is quickly becoming the new bachelor's degree, a necessity to land a job in a competitive marketplace. This sentiment is consistent with expert projections that master's degrees will continue to grow in demand (Pappano, 2012; Selingo, 2013; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). Additionally, graduate programs were added in high demand STEM and health-related fields, suggesting a direct response to market demands. At BAU there is no denying the addition of a medical school adds prestige, but individuals also pointed to the decreasing number of primary care physicians in the state as one reason for opening the medical school. CDU's addition of new engineering master's and PhD programs is directly tied to the rebounding auto industry. In talking about these programs, one individual pointed out that the university's

new graduate programs were focused on regional economic needs and therefore driven by market demands, not the pursuit of prestige.

These examples suggest institutions responding to market and student demand in a pragmatic manner. Prestige may have been a byproduct of those decisions but did not drive actions. Additionally, programs were generally added within the context of institutions' historical missions. These institutions did not add pure research-based graduate programs. In fact, CDU fired its former dean of engineering for focusing too heavily on a research agenda. While a medical school certainly differs from BAU's historical roots as a Normal School, administrators pointed to its focus on training primary care physicians to serve in the immediate surrounding region as an extension of how a modern public regional university helps meet regional economic needs.

Institutional actions related to student enrollment profiles can also be explained through a pragmatic lens. Increasing merit aid may be viewed as prestige-driven as a means to attract students with higher ACT and SAT scores and GPAs. However, participants at both institutions described this tactic as a way to ensure financial survival as the competition for students increased due to a declining number of high school graduates (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2012). While additional merit-based scholarships may attract higher quality students, the case study institutions also offered financial aid packages just to remain competitive in attracting their typical profile students. At CDU one person stated, "My position is in this competitive market we're not [even] investing at the rate that other schools are investing." A similar argument can be made for why both institutions expanded their traditional recruitment territories to include out-of-state and international students. This is an action driven by institutional survival not the pursuit of prestige. Finally, both institutions took great care to remain focused on their historical missions, protecting access for all types of students by increasing need-based aid, keeping tuition increases lower than peers, and with CDU specifically, continuing to enroll a large percentage of first generation and Pell students.

Current literature often provides an explanation for the behavior of non-elite institutions in the following manner: the quest for resources causes institutions to mimic top-ranked institutions to seek legitimacy, increase their reputation and pursue prestige, and potentially obtain resources perceived to be at the next level, even if it means changing their institutional DNA. This study suggests an alternative explanation for two SCUs during the Great Recession. This alternative begins with two institutions focused first and foremost on survival, with ac-

tions driven by a pragmatic response to their situations and the external environment. If those actions (e.g., adding graduate programs) add prestige, these institutions gladly accept that outcome, but the driving force of institutional strategy is survival and pursuing actions that directly and immediately benefit the university, with less concern as to where that places them within the larger higher education landscape. That is why BAU is simultaneously adding a medical school but also increasing distance education and online offerings. One an initiative associated with research universities and the other associated with for-profit institutions. Facing a troubling external environment, these institutions were focused on the short game of survival not the long haul of incrementally increasing reputation and prestige with the hopes of that possibly and eventually leading to obtaining greater resources and long-term institutional sustainability.

Conclusion

In recent years an increasing number of voices have bemoaned "Harvard envy" and the mimetic behavior of many colleges and universities, and it is often assumed that such behavior is undertaken in pursuit of greater institutional prestige (Christensen & Erving, 2011; DeMillo, 2011; Rosen, 2013; Selingo, 2013). However, the case study institutions demonstrate that there may be alternative explanations for why institutions engage in certain activities typically considered to be prestige-driven. What institutions do may often appear similar, but understanding exactly how and why they pursue similar activities provides a fuller explanation of institutional behavior. Attention should turn from simply asking whether state comprehensive or other colleges and universities are adding graduate programs, to examining how those programs are set up (e.g., career-oriented versus research-focused) and why those programs were established (e.g., to meet student demand).

This study does not pretend to claim that all institutions always act pragmatically or that the pursuit of prestige and other institutional theories do not explain the actions of the two case study institutions. There are a number of forces that influence the behaviors of large, complex organizations like colleges and universities. What this study provides is a framework for considering how traditional theories may not fully explain the institutional actions of two SCUs during the Great Recession. Further research is needed to continue the examination of this important issue of institutional behavior as higher education scholars ponder the future of institutional diversity and the purpose and role of different institution types.

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