ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITIES OF PUBLIC LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES:

A MULTICASE STUDY

by

PHILIP JAMES ADAMS

(Under the Direction of James C. Hearn)

ABSTRACT

The history of higher education in the U.S. encompasses a vast proliferation and remarkable evolution of individual colleges and universities as well as state systems of higher education. Research on higher education institutions, however, has come to focus predominantly on two institution types: large public universities and small private colleges. This despite the general acknowledgement of the value of institutional diversity, in the U.S. higher education system overall and in public state systems more narrowly. Among the understudied institution types within state systems particularly are public liberal arts colleges. Institutions belonging to this small niche of the higher education landscape share public missions of access, affordability, social mobility, and more with their public system members while also striving to deliver a liberal arts-focused education in a setting more reflective of the small private college sector with small enrollments and highly residential campuses. This study follows a multicase study design to examine more closely the organizational identities of three such institutions. UNC Asheville, the University of Science & Arts of Oklahoma, and Sonoma State University are all members of the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges. Guided by a framework from

organizational identity theory, this study seeks to discover those internal identity attributes that are most central to each case university's identity, as well as the external stakeholders or interorganizational networks that exert significant influence on those identities. In the process, this study also demonstrates organizational identity theory's useful as a structure to guide institutions' self-reflection. Such reflection yields greater understanding of public liberal arts colleges for university leaders, system administrators, and researchers. It further enables stronger understanding of institutional and system-level decision-making and policy process as state systems consider mission differentiation within a diverse state higher education system.

INDEX WORDS: public liberal arts colleges, hybrid identity, organizational identity, COPLAC

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PHILIP JAMES ADAMS

B.A., East Carolina University, 2000

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PHILIP JAMES ADAMS

Major Professor:	James C. Hearn
Committee:	Timothy R. Cain
	Erik C. Ness

Electronic Version Approved:

Ron Walcott
Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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DEDICATION

To my grandfather, Harry Philip Meinhardt.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

> What other concern is quite so captivating than dealing with the ongoing, lifelong project of assessing identity and figuring out how one relates to others and the surrounding world? (Gioia, 1998, p. 17)

One of the remarkable features of the U.S. system of higher education is its institutional diversity. This variety of institution types, along with its decentralized nature, has contributed to near universal access within American higher education (Hurtado, 2004). Such a diverse system offers a wide range of choices for prospective learners, responding to the interests of a variety of stakeholders. A system of numerous and different colleges and universities helps make higher education available to nearly everyone while also serving the needs of the general citizenry (Birnbaum, 1983). In addition, a pluralistic system leaves room for individual institutions to select and serve their own specific missions, relieving the burden of being all things to all people (McClay, 2005).

Institutions within a diverse system can differ from each other in numerous ways: by serving different populations of learners, by offering different portfolios of degree programs, by delivering instruction via different modes, or by creating different campus residential experiences, to name a few. In a diverse system, institutions may also ensure their distinctiveness from others by being internally homogenous. For example, a college

focused on instruction and career preparation in the health sciences is sure to separate itself from colleges of engineering or any other special curricular focuses. Likewise, a college with a highly residential campus offers a very different experience than does a commuter campus. Among a group of these internally homogeneous institutions, however, another way for an institution to distinguish itself would be to exhibit internal diversity, offering a wide variety of programs and experiences (Huisman & Morphew, 1998). This internal diversity, typical of large research and comprehensive universities, is markedly different from the diversity among multiple institutions within a larger system, but having both can be good. Together they produce a kind of "ideal diversity" within a system (McClay, 2005).

Internal homogeneity allows institutions to excel at a smaller number of things. It also offers students the benefits of focus in the curriculum and the best facilities and other physical resources to support that focus. For example, a health science-focused institution might offer much better lab technology compared to a comprehensive institution that has to spread resources across many more degree programs. Conversely, internally diverse institutions could facilitate broader exploration of disciplines and majors for students who begin college less certain of their academic interests or prospective career path. If one purpose of higher education in general is this kind of exploration, having internally diverse institutions, like comprehensive and flagship universities, is a good thing.

One type of institution that can bolster a system's diversity is the public liberal arts college. Residing at the intersection of the liberal arts college sector and the public four-year sector, public liberal arts colleges share some individual features with other liberal arts colleges, which as a group are overwhelmingly privately controlled, and other

features with other public colleges and universities, which are generally larger and more internally diverse. On the whole, however, public liberal arts colleges are distinct from both other sets of institutions, having their own organizational identities and facing a unique set of challenges. Despite their distinctive position in the higher education field and their contribution to its institutional diversity, public liberal arts colleges are less closely examined or well understood than other institution types.

Problem Statement

A body of literature on institutional types that focuses so heavily on the large public multiversities and the small private colleges can suggest that these are the only two types of four-year institutions—or at least the only two types worth examining. Although attention to public regional universities has increased more recently (McClure, 2018; Orphan, 2020), there are many other institution types that contribute to the diversity of higher education that also warrant greater consideration. Little scholarship exists on public liberal arts colleges in particular, which suggests that these institutions are less well understood on their own and in the context of diverse state systems.

Like all public colleges and universities, public liberal arts colleges share a mission of access, but these colleges merit more study especially because of what they offer access to. Their public nature and accompanying affordability offer access to an educational experience "otherwise reserved for the privileged" (Paino, 2014). Without resisting state systems' possible homogenizing effect, public liberal arts colleges may drift in their program offerings, enrollment sizes, or other significant identifying characteristics, becoming more like the other campuses of their state system and losing their distinctive experience (Schwaller, 2009). Protecting against that drift and

maintaining a public liberal arts identity, however, is an active process which requires frequent reflection (Scott & Lane, 2000b). Increasing the attention to public liberal arts colleges in the scholarship on institution types suggests could support the preservation of these colleges and the opportunities they afford students.

Significance

More attention to other institution types—here, public liberal arts colleges—can help researchers and practitioners explore ways to help these less common institutions thrive individually, as well as ways they can benefit students by enriching the institutional diversity of a state system of higher education. This diversity and mission differentiation in a system can help achieve a variety of outcomes in efficient ways (Harris, 2020), but state system offices need to fully understand their different member institutions to create and maintain that diversity. Concurrently, institutions need to know themselves well in order to position themselves in a diverse system and advocate that to a system office.

Organizational identity "serves as a rudder for navigating difficult waters" (Albert et al., 2000, p. 13). It helps organizations and their members understand who they are and how they should interpret issues that face them. This study contributes to a better understanding of public liberal arts colleges by applying organizational identity theory as a framework for a closer investigation of this less well-known institution type. The improved understanding can strengthen institutional diversity within state systems, while organizational identity theory offers a guide for examining institutions that may be helpful to university and college leaders.

Study Overview

In this study, I explore the organizational identities of three public liberal arts institutions. Given that this institution type has received so little scholarly attention, this study is motivated by a general interest to know more about how these places see themselves, what unique challenges they face, and what distinguishes them from other higher education institutions.

It is important to note that this study is not intended to offer specific explanations of any actions taken, changes effected, or strategies developed by the institutions involved. Rather, the primary interest is only to more fully understand who these institutions are, what their identities are as constructed by their organizational members. With that in mind, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. Which attributes or characteristics of public liberal arts institutions emerge for individual members as significant to their understanding of their institution's organizational or collective identity?
2. How do external referents help shape institution members' understanding of their university's identity? Do peer institutions or membership associations such as the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges influence organizational identities?
3. Does a hybrid public liberal arts identity create unique opportunities or challenges for a university or its individual members? If so, how?

To answer these questions, this study undertook a qualitative comparative case study of three public liberal arts institutions, all of which are members of the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC), a membership association that supports the aims of its member institutions and promotes the value of liberal arts education delivered in student-

centered environments at public colleges and universities. By applying the construct of organizational identity to a group of colleges and universities that is currently underexplored, this study expands the scholarship on institution types and acknowledge the value of institutional diversity within higher education.

To contextualize the institutional niche of public liberal arts colleges, the literature review in Chapter 2 presents an overview of the historical development of higher education in the U.S., followed by closer descriptions of the organizational attributes of both private liberal arts colleges and large public universities. That chapter concludes with a more detailed introduction to public liberal arts colleges and the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges. Chapter 3 explores organizational identity theory, the framework guiding this study. Chapter 4 describes the rationale for employing a multicase study design and outlines the processes for case and participant selection, data collection, and analysis. Chapters 5–7 present the findings for the individual case institutions. These chapters each begin with a case background and brief institutional history of the respective case university before presenting findings thematically guided by the study's research questions. Chapter 8 considers the cases collectively, comparing significant identity attributes and influences before concluding with implications for future research and application.

CHAPTER 2

PUBLIC LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES AS A SECTOR

As the public liberal arts college sector has emerged in recent decades, it has drawn primarily from the histories, traditions, expectations, and identities of two different categories of U.S. higher education: private not-for-profit liberal arts colleges and public four-year colleges and universities. If, as Thelin (2011) described, "institutions are heirs to various historical strands" (p. xxviii), the sagas of public liberal arts colleges, the stories of their evolving roles and missions, are woven from at least two significant and distinct threads. With regard to mission as well as campus environment, public liberal arts colleges may more closely resemble their private counterparts, but they are also bound closely to the purposes, governance structures, and funding more commonly connected to public institutions.

Common conceptions of these institution types can serve as a "type of shorthand [that] can be useful for basic conceptualization" (Harris, 2020, p. 184), but they also contribute to a pervasive idea that the US is "a nation of enormous public universities and small private colleges" (White, 2003, p. 52). Examining more closely the institutional features of both types enables the imagining of other types as well—including that of the public liberal arts—and creates a richer, more diverse conception of the organizational field of higher education. To highlight similarities and differences between the types and disentangle features for further consideration, this chapter begins with an overview of the history of U.S. higher education, exploring colleges' and universities' common

beginnings and points of divergence. After identifying representative characteristics of each institution type, the chapter then offers a more detailed depiction of public liberal arts colleges and an introduction to the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC) that supports these distinct institutions and promotes their shared mission nationally.

Historical Overview of U.S. Higher Education

The features that have come to be associated with the multiple institution types of the U.S. higher education field have evolved over nearly four centuries. If a single institution's founding helps clarify that institution's purpose (Hartley & Schall, 2005), then perhaps the beginnings of higher education in the U.S. can shed light on the development of different institution types within the field—particularly the private liberal arts college and the public four-year institution.

The English college of the late 16th and early 17th centuries offered "the informing pattern for the American colonial colleges" (Pfnister, 1984, p. 148), including the adaptation of a residential model and the classical curriculum to the new North American context (Oakley, 2005; Thelin, 2011). Through the 18th century, these institutions served to socialize members of the elite class who were intended to be community leaders. Responding to a perceived moral crisis of the time, these colleges sought to develop both the intellect and moral character of their students (Vine, 1976). To achieve those goals, the early colleges typically committed to a liberal arts curriculum and learning goals characteristic of liberal education: breadth of knowledge, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, strong communication, global understanding, and civic commitment (Hawkins, 1999), but the history of these institutions suggests that even the colonial

colleges were not dedicated purely to a liberal purpose. “From the beginning there had been a strong measure of pragmatism mixed into the dedication to the older arts tradition” (Pfnister, 1984, pp. 149–50). These colleges were originally intended to train the boys and young men of the colonies for the clergy or for civic leadership, and so those institutions can be seen as serving a professional mission (Horowitz, 2005b). The ambiguity of a distinction between a professional and a liberal purpose deepens when considering that these colleges ostensibly trained students for the clergy but did not actually confer theology degrees or ordain ministers (Thelin, 2011). A curriculum grounded in the liberal arts but intended to prepare young men for church and community leadership suggests that liberal and practical outcomes have never been clearly separable in higher education.

Likewise, the public-private distinction for colleges and universities is also historically blurry. Indeed, “throughout most of the eighteenth century such a distinction was unknown” (Herbst, 1975, p. 273). Founded by private citizens and churches (i.e., not the government), the colonial colleges nonetheless served public interests and created formal connections to the state that reinforced their publicness. Public officials were placed *ex officio* on the governing boards of newly established colleges. Institutions including Harvard, the College of William & Mary, and Yale also received financial support from colonial legislatures (Herbst, 1975). The hybrid or privatized model of U.S. higher education, then, has existed since the field’s foundation (Lambert, 2014).

The increasing diversity, particularly religious pluralism, in the colonies drove higher education toward privateness. Where previously the colonial colleges had enjoyed a monopoly on higher education in their respective colonies, the founding of Queen’s

College (now Rutgers University) as the second college in New Jersey in 1766 disrupted that provincial model and demonstrated that groups within colonies could create institutions to meet their more specific interests. Later, the chartering of seven state universities between 1785 and 1820 showed that states could employ a more specific strategy in advancing their educational interests as well (Herbst, 1975). While the notion of a sharp public-private distinction may not have emerged through these practices, the 1819 Supreme Court decision in the case of Trustees of Dartmouth College v. Woodward ("the Dartmouth case") "laid the legal foundations on which our present public and private institutions and systems of higher education have been built" (Whitehead & Herbst, 1986, p. 349). In Chief Justice John Marshall's opinion for the majority, he clarified that state charters incorporating colleges as private charitable institutions did not make them public. Rather, that incorporation protected their privateness from state interference (Oakley, 1992).

Although Chief Justice Marshall made clear that an institution could be chartered by a state to be "an instrument of government, created for its purposes" (quoted in Oakley, 1992, p. 36), in practice, colleges which were now more protected as private continued to seek state support. For example, Yale received its final gift from the Connecticut legislature in 1831, more than a decade after the Dartmouth case decision (Pierson, 1968). With a clearer separation in legal status, if not yet in practical reality, the private denominational college and the state university "came to constitute the two major traditions of American higher education in the nineteenth century" (Herbst, 1975, p. 277).

As both the small private colleges and the (still similarly small) state universities proliferated in the early nineteenth century, so did questions associated with the purposes

and structure of higher education. Where cultivating civic mindedness in students had been the dominant principle of higher education in the early national period, the antebellum period saw a shift toward practicality through the growth of vocationally oriented programs. The public began expecting college to prepare students for more professions and to share knowledge with their communities (Dorn, 2017). As the nation expanded geographically, these new institutions adapted to meet the needs and interests of their local students, bringing "incessant surface change" to the curriculum (Pak, 2008, p. 43). This context of change and a growing interest in practical education prompted responses from colleges, including the addition of more sciences, engineering, the law, and modern languages to their curricula (Thelin, 2011). It also precipitated a defense of the liberal arts in the landmark Yale Report of 1828. The report represented, in one way, Yale's (and other colleges') efforts "to maintain a hold on the traditional curriculum" (Pak, 2008, p. 44), even as curricula were expanding. The Yale Report explained to stakeholders that the benefits of the classical curriculum were adaptable for future work life in a time when individuals were changing occupation more frequently (Lane, 1987), while reassuring them that Yale was also keeping its curriculum up to date (Pak, 2008). As public values were shifting from moral and civic concern to individual private success, the Yale Report offered a defense of a curriculum originally intended to serve more community-minded purposes and suited it to an audience more interested in individual achievement (Lane, 1987). The changing interests and needs of the public, as well as the varying local contexts in which colleges existed, encouraged the evolution of multipurpose colleges across the United States (Horowitz, 2005b). Post mid-century, it

was becoming less and less realistic to think of the whole of higher education as any one type of institution pursuing any single purpose.

Another landmark moment further contributed to the diversity of the landscape as well as reinforced higher education's pragmatic orientation in the mid-nineteenth century. The Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862 tied university activities closer to public goals such as training experts in agricultural and mechanical fields (Feeney & Welch, 2012). Calls for more practical, and even specifically agricultural, education existed prior to the first Morrill Act, but this legislation helped formalize a type of institution whose purpose "was to educate the populace in each state in the proper care and management of the agricultural resources and to assist in developing proper agricultural practices for the many different ecological environments found throughout the United States" (Abramson et al., 2014, p. 8). The Morrill Act revealed tensions at some institutions as they sought to serve multiple missions. Universities continued pursuing high academic standards and disinterested research while now also offering more accessible and practical education to nontraditional students. These tensions were relieved by later legislation such as the Hatch Act of 1887 and the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 that, through the establishment of agricultural extension programs, allowed institutions to meet different sets of goals (Sorber & Geiger, 2014).

Service and utility became a stronger theme for the land grant institutions, but the structural characteristics of public and private institutions hardly differed in the 19th century. Public institutions then were typically larger than private ones, but not by much and not always (Goldin & Katz, 1998), and they were still committed largely to civic and liberal arts education (Hawkins, 1999). Even the Morrill Act (1862) directed the new land

grant colleges "to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life" (sec. 4). Land-grant institutions would certainly continue to grow and develop into complex organizations, but innovations at private institutions also contributed to the development of the American research university as an institution type.

Both existing and new institutions in the late nineteenth century grafted the Germanic model of graduate study and research onto the traditional undergraduate collegiate structure to create more complex institutions (Keohane, 1999). This emergence of the university helped cement a less nuanced conception of the "traditional" liberal arts college through a contrast of those original small college notions against the expanding, practical university. While some higher education histories (e.g., Hofstadter, 1955) portray the rise of universities as the death knell of liberal arts colleges, the small college remained even after the founding of Johns Hopkins, University of Chicago, or Stanford (Axtell, 1971). Veysey (1965) also juxtaposed the new universities against an older idea of the liberal arts college to illustrate the progress and vitality of the new institutions while implying the demise of the small college (Horowitz, 2005a). But for decades, those universities were not terribly different from liberal arts colleges, at least structurally.

In the early 20th century, differences between the universities and small colleges continued to grow, particularly as national associations like the Association of American Universities (AAU) and the Association of American Colleges (AAC, now the AAC&U) helped institutionalize their respective missions and characteristics as types (Hawkins, 1992; 1999). Universities were expanding in scope and size and were quickly becoming "too diverse easily to define" (Veysey, 1965, p. 311), while many small colleges

reasserted their commitment to liberal education and a teaching-centered approach. Concerned that the small colleges would be overwhelmed by the rapidly growing universities, the AAC defended both the liberal educational philosophy and the small college as the appropriate place for its enactment (Hawkins, 1992).

Institutions of both types continued to experiment and evolve, as well. The elective system, often associated with Harvard president Charles Eliot in the late 19th century, offered students their choice of courses and gave teachers more room to innovate in their pedagogies. The individual nature of these new choices emerged at private institutions initially, but they represented a democratic value characteristic of public institutions, too (Pierson, 1968). With the spread of the elective system, as well as the increase in specialization and graduate research in the early 20th century, "many feared that liberal education was being 'displaced' by vocational and other types of education" (Zayed, 2012, p. 144). Leaders at universities including Harvard, Chicago, and Columbia responded to this overspecialization with programs of required introductory courses for all students and other early efforts in general education (Zai, 2015). This kind of experimentation also occurred at other types of institutions such as land-grant colleges, women's colleges, and normal schools (Zayed, 2012). Despite general education programs' efforts to preserve a more comprehensive liberal culture at universities, in the face of competing demands for research and utility, it "could not survive at the center of the academic map" (Veysey, 1965, p. 233). With the separation of general education and the major, the liberal education outcomes of interdisciplinarity and breadth of knowledge generally receded (Hawkins, 1999).

Beyond competition from the growing universities, liberal arts colleges also faced other existential threats around the turn of the 20th century. The small four-year colleges encountered a challenge from below with the improving system of public secondary schools and the introduction of junior colleges (Harper, 1900; Pfnister, 1984). Some elite colleges during this time, such as Princeton, Swarthmore, and Franklin and Marshall, were free from concerns for survival, welcoming the 20th century with connections to and gifts from wealthy businessmen like Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller (Leslie, 1992). Many other colleges without the same resources, however, were adapting to this competition from other institution types, as well as with a general interest in more professional and vocational training, by diversifying their curriculum (McGrath & Russell, 1958).

While diversification of curriculum and stratification of wealth was occurring among liberal arts colleges, the divide between public and private institutions also began growing in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Some public institutions, fueled in part by state interests in subsidizing training for agriculture, mining, and other practical fields, grew to become large research-oriented universities by the 1920s (Goldin & Katz, 1998). Other institution types similarly expanded in the same period. Many normal schools of the late 19th century grew into teachers colleges during this time, on their way to becoming comprehensive colleges and regional state universities later (Thelin, 2011). While the entire field of higher education in general grew in scope and scale before World War II, the public institutions outpaced the privates. Even among the new class of elite universities, privates typically remained smaller in pursuit of prestige.

The post-war expansion of higher education further affected the diversity and stratification of the field in several ways. Public universities arguably felt a stronger obligation to provide many more of the practical and applied programs than did their private counterparts, and they met that obligation by expanding both professional and graduate degree programs (Graham & Diamond, 1997). While those changes separated the public and private institutions, in other ways the line was blurred, particularly by the federal funding that drove much of the post-war growth—and still sustains much higher education activity (Keohane, 1999). Heavy federal research investment provided grant funding at both public and private universities to support projects related to national defense, public health, and other government areas of interest (Fabricant & Brier, 2016). The federal portable student aid offered through programs like the G.I. Bill and eventually the Pell grants facilitated increased enrollment at many institutions public and private, as well, leading to a great diversification in higher education in general (Hawkins, 1999; Keohane, 1999).

These developments were not distributed equally across institutions. Larger universities benefitted from the research funding in ways that smaller institutions could not. They were also better equipped to absorb the great influx of students supported by the G.I. Bill, so the divide between large universities and small colleges widened on several dimensions. Further, elite liberal arts colleges had the resources and prestige to maintain more socioeconomically privileged student populations, while larger and more tuition dependent colleges and universities served a more racially and economically diverse student population (Hawkins, 1999).

The long history of U.S. higher education has seen great growth in the number of institutions, the number of students, the amount of research activity, and the level of government involvement. Shifts in all of these areas have contributed to the formation of numerous institution types and created a higher education landscape renowned for its diversity. The field is certainly not done evolving, and it is valuable to consider the ways that well-understood institution types such as the private liberal arts colleges and the public colleges and universities contribute still to hybrid identities found in smaller sectors like public liberal arts colleges.

Liberal Arts Colleges

A direct inheritance from the American colonial colleges is the mission of modern liberal arts colleges to focus on the development of a student's whole person (Horowitz, 2005b; Fix, 2005). While those early colleges drew inspiration from English residential colleges for both curriculum and environment, the nearly four centuries that have passed since have brought numerous innovations and options through which colleges might choose to pursue this mission. What has defined the liberal arts college sector is the similar decisions these institutions have made regarding the preservation of their historic mission, the curriculum through which to achieve that mission, and the campus environments in which to do so. In a sector comprising hundreds of colleges, there will inevitably be great variety (Astin, 1999; Oakley, 2005; Hearn & Belasco, 2015), but the liberal arts college identity can be more fully understood by examining the goals and characteristics expressed through a common mission: to develop students' intellectual capacity through the study of a broad liberal arts curriculum in a residential setting

dedicated to undergraduate instruction (Astin, 1999; Blaich et al., 2004; Breneman, 1990; Carnicom, 2014).

Liberal Education

If the curricular and environmental structures are the means by which the goal of a liberal education is achieved (Blaich et al., 2004) then examining what is meant by liberal education is fundamental to understanding liberal arts colleges. Characterizing liberal education is a challenge, though, because "a liberal education is not a thing of precise definition" (Schmidt, 1957, p. 241). It is an educational philosophy that values a particular approach to teaching and learning (AAC&U, 2002). It can be viewed as an investigation into central human questions and the pursuit of understanding about the connections between things (Glyer & Weeks, 1998; Meiklejohn, 1920). This concept of education might also be defined in other ways: by its intended outcomes, by the disciplines with which it is traditionally associated, or through a contrast with what it is not.

Beyond the content knowledge that may be gained through the study of any subject, liberal education aims to develop capacities that contribute to the well-roundedness of a person (AAC&U, 2002)—a list that comprises numerous skills and abilities. The object of liberal education is to cultivate stronger problem solving and critical thinking skills, an ability to discern the truth, and a general intellectual flexibility. It fosters improved teamwork skills, including strong written and oral communication, understanding multiple perspectives, working through differences, and leadership. This type of learning also nurtures more personal characteristics: better ethical judgment, a sense of social responsibility, increased civic participation, an appreciation of the arts,

and a clearer self-definition (AAC&U, 2002; AAC&U, 2020; Jones & Hearn, 2018; Pascarella & Blaich, 2013; Shinn, 2014; Winter et al., 1981). These many outcomes for the individual student construct a vision of a well-rounded person who is prepared for a life of work, citizenship, and continued learning.

Liberal Arts

Because a liberal education is an approach to education and a collection of outcomes related to an individual's overall development, it is not the exclusive province of any specific set of academic disciplines (AAC&U, 2020). Although liberal education outcomes may be achieved through the (liberal) study of various disciplines, including those considered more practical in nature (AAC&U, 2002; Delucchi, 1997), an implicit theory persists that "there are 'liberal arts' disciplines" (Blaich et al., 2004, p. 8). This theory may follow from the arguments and traditions of early U.S. colleges that associated liberal education outcomes with the study of certain subjects. It is a challenge in itself, however, to enumerate the liberal arts individually because that curriculum, too, has been changing throughout history (Schmidt, 1957). It extends back at least as far as ancient Rome with the seven liberal arts of logic, grammar, and rhetoric (the Trivium) and arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy (the Quadrivium) (Glyer & Weeks, 1998). This ancient curriculum also stemmed from two basic traditions, which followed different interests and intended outcomes: a "philosopher" tradition and an "orator" tradition. The philosophers privileged reason, logic, and mathematics for more purely intellectual and even moral purposes, while the orators focused on speech and rhetoric for their public and practical purposes in civic engagement (Kimball, 1995). As the liberal arts wound their way to the colonial college curriculum, their inclusion was informed by

both the intellectual and civic approaches, while the curriculum also continued to change and expand, adding subjects and purposes from other traditions along the way.

The colonial college curriculum included elements from the Trivium and Quadrivium, as well as the study of ancient languages, toward a more civic purpose aligned with the oratorical and humanist traditions (Kimball, 1995; Sanford, 1968). In the 19th century, American society became more concerned with economic goals rather than civic, and reformers wanted a curriculum, with additions of modern languages and new sciences, to prepare students for a modern world. Though the Yale Report of 1828 defended the classical curriculum, even reframing it to meet more contemporary interests (Lane, 1987), it could not stop the curriculum from changing. Nearly a century after the Yale Report, Meiklejohn's (1920) expanded list of disciplines in the liberal arts included more social, humanistic, and natural sciences, along with philosophy, history, arts, and literature. This broader curriculum served purposes from both the philosophical and oratorial traditions as well, enlarging the scope of higher education's mission.

More recent scholarship names similar disciplines when describing the liberal arts, with specific examples like philosophy, history, literature, art, languages, and sociology (Horowitz, 2005a; Jones & Hearn, 2018), along with broader groups like the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities (Hearn & Belasco, 2015; Sorum, 2005), suggesting that the idea of certain subjects as more or less suited for the purpose of conferring a liberal education endures. The categorization of disciplines as liberal or not has been institutionalized in systems such as the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (Carnegie Classification) (n.d.-b), which has reinforced the notion that liberal education outcomes are the province of some disciplines and not of

others. As debate continues over whether liberal learning requires the study of certain disciplines, the curriculum continues to be a critical consideration in the achievement of the liberal learning outcomes. Another significant component of the liberal education endeavor is the college environment (Blaich et al., 2004).

Liberal Arts College Environment

With an enduring commitment to liberal education through study of the liberal arts, the small liberal arts college may offer the best setting for effective learning to occur (Howell & Eidson, 1985; Kuh, 2005). While the liberal education mission and the liberal arts disciplines are difficult to precisely define, describing the liberal arts college as a place is more straightforward. A number of their structural characteristics have remained consistent within the sector. In addition to their liberal arts-focused curriculum, distinguishing features of liberal arts colleges include their small size, residential campuses, teaching-focused faculty, high student-faculty interaction, and more often than not, private control (Astin, 1999).

Private control is perhaps one feature of many liberal arts colleges that has allowed them to preserve their focus on liberal education despite pressures for professional or practical education as well. Colleges' private control can help protect values and missions "in ways not possible at state institutions" (Breneman, 1990, p. 3). With the protections that followed from legal decisions like the Dartmouth case, state governments are less able to interfere with colleges' charters, missions, and activities both instructional and fundraising (Whitehead & Herbst, 1986). It is unsurprising that an overwhelming majority (approximately 80%) of institutions in the Carnegie

baccalaureate category are also private not-for-profit[1] (IPEDS). This is also reflected in the body of scholarship that largely focuses on only private institutions (Astin, 1999; Baker et al., 2012; Bonvillian & Murphy, 1996; Breneman, 1994; Cenczyk, 2016; Pascarella et al., 2013).

The metric of proportion of degrees used by the Carnegie Classification does prioritize the curriculum as an essential feature of a liberal arts college, but it also acknowledges that "high concentration of majors in the arts and sciences is not the same as a liberal arts education" (Carnegie Classification, n.d.-c, "See the full definition"). Consequently, the system does make rare exceptions for including institutions which might not meet the degree criteria in the Baccalaureate group by considering other features related to small enrollment size, a highly residential campus, and an enrollment profile of high undergraduate presence with low graduate coexistence (Carnegie Classification, n.d.-a). Since liberal arts colleges have traditionally sought "to bring students together in a close community setting" (Chapman, 2006, p. 12), small enrollment size follows predictably as a common feature for these schools, which is noted nearly universally in the literature (see Astin, 1999; Baker et al., 2012; Blaich et al., 2004; McPherson & Shapiro, 2000; Oakley, 2005). IPEDS data for the 2019–20 year bears this out, with public and private not-for-profit institutions in the Baccalaureate category having an average total enrollment of about 1,700 students. When examining only the private not-for-profit baccalaureate colleges, that average lowers even more to approximately 1,400, further correlating small size and the private liberal arts college.

[1] This study is concerned only with public and private not-for-profit institutions. While for-profit colleges and universities are an important sector of higher education, the use of "private" here will refer only to private not-for-profit unless otherwise specified.

Size can be significant for these small colleges, but perhaps primarily as an indirect influence. Small enrollments facilitate colleges' maintenance of other features associated with positive learning outcomes, such as a more residential campus (Astin, 1999). Having students live on campus to attend college full time creates more access to opportunities for engagement in high-impact educational practices such as undergraduate research, community service, or capstone experiences (Kuh, 2005). It also facilitates the frequent interaction with other students in and out of the classroom that contributes to good outcomes (Blaich et al., 2004). Again, IPEDS data confirms that, among public and private not-for-profit baccalaureate colleges, an overwhelming proportion (approx. 85%) are very small to medium in size and primarily or highly residential.

Current liberal arts colleges' small size and residential nature, coupled with the histories of their colonial predecessors serving the small social elite class (Horowitz, 2005b), conjure images of highly selective, and even elitist, schools. While a few institutions like Bowdoin, Swarthmore, and Pomona Colleges may still maintain admission rates in the single digits (IPEDS), only a few can claim that kind of elite status. There is actually great variety in the selectivity of liberal arts colleges, and many serve students from a wider range of backgrounds, which may be more faithful to their collective histories (Bonvillian & Murphy, 1996). Many baccalaureate colleges provide greater access through higher admission rates as well as broader opportunity through a diversification of curriculum that includes more professionally oriented programs (Baker et al., 2012). The less selective colleges simply lack the same name recognition or public visibility to counterbalance the elitist stereotype (Cenczyk, 2016; Oakley, 2005).

The small total enrollments of these colleges and their residential nature also typically translate in different learning experiences for their students. Most basically, students at liberal arts colleges take fewer classes online—about half as many as at other institutions (Kuh, 2005). Once in the classroom, liberal arts colleges' commitment to small class sizes appears in their typically low student-to-faculty ratios (Breneman, 1994; Lapovsky, 2005; Moody, 2018). According to IPEDS data, the average student-to-faculty ratio at public and private not-for-profit baccalaureate colleges is under 13 to1. This low ratio enables classroom environments that can afford students "higher levels of both clear and organized instruction and deep-learning experiences" than they might encounter at larger research or regional universities (Pascarella & Blaich, 2013, p. 14).

The advantages students might encounter in the liberal arts college classroom also come from the faculty. Liberal arts college faculty are "distinguished by sustained dedication to undergraduate teaching and the values of a traditional liberal arts environment" (Lang, 2000, p. 139). This dedication often materializes in faculties that are primarily fully qualified, with most members holding terminal degrees. Because of the low graduate program coexistence, courses also have few or no graduate teaching assistants (McPherson & Shapiro, 2000). The faculty at these colleges "tend to place a higher priority on the importance of teaching than faculty at other types of American four-year institutions" (Pascarella et al., 2013, p. 569), and consequently, they spend much more of their time on teaching than their counterparts at research universities (Cenczyk, 2016; Howell & Eidson, 1985). Faculty commitment to teaching at liberal arts colleges also extends outside the classroom. The small college environment facilitates more informal student-faculty interaction, and also increases the likelihood that students

engage in high-impact practices such as undergraduate research projects with faculty, independent study, or capstone experiences (Kuh, 2005). This high opportunity for undergraduate engagement contrasts with experiences at larger, more research-oriented institutions where undergraduate education can feel like an afterthought, leaving first- and second-year students especially with little attention (Howell & Eidson, 1985).

The engagement opportunities for students at liberal arts colleges also extend beyond working with faculty in or out of the classroom. Structures such as study abroad programs or community service projects occupy students outside of the classroom while giving them the chance to "integrate their curricular and co-curricular experiences" (Kuh, 2005, p. 126). With both faculty and student affairs professionals that are more student-centered and service-oriented than their counterparts at comprehensive or research universities, liberal arts colleges use experiences and practices outside of the classroom to contribute to "seamless learning environments" the facilitates students' holistic development (Renn & Patton, 2017, p. 61).

Challenges for the Liberal Arts College

Because the great majority of liberal arts colleges are private (Baker et al., 2012; IPEDS), they potentially enjoy more freedom than state institutions do to offer the curriculum, programs, and residential experience that support their missions, but they are also more dependent on tuition and other private funding sources. Consequently, they are more vulnerable to external forces such as student/parent preferences (Baker & Baldwin, 2015; Taylor & Cantwell, 2018). While the structural characteristics of liberal arts colleges contribute to the achievement of many positive student outcomes (Pascarella & Blaich, 2013; Pascarella et al., 2005; Renn & Patton, 2017), the liberal arts college

experience is resource intensive and expensive to provide, and those small colleges can vary greatly in the level of their available resources, with some colleges able to spend as much as five times more per student than others (Astin, 1999). The schools' commitments to small class sizes and full-time faculty mean that they are often paying more for faculty to teach fewer students. The residential nature of the institutions also means that funds must be committed to maintaining facilities for current students and expanding and improving facilities to attract new students, while the institutions' small sizes means that they cannot benefit from economies of scale (Lapovsky, 2005; Lytle, 2013; McPherson & Shapiro, 2000). Liberal arts colleges' independence and their mission of liberal education expose them to particular threats as individual institutions and as a sector.

The entire field of higher education faces a broad public skepticism regarding the value of higher education overall, but liberal arts colleges may be particularly vulnerable given a more specific suspicion of the usefulness of the liberal arts (Art & Science Group, 2017; Broad, 2017). This concern that college, although it may be enjoyable, leads to nowhere has existed for generations (Donham, 1944). There is a public misconception about the goals and benefits of liberal arts education, as well as the connections it already has with career skills (Pascarella et al., 2005). In a survey of high school seniors in 2017, nearly two thirds of respondents indicated their belief that a liberal arts education could help a person become more well-rounded, but only about half felt that it would help them secure a good job (Art & Science Group, 2017). These opinions may be informed by their parents or even public figures like politicians expressing strong criticism of liberal arts education (Berrett, 2015). The perception of a liberal arts education as a luxury threatens

liberal arts colleges especially (Pascarella et al., 2005). When many parents and students see college as a "springboard to employment" (AAC&U, 2002, p. ix), a misunderstanding about the professional benefits, as well as the broader value, of a liberal education can be dangerous to liberal arts colleges (Schwaller, 2009).

This skepticism about a liberal arts education opens the door for more competition from other institution types offering different programming. Small colleges have been competing with multipurpose universities since the rise of universities in the nineteenth century (Cable, 1984), but particularly since the massification of public universities in the 1960s, the large public institutions have been competition for the private college sector. Together with online institutions and for-profit schools, these places typically offer different combinations of lower costs, more career-oriented degree programs, and more flexible paths to completion (Baker et al., 2012). To prospective students, small private colleges can seem particularly expensive compared to public options (Cenczyk, 2016; Kiley, 2012). Although high sticker prices can be a signal of prestige or high quality for the small colleges, if prospective students do not fully understand high price-high aid models, the price tags may dissuade them from even applying (Neely, 1999). To address the concerns about cost, public opinion, and other external pressures, liberal arts colleges have responded with strategies ranging from recommitting to historic missions to expanding curricula to delivering instruction via new technology (Hearn & Warshaw, 2015).

For some colleges, "reclaiming the institution's history [has] proved a particularly effective way of reclaiming a distinctive identity" (Hartley, 2003, p. 88). Reemphasizing their own unique features and benefits has been a way for small colleges to differentiate

themselves from larger universities in the competition for students (Bonvillian & Murphy, 1996). Small colleges can certainly tout the student development outcomes related to their campus environments, but in response to public interest around the career and financial outcomes of higher education, some institutions have begun reframing a liberal arts education in more practical terms. Humanists may be "leery of speaking of their work in terms of its utility" (Bérubé, 2011, p. 96) because they associate the concept of utility with application in a professional setting, but as the AAC&U (2002) suggested, usefulness or practicality can extend beyond the workplace. "The 'utility' of the humanities might lie in the development of modes of understanding and interpretation" (Bérubé, 2011, p. 96), which are applicable to many contexts.

Some liberal arts colleges, though, especially those that are less well known or with fewer resources, may find a recommitment to mission or reframing their liberal arts offerings insufficient for ensuring their survival. In this case, the institutions may add more vocationally oriented programs both at the bachelor and graduate level (Zemsky, 2004). In fact, adapting and expanding curricula to incorporate new knowledge and appeal to changing public demands has been as much a trait of liberal arts colleges throughout the sector's history as any notion of a static liberal education program (Cable, 1984; Horowitz, 2005a; Oakley, 1992). Some studies, such as Breneman's (1994) suggest that this curricular adaptation is a threat to the liberal arts sector. Examining the sector in terms of proportions of degrees granted in the liberal arts disciplines may raise concern because, by that metric, liberal arts colleges are changing (Baker et al., 2012; Breneman, 1994; Delucchi, 1997). If the type of degrees granted is the singular measure of an institution type, then the number of true liberal arts colleges is diminishing. With the

reality of changing degree offerings as a historical constant and a necessary survival strategy, the greater threat for liberal arts colleges may be selling out their past (Bonvillian & Murphy, 1996). If liberal education depends on the approach to teaching rather than on a specific set of disciplines, as the AAC&U (2002) has proposed, then the addition of more practical subjects is only a threat when those subjects are not taught in a "liberating spirit" (McGrath & Russell, 1958, p. 17).

Liberal arts colleges have faced numerous challenges throughout their histories and have demonstrated considerable resilience, enduring multiple periods of crisis, death, and resurrection (Jones, 2015; Spellman, 2009). By retaining structural characteristics such as their small enrollments, residential campuses, undergraduate teaching focus, and engaging extracurriculum, along with their missions of holistic student development, liberal arts colleges can preserve a distinctive institution type in the larger higher education field.

Public Four-Year Colleges and Universities

The public sector of U.S. higher education is vast and diverse. The group of public institutions spans from two-year community colleges to doctoral research universities and serves roughly 80% of all postsecondary students in the country (Coleman, 2016; Heller, 2011). With such variety in the sector, it can be difficult to discern what characteristics these institutions have in common and what distinguishes them from private colleges and universities. Even the "public" mission that all of these institutions serve is a broad umbrella, with room for variation in the levels and areas of degrees offered, the populations of students targeted, the geographic regions served, and the balance between teaching, research, and service activities (Duderstadt & Womack,

2003). Institution types found even within the narrower public four-year category include national universities, institutions with special statewide missions like historically Black colleges and universities or health sciences institutions, urban universities serving primarily commuter students in a targeted service area, and regional comprehensive institutions providing access to students from sub-state regions (Kelly & Ewell, 2009). Given the tremendous diversity within the public four-year sector, examining them in the aggregate dilutes the distinctiveness of individual campuses, but it also helps identify those features which are shared across the sector, including aspects of the missions, curricula, environments, and common challenges.

Publicness

The first shared characteristic of all these institutions, then, is their publicness, which itself can be difficult to define. The question of what is public is "a question whose answers are socially constructed and dependent on national history, cultural identity, and, of course, disciplinary focus" (Bozeman, 2013, p. 179). Traditional approaches to the public/private distinction tend to be "dualistic, in that they treat public and private as mutually exclusive" (Marginson, 2007, p. 313). This type of definition can be problematic in its simplicity, but as happens with the liberal arts-professional distinction in higher education descriptive data, the public-private distinction is also treated as a binary, driving considerations of institutions' publicness to conceptualize it, at least at first, in that simplistic framework. This dichotomy goes back at least as far as the Dartmouth case, which established private colleges' independence from government interference (Whitehead & Herbst, 1986), but now, just as then, the relationship between higher education and the state is more nuanced.

While the simple legal distinction based on government or private ownership may be powerful, it does not deal fully with the complexities of nonprofit organizations like colleges and universities (Bozeman & Bretschneider, 1994; Coursey & Bozeman, 1990). The dimensional approach from organizational theory comprises multiple measurements or continua along which organizations can be more public or more private, making publicness a matter of degree (Anderson, 2012; Antonsen & Beck Jørgensen, 1997). Instead of being wholly public or private, in a dimensional approach, organizations are considered public to the extent that they are "influenced by *both* external political authority and external economic authority" (Bozeman, 2013, p. 176, emphasis original). The percentage of an organization's budget that comes from government sources is one way to envision how public it is (Bozeman, 2004; Feeney & Welch, 2012; Rainey, 2014). Organizations can also demonstrate publicness by what goals or agendas they set, as well as the level of influence the government has in setting those agendas and how openly their work toward those goals is communicated (Bozeman & Bretschneider, 1994; Emmert & Crow, 1988). Different combinations of these dimensions appear in the literature on the complexity of higher education institutions.

The legal distinction of ownership being public or private is a clear difference for universities wherein institutions either are or are not "instrumentalities of the state" (White, 2003, p. 50), but the idea of governmental control can be much more relative. Public colleges and universities will undoubtably experience some influence from government, but the level varies because of the diversity of state governance systems for higher education. Some states may leave institutions more freedom to self-govern while others will employ a centralized governing board to oversee issues of curriculum,

research programs, and other areas of university activity (Kerr, 1991; Lambert, 2014). This control also may or may not be related to the level of funding state governments provide for higher education. The organizations may be considered more public when higher percentages of their budgets come from the government, but the publicness of funds may be further compounded when accompanied by constraints to use them for specific purposes (Kerr, 1991; Marginson, 2006). This prescription of how to apply public money to the operation of colleges and universities is one way a state government can seek to ensure that an institution is serving the public as the state intends, pursuing goals set by the state for the benefit of its citizens (Calhoun, 2006; Emmert & Crow, 1988).

An additional dimension for assessing an institution's publicness involves its mission, history, and culture—in other words, its saga (Clark, 1970/2009). Over its history, through its service to a region or its close connection with a state government, a college or university could cultivate considerable political and popular support, engendering a sense from a state or local citizenry that the institution belonged to them (Lambert, 2014). Conversely, historical arguments to free itself from state intervention (like Dartmouth) can reinforce a place's privateness. This dimension is more difficult to quantify than percentages of a resource mix and shifts more toward a normative understanding of publicness. Normative publicness gets institutionalized through state laws and constitutions that reflect public values, through membership associations that reinforce organizational values, and through popular culture (Moulton, 2009). Beyond legal ownership status or a financial contribution through tax dollars, citizens of a state or region can feel "significant psychological ownership and pride in their public colleges

and universities and view this connection as more than just financial" (Lambert, 2014, p. 19).

The missions of public institutions, then, are driven by public values and sentiments. Because they are typically larger and more complex than liberal arts colleges, the missions of public institutions—more frequently universities than colleges—extend beyond the singular teaching mission of small colleges (Duderstadt & Womack, 2003). Universities' missions often comprise the tripartite purposes of teaching, research, and service. These three categories of activity encompass a wide range of activities performed by both public and private institutions, but the purposes themselves and the values they reflect are public in nature (Lee, 2017; Lewis & Hearn, 2003). In order to offer education as broadly as possible, universities must also pursue goals of access, affordability, and inclusiveness. Public institutions especially strive to reach underrepresented groups in their states and encourage social mobility (Benson & Boyd, 2015; Coleman, 2016). Because of the public value in economic and workforce development, public institutions tend to have stronger vocational objectives as well (Curris, 2006; Donham, 1944). A public mission also entails more utility through applied research and extension programs (Duderstadt & Womack, 2003). Combinations of all of these goals construct numerous college and university missions, all of which are public in their own ways.

Blends of activities related to these missions vary across public institution types including land-grant universities with their historical focus on practical training and extension, regional universities centered on access and student learning, and flagships with more national and global research agendas (Abramson et al., 2014; Orphan, 2020). Public institutions also serve multiple publics with varying and constantly shifting

expectations (Cantwell, 2013). These long lists of values, mission, and constituencies can also lead to contradictory goals for these places (Fabricant & Brier, 2016). For the general public, the desire for accessibility and affordability often runs up against an interest in high quality, especially around undergraduate education (Calhoun, 2006, Eckel, 2008). Public officials and policymakers may demand that public universities be run with business-like efficiency, conflicting with interests in other higher education values such as academic freedom and faculty governance (Beck Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007; Fabricant & Brier, 2016). Individual institutions, state systems, and state governments must decide what mix of goals and values will be pursued and what kinds of goods the institutions might be expected to produce.

Simply, both public and private universities can produce both public and private goods. All higher education institutions can contribute to the public good by advancing general human development, ensuring a healthy democracy, transmitting a collective culture, and creating social efficiencies (Labaree, 1997; Marginson, 2007; Marginson, 2011). University research creates new knowledge that can be shared universally and can yield new technologies to solve social problems (Lambert, 2014; Marginson, 2011). The training of students also generates external benefits for labor markets seeking qualified workers, and direct university service through community engagement can support local industries and communities (Groen & White, 2004; Lambert, 2014). But higher education also produces private benefits, often in the form of individualized status benefits for graduates such as increased income or social standing (Calhoun, 2006; Lewis & Hearn, 2003). With all these possible outputs from both public and private institutions, it is the balance of these offerings that can help differentiate institutions (Marginson, 2007).

Publicness may be examined and even assessed along multiple dimensions including finances, missions, and outputs that blur a contrast with privateness. In scholarship, data collection, and even common discourse, however, publicness is typically equated with government activity and state ownership (Bozeman, 2004; Marginson, 2007). With that in mind, the descriptions here of the characteristics common to public higher education institutions refer to institutions identified as public by their core, dichotomous distinction of government control.

Public College and University Curriculum

The expansion of the functions of public universities into research, innovation, and regional service has led to some criticism that they now "rarely make [students'] education a priority" (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003, p. 344). But the university has not totally relinquished its hold on liberal arts or undergraduate education in general (Hawkins, 1999). It is prevalent enough, at least, that universities' missions still frequently claim a liberal arts education, even if it is hidden in a more diffuse and comprehensive statement (Delucchi, 1997; Morphew & Hartley, 2006). Even more than liberal arts colleges, however, public institutions have had to find "an equilibrium between a pragmatism that lawmakers equate with 'jobs' and the liberal education that faculty value as essential to a thinking, thoughtful, and useful citizen" (Phillips, 1995, pp. 156-157), striking a balance in their curricula that serves their public goals of both holistic student development and also offering specialized professional training (Smith, 2010). To create space for more majors and areas of study, liberal studies consequently often finds itself at larger public universities as "a separate, but not necessarily equal, significant component of a four-year undergraduate degree" (Fry, 2014, p. 135). Instead

of a more integrated and interdisciplinary curriculum common (though no longer universal) at liberal arts colleges, universities typically deliver two years of general education followed by another two years of specialized education in a student's major (Fry, 2014). Even this is decreasingly true. Students are beginning work in their majors sooner and sometimes bringing AP or dual enrollment credits that exempt them from more general education coursework (Evans, 2019).

Once past a general education sequence, the menu of degree programs at universities varies by institution type. For instance, land-grant universities may serve their historical missions of practical training and economic development through majors in large schools of agriculture or other applied sciences (Abramson et al., 2014). Public comprehensive universities often determine their major offerings in relation to regional workforce needs, offering programs that may not be strictly vocational but that are still seen as preparation for higher-skilled occupations (Gumport, 2019; McClure, 2018). Regardless of the particular combination of programs, public institutions overall cover a wider array of fields than liberal arts colleges typically offer.

Public Institution Environment

The multiple missions of and complex external influences on public universities can be seen in their physical campuses. "The icons of the public university tend to be football stadiums or the smokestacks of central power plants rather than the ivy-covered buildings or monuments" of private colleges (Duderstadt & Womack, 2003, p. 11). Public flagships and regional universities often have large campuses that sprawl out from a historic "old main" with discernable phases of growth, reflecting sporadic appropriations from the state. Enrollment booms in the 1960s and 70s brought high-rise

dormitories, satellite sites, and shuttle bus systems (Chapman, 2006). The random groupings of buildings mirror the organizational structures at larger universities—loosely coupled schools and offices that serve disparate parts of the universities' expansive missions (Hirt, 2006; Kerr, 2001).

These campuses have to accommodate much greater enrollment numbers as many public universities have traded the selectivity of elite liberal arts colleges to increase access to higher education for underserved populations in their states (McClure, 2018). These enrollments vary across institutions, from a few small public colleges or branch campuses enrolling around 1,000 students each to flagship multiversities with enrollments of 40,000 and more (Taylor & Cantwell, 2018). Even with this variation, the average enrollment of public four-year institutions is over 11,000 students, or about seven times the average for private not-for-profit baccalaureate colleges and four times the average of all private institutions (IPEDS). With lower barriers to entry, many public four-year institutions—especially regional comprehensive universities—have historically been more accessible to students from underrepresented populations, including women, minoritized students, rural students, older and working students, and those from lower income backgrounds. This equality of opportunity is a fundamental public value and achievable only through systems and institutions that are less selective regarding students' prior experience or preparation (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Hirt, 2006; Orphan, 2020).

The typically larger enrollments of these public institutions also have an effect on the learning environments of their students. On campus, students enrolled in universities are encountering individual classes with increasing sizes, as well. Although class sizes

can vary within an institution, it is not uncommon to find classes at large universities with enrollments in the hundreds (Beattie & Thiele, 2016). This trend of growing class size is occurring more often at public institutions as they seek ways to offer instruction more efficiently (Ake-Little et al., 2020; Fabricant & Brier, 2016). These institutions have also looked for other modes of instructional delivery to provide access to increasing numbers of students. One of these modes has been through online courses. Enrollments in online courses have been growing rapidly overall, but the numbers of online students also vary across institution type. Online students are much more common at master's and doctoral institutions than at baccalaureate colleges, and at public institutions more often than private (Allen & Seaman, 2007; Allen & Seaman, 2016). The diversity of classrooms, in person or virtual, that can be found at large public institutions reflects the needs and interests of the more diverse student populations found there, but it also communicates different expectations for faculty.

With missions that expand beyond undergraduate education to include research and service, public universities place more and different demands on their faculty members. Those additional missions may represent increased publicness in the universities, but they also necessarily draw faculty attention away from teaching (Duderstadt & Womack, 2003). At more research-focused institutions, the academic reward structure privileges research activity over teaching, and consequently faculty feel pressure to spend more time conducting research (Hirt, 2006; Kerr, 2001). Higher education has often tried to emphasize the connections between research and teaching as a rationale for supporting its research mission (Duderstadt, 2004), but Gehrke and Kezar (2015) found only a slight relationship between the two reflected in the scholarship on the

topic. One way some institutions have attempted to manage the competing demands on faculty members' attention is through the unbundling of the faculty role. Part of that has included a separation of research and teaching responsibilities through the increased use of teaching-only adjunct positions (Fabricant & Brier, 2016; Gehrke & Kezar, 2015). Further unbundling has removed other responsibilities such as advising from faculty, which has led to "a fracturing of the student experience" (Gehrke & Kezar, 2015, p. 118).

The changing role of the faculty also has brought consequences for the student experience. Undergraduate students at larger, more research focused institutions are typically less likely to experience the beneficial student-faculty interactions that can occur outside of the classroom. The realities of these experiences vary among public institutions, of course, with less research conducted at public regional universities than at flagship or land-grant institutions (Orphan, 2020), but although regional university faculty may spend more time teaching and interacting with students than faculty at larger universities, that interaction is still less common than at liberal arts colleges (Hirt, 2006). Even when more comprehensive institutions create honors colleges or programs to replicate the liberal arts college experience for at least some of their students, those students and programs often still get lost in the bigger non-honors campuses (Carnicom, 2014).

The challenge for faculty at a single institution of balancing all of these missions can be great, but one advantage for these large public institutions is that they likely operate in state systems of colleges and universities that can spread these missions over a coordinated network. The strategic opportunities of a system allow the institutions to fill complementary roles and avoid working at cross purposes (Langenberg, 1994). The

degree of control that states exert in the governance or coordination of their higher education systems, however, varies greatly from state to state. Some states offer considerable autonomy to institutions in their systems, while others have constructed highly coordinated or centralized governing boards or agencies (Eckel, 2008). Governing boards of public higher education systems are typically modeled after the lay boards of private institutions, but they oversee multiple institutions in a system. They can be responsible for numerous activities, including strategic planning, budgeting and resource allocation, and policy development. Other state higher education systems, on the other hand, utilize coordinating boards, which do not directly govern institutions, but can, with varying degrees of authority, review and make recommendations regarding different functions of the system, such as budgets, academic programs, and other policies (McGuiness, 2011). Leveraging whatever bureaucratic authority is available through their governance structures, state systems can work to accommodate seemingly conflicting public values, like high quality and broad access or high research activity and undergraduate education, by encouraging institutional diversity within the system (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Birnbaum, 1983).

Institutional diversity and mission differentiation within a state system can not only help achieve a variety of outcomes but can also do so more effectively and more efficiently (Harris, 2020; Morphew, 2009). Efficiency is especially relevant when state systems aim to be good stewards of public resources and expect public institutions to use state funding responsibly. It is important to keep in mind, however, that state appropriations are not the only source of funding for public colleges and universities. Nor are state-owned institutions the only type that receive any public funding (Duderstadt &

Womack, 2003). As a dimensional approach to publicness suggests, all organizations can obtain revenue from a mixture of sources (Bozeman, 2004; Emmert & Crow, 1988), though public organizations are often expected to benefit more from government support. Both publicly and privately controlled institutions benefit from federal financial benefits through research grants, student financial aid, and tax-exempt status, while public schools also receive direct state appropriations. Conversely, both types of institutions generate revenue through private sources, as well, including tuition and private philanthropy (Cheslock & Gianneschi, 2008; Duderstadt & Womack, 2003). The degree of reliance on public resources, even beyond legal ownership status, often "explains the publicness of higher education institutions' activities" (Lee, 2017, p. 197).

Challenges for Public Institutions

As with private liberal arts colleges, some of the challenges that public higher education institutions face are common to the entire higher education field. Waning public support is not unique to any one sector (Lewis & Hearn, 2003). With pressures and expectations for higher education coming from numerous interest groups—federal and state agencies, industry communities, alumni, donors, parents and prospective students, and many others—the complex roles and sometimes competing missions of universities create considerable challenges (Duderstadt & Womack, 2003; Kerr, 2001). Many of these new expectations center on colleges and universities as drivers of economic development efforts (Eckel, 2008). Public perception of higher education has been moving away from a notion of higher education as a social institution and toward viewing it as an industry (Gumport, 2001). Reflecting those general interests, public universities have been shifting their priorities away from liberal education toward applied research and

vocational training, which has heightened tensions between the goals of citizenship and workforce development that have existed for at least 150 years (Fabricant & Brier, 2016; Rosenstone, 2003).

With a greater interest in the economic returns of colleges and universities they support, states have arguably lost sight of less quantifiable social benefits of higher education and have also become less interested in funding their public institutions. This has resulted in declines in state funding over the past several decades (Coleman, 2016; Hemelt & Marcotte, 2016). These reductions, in turn, have led public institutions to enact more business-like practices, further blurring public-private distinctions in higher education (Cantwell, 2013; Feeney & Welch, 2012). The primary business-like strategy for public institutions has been to behave more like private ones in seeking revenue from private sources (Ortagus & Yang, 2018). Many of the market-facing strategies that public institutions are now pursuing, however, challenge the idea that public institutions are committed to the public goods of access, affordability, and diversity (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Lambert, 2014). Perhaps the principal revenue generation strategy in response to diminishing state appropriations has been to raise tuition prices. "Students are being asked to shoulder the burden of state divestments now more than ever before" (Webber, 2017, p. 4). For four-year public colleges, the average net price, adjusted for inflation, has doubled in the last twenty years (Webber, 2018), and by 2008, student tuition had comprised more than 50% of those institutions' operating expenses (Fabricant & Brier, 2016).

In addition to impacting accessibility for in-state students, diminishing state appropriations have led public institutions to enroll more out-of-state and online students

to generate more revenue. With less support from their state governments, public institutions may feel less obliged to prioritize serving in-state students and instead increase non-resident enrollment. Institutions can realize revenue gains simply through increasing the number of out-of-state students because of the higher out-of-state tuition prices commonly found at public institutions. Because public institutions often have more autonomy over out-of-state tuition prices, they can further maximize those gains by increasing out-of-state tuition prices as well (Jaquette & Curs, 2015). Increased online education can also attract students from new markets or geographic regions, even within a university's own state (Ortagus & Yang, 2018). Depending on where online students are drawn from, this alternative delivery of instruction can serve public goods of increased access and completions, as it does when it provides opportunity for non-traditional students who need more flexibility for attendance. In fact, the vast majority of students taking exclusively online courses at public institutions come from inside the institution's own state (Allen & Seaman, 2016). On the other hand, typically lower retention rates for students in online classes compared to on-campus students and inconclusive evidence about online instruction quality raise questions about the value for students of online education (Labelle et al., 2020; Ortagus & Yang, 2018).

Public universities may also respond to decreasing state appropriations by growing research revenue and seeking private philanthropy (Ortagus & Yang, 2018), but both of these strategies are also dependent on institutions' existing capacities for both. While state comprehensive universities are particularly susceptible to the challenges of declining state appropriations, they are not as successful as flagships at securing external research grants (Zeig, 2016). External research funding can also be less prevalent at small

institutions that have more faculty and degree programs in the humanities, social sciences, and fine arts—disciplines that attract less research funding overall (Graham & Diamond, 1997). Likewise, even as all public institutions have come to rely more on private philanthropy in the wake of diminishing state funding, not all institutions experience equal success in their fundraising efforts (Cheslock & Gianneschi, 2008; Lee, 2017). A greater research orientation, by Carnegie classification, "is associated with much higher levels of giving revenues" (Cheslock & Gianneschi, 2008, p. 221).

In addition to alternative revenue generation, public institutions may introduce cost-cutting or efficiency measures in response to less state support. These measures include larger class sizes, greater use of adjunct instructors for teaching, and less engaging pedagogy. These changes are occurring disproportionately at non-elite institutions, including public comprehensive universities, that enroll more students from underserved populations (Fabricant & Brier, 2016), and all of them contribute in various ways to increased stratification within public systems of higher education and challenge the public missions of accessibility, affordability, and social mobility (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Carnevale et al., 2018; Cheslock & Gianneschi, 2008).

Regarding this turn toward market-driven behaviors for public institutions, Lambert (2014) noted that privatization "need not necessarily change the mission of public higher education" (p. 10), but others have argued that "shifting revenue sources at state universities may be shifting outcomes away from state-centered training, services, and teaching" (Feeney & Welch, 2012, p. 274). Equal opportunity and other public goods are also "readily lost in the transition from state-run systems to markets" (Marginson, 2007 p. 320). After privatization, public universities will still retain visible characteristics

such as large enrollments, numerous professional and graduate degree programs, high research activity, and even sprawling campuses to differentiate them from small liberal arts colleges, but they may lack the distinctive public missions that could set them apart from private institutions while connecting them to other members of their public state higher education systems.

Public Liberal Arts Colleges

The evolution of U.S. higher education and the emergence of institution types, along with structures like the Carnegie Classification to define those types, have left a small number of colleges and universities at an interesting, and often overlooked, intersection of public institutions with specific liberal arts focuses. Applying the criteria of public control and baccalaureate college status, similar to Breneman's (1990) method of circumscribing the private baccalaureate college sector, yields a list of just over 100 publicly controlled baccalaureate colleges (with IPEDS data available for 90[2]).

The group of public liberal arts institutions is small but important to maintaining the institutional diversity that the U.S. higher education landscape is known for, with these colleges offering "alternatives to both the public megauniversity…and the expensive private liberal arts college" (Wagner, 1995, p. 85). Individually, public liberal arts colleges work to fulfill missions from both of the public and the liberal arts traditions that sometimes come into conflict with each other—namely, offering a smaller, residential college experience in the liberal arts while pursuing the access and public goals of a state higher education system (Olsen, 1997).

[2] The group of public baccalaureate colleges in IPEDS includes multiple campuses for the Pennsylvania State University (24) and Purdue University Global (13). These campuses were excluded from descriptive statistics here because of their missing data.

While many of the values and goals associated with all higher education institutions can be considered public, the state-owned institutions are often expected to serve the public good most directly. Perhaps foremost among the public values these institutions provide is access (Berger, 2009; Epp & Spellman, 2014). If all public colleges and universities, however, strive to increase access for a broader and more diverse population of students, the distinguishing contribution of public liberal arts colleges, then, is providing "access to a form of education otherwise reserved for the privileged, serving another important public purpose of opportunity and social uplift" (Paino, 2014, p. 73). Although private liberal arts colleges may be less selective and slightly more affordable, with aid, than they are often imagined to be, the public liberal arts colleges represent intentional effort on the part of states to combine a commitment to undergraduate liberal education with a commitment to access for more students (Cleeton & Gross, 2004; COPLAC, 2021a; Free et al., 2015). In the pursuit of this unique blended mission, public liberal arts colleges also exhibit curricular and structural characteristics that find roots in both the private small college and public university traditions.

Reflective of their position as public institutions, public liberal arts colleges often offer curricula that "blend the goals of liberal learning with applied skills in the professions" (Spellman, 2010, p. 57). Comparing IPEDS data for public baccalaureate colleges to those for private not-for-profit baccalaureates, the group of publics have higher proportions of both balanced and professionally focused Carnegie undergraduate instructional profiles and a lower proportion of arts and sciences focused profiles. Indeed, the distribution of these instructional profiles among public baccalaureate colleges more closely resembles that of public master's and doctoral institutions than it does the private

baccalaureates. Although the public baccalaureates do have more professionally oriented undergraduate education, they also share the tendency for lower graduate education coexistence with the private liberal arts colleges, retaining the focus on undergraduate education. These instructional profiles suggest that public liberal arts colleges have had to make different curricular decisions because of greater expectations to serve regional or statewide vocational needs directly (Epp & Spellman, 2014).

Public liberal arts colleges' more diverse curricula reflect the pressures they face from statewide governing or coordinating boards, or even state lawmakers, to align a college's academic programs more closely to workforce or economic development goals (Selingo, 2001). When the interests of the system, however, eclipse campus-specific goals of a single institution, the system becomes more homogenous (Schwaller, 2009). In that instance, public liberal arts colleges resemble the more comprehensive universities in their respective state systems, resulting in less institutional diversity. But an institutionally diverse system offers greater choice to prospective students and makes higher education available to more people in the state (Birnbaum, 1983). Ultimately, the institutional diversity of a system relies on at least some of its member institutions being internally homogenous, serving specific missions or populations. By striking a balance between large comprehensive universities and smaller colleges that fill different niches in a state or service region, systems can reach an "ideal diversity" of inclusive and exclusive institutions that meets the needs and interests of all the system's constituents (McClay, 2005). Though it is a challenge to remain so distinct from other state system members, public liberal arts colleges serve their respective states' residents by making available a

"residential liberal arts college to meet the needs of students whose academic potential is best realized in a smaller learning environment" (Spellman, 2014, para. 6).

Creating that particular learning environment typically means that public liberal arts colleges often seek to emulate campus features of their private counterparts, but just as in other four-year sectors, the public baccalaureates as a group exhibit considerable diversity in their institutional characteristics. For instance, the average total enrollment at Carnegie public baccalaureate colleges is approximately 2,800—about twice as high as at private baccalaureates—but the enrollments range from just a few hundred students to over 12,000 at the largest public baccalaureate. This shift toward larger enrollments brings them closer to other public university enrollments, but still not anywhere close to the average enrollment of 15,000+ at public master's and doctoral institutions. The larger enrollment size may also be a function of slightly higher admission rates at publics, suggesting that the private small colleges are still somewhat more selective. It also could reflect the greater affordability of public baccalaureates, whose average published in-state tuition price is around $6,600, compared to the average of $32,000 for the privates. Further, the enrollments at public baccalaureates tend to represent a clearer commitment to goals of access and state service. While these campuses are not, on average, more racially diverse than private liberal arts colleges, they do tend to serve more first-generation college students as well as a higher proportion of students who are in-state residents (Berger, 2009; Downes, 2010; IPEDS).

Public baccalaureate colleges also skew a little closer to fellow public institutions in other on-campus characteristics, falling somewhere between private small colleges and public universities. The average student-to-faculty ratio at public baccalaureates is higher

than that at privates (15:1 compared to 12:1), but it is still lower than the average ratio for public master's and doctoral universities (17:1). These lower ratios suggest opportunity for more frequent interaction between students and faculty, which supports liberal learning outcomes for students (Blaich et al., 2004). Small colleges, both public and private, are often sites for undergraduate research, so the faculty are expected to be more involved with students outside the classroom, as well. This, as well as the increasing demands for research productivity experienced by faculty at many institutions, have placed additional burden on faculty at small colleges (Evans, 2010). Downes (2010) also noted more frequent interaction among faculty, suggesting public baccalaureates' commitment to interdisciplinarity and innovation through collaboration. Although the generally small enrollment sizes of public baccalaureate colleges can facilitate this in- and out-of-classroom interaction for students and faculty, the public campuses are more frequently non-residential (by Carnegie size and setting categories) than private baccalaureates.

Because of the unique combinations of features that align them more closely along different dimensions with either private liberal arts colleges (size, instructional profile) or public universities (price, selectivity), public liberal arts institutions encounter decision-making opportunities as well as challenges particular to their niche. To help promote the public liberal arts generally and to support individual public liberal arts colleges as they face their unique circumstances, some of these institutions have joined together in the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges.

Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges

The small group of public liberal arts colleges went nearly unnoticed, and more certainly unrecognized, until the 1980s, when David Brown, former chancellor of the University of North Carolina Asheville (UNCA), noticed that his university's character and mission distinguished it as an "outrider" from the other institutions in the University of North Carolina system. Brown observed that other similar institutions were scattered around the country, which Schuman (2014) described as "the discovery of a previously unrecognized segment of the American collegiate scene, the public liberal arts college" (p. 1). Brown's identification of potential peers was the impetus for what became the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC). Leaders from nine similar institutions met first in 1988 with an initial interest in gaining visibility for their individual institutions and the segment more broadly, and COPLAC was formally incorporated in 1992 to promote the unique mission of public liberal arts colleges (Schuman, 2014).

COPLAC has grown to now include 30 members across 28 states and one Canadian province (COPLAC, 2021b). These member institutions, through their adherence to COPLAC's membership criteria, have indicated their intentions to "provide the benefits of the private liberal arts college education in a publicly funded institution" (Schwaller, 2009, p. 58). Some of COPLAC's membership criteria are mission-driven, such as a "strong commitment to preparing students for a life of active citizenship and public service" (COPLAC, 2019, p. 2), but other observable criteria, including "a predominantly undergraduate student population" and "an academic profile in which a significant proportion of all undergraduate degrees conferred in disciplines and

interdisciplinary majors are typically characterized as liberal arts and sciences" (p. 2), also signify a commitment to the undergraduate liberal arts education mission. Many of these criteria characterize all liberal arts colleges, regardless of control or legal ownership, but the additional expectations for a commitment to access and recognition by the institution's state or governing board further align COPLAC members with public values and goals.

Arguably, these criteria have helped distinguish COPLAC members even within the public baccalaureate sector. Compared with the larger group of 90 public Carnegie baccalaureate colleges, COPLAC institutions have a higher percentage of undergraduates who are under 25 years old, suggesting a more traditionally aged student population. Their campuses are far more likely to fall into Carnegie categories of primarily or highly residential rather than non-residential, reflecting the lower proportion of commuter students at COPLAC schools. Further, the instructional staffs at member institutions include, on average, a greater proportion of faculty who are tenured or on the tenure track, and the Carnegie undergraduate instructional programs are more likely to be arts and sciences focused rather than balanced or professionally oriented than those at even the public baccalaureates. Along these metrics, COPLAC members as a group tend to look more like the group of private liberal arts colleges than the publics.

In other ways, however, the COPLAC group clearly serves public and state-specific missions. One of the strongest signals of their publicness is their lower tuition price. The average published tuition price for in-state students at COPLAC schools is comparable to the average of all public master's and doctoral institutions and is a fraction of the average price for private baccalaureate institutions. The COPLAC group also has a

higher average enrollment, a higher admission rate, and a higher proportion of first-time undergraduates with in-state residence than both public and private baccalaureate groups. These figures combine to suggest greater access as well as increased service to the students of the institutions' respective states, but they also reflect the inclusion of a number of Carnegie classified master's institutions (rather than only baccalaureate colleges) among the COPLAC membership.

Between the multiple Carnegie criteria for its basic classifications and the broad COPLAC membership criteria, the member institutions individually exhibit numerous combinations of characteristics. The smallest COPLAC members, for instance, enroll fewer than 1,000 students each, while the largest approaches 9,000, with 99% in-state undergraduates. Selectivity varies widely, with admissions rates spanning from a moderately selective 56% to a very open 98%. Accessibility is also impacted by in-state tuition prices that differ by over $10,000 per year. The student populations look different across the member institutions along dimensions like age, race, online participation, and part-time participation. Two COPLAC members are designated minority-serving institutions.

These differences can certainly be influenced by the institutions' current contexts, such as locale, regional demographics, and state system missions, but their distinct institutional histories may also contribute to their unique identities. Many had specific teaching missions as normal or industrial schools, women's colleges, junior colleges, or even high schools (Schuman, 2014). For example, the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA) was only designated a public liberal arts college in the 1990s, after being founded as a normal school in 1894 (Grant, 2005; MCLA, 2021). Like some other

COPLAC members, and many other public regional universities, MCLA followed a typical path from normal school to designation as a state teachers college in the 1930s to state college designation in the 1960s. Instead of growing into a larger comprehensive university, though, it was renamed in 1997 from North Adams State College to the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, "reflective of specialty school status within the Massachusetts State College public system as The Public Liberal Arts College of Massachusetts" (MCLA, 2021, "History"). While this kind of saga differs from some popular conceptions of the elite, exclusively liberal arts college, roots in teacher training are in fact common among both public and private colleges that are now considered liberal arts schools, and consequently, they often retain teacher education and other more professionally aligned programs in addition to liberal arts cores (Schwaller, 2009).

Other COPLAC members have shorter histories, having been founded as branch or satellite campuses within state systems in the 1960s and 70s. The University of South Carolina Aiken (USCA) was a two-year branch within its state system before graduating to a senior college and conferring their own bachelor's degrees (USCA, 2021). Other institutions founded in that same era, including Ramapo College of New Jersey (Ramapo) and University of Minnesota-Morris (UMN Morris) began as four-year system members with a more liberal arts college focus (Ramapo, 2021; UMN Morris, 2021).

Beyond different public beginnings, a few COPLAC members began as private institutions. Former member institution Henderson State University (HSU) was founded in 1890 as a private Methodist liberal arts college and became a public institution in 1929 after being offered to the state following mergers of Methodist colleges in Arkansas (HSU, 2021). Truman State University, likewise, was privately founded in the late

nineteenth century, but with a more professional mission as a normal school and commercial college. It quickly became a public normal school and followed a similar path as the other historical teachers colleges before receiving designation as Missouri's public liberal arts and sciences university in 1985 (Truman State University, n.d.) New College of Florida followed a different path, being founded as a private college, only much later in 1960. It joined Florida's State University System when it was absorbed as part of University of South Florida (USF) in 1975, and it did not regain status as an independent institution until 2001, when it was separated from USF and designated Florida's Honors College (New College, 2021).

While the various evolutions and expansions of mission are not unique to COPLAC or the baccalaureate sector of higher education institutions, it does mean that these schools must contend with numerous influences as they work to clarify and enact their current missions and identities. Their membership in COPLAC, as well as their state designations as public liberal arts or honors institutions, aligns them with the liberal arts tradition and mission of providing an education grounded in holistic student development and the intellectual arts (Blaich et al., 2004). Because they are all public institutions, and because many followed paths shared by the larger public regional universities, they also face decisions around how much to integrate their historically practical missions by offering professional degrees. Those histories pose a further identity-related challenge for COPLAC members. Where some of the prestigious private liberal arts colleges enjoy the advantages of continuous sagas that contribute to their strong institutional identities and often to their prestige, COPLAC members have faced discontinuities—such as MCLA's shift from state college to designated liberal arts institution or New College's changing

status and more recent independence—that offer less support for an enduring identity in the public imagination.

COPLAC as an organization has helped define and support the public liberal arts sector by identifying institutional characteristics that reflect public liberal arts colleges' missions to balance the liberal and sometimes exclusive traditions of the small private college with the more practical and accessible charges of public institutions. Membership in COPLAC, then, can serve individual institutions in multiple ways. COPLAC executive director Cole Woodcox explained that for most members, belonging to COPLAC affirms their identity and reflects their existing commitment to public liberal arts education and the accompanying characteristics. In some cases, though, the membership process can be more aspirational (personal communication, 20 November 2020). Perhaps initially meeting some (but not all) of the membership criteria, institutions can express intent and associate with COPLAC as provisional members in order to define goals and strategies that will help them more fully realize a public liberal arts mission.

COPLAC also connects individuals at these unique institutions with each other, facilitating member collaborations "including multi-campus faculty and student research projects, professional development opportunities for faculty and professional staff, and enhanced information sharing" (COPLAC, 2021c). These opportunities strengthen whole institutions as well as support individual faculty, staff, and students at each campus by expanding available resources and identifying best practices for their unique contexts. In addition to supporting those internal constituencies, COPLAC also increases visibility for these institutions and the sector more generally (Schuman, 2014). Particularly as COPLAC has grown in its own right as a nationally recognized professional association,

it continues to promote to state and federal policymakers the importance of "providing students with comprehensive public higher education in the liberal arts and sciences" (COPLAC, 2021c). This kind of communication has helped clarify the special position and the benefit of public liberal arts colleges for multiple audiences: other national associations, state elected officials, state higher education system leaders, and a more general public.

Conclusion

An image of a modern public liberal arts college can be constructed by combining missions and characteristics from the histories and present realities of both private liberal arts colleges and public universities. With influence coming from historical traditions, state system goals, public demand, and associations like COPLAC, understanding this sector means understanding the ways those influences contribute, and possibly compete, to shape this unique sector.

Despite a reputation derived largely from the elite members of that sector, American liberal arts colleges have been more practically and publicly oriented than is often acknowledged. They have been responsive to evolving public interest from the beginning, expanding their curricula and degree offerings to prepare students for both civic and professional life. As their course catalogs have grown, however, liberal arts colleges have largely retained their commitment to liberal learning outcomes and the teaching-focused environments associated with liberal education missions. Small total enrollments, small class sizes, low student-faculty ratios, and highly residential campuses are all features that have come to typify the liberal arts college sector (Astin, 1999; Kuh, 2005).

In contrast to the small liberal arts colleges, large comprehensive and research universities have developed to encompass multiple missions serving various constituencies. Although both public and private institutions have evolved into large research universities, the majority of today's doctoral research universities are publicly controlled. Further, the majority of all public four-year institutions are master's and doctoral colleges and universities rather than baccalaureates or other specialty institutions. This has led to a popular conception of higher education that imagines a divide between large public universities and small private liberal arts colleges (White, 2003). While a public-private dichotomy based on state-ownership is reductive (Marginson, 2007), examining institutions based on their control does reveal some clear contrasts, including larger enrollments, more professional majors, greater research demands on faculty at public institutions (Duderstadt, 2004; Gumport, 2019). These also contribute to a stronger alignment of university activity to state workforce development needs (Fabricant & Brier, 2016).

At the intersection of the liberal arts college model and the (often large) public university model, the public liberal arts college blends missions and characteristics from both sources, creating "odd academic ducks" (Downes, 2010, p. 97) that face a unique set of challenges. As public colleges offering liberal arts education opportunities, they face skepticism common across all of higher education from potential students and their families regarding the value of liberal arts degrees as well as specific pressures from their respective state governments and public higher education systems to align their instructional profiles more tightly with state economic goals or professional preparation and workforce development.

To promote the mission of this small sector of institutions, COPLAC communicates the value of its members' work to state and federal policymakers as well as to other national higher education organizations. The association also connects members with each other to create opportunities for students and faculty across institutions to collaborate on research, instruction, and professional development (COPLAC, 2021c). Through communication within the membership and to external audiences, as well as through refinement of membership criteria, COPLAC continues to help shape the public liberal arts college identity. Member institutions benefit from the support of COPLAC as they work to preserve their distinct identities within state systems and a broader national landscape dominated by the images of larger and more familiar sectors.

CHAPTER 3

ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY

Every entity, whether an individual person, a group, or an organization, "needs at least a preliminary answer to the question 'Who are we?'" (Albert et al., 2000, p. 13). In their foundational work on organizational identity, Albert and Whetten (1985) suggested that "the issue of identity is a profound and consequential one, and at the same time, so difficult, that it is best avoided" (p. 265). Although it may be challenging for organizations to confront their own identities, organizational identity has become an important concept in the study of organizations through which researchers and leaders can better understand the decisions made in response to internal and external influences.

Albert and Whetten (1985) described organizational identity as having two uses, based primarily on the users of the concept. Researchers studying organizations could use it "to define and characterize certain aspects of organizations" (Albert & Whetten, 1985, p. 264). Similarly, organizations themselves could use it self-reflectively to better understand themselves and their environments. For researchers, particularly as the scholarship on organizational identity has matured, the concept itself has become increasingly useful as an "interpretive frame in the analysis of organizations" (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 7). As a construct, organizational identity can be used to examine a range of organizational decisions and behaviors, from responses to their environments to internal dynamics to long-term planning (Foreman & Whetten, 2002). For organizations themselves, identity is often invoked when they face significant choices, particularly

those for which other, arguably more rational, decision making processes have been unsuccessful. Organizations' self-knowledge can serve as a guide for many of its activities (Gioia et al., 2010; Whetten, 2006). Identity also helps organizations communicate who they are to internal and external audiences. More specifically, it helps leaders convey a vision, mission, and values to multiple audiences and provides something for other organization members to connect with and commit to within the organization (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

Conceptualizing Organizational Identity

At its simplest, identity describes the essence of an entity (Ashforth et al., 2011). Albert and Whetten (1985) initially conceived of organizational identity as an extension of individual identity, viewing both as "a classification of the self that identifies the individual as recognizably different from others" (p. 267). Organizational identity is a claim about the essential character of an organization and encompasses features such as place, founding date, and original purpose, but it is also a relational concept. It situates the organization within a larger field or network of other organizations through comparisons that reveal how an organization is different from others (Ashforth et al., 2011; Corley et al., 2006; Fiol et al., 1998).

The relational nature of organizational identity finds its roots in social identity theory, which describes how individuals construct identities by sorting themselves into various social categories. The individuals' self-concepts are shaped through the aggregation of the attributes associated with those categories into unique sets (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Often, the categories are embodied as existing social groups to which an individual can claim membership, informally or formally. Social identities, then, are

based on the individual's sense of membership in different social groups, from bowling teams to work organizations (Dutton et al., 1994; Pratt, 1998). Social identity theory suggests that individuals often "fixate on their distinctiveness, to emphasize their distinctiveness vis-à-vis others" (Gioia, 1998, p. 19), but it also incorporates an associative aspect in which individuals see themselves as similar to others as well as a consideration of the intensity of those associations (Brewer, 1991; Dutton et al., 1994).

As Albert and Whetten (1985) applied concepts of individual identity construction to organizations, the relationships involved likewise moved up a level from between individuals to between organizations. In shaping an organizational identity, the organization as a collective must locate itself in its environment through these comparisons. In their original conceptualization of organizational identity, Albert and Whetten stipulated that any statement of identity should satisfy three criteria. It should claim those attributes that are central to an organization's character, those that make the organization distinctive, and those that exhibit a temporal continuity.

Central Character

What is central to an organization's identity can be difficult to define because it is open to judgment (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Corley et al., 2006), but this may also be the most essential aspect of identity, given that constructing an identity without some essential core attributes is difficult to imagine. Albert and Whetten (1985) acknowledged that there was no universal list of those attributes that might be considered most important for an organization. Among the most frequent features described as central for organizations, however, are mission, values, and history (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Felix, 2020; Gioia et al., 2013). These intangible attributes often supply answers to the

questions of why or how organizations do what they do (Gustafson & Reger, 1995). Other more concrete features, such as products or services offered by an organization or its geographic location and target clientele, may still be considered central when they follow from or closely relate to an organization's mission or founding purpose (Gioia et al., 2013; Gustafson & Reger, 1995). In higher education, for instance, colleges' or universities' central features may be visible through the curricula and degrees they offer, the kinds of students they enroll, or the region or state they serve.

Distinctiveness

Establishing an organizational identity also entails understanding which attributes set an organization apart from others. Consequently, distinctiveness necessitates comparisons with other organizations. Distinctions from other organizations can first justify an entity's existence and further increase its attractiveness within a group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; 1996). But not all of an organization's identity features need to be unique. In fact, when organizations in the same industry are founded in similar places at similar times, they could have comparable identities (Barney & Stewart, 2000). This scenario highlights Albert and Whetten's (1985) early caveat that identity criteria are independent. A central characteristic, like a founding or geographic location, need not also be the characteristic that makes an organization distinct. Some of these features may overlap, but not necessarily so. Ultimately, a distinctive *set* of identity characteristics will set an organization apart (Corley et al., 2006).

Like social identity theory, organizational identity also relies on relevant comparison groups, so organizations must balance their needs for assimilation and for differentiation (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Whetten, 2006). Just as social identity theory

describes the ways that individuals seek to define themselves, organizations shape their identities through the categories they belong to as well as the ways they differ from other members within those categories. Because organizations may belong to numerous groups, both formal and informal, the content of comparisons an organization makes between itself and others can vary as referents vary. Ashforth and Mael (1996) observed this in the field of higher education: "Comparing one state university with another may raise issues of relative teaching effectiveness, whereas comparing a state university with a private university may raise issues of relative funding" (p. 25). Participation in the field of higher education writ large, or more specifically in a state higher education system, reveals some of the extraorganizational pressures that promote similarity between organizations, but it also highlights the value of an organization's differentiating itself along whatever dimensions afford positive comparisons.

Optimal Distinctiveness

Maintaining a balance between similarity and difference is a challenge for organizations just as it is for individuals (Gioia, 1998). Drawing from social identity theory, some organizational identity scholars have adapted the idea of optimal distinctiveness to examine how organizations balance those interests. Brewer (1991) proposed that individuals achieve optimal distinctiveness by identifying with categories that are neither so large that they need more differentiation nor so small that they desire more inclusion. Organizations, likewise, feel pressures toward both assimilation and differentiation, but where individuals are driven toward optimal distinctiveness by intrinsic needs, organizations may be externally driven (Zuckerman, 2016). Being similar to other organizations offers a firm recognition and legitimacy. Distinction from other

organizations reduces competition for a firm (Deephouse, 1999). Integrating optimal distinctiveness theory with different audience theory and two-stage valuation theory, Zuckerman (2016) demonstrated how the pressures for an organization to assimilate or differentiate can change based on audiences and contexts. This reinforced earlier observations that not all of an organization's attributes must be distinguishing and that even the distinctive features need not be visible at all times (Corley et al., 2006; Dutton et al., 1994).

Temporal Continuity

Of Albert and Whetten's (1985) three identity criteria, the temporal component of identity has arguably seen the most debate and competing interpretation in the related literature (Gioia et al., 2013). The debate around the nature of this criterion hinges on the difference between the endurance of attributes and the continuity of identity (Gioia et al., 2000). What it means for an identity or its individual attributes to endure over time or exhibit continuity "is clearly in the eye of the beholder" (Ashforth & Mael, 1996, p. 27). This ambiguity can indeed be traced back to Albert and Whetten's (1985) description of this component as "some degree of sameness or continuity over time" (p. 265). Endurance relies more heavily on the idea of sameness. Enduring features, those that remain unchanging in an organization, are more important to its identity than others that can change more easily or frequently. This view of temporal continuity also relies on a presumption connecting durability with the centrality of attributes. Those intangible features that are most central to an organization are also most likely to be deliberately preserved (Gioia et al., 2013; Gustafson & Reger, 1995). On the other hand, "continuity over time" leaves room for change and expects only that an organization's present

identity "will not be inconsistent with past identity" (Barney & Stewart, 2000, p. 37). The prevailing approach now is inclusive of both views, acknowledging that organizational identity is neither completely static nor constantly changing (Gioia et al., 2013).

With a conception of organizational identity that incorporates the possibility, and even inevitability, of change (Alvesson et al., 2008), the impression of stability remains significant. Gioia et al. (2000) observed the persistence of labels used to describe organizations' core beliefs and values even while the meanings underlying the labels shifted. This idea is reflected in higher education and the concern over the state of the liberal arts. Although the labels "liberal arts" and "liberal arts college" have existed for centuries, their meanings—e.g., the liberal arts curriculum—have been evolving for just as long. As organizations within the field undergo change by adding degree programs or expanding campuses, they also preserve a sense of stability and continuity be retaining the familiar labels. The consistent use of labels reinforces an organization's identity and suggests that whatever changes may be occurring are at least consistent with the organization's values and history (Chreim, 2005; Gioia et al., 2000).

What Organizational Identity Is Not

With so many related and interconnected concepts that contribute to a fuller understanding of organizations, there is also some inevitable fuzziness regarding conceptual boundaries between identity and related ideas (Ravasi & van Rekom, 2006). While acknowledging the value and richness of their interconnectedness, attempting to distinguish these other concepts and clarify their boundaries can also be helpful to understanding organizational identity (Hatch & Schultz, 2000). Identity should be

distinguishable from other concepts like organizational culture, organizational image, and identification (Whetten, 2006).

Organizational Culture

Organizational identity and organizational culture are often considered together because they frequently interact to "mutually construct each other" (Atienza, 2017, p. 572). Where organizational identity can be thought of as the answer to the question of "who we are," organizational culture most typically describes "the way things are done around here" (Buffone, 2013, p.30). Organizational culture, then, is the context in which identity is shaped and expressed (Hatch & Schultz, 2000). Although that context includes a kind of rule system that directs meaning-making, the rules provided by an organizational culture are more often implicit, expected to be understood by members of the organization but rarely communicated as directly or explicitly as identity is (Fiol et al., 1998; Hatch & Schultz, 2000).

While organizational culture is not entirely a closed system, it is also overwhelmingly something situated within an organization, originating throughout an organization at all levels of hierarchy and manifesting in numerous cultural forms (Hatch & Schultz, 1997). These forms include stories of particular events or members as well as the more comprehensive saga about the organization as a whole. Other more tangible cultural forms such as typical dress within a company, distinctive architecture, or even letterhead or a college's diplomas can reflect as well as inform an organization's distinctiveness (Pratt & Rafaeli, 2001; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). All of these forms contribute to a set of shared understandings about an organization that help direct members' ways of doing things (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Fiol et al., 1998).

Organizational Image

Like culture, image is a concept closely related to and interactive with organizational identity. One of the earlier definitions of image, particularly as distinguished from organizational identity, comes from Dutton & Dukerich (1991), who described image as the way that an organization's members imagine external audiences view the organization. In this definition, identity can be a foundation for image as members start with their own understanding of the focal organization and assess how external audiences' views about the organization might differ from their own (Hatch & Schultz, 2000). Because of its reliance on the organizational members' impressions, this understanding of image focuses more on internal issues compared to a view of image often applied in marketing literature that stresses image as a construct of external audiences (Hatch & Schultz, 1997). As understandings of image have evolved in both organizational and marketing literature, a number of distinctions have demonstrated the value of more precise definitions (Gioia et al., 2000).

When first theorizing organizational identity, Albert and Whetten (1985) acknowledged that identities could be shared with multiple audiences and that publicly presented identities—e.g., those directed specifically at external audiences—were often more positive and monolithic than identities construed and shared internally. The communication to external audiences found in Albert and Whetten's notion of public presentation can also be seen in a specific notion of organizational image. Earlier studies have used terms like "desired" or "projected" image to describe what Brown et al. (2006) suggested be called "intended image," which are the "mental associations about the organization that organization leaders want important audiences to hold" (p. 101). This

concept reflects a communication from the organization, and from its leadership in particular, to external audiences. Intended image also resembles other concepts from the literature, such as corporate identity, that are similar expressions of an organization's essence directed toward outside audiences and frequently mediated by organizational leaders to engender a positive impression of the organization (Hatch & Schultz, 1997; 2000).

In contrast to intended image, the idea of a construed external image more closely aligns with Dutton and Dukerich's (1991) earlier description of image, which involved the members of an organization envisioning an external audience's impressions of the organization. This construed image is distinct from an organization's reputation, which is the set of beliefs that external audiences *actually* hold about the organization (Brown et al., 2006). Instead, construed image relies on internal members' beliefs about the views held by the external audience regarding the organization. In this way, "construed external image acts as a potentially powerful mirror, reflecting back to the members how the organization and the behavior of its members are likely being seen by outsiders" (Dutton et al., 1994, p. 249).

Interdependence of Identity, Culture, and Image

Intended image, construed image, organizational culture, and organizational identity are ultimately interdependent. The work of Hatch and Schultz (1997; 2000; 2002) especially has demonstrated how these concepts interact to inform and shape each other: "culture, identity and image form three related parts of a system of meaning and sense-making that defines an organization to its various constituencies" (Hatch & Schultz, 1997, p. 357). While image may be the most interactive with audiences external

to an organization, organizational identity provides the material used to construct those images. That identity is itself seated in an organizational culture that supplies the behaviors and artifacts used to create an identity while also responding to the influences of internal and external audiences as mediated through construed external images and members' understanding of their own organization's identity.

Perspectives on Organizational Identity

When considering the attributes that make an organization what it is—i.e., its identity—different streams of the literature have conceived of organizational identity from two primary perspectives. Central to the debate between the differing conceptions of organizational identity is "the distinction between identity-as-shared perceptions among members versus identity-as-institutionalized claims available to members" (Whetten & Mackey, 2002, p. 395). In other words, the question asks whether an organization's identity belongs to the organization itself as its own "social actor" or whether its identity is socially constructed by its members.

Social Actor Perspective

By viewing an organization as its own social actor, observers may discern its identity by examining organization-level actions and obligations. In this view, the organization holds its own set of characteristics and identity attributes that exist independent of its members' beliefs about the organization and that "can be experienced, assessed, appreciated, and possibly managed" (Corley et al., 2006, p. 90). Primary to the social actor perspective is an independence from any member's interpretation of the organization. With an identity separate from its members, an organization possesses rights and responsibilities as if it were a single individual itself, and organizations as

actors can express their own character through institutional claims, actions, and commitments (Gioia et al., 2010; King & Whetten, 2008). For social actor proponents, organizations' identity claims also rarely change. Their focus lies instead in organizations preserving both consistent and unique identities. From this top-down perspective, organizations' claims about their identifying characteristics inform both members and other audiences about what the organization is (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006).

Social Construction Perspective

Different from the social actor view, a social construction perspective "places the focus of attention on the shared interpretive schemes that members collectively construct" (Gioia et al., 2010, p. 5). Organizational identity, therefore, results from a process of negotiation that occurs among all members of an organization, which means that organizational identity is shaped by the perceptions of many individuals as well as small intraorganizational groups and leadership. It is up to members of the organization to articulate who they are collectively (Corley et al., 2006; Gioia et al., 2013). To reach a common understanding, members negotiate meanings among themselves, making sense of which of the organization's attributes they find essential (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006).

Even within a social construction perspective, different interpretations of the nature of organizations lead to slightly different understandings of their identities. When organizations are viewed simply as social collectives, their identities consequently become aggregates of all the individual organizational members' cognitions about its identity. If organizations are understood as more than simple collectives, however, their identities can be seen as a kind of gestalt or "group mind" (Pratt, 2003; Whetten, 2006). In either case, the essence of social construction remains the same, which is the

conception of organizational identity as emerging from meanings negotiated by members of the organization.

Narrative

A narrative approach to organizational identity shares with the broader social constructionist perspective the foundational notion of identity as meaning collectively understood among the organization's members but focuses more specifically on identity as the story (or stories) of an organization. Identity narratives, like other socially negotiated identity claims, are "discursively constructed" by multiple authors and stakeholders (Chreim, 2005). In this conceptualization, narration is a process whereby both narrators and audiences add, edit, accept, or reject various elements of the stories being told about an organization (Humphreys & Brown, 2002). This framework also finds narrators highlighting different aspects of the organizational identity at different times for different audiences (Hatch & Schultz, 2000). Although identity narratives can include various member perspectives on an organization, ultimately narratives are judged by their coherence and continuity. The themes that emerge from within a coherent narrative can identify the core features of an organization (Chreim, 2005). Like other socially constructed identities, narratives express their claims only after processes of meaning making and negotiation among an organization's members.

Perspectives Integrated

Though the perspectives themselves are different, it is unclear whether social actor and social construction perspectives on organizational identity are mutually exclusive. In fact, Gioia et al. (2010) suggested that the two perspectives are "not only reconcilable but mutually necessary" (p. 35). Ravasi and Schultz (2006) likewise

described how applying both perspectives could yield a fuller understanding of the ways organizational identity emerges from "the interplay between identity claims and understandings" (p. 436). As social actors, organizations, often through their top leaders, express claims about who they are and what features are essential to their identity, shaping how members construct their views of the collective. Meanwhile, from a social constructionist view, the larger group of organizational members assumes primacy in identifying what features are most important about the organization. Employing both lenses when examining organizational identities is arguably essential for a comprehensive view of identity dynamics.

Constructing Organizational Identity

Earlier research in organizational identity focused less on the identity formation process, relying instead on an assumption "that organizational identity can be readily inferred from industry membership and/or the founder's vision" (Gioia et al., 2010, p. 34). While industry categorization and vision may bound the range of possibilities, they certainly do not entirely define an organization's identity. Unique identities result from a more comprehensive and multifaceted collection of attributes (Ravasi & van Rekom, 2003).

The focus on the mission and role of an organization represents a more objective social actor perspective of organizations, but applying both social actor and social construction views leads to a clearer view of identity formation (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Broader "social forms, categories, and group affiliations contribute to identity" (Choi, 2012, p. 45) by providing a foundation from which organization members can begin to reflect on relative importance of those attributes to the organization. The process of

organizational identity formation ultimately relies on those perceptions from individual members as they move through a recursive loop. Individual members' ideas lead to shared cognitions among internal groups which, in turn, grow into "institutionalized realities" within the organization (Ashforth et al., 2011, p. 1146). Organizational identity solidifies and strengthens through consensus among members and through their collective confidence that their perceptions about the organization are true (Ashforth & Mael, 1996).

Although an organization's self-definition is primarily an internal process, the process is also influenced by external interactions (Gioia et al., 2010). Notably, organizational image affects identity formation through a process Dutton and Dukerich (1991) referred to as mirroring. As internal members imagine how external audiences perceive the organization, those ideas serve as mirrors, confronting members with notions of how outsiders see their organization and prompting members' reflection on how internal and external views of the organization align. The reflection becomes part of the recursive process whereby individual members' perceptions become collectively accepted or edited on their way to being institutionalized. These reflections also may come from multiple sources as organizations interact with various external audiences (Hatch & Schultz, 2000), but Scott and Lane (2000a) suggested that "reference others," a specific type of external audience, "are likely to have a particularly strong influence on self-definition processes" (p. 46). Reference others are groups or individuals that a focal organization's members identify with or see as relevant for comparison.

These "ordered inter-organizational comparisons and reflections over time" (Albert & Whetten, 1985, p. 268) are instrumental in shaping organizational identities.

Because categorizations and comparisons also lead to relative positioning of an organization within an industry or other group, the process of formulating identity claims can also be seen as strategic act to attain legitimacy within a field (Gioia et al., 2010). As such, the influence of organizational leadership can be especially important in identity construction.

Leadership

All members of an organization contribute to its identity, but top leadership, or what Ashforth and Mael (1996) called "powerholders" (p. 24), can wield an outsized influence in the identity formation process. Leaders are likely to have a greater say in what desired images are projected by the organization, which external audiences are considered, and how organizational narratives are constructed (Hatch & Schultz, 2002).

Leadership has a central role in coordinating and maintaining an internal system of shared meaning for an organization, and top management often rely on organizational identity to preserve coherence and cooperation within the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Gioia, 1998). As all members participate in sensemaking within the organization and contribute their perceptions to the shared understanding of the collective, leaders also sensegive and remind other members of the organization's mission, values, and other key attributes. In doing so, they "furnish a consistent view of what the organization is all about to the world" (Scott & Lane, 2000a, p. 47). Organizational identity's socially constructed nature makes it subject to that kind of influence from leadership (van Knippenberg, 2016).

Another way that organizational leaders help shape identity is through the selection of external referents and audiences. With the increased influence that

accompanies management positions, managers can select external individuals or organizations as "reference others" and shape their organization's identity through comparison with those others. They may also have greater control over which extraorganizational groups or categories they want their organization to identify with. These referents provide a common set of characteristics or identity attributes that the focal organization can choose to align with as they seek legitimacy (Gioia et al., 2010). Finally, leaders can select specific external audiences to receive the desired images that they project. Just as leaders guide internal cohesion by communicating their perceptions of the organization to other members, leaders also direct external messages about the organization. By crafting desired images for targeted external stakeholders, leaders also affect the construed images that are mirrored back to the organization, shaping the organizational identity (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Hatch & Schultz, 2002).

Identity narratives are also "power effects" from leaders (Humphreys & Brown, 2002, p. 423). While senior management narratives are not *the* organizational identity, they are a strong influence. In his description of organizational saga, Clark (1972) viewed senior faculty as "the key group of believers" (p. 181) who assumed leadership in both sustaining and protecting a university's saga. Because even leaders' narratives can be contested during identity construction, these managers seek acceptance for their narratives and also typically align them to meet expectations of internal and external stakeholders (Humphreys & Brown, 2002).

A managerial approach that incorporates a power dynamic may be more applicable when examining hierarchical organizations with authority vested in certain positions. In these organizations, leaders assume more responsibility for organizational

identity. In contrast, responsibility for a group identity is often diffused across the membership of a more professional organization (Scott & Lane, 2000a). In both instances, however, leaders may arise within an organization in the first place because their identity best represents the group identity (Scott & Lane, 2000b). Higher education offers an illustration of this notion in that the majority of college and university presidents still come from within higher education, often following pathways that include faculty positions, deanships, provost appointments, and other academic affairs roles (American Council on Education, 2021). When college and university leaders come from outside academia, "they often need to learn the norms, processes and culture of governance in higher education" (Aspen Institute Task Force, 2017). Otherwise, those new leaders could make decisions or communicate messages that are inconsistent with the collectively understood identity claims, which would lead to dysfunction within the organization (van Knippenberg, 2016).

Reflection and Identity Development

From their foundings, to choosing leadership, to responding to external influences, to all the other decisions they are faced with, organizations are "constantly in the process of *becoming*" (Ashforth & Mael, 1996, p. 26, emphasis original). Underlying the decisions and resultant actions that organizations and leaders make and take is constant self-reflection (Scott & Lane, 2000b). Because it requires so much reflection and revisiting, some scholars have questioned whether it is more appropriate to consider organizational identity as a thing or as a process (Ravasi & van Rekom, 2003). This study approaches identity as a thing, a set of shared beliefs and understandings, but those collective perceptions are "progressively, even continuously, negotiated by organization

members—via their interactions with each other and with external stakeholders" (Gioia et al., 2010, p. 35). Dutton and Dukerich's (1991) mirroring process can be a significant part of reflection, but individuals can also examine and reflect on their organization without an external audience to mediate that. Balancing the attention spent on internal and external audiences can help organizations avoid dysfunction in the dynamic. With too little focus on external stakeholders, organizations can suffer from a kind of narcissism and become unresponsive to external environments to the detriment of organizational health. Conversely, excessive concern for outsiders' images risks hyper-adaptation, where organizations abandon substance and continuity in favor of images for external audiences (Hatch & Schultz, 2002).

Multiple Organizational Identities

As organizations first answer and then reflect on the question "Who are we?", they sometimes discover that their question has more than one answer. Multiple identities arise in organizations that can supply those multiple answers (Hatch & Schultz, 2000; Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Gioia (1998) noted that, in fact, organizations can be "expected to display different identities to different audiences" (p. 21), similar to the prevalence of certain characteristics in different contexts. Particularly in larger, more complex organizations, various individual members will have differing perceptions of the organization and will react differently around situations related to its identity (Corley, 2004). Organizations develop multiple identities when their members lack consensus around which characteristics are central, distinctive, and enduring about the organization (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Although an essentialist might claim that an organization cannot have more than one core, much organizational identity scholarship suggests that

the converse may be true—that "the idea of any organization having a single identity is unrealistic" (Corley, 2004, p. 1170). The idea of a hybrid organization with more than one identity even appears in Albert and Whetten's (1985) foundational work on the subject.

Organizations often become hybrid through their acquisition of additional identities. Albert and Whetten (1985) found this especially likely for public organizations because those "often become the repository of all things that other organizations will not undertake" (p. 276–77). Organizations in that sector, as well as generally successful and more visible organizations, tend to accept more responsibilities, leading to their accumulation of multiple identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1996). Adding more functions, however, might not necessarily create a hybrid identity. To be hybrid, organizations must comprise "two or more potentially conflicting dimensions that are not normally expected to go together" (Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997, p. 594). These dimensions, though, must also be understood as inviolate, incompatible, and indispensable. That is, even though the organization's defining characteristics do not all align with each other, members of a hybrid organization will typically resist any change to the characteristics or any attempts to eliminate one of the multiple identities (Albert & Adams, 2002). Consequently, hybrid organizations are left trying to preserve a tenuous equilibrium between parts of themselves.

Albert and Whetten (1985) also defined two different types of hybrid organizations to describe how multiple identities are distributed across a collective. Ideographic organizations are those in which subunits exhibit singular but distinct identities of their own, while the subunits of holographic organizations more consistently

exhibit the shared properties of the whole organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985). In ideographic organizations, differentiation between subunits occurs along functional or professional boundaries and the multiple identities can remain relatively distinct from one another (Corley, 2004). In such cases, individual members may not always be aware of the organization's multiple identities. This heterogeneity typically contributes to a less specific or weaker organizational identity, so members find it more difficult to identify with the whole organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1996). On the other hand, holographic forms find members experiencing a stronger shared understanding of the organization, even if it does involve some competing characteristics.

Hybrid identities of both forms offer advantages as well as challenges for organizations and their members. Dual or multiple identities in any form contribute to organizations' adaptability in complex organizational environments. Hybrids have a relative advantage over "mono" identity organizations in their greater flexibility (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Pratt & Foreman, 2000). More identities, with their accompanying additional missions or functions, expand organizations' options for legitimate responses to changing contexts, but too many can create an overload for organizations and their members. With excessive purposes or value sets, "the framing of a singular identity becomes increasingly difficult" (Feldner & D'Urso, 2009, p. 148). Particularly in a holographic organization, complex hybrid identities can create a kind of role overload for both the organization and its individual members. The organization experiences strain when trying to meet the various and potentially competing expectations from external audiences (Feldner & D'Urso, 2009), while members encounter their own "intra-role

conflict" whole trying to "uphold the different dimensions of the hybrid identity" (Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997, p. 595).

These challenges in particular require hybrid organizations to manage their multiple identities to avoid dysfunction. In a classification scheme for the management of these multiple identities, Pratt and Foreman (2000) suggested that organizations and their managers can adjust identities along two dimensions: plurality and synergy. Managers can preempt possible role overloads by increasing or decreasing the number of identities an organization assumes (plurality), while also pinpointing which identities are actually indispensable (Albert & Adams, 2002). Strategies such as compartmentalization, which are more likely in ideographic organizations, allow managers to deal with identities separately. Increasing synergy among identities tests their inviolability and incompatibility, but where alignment can be increased, managers can reduce potential role strain for members, alleviating the conflict between previously competing aspects of the hybrid identity. Holographic organizations typically benefit more from greater synergy (Pratt & Foreman, 2000).

Albert and Whetten (1985) used the modern research university as an early example of an organization with multiple identities because of its normative and utilitarian functions. The university is traditionally normative, providing educational and cultural enrichment while maintaining social patterns. Like other normative institutions such as churches and voluntary organizations, the university is driven by ideology. But it also increasingly serves utilitarian purposes as well. At the heart of the service component of the university's tripartite mission is a usefulness to their surrounding communities, perhaps through direct community engagement or through applied

research. An expectation of usefulness underlies the university's focus on training of individual students as pathways to careers (Albert & Whetten, 1985). As ideographic organizations with numerous subunits operating in different "product markets," universities require a broader identity umbrella to cover all their functions. These additional units and functions have also increased pressure to operate universities more like commercial businesses while trying to preserve the normative identities with which faculty tend to identify (Barney & Stewart, 2000; Besharov & Brickson, 2016).

Challenges to Organizational Identity

In day-to-day operation, organizations often rely on rational decision-making models or even routines that have become ingrained in the organizational culture. Organizational identity has little value for those more frequent situations, but it can be crucial when other models fail. It is most observable in times of upheaval or when an organization must contemplate "out of character" actions (Whetten, 2006). Particularly critical incidents or dilemmas can represent a threat to an organization's identity, which can be effectively the same as a threat to its survival (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Whetten, 1998).

Conflicts between the expectations of various stakeholders may prompt organizations to more closely examine their identity. Members of different subunits within an ideographic organization, for instance, may hold different beliefs about what missions or products are most important to the organization, creating tensions that disrupt its operation. Within a seemingly more cohesive holographic organization, conflicts may arise within individual members as they attempt to reconcile competing expectations from their managers or external audiences (Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997). Similarly, the

conflict may manifest between the collective understanding of organizational members and audiences external to the organization. Especially depending on who the external audiences are—customers, regulators, competitors—differing expectations for the focal organization's goals or values can create an existential crisis. Managing these conflicting expectations is a particular challenge for modern universities that must appeal to external stakeholders for the funding they rely on, like state appropriations, federal research funding, and student tuition (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Stensaker, 2015).

Conflicts in expectations can reveal themselves through greater exposure over time with external audiences or in more punctuated critical incidents. Increased access to information has made it easier for external groups to learn more about organizations and discover any divergence between projected images and organizational actions (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). As external stakeholders gain more frequent access to and knowledge of the daily routines of organizations, internal members also hear more and more often about their organization from those outsiders, which leads to greater impact of mirroring in the identity dynamic (Dutton et al., 1994; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996). Through these frequent interactions, both insiders and outsiders affect the durability and management of an organization's identity (Pratt & Foreman, 2000).

Besides increased contact with multiple stakeholder groups, "out-of-character" events can call into question crucial attributes of organizations and pose threats to their identities. Albert and Whetten (1985) originally formulated organizational identity to help explain irrational responses to a minor budget cut at their university. Similarly, other actions from leadership at colleges and universities have resulted in concern over their respective identities. Decades ago, Breneman (1994) and Delucchi (1997) questioned the

health of the whole liberal arts college sector, both noting that the addition of professional degree programs to colleges' catalogs were changing the nature of the individual schools and the sector as a whole. Working from the other direction, more recent stories describe universities eliminating majors in the liberal arts and consequently encountering pushback from faculties who viewed those cuts as violations of their institutions' missions (Flaherty, 2019; Norton & Grossman, 2021).

Organizational Identity and Change

Even in the earliest conception of organizational identity as enduring, Albert & Whetten (1985) also accounted for the reality of organizational change. Subsequent conceptions of organizational identity reimagine the enduring nature of identity as something more dynamic, involving more frequent change, but even though it is more fluid, identity can still be continuous (Gioia et al., 2013). Despite organizations experiencing frequent change, however, having a clear identity provides consistency and helps ensure that the changes at least will follow existing paths (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Stensaker, 2015). For organizational leaders, balancing the pressures to endure and to change means maintaining continuity while navigating environments that are also changing around them.

External environments create pressures for all organizations, and universities are no exception. Ever increasingly, universities face market-based pressures to meet the demands of stakeholders including private industry as well as potential students and their families. They also encounter normative and regulatory pressures from state higher education systems (for public institutions), accrediting associations, or competing institutions (Feldner & D'Urso, 2009; Stensaker, 2015). As the expectations, beliefs, or

perceptions of these external stakeholders evolve, organizations have to adapt but must balance that need with the desire to preserve their identity. Organizations best suited to succeed in shifting and sometimes unpredictable environments are those "that possess a relatively stable set of intangible identity attributes and another set of more changeable substantive identity attributes" (Gustafson & Reger, 1995, p. 464). By being able and willing to adapt concrete features while retaining intangibles like mission and values, organizations can weather different types of changes in their environments.

Sometimes organizations find change necessary in response to foreseeable evolutions in the environment and to maintain longer-term viability, but change can also come more quickly as a reaction to acute instances of opportunity or threat (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). These "dislocating events" (Ashforth & Mael, 1996, p. 26) can spur more change than gradual evolutions and can come from both internal and external sources. Elsbach and Kramer (1996) described the threat that can come from external rankings of colleges and programs that lead to organizations questioning their relative positions within a category or the perceptions about their central characteristics. Rankings can influence members' construed external images which in turn influences both their sense of the organization's identity and their individual identification with the organization (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). Other critical incidents can occur internally, including on college campuses. Changing realities at higher education institutions, like declining enrollments or decreasing state appropriations, create decision points for organizational leaders. Hartley and Schall (2005) described Swarthmore's decision in 2000 to eliminate their football program. After several years of heavy investment in its revitalization, the college decided that the financial costs required to revive and sustain a

successful football program outweighed its importance, or centrality, to the college's identity. Still, when the president eliminated the sport, various groups of stakeholders within the college had to confront the loss of that attribute and reconcile it with their individual understandings of the college's identity. Regardless of their source, these punctuating moments can create disconnects in understandings of an organization's identity.

Both internal and external disruptions can challenge organizational identities, but the response need not always be change. Scott and Lane (2000b) observed that "both identity change and identity endurance are adaptive responses" (p. 143). Particularly in times of crisis or great uncertainty, the sense of organizational identity held by members is intensified and can act as a source of resistance (Fiol, 2002; Gustafson & Reger, 1995). Further, resistance to change can be viewed as a defense against specific challenges to organizational identity, but the related idea of identity persistence can work to preempt those challenges. Persistence is a more active and ongoing process that involves interpreting information in ways that protects identity and even changing other aspects of an organization other than identity (Gioia et al., 2013).

Interorganizational Connections

As organizations and their leaders seek to establish and maintain clear identities, interorganizational associations help facilitate the construction of a strong self-definition through comparison with other entities (Miller, 2019; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). These comparisons require organizations to assess both their similarities with and differences from other organizations, balancing sameness and distinction. King and Whetten (2008) suggested that the central and enduring natures of identity attributes actually emphasize

sameness, in contrast to the distinctiveness that also contributes to identity. Just as an individual, according to social identity theory, defines oneself by the others they identify with and feel similar to, an organization declares its identity in part through "the set of similar organizations with which *it* identifies" (Albert, 1998, p. 8, emphasis original). Organizations can reinforce or maintain those relational identities by interacting with the comparison organizations over time (Gioia, 1998). External comparisons also serve the aim of distinctiveness by highlighting how organizations are unlike others and identifying who they are not. By focusing on differences from others, organizations demarcate the boundaries of their own identities (Barney & Stewart, 2000; Whetten & Mackey, 2002).

If identity is partly about connection and comparison, then membership associations can play a role in shaping identity (Whetten, 2006). Indeed, Albert (1998) suggested that "the kinds of interorganizational alliances into which a firm enters…may be its most defining element" (p. 3). Organizations joining membership associations is a kind of formal categorization that "can confer a social identity" (Glynn & Navis, 2013, p. 1127). In higher education, membership associations and categorization systems exist to shape how colleges and universities define themselves. Groups such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the Association of Public & Land-Grant Universities (APLU), along with other categorization systems like Carnegie Classification and athletic conferences, all furnish sets of characteristics and meanings that are applied to the individual colleges and universities that belong to the categories (Miller, 2019; Renn & Patton, 2016). Those attribute sets, often manifesting as membership criteria, form organizational prototypes and establish minimal standards for membership in a category, but organizations can and do diverge from prototypes and

differentiate themselves from other category members, striving for a kind of optimal distinctiveness (Glynn & Navis, 2013; King & Whetten, 2008). Because identities may be constructed through combinations of self-categorization choices, organizations also can highlight different memberships at different times in response to external audiences or contexts.

Following the principle of homophily, organizations tend to associate and identify with others that align with their existing self-definition, from which audiences can infer information about the organizations (Choi, 2012; Elsbach, 1998). Proverbially, "birds of a feather flock together." But formal membership in associations can also signal aspirations (Miller, 2019). Organizations find others that they are like, but they also associate with others they want to be like. Extrapolating from social identity theory, organizations will seek to affirm as well as "enhance their existing self-concepts" (Elsbach, 1998, p. 232). For example, many of the members of COPLAC joined the association because they already met the full membership criteria and were similar to other members, but other institutions have joined initially as provisional members. Their provisional membership can signal that, although they did not yet meet all the membership criteria, the institutions aimed to move their identity into greater alignment with other public liberal arts colleges (C. Woodcox, personal communication, November 20, 2020).

Public Liberal Arts Colleges as Hybrid Organizations

Universities, and research universities in particular, have been used as examples of hybrid organizations since the early scholarship on organizational identity (see Albert & Whetten, 1985), but it is important to keep in mind that significant organizational

diversity exists within the large higher education field. Constructing an organizational identity for any single higher education institution requires considering numerous factors. While curricular offerings are a centerpiece of campus identities, other features like history, geography, student subcultures, athletics, and more also factor into identity (Renn & Patton, 2016; Schwaller, 2009).

Some of these attributes bundle in predictable ways as sets of attributes characteristic of more specific institutional types (King & Whetten, 2008). As a niche in the higher education landscape, liberal arts colleges reflect their own typical set of attributes, or category prototype, that comprises features such as a majority of liberal arts degrees conferred, small enrollment and class sizes, a focus on undergraduate teaching, and a residential campus. Exhibiting these familiar characteristics provides benefits for liberal arts colleges, whose stakeholders (including potential students) expect those institutions to adhere to the prototype of the category. Conversely, moving away from some of the expected attributes could prove detrimental to a liberal arts college's appeal (Hoskins & Brown, 2017). This is a concern for public liberal arts colleges in particular because they do not always offer the same small size or selectivity of their privately controlled counterparts.

This also raises questions about the nature of public liberal arts colleges' identities. Does the addition of public control create a second or hybrid identity for these organizations, or is publicness just an attribute to be folded into a "complex but singular composite claim" (Foreman & Whetten, 2002, p. 621)? Following Albert and Whetten's (1985) original idea of a hybrid organization, Golden-Biddle and Rao (1997) proposed that hybrid identities can incorporate "two or more conflicting dimensions that are not

normally expected to go together" (p. 594). If organizations construct their identities in part by choosing which groups or categories to claim membership in (Besharov & Brickson, 2016), then public liberal arts colleges could create hybrid identities by claiming membership in both the liberal arts college category and the public university category—if a liberal arts focus and public control could be considered independent claims (Foreman & Whetten, 2002).

At the very least, public liberal arts colleges negotiate a complex set of identity claims. These institutions tend to deviate both from a liberal arts college prototype and from a public university prototype, potentially challenging the validity of claims to membership in both categories (Glynn & Navis, 2013). Their liberal arts focus often sets them apart from other members of their state higher education systems as well as the systems' own goals of business-like efficiencies and alignment with state workforce and economic interests (Schwaller, 2009). On the other hand, their public nature encourages greater accessibility and affordability than is commonly associated with private liberal arts colleges (Hoskins & Brown, 2017). The conflicting nature of some of these public liberal arts college attributes suggests that they may, in fact, contain multiple identities.

While public liberal arts colleges do not have the research missions often associated with the universities imagined by Albert and Whetten (1985) in their original depiction of hybrid organizations, they do still align with Albert and Whetten's notion of competing value systems. In describing the hybrid nature of modern universities, they ascribed both normative and utilitarian orientations to the organizations. Universities fulfill a normative purpose through their educational and cultural functions, and their utilitarian nature manifests itself in their service missions as well as their applied research

activities. Increasingly, as student instruction is viewed as professional training and more practical degree programs are added, even liberal arts colleges have begun to assume a more utilitarian character that competes with their traditionally normative identities.

Applying organizational identity theory to public liberal arts colleges can help stakeholders and general audiences inside and outside those colleges better understand who they are as organizations, who they want to be similar to or different from, and how their identities can affect their decisions and actions (Ravasi & van Rekom, 2003).

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH DESIGN

While some scholarship exists on particular phenomena occurring at public liberal arts colleges (e.g., Cleeton & Gross, 2004; Downes, 2010; White-Farnham & Meyer, 2014), the organizational identities of these institutions have gone underexamined. To strengthen an understanding of this niche sector of higher education institutions, this study explores the identities of three public liberal arts colleges and universities. This research was guided by three primary research questions related to important features of the institutions, the influence of organizational peers, and the hybrid nature of a public liberal arts identity:

1. Which attributes or characteristics of public liberal arts institutions emerge for individual members as significant to their understanding of their institution's organizational or collective identity?
2. How do external referents help shape institution members' understanding of their university's identity? Do peer institutions or membership associations such as the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges influence organizational identities?
3. Does a hybrid public liberal arts identity create unique opportunities or challenges for a university or its individual members? If so, how?

These questions are not guided by any specific proposition or hypothesis, nor are they intended to build new theory. Rather, they are informed by pre-existing theory on organizational identity and applied to the new, underexamined context of public liberal

arts colleges (Pratt, 2009; 2016). As an exploratory study, this research seeks to better understand this institution type, enabling university leaders, state higher education system leaders, and wider external audiences to appreciate the distinct features of these colleges and universities as well as the ways they contribute to the institutional diversity within their state higher education systems.

Methodology

As organizational researchers have long acknowledged, qualitative research is particularly suited to the study of identity and related processes because those concepts "are best described in narrative and qualitative terms" (Albert, 1998, p. 12). Researchers often employ qualitative methods when they are interested in understanding the ways that people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the broader world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Given the socially constructed nature of organizational identity, interpreting this kind of meaning-making benefits from the rich, personal description that can be captured by qualitative research.

Of the numerous qualitative research methods, case study is especially well-suited for organizational questions and situations that do not lend themselves to experimental design (Lee, 1999). Contemporary situations and questions often defy experimental designs when the researcher has little to no control over the events being studied and when the research questions are "how" or "why" questions (Yin, 2018). Yin adds that, while the "how" and "why" questions point to case study method's usefulness in understanding social phenomena and processes, the method is also relevant when the questions require extensive description. In some ways, the nature of this study can be interpreted as descriptive, seeking to develop a greater understanding of university

community members' understanding of their institutions' identities without much attention to explaining a particular process. As noted in Chapter 3, this study considers organizational identity a thing, a set of shared beliefs, but the nature of organizational identity's reliance on social construction and the interaction of numerous stakeholders' perceptions of the institutions also suggests that any investigation of an organization's identity also includes an examination of how members and external referent organizations contribute to its development. In this way, asking descriptive, in-depth questions about an identity may also yield greater insight into the process of identity development. This type of improved general understanding is a common aim of case study research (Stake, 1978) and consequently appropriate for this study.

As this study concerns organizational identities, the unit of analysis here is the institution. Although the organization is a common unit of analysis for case studies, methodologists recognize that the boundaries between a case and its context may not be perfectly defined. This idea is prevalent in the organizational identity literature, as well. Related constructs such as mirroring, construed image, and extraorganizational influence describe how factors within and beyond the organization interact with and around identity (Brown et al., 2006; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Hatch & Schultz, 2000), but case study design is suited for capturing the nuance of these interactions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Beyond examining a single case, this study's multiple case study design presents opportunity to more deeply examine the phenomenon of a public liberal arts identity by inspecting it in multiple environments (Stake, 2006).

Case Selection

If a rationale for following a multiple case design is to enable "an even deeper understanding of the processes and outcomes of cases" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 30), then the selection of cases should likewise be made "to achieve the greatest possible amount of information on a given problem" (Flyvberg, 2006, p. 229). In that instance, looking for representative cases or following a random sampling process is likely not the most appropriate strategy. Instead, following a purposeful sampling process, I sought to identify a set of cases (i.e., institutions) that would cover a broader range of contexts and ideally offer richer data for analysis (Palinkas et al., 2015). This purposeful process comprised two steps to construct a group of three individual cases that shared the common feature of a public liberal arts college identity while offering a variety of other institutional characteristics.

The first step of the sampling process limited the group of possible case institutions to only members of the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC). The public liberal arts identity is certainly not the exclusive province of COPLAC member institutions. As noted in Chapter 1, there are around 100 publicly controlled institutions in the Carnegie baccalaureate classification, suggesting that other colleges and universities who are not currently COPLAC members may also be able to meet the association's membership criteria. Despite the possibility, however, those other institutions have not sought that membership. If membership in interorganizational associations is one way that institutions can shape and reinforce their identities (Whetten, 2006), the colleges and universities that have sought and established association through COPLAC can reasonably be imagined to both value and possess the identity attributes

that support their inclusion in that group. Consequently, my first case selection step relied on a kind of criterion sampling, seeking "to include instances in the sample that match a predefined profile" (Schreier, 2018, p. 93). That "predefined profile" is often a set of characteristics, but for this study, the single criterion of COPLAC membership captures the specific combination of both public and liberal arts features that contribute to the organizational identity being examined here. That membership also reflects the importance to the institutions of those features that helps shape their identities. Finally, COPLAC membership indicates not only a case institution's identity claim as a public liberal arts college, but formalizes peer institutions' affirmation of that identity, as well.

As Stake (2006) proposed, "for multicase research, the cases need to be similar in some ways" (p. 1). The criterion sampling step ensures that similarity in this study. The value of multicase research, however, comes from being able to examine that common characteristic in different contexts. To that end, the second step in my case selection followed a maximum variation approach. This process "involves looking for outlier cases to see whether the main patterns still hold" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 32). Maximum variation sampling can rely on identifying cases that differ along just one dimension (Flyvberg, 2006), but I chose to consider variation across multiple dimensions. COPLAC membership standards delineate expectations around many institutional characteristics, including enrollment size, graduate coexistence, on-campus residence, and others, but those standards allow for enough variation that member institutions can look considerably different. Features beyond membership criteria such as geographic location, state governance structure, and the year of COPLAC membership may also influence the cases and their identities. Acknowledging the unlikelihood of selecting three cases that

could maximize variation along all the dimensions considered in the selection process (see Appendix A), the three selected cases do exhibit variation across those dimensions.

The University of North Carolina Asheville (UNCA), the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma (USAO), and Sonoma State University offer different histories and current characteristics, detailed in the case chapters, which allowed for a rich examination of contributing factors to their organizational identities. These three institutions represent three "waves" of membership in COPLAC—UNCA being a founding member in 1992, Sonoma State joining in 1999, and USAO following in 2007. They also cover three general bands of geographical membership: the eastern seaboard, the mid- and southwest, and the west coast. The universities vary in enrollment size, representing almost the full range within COPLAC. In Fall 2019, UNCA enrolled 3,600 students, nearly the COPLAC mean of 3,559. USAO was the second smallest COPLAC member at 800 students, and Sonoma State the largest at 8,887. Across other dimensions, the three cases are not always as evenly distributed, but they still offer notable differences. USAO was one of the more selective COPLAC institutions, admitting only 64% of applicants, while UNCA and Sonoma State were more open at 84% and 91%, respectively. UNCA and USAO were two of the most affordable schools in the group, with total prices for in-state students living on campus landing near the low end of the price range. Sonoma State, conversely, fell in the top quartile of the group, making it one of the higher-priced COPLAC members. Taken collectively, these characteristics and others construct a range of possibilities for what a COPLAC member institution might look like, with room for notable variety.

Data Collection

Case studies often include multiple data sources, including interviews, documents, and observations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Studies in organizational identity are no different, drawing data from claims made by institutional leaders, characteristics of institutional categories, or other identity components (Corley et al., 2006). Of particular import to organizational identity studies are both textual data and semi-structured interviews as ways to capture the collective understanding of an organization's identity (Ravasi & Canato, 2013). The personal interview, especially, highlights a peculiarity of organizational studies in that organizational theory applies to the level of the collective, but the data often exist on the level of the individual (Ravasi & van Rekom, 2003). Following the example of other organizational identity studies (e.g., Gioia et al., 2013), this study relies predominantly on participant interviews as its dominant data source, with reference to documents for background as well as fact-checking and triangulation.

Interviews

As Roulston and Choi (2018) highlighted, using interviews as the primary data generation method "works well if the purpose is to learn about people's beliefs, perspectives, and meaning-making" (p. 243). With this study's emphasis on the beliefs and understandings that organization members hold about their universities, the centrality of interview data is appropriate here. The interviews themselves followed a semi-structured approach, following an interview protocol (see Appendix B) that was informed by issues and themes established in extant literature on both organizational identity theory and institutional categories (Gibbs, 2014). The semi-structured nature of the interviews afforded the flexibility to vary the wording or order of the guiding questions

depending on the direction of the conversation and the depth of responses from the participants (deMarrais, 2004; Halcomb & Davidson, 2006).

All interviews for this study were conducted in the 2020–21 academic year. At that time, the COVID pandemic precluded travel for in-person site visits and face-to-face interviews. Instead, interviews occurred online via Zoom videoconferencing. Although Opdenakker's 2006 review of qualitative interviewing techniques predates Zoom software, the advantages he describes for face-to-face interviews—voice, intonation, body language, other nonverbal cues—extend at least to some degree to synchronous videoconferencing, making it still preferable to telephone or asynchronous methods. Indeed, Zoom provided two other conveniences for the interview data collection process: increased access and interview recording. Because interviews took place online, I did not encounter the same time constraints that I likely would have faced had I visited sites in person. Instead, I was able to offer much more flexibility to participants and consequently secured interviews I otherwise would have missed due to scheduling conflicts. Zoom also allowed me to audio and video record the interviews easily.

Participants

Beyond determining appropriate data collection methods (i.e., interviews), researchers must identify participants who are "especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon" (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 125). Participant selection for this study, like the case selection process, followed a purposeful sampling process of two general stages. The first step of participant selection was a kind of criterion sampling guided by literature on organizational identity. Ashforth and Mael (1996) described the outsized influence that an organization's leadership, or "powerholders" (p. 24), can have

in identity formation and communication. With the expectation that leaders within each case would be particularly knowledgeable and instrumental regarding the universities' identities, I narrowed the pool of prospective participants to powerholders at each case institution—chief executive officers, chief academic officers, other vice presidents, deans, program directors, and individuals in similar positions within a university's organizational hierarchy. Guided by Albert and Whetten's (1985) concepts of holographic and ideographic organizations, the second step in participant selection followed a loose maximum variation approach, seeking to include perspectives from across the case sites' functional areas, from executive administration to student affairs programs to different academic schools and departments (Schreier, 2018).

In total, the study included 36 individuals, each of whom participated in a single one-on-one interview, lasting approximately 50 minutes on average. As part of the recruitment process, participants were informed that their home institutions would be identified in the study, but as individuals, they had the option to remain anonymous. Only four chose to remain unidentified throughout, while others did indicate their interest in keeping certain responses uncredited. The interviews are distributed fairly evenly across the three case sites—13 at UNCA, 11 at USAO, and 11 at Sonoma State. The 36th interview was conducted with the executive director of COPLAC, Cole Woodcox, who provided background and context regarding the mission and work of COPLAC. His interview was not included in the formal analysis process. Rather, it informed the construction of the interview protocol as well as the code list used in analysis.

Documents

Participant interviews serve as primary data source for this research, but throughout the study, documents were also collected and reviewed. These texts primarily served to "corroborate and augment evidence from other sources" (Yin, 2018, p. 115). In fact, documents were examined prior to interview data collection to establish background and context for each case. They were also reviewed concurrently with interview data to support fact-checking and triangulation (Bowen, 2009). All documents under consideration in this study were publicly available and originated from either the case institutions themselves or their respective state higher education systems. These documents included the university websites, mission statements, course catalogs, strategic plans, and other texts that the institutions use to communicate their identity, or at least their intended image. Particularly with regard to documents directed toward an external audience, it is important to remember that these texts can reveal both who an organization is as well as who they aspire to be (Ragan & McMillan, 1989).

As with interview participant selection, choosing which documents to include is also a decision about whose perspectives to elevate. Certainly other documents, such as local newspaper articles or institutional profiles in various publications, can construct an image of the organization different from the senior leadership's (Chreim, 2005). Given this study's emphasis on internal members' conceptions of their universities' identities, however, I have restricted the document review to those made available by the case institutions themselves.

Data Analysis

Kennedy and Thornberg (2018) describe the data collection and analysis relationship as a spectrum with one end being a linear-sequential approach wherein researchers collect all the data first and then analyze it, and the other end an iterative approach in which "ongoing data analysis guides researchers to change or add a new data collecting method" (p. 49). The reality of the process, Kennedy and Thornberg suggest, is somewhere in between those two ideal types. This study followed a more sequential approach, with the bulk of the data, particularly interviews, collected before the later steps of coding cycles and formal analysis began. As an initial step in the analytical process, however, transcription of the interviews occurred during data collection and continued concurrently throughout.

Transcription is often presented as a minor task of transition between data collection and analysis (Azevedo et al., 2017), but the act of transcription is, in reality, selective and interpretive, requiring the researcher to make critical and theoretical choices that reflect their interpretations (Bailey, 2008; Davidson, 2009). As data collection was still ongoing, I transcribed recently conducted interviews myself for several practical benefits. The process of doing transcription "promotes intense familiarity with the data, which leads to the methodological and theoretical thinking essential to interpretation" (Lapadat, 2000, p. 204). Early review of interview data contributed to an iterative refinement of the interview protocol, shaping clearer questions and helping elicit more valuable data (deMarrais, 2004). Given an interviewer's firsthand knowledge of the exchange, interviewers transcribing their own interviews can reduce transcriber error, thus benefitting reliability and validity (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). Finally, listening to

interview recordings encouraged reflection on my own practice as an interviewer, which can be helpful to newer qualitative interviewers as well as beneficial to later interviews conducted for this study.

My transcription process began by creating a rough draft with a first pass of the audio recording, focusing only on getting words down (Azevedo et al., 2017). This first effort was subsequently edited and reviewed over several more rounds of listening to recordings. These later rounds also required decisions about whether to preserve the natural language of the exchange and produce a verbatim transcript, replete with false starts, filler words, and other dysfluencies or to denaturalize the language, converting it to standard orthography and punctation to facilitate greater readability (Lapadat, 2000).

For my research purposes, I chose to denaturalize the language of my interviews. Although verbatim transcription is valuable to reliability and validity of the research, Halcomb and Davidson (2006) caution that verbatim transcriptions may also encourage the application of techniques like discourse or conversation analysis to consider how nonverbal communications suggest more implied meanings. As Lapadat (2000) noted, "if the researcher is interested primarily in the *content* of an interviewee's remarks, it might not make sense to do a narrow transcription inclusive of overlaps, pause length, and so on" (p. 214, emphasis in original). Because my analytical approach to the data focused on content analysis, I chose to generally denaturalize the language, although I did retain some natural features like contractions to preserve some of the participant's tone and comfort in any written representation. As transcripts were finalized, I imported them into the MaxQDA software program, constructing a dataset that further facilitated systematic analysis.

As data collection and interview transcription was completed and the dataset was generated, I continued analysis by following a two-cycle coding process as described by Miles et al. (2014) and further elaborated by Saldaña (2016). First-cycle coding began by following a primarily deductive approach, relying on the construction of an initial code list before starting the coding process (Miles et al., 2014). Development of the list included identifying key concepts from the literature on institutional categories and organizational identity theory, as well as reviewing the study's interview protocol (Gibbs, 2014; Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2020). As Saldaña (2016) notes, "pre-established codes that relate to attributes…, culture, values, attitudes and beliefs, for example, are most likely essential to studies about identity" (p. 72). But because there is no set list of possibilities when judging which attributes are central for an organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985), the analytical plan also remained open to inductive codes as concepts emerged from the data that were not predicted by the original deductive code list. The final code list for this study is included in Appendix C.

First-cycle coding followed a primarily structural coding approach, facilitating the indexing of data from multiple participants for closer examination later. The additional use of subcoding or simultaneous coding when appropriate also allowed the capture of descriptive as well as theoretical or evaluative meanings from the data (Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2020; Saldaña, 2016). I applied more detailed coding in the first cycle with the expectation that the codes would be reorganized or collapsed in a second cycle. Examining frequency counts after the first cycle also informed the reconfiguration of the code system and helped identify more common concepts for the development of categories (Saldaña, 2016). In the second cycle, the initial codes were indeed restructured

and condensed into more meaningful findings. The findings within each of the three cases were then considered collectively in a cross-case analysis. Given the significantly different contexts of the cases in this study, which resulted from the maximum variation approach to case selection, I sought to preserve the situationality and findings of the individual cases rather than move toward generalization through merging the case findings (Stake, 2006). This allowed for the exploration of the nature of public liberal arts colleges as it exists and responds to a variety of local conditions.

Positionality

Also significant to the collection and analysis of data in this study is my own position as the researcher and instrument of data collection. Acknowledging my biases and assumptions is important in approaching this work. My engagement with existing literature as well as personal experiences led to my belief in the importance of institutional and system diversity. My particular interest in public liberal arts colleges as an institution type grew from reflection on my own college choice process and my experience as a college student.

As a prospective undergraduate, my college choice process was shaped by vague understandings of institution types and of cost and affordability. I viewed the higher education landscape, as White (2003) describes, in terms of large public universities and small private colleges, and believing all private colleges to be prohibitively expensive, I limited my search to public universities. Consequently, I attended an in-state regional comprehensive university with an enrollment of about 20,000 students where I received my bachelor's degree in philosophy. In retrospect, I believe a public liberal arts college would have been a better fit for me and encouraged more engagement in classes and in

extracurricular opportunities. I simply did not know this was an option. Stronger identities at these institutions might not have guaranteed I or other prospective students would have known about them, but it seems an important first step in promoting these colleges to high schools, families, and students across their respective states.

One purpose of this study is to inform and promote a better understanding of public liberal arts colleges and their roles in increasing state higher education system diversity. Allowing that my position and bias might guide me toward a location of advocacy for these institutions, I followed established practices including verification, member checking, and peer consultation to help ensure the study's reliability.

Limitations

Qualitative research in general, and case study research in particular, often encounters concerns regarding a perceived limitation of generalizability, but it is important to remember that "generalizability is not the goal in case studies, for the most part" (Hays, 2004, p. 218). This study is no exception. Indeed, with this study's exploratory nature, the primary goal was to learn more about public liberal arts colleges and universities and which identity features may be the most relevant to their organizational identities. Any transferability of this study's findings may stem from Yin's (2015) process of analytic generalization, wherein the findings could inform concepts or hypotheses that could be applied to cases beyond those included here, most likely to other COPLAC members or public liberal arts colleges generally.

While the multiple case design and the maximum variation sampling of cases for this study contribute to improved transferability to other cases, this study does face a limitation with regard to internal generalizability (Schreier, 2018). Although the within-

case sampling of participants was informed by relevant literature and aimed to include a variety of perspectives on the cases, this study does not and cannot include the perspectives of all the organizations' members. Although I have chosen to focus on participants in leadership roles, this study should not be interpreted as suggesting that that is "the only available construction of OI [organizational identity]" (Ravasi & Canato, 2013, p. 197). Purposeful participant selection here did seek to include a variety of perspectives across multiple functional, organizational, and professional boundaries within each case institution (Corley, 2004), but time and resource constraints precluded the inclusion of all possible constituent groups that contribute to an organization's collective identity. Other constructions of organizational identity might reasonably comprise the voices of students, alumni, state higher education officials, and even the public at large (Schwaller, 2009).

Time was an additional limitation of this study. The three cases included here were selected, in part, by examining institutional data from a single academic year, but this kind of snapshot cannot fully capture an organization's identity (Gioia et al., 2000). Because identity is itself dynamic and changing over time, "tuning in" fully to an institution's identity requires "longitudinal research and an ethnographic effort" (Carlsen, 2016, p. 127). Relying on semi-structured interviews to examine identity followed a common convention of organization research, but it still does not fully capture the ways that an institution's identity has persisted or evolved over time.

CHAPTER 5

CASE FINDINGS: UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA ASHEVILLE

The University of North Carolina Asheville (UNCA) is one of the smallest institutions in the University of North Carolina System (UNC System), enrolling approximately 3,200 undergraduate students. In its published mission statement, the university identifies itself as "the state of North Carolina's designated public liberal arts university" (UNCA, 2023b, "Mission") while emphasizing elsewhere on the university's website that it is the only such campus in the UNC System. The statement goes on to mention the university's liberal arts curriculum, learning outcomes including critical thinking and thoughtful expression, and student experiences such as undergraduate research and community engagement. Further, the mission statement cites small class sizes and close collaboration as means through which this UNCA prepares graduates to be "leaders and productive citizens." All of these features reflect the goals and practices of typical small liberal arts colleges, but UNCA's mission statement also acknowledges the institution's publicness. Through the statement, UNCA counts itself among the "excellent, diverse, and accessible institutions" in the UNC System, identifying with more traditionally public aims as well as the liberal arts goals.

Institutional History

UNCA began as Buncombe County Junior College in 1927 with support from the Buncombe County public school system in Asheville, NC. Its first two decades brought rapid changes in name, governance, and location around the city. Throughout its early

growing pains, however, the junior college retained public support and a mission to offer accessible post-secondary vocational and transfer pathways for local students (Highsmith, 1991).

Relying primarily on support from local school systems and the Asheville public during its first few decades, Asheville-Biltmore College, as it was known then, found more stability in the 1950s, with North Carolina's Community College Act of 1957. Through this act, A-B College "was the first college to be certified as a state-supported community college" (Adams, 2014, "First Community College System Established"). Despite the new designation, however, alumni and student groups continued to voice interest in the college becoming a four-year institution itself (Highsmith, 1991). That desire was soon realized when A-B College became a baccalaureate institution following the passage of the North Carolina Omnibus Higher Education Act in 1963 (Adams, 2014).

This new designation provided an opportunity for the faculty of A-B College to "begin planning for an institution that would be in many ways different from the standard state-supported senior college" (Highsmith, 1991, p. 59). As president of A-B College at the time of its transition to a four-year institution, Highsmith (1991) described a perception of the other state colleges as "oriented toward higher education as a place to receive training for a specific job" (p. 59). A-B College's leadership pursued a different focus: "The consensus was that we should become a liberal arts college, a uniquely American institution" (p. 59).

President Highsmith 's initial proposal for A-B College as a senior college included innovations such as a trimester system, a holistic and interdisciplinary

humanities program, and the specific exclusion of business or education majors—all common to smaller liberal arts colleges. Consultants from the NC Board of Higher Education raised concerns over the higher costs associated with the distinctive programs, but after making comparisons with Duke University's and UNC Chapel Hill's "college divisions" as well as smaller colleges such as Davidson College, the Board ultimately approved his plan. Highsmith (1991) recounted a personal exchange with NC Governor Dan K. Moore in 1965 wherein Moore observed, "There is only one good undergraduate liberal arts college in North Carolina, and that is Davidson. I would like to see this become the Davidson College of the state system" (p. 69). From its beginning as a senior institution, A-B College worked to distinguish itself from other state-supported colleges.

In 1969, A-B College was admitted to the Consolidated University System, becoming UNC Asheville. A restructured UNC System in 1971 further centralized public higher education in North Carolina and brought additional pressures for conformity across the new system's member institutions. "Support for the idea of a small, high-quality liberal arts college with an innovative posture and more expensive programs, as reflected in faculty strength and faculty salaries, had vanished" (Highsmith, 1991, p. 160). Despite the significant changes at the state level and the accompanying system-wide mandates for all universities, the faculty of UNCA worked to implement changes in ways that preserved "as much of the liberal arts posture as possible" (Highsmith, 1991, p. 171) with considerable success.

Highsmith, who had begun as president of A-B College and oversaw its transition to UNCA, was succeeded as chancellor of the university by David Brown in 1986. Brown had recognized UNCA's position as "an outrider in the University of North Carolina

system" (Schuman, 2014, p. 1), which prompted him to identify institutions in similar positions around the country. In 1988, Brown convened the first meeting of what would become the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC) (Schuman, 2014). UNCA is a founding member of COPLAC and has been the council's administrative home since 2009 (Bennett, 2017).

UNCA's emphasis on its public liberal arts identity persists. Public statements of its mission and values highlight key features of a liberal education experience such as undergraduate research, small class sizes, and critical thinking (UNCA, 2023b). Its strategic plan elaborates on those priorities as well as more public-aligned concerns like "access, affordability and efficiency, student success, [and] economic impact" (UNCA, 2016a, p. 4). This plan also acknowledges the need to balance the two sources of inspiration: "As the public liberal arts university within the North Carolina University system, UNC Asheville includes the perspectives of the system and the state in our plan" (UNCA, 2016b, p. 20).

Findings

Institutional Identity Attributes

Often organizations communicate their identities to internal and external audiences through statements across various media that emphasize key features of the organization. UNCA is no exception. In the "About" section of the university website, UNCA highlights its designation as the UNC System's only liberal arts and sciences campus (UNCA, 2023a). While statements on webpages or in print materials present a static version of the university's identity, conversations with individual members of the university revealed an identity that was more in flux. In responding to an initial broad

question—*What is UNCA's identity? What kind of place is it?*—over half of this study's participants began their responses by acknowledging that identity was something that the university still struggles with. As Bill Haggard, then UNCA's Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, described it, identity is "an ongoing question" at the university. Many participants followed that initial observation by echoing the university's message, noting UNCA's official designation as the UNC System's public liberal arts university. Invoking this prototype, or perhaps the intersection of two prototypes, offered participants a set of attributes from which to choose and elaborate on in subsequent discussion.

Mission and Values

Participants' descriptions of UNCA's mission and values included many aspects driven strongly by the university's publicness. All of the participants highlighted the public control of the institution and the ways that being a state university shaped UNCA's values and goals. Among the most frequently mentioned of those values were access and affordability. The mission of access, with its frequent complement affordability, is common to nearly all types of state universities. At UNCA, however, this access leads to a particular kind of educational experience. For John Pierce, then Vice Chancellor for Budget and Finance, the chance to give students access to "a top-quality liberal arts education" at a more affordable public price was "phenomenal mission." Haggard viewed the more affordable cost and general accessibility UNCA offered as opening up a path to a liberal arts education for a broader range of prospective students, including first-generation or low-income students who would not otherwise consider it. Melanie Fox, then Associate Dean of Students, highlighted the visible effects the lower state price has on the university: "I think it would be a challenge to get the same type of students that we

currently get if our costs went up." A low price in and of itself, however, was not the only consideration for participants. The lower tuition price factors into the value of the experience and the degree that UNCA offers. For Pierce, the lower price point at UNCA allows the university to create a very different, and advantageous, value proposition to prospective students. The way that UNCA was increasing access and serving its students was by offering not just a low price, but an education comparable to those found at private liberal arts colleges.

As is typical of public universities, the lower tuition cost is lowest for in-state residents, meaning that students from an institution's home state of North Carolina benefit the most from public-tuition pricing. Participants agreed that UNCA's primary focus was on serving students from North Carolina, but their responses differed about how far across the state the university's service area extended. That variety suggests that this is one area of UNCA's identity which is actively being negotiated. As Lisa Mann, Director of the Career Center, described, "Right now, I think many of us thought of ourselves as a more regional-serving institution, and the goal is not to be that." Nancy Ruppert, professor of education, agreed that UNCA's recruitment focuses all over the state, but she also pointed to some practicalities that more narrowly bound the geographic scope of recruitment—at least for certain programs. Ruppert described a partnership with Asheville City Schools that worked with local high schools to recruit minority students who want to become teachers. Programs like this that rely on local partnerships simply cannot scale to the entire state, so they tend to focus on more local service areas. Conversely, administrators like Shannon Earle, then UNCA's Chief of Staff, described more far-reaching recruitment aspirations. Earle acknowledged UNCA's unique

statewide mission but also noted recruitment efforts into other states, especially in the southeastern U.S. She described the university's out-of-state recruitment as driven, at least in part, by the notion that a quality liberal arts education experience benefited from the inclusion of students and perspectives from other states, regions, and even countries. A UNC System mandate that no more than 18% of incoming first-year students enroll from out of state means individual campuses like UNCA are unable to change the balance dramatically, but even with that constraint, some administrators envisioned enrolling high-achieving students from farther afield. As Earle described, "we're sort of focused on the whole world."

UNCA serves individual students of the state by delivering a more accessible and affordable educational experience, but as a public institution, it must consider an obligation to serve the state itself as well. One way it can do that is by helping develop an educated and skilled workforce to bolster the state's economy. This is often interpreted as providing students professional preparation through coursework and degree offerings. Several participants who were UNCA faculty members noted how other UNC System institutions offer many more professional programs and degrees, which is a more direct connection to a goal of developing the workforce in the state. Earle described the development of an engineering and mechatronics program as an example of a professional program at UNCA. She acknowledged that it was not a typical liberal arts degree, but described that challenge of that decision process:

> It is always a balancing act to try to figure out. You want to stay true to who you are—your programs need to reflect that—but you also have to balance it with making sure that you have workforce development for your region.

Other administrators saw the value of a more typical liberal arts education as professional preparation. Sarah Broberg, then Director of University Communication, and Kirk Swenson, Vice Chancellor for University Advancement, both emphasized that the liberal arts education prepares students for nearly any type of work and that UNCA graduates are equipped to adapt to the everchanging needs of the workforce. Pierce described his own liberal arts undergraduate education as the thing that allowed him to change roles across multiple industries throughout his career.

Ellen Pearson, professor of history, saw even the professionally oriented programs like engineering and management as still integrated into UNCA's campus. Additionally, Pearson described strategies other than degree programs to developed students' marketable skills. Experiences delivered online, like Century America and COPLAC Digital, allowed students to work in liberal arts disciplines while developing skills with technology that could prove marketable in future career searches. Other faculty likewise suggested that there are ways to develop skills and build résumés besides through pre-professional majors. Opportunities such as internships offer students opportunities to connect and apply their learning to professional contexts. Mann agreed that majors strictly aligned with careers was not the answer for UNCA. "Schools that have those linear majors, it's so much easier to do career work there. But it's so much more rewarding and interesting to do career work here, even though it's harder."

While participants described professional preparation as important to UNCA's identity, many also reiterated that the university's mission is broader than that. The university itself claims that its "education prepares students for lives of leadership and service with an emphasis on critical thinking, clear and thoughtful expression, applied

research, community engagement, free and open inquiry" (UNCA, 2023b). Participants touched on all of these liberal outcomes and others in their descriptions of the university's mission. Mentions of liberal outcomes often got bundled together in responses, so in one participant's reply, they may list several liberal outcomes, like Pearson did when she described graduates who can think on their feet, who are analytical thinkers, who can write and speak clearly. Swenson emphasized leadership development while Ruppert highlighted the development of lifelong learners and Pierce stressed creativity to adapt to an everchanging world. Fox neatly summarized the sentiments of many participants: "I think the thing that connects us all is that education of the whole person."

Curriculum

One means by which liberal outcomes are achieved is the curriculum. More specifically, a notion persists that a set of specific liberal arts disciplines might make up the curriculum at a liberal arts college or university (Blaich et al., 2004). That list, however, is notoriously hard to define. Patrick Bahls, professor of mathematics, recounted an experience working with other faculty members to revise a general education curriculum: "We had maybe 30 faculty in the room, and the first step was to try to figure out what we meant by 'liberal arts.'…I think we [had] this sort of vague, touchy-feely idea of what liberal arts means, but we never really drilled down." Other participants did identify more specific disciplines as belonging to the liberal arts group. Melissa Himelein, professor of psychology, named some familiar fields traditionally included among the liberal arts. "You can't be a liberal arts institution," she said, "and

not have philosophy and classics." But she pointed to a common challenge of offering liberal arts majors, as well:

> Art, music, drama. They're expensive programs, and so I'm sure there's a lot of small colleges that just have to, you know, really minimize that. Or you can't have majors in foreign languages, for example. You just cover the bases there. But when you're a liberal arts college, you kind of have to have those majors.

Even UNCA, however, is making changes among its major offerings. Its drama and philosophy programs are no longer accepting new majors, and the Department of Languages and Literatures offers only minors, rather than majors, in French and German (UNCA, 2024a; 2024b).

UNCA's publicness also means that it offers other degrees not typically found among the liberal arts. They can, however, be offered in a way that includes more liberal learning outcomes. Haggard recounted meeting the parents of an incoming engineering major coming the UNCA, who were engineers themselves:

> They talked about how their education was, you know, purely engineering, and how important it is that engineering exists in a context, and that they really wanted their son to come here so that he would get the traditional liberal arts education along with the education and training to be an engineer. So, some people really get it, and really value it.

Ruppert faced the question of professional preparation from a different perspective. UNCA does not have an education major, instead offering teacher licensure through coursework beyond that required for a major. Although the extra coursework often means more time to completion for students, Ruppert said "there's a real sense of pride for

students who finish a degree and get licensed to teach, and our student success at being able to be hired is high because of that."

Regardless of major, the educational experience at liberal arts colleges is also often characterized by a strong core curriculum and a sustained emphasis on interdisciplinarity. Both faculty and student affairs professionals described UNCA's liberal arts core, including its Humanities Program, which is a sequence of three courses and a capstone project required of all students at the university. Fox described both the humanities requirement and a "liberal arts focused" first-year experience course as important to UNCA's distinctive identity. "Those two things, plus some other general ed requirements, in terms of arts, in terms of language, in terms of those things, are what makes us different than just your general public institution." Himelein explained that the humanities program "is supposed to be interdisciplinary, so it's taught by, although largely faculty from the humanities, faculty from social sciences and natural sciences also." And while faculty from different fields can bring varying perspectives to those required courses, Pearson pointed out a challenge to delivering a truly interdisciplinary curriculum:

> I think that we want to emphasize interdisciplinarity, but—and this is where the 'public' kind of comes in. This is a hindrance—that because we're public, because we answer to this Board of Governors and the legislature, we don't have the same flexibility as a private liberal arts institution.

Although many participants included interdisciplinarity as an important attribute in UNCA's curriculum and larger identity, some, like Pearson, highlighted that the presence

of interdisciplinarity often relied on the energy and creativity of individual faculty members to overcome organizational barriers.

Campus Features

Beyond mission and curriculum, many participants discussed features of the campus itself, and those discussions often began with size. Smaller overall enrollment size was also tied to the notion of UNCA's identity and to liberal arts colleges in general. For Ruppert, the small size enabled UNCA to cultivate a desirable environment for the institution's members. As she put it, "our identity is really about being a community, being a small, caring community campus." Other faculty members viewed size as a key feature of the liberal arts college prototype, which in turn meant that size was important to UNCA to maintain that identity. "I do think size makes a difference," Pearson said. "I don't think you can be a very good liberal arts institution and be any bigger than maybe 5,000 students because you are having to attend to the whole person." Determining a specific maximum number of students is a near impossible task, but Pearson recounted the story of the College of Charleston, a former member of COPLAC, which left the group voluntarily when they believed they had gotten too big. Himelein framed enrollment size as a matter of distinction rather than belonging. Growing much more, she believed, would make it much harder to distinguish UNCA and other COPLAC members from regional comprehensives.

Enrollment size is easily observable, but it often wields a more indirect influence on students' experiences (Astin, 1999). Smaller enrollments typically facilitate the smaller class sizes and lower student-faculty ratios characteristic of liberal arts colleges, which in turn often lead to closer student-faculty interaction in and out of the classroom.

Faculty, administrators, and student affairs professionals all highlighted the personal relationships that shaped the student experience at UNCA. In addition to size, those closer relationships also rely on faculty and staff who are equally invested in cultivating them. Participants across the university mentioned how much faculty and staff were involved. Especially common was the notion of a higher teaching load for faculty at UNCA than at other institutions, which is only one of the demands on their time that participants discussed. Himelein, who directed the Center for Teaching and Learning at UNCA for 10 years, explained that the transition to UNCA could be difficult for new faculty because the expectations to serve in so many roles made it easier to get overwhelmed. The willingness of these faculty and staff to contribute so much to students was evidence for many of the participants of what Ruppert called a "deep commitment of purpose."

That student body that UNCA faculty and staff are dedicated to serving also reflects the intersection of liberal arts and public missions. Some highlights the large group of first-generation college students at UNCA, many of whom chose UNCA because the lower cost of attendance made it more accessible. Others observed that more students were also working while attending school, or that they were transfer students, or non-traditional in some other way. Some of these student characteristics, participants said, made building community on campus a little more difficult. Those students were less likely to live on campus, or their time outside of class was spent working. Suggesting its importance to a liberal arts identity and experience, Swenson expressed an interest in building back a more residential, four-year student population. Whatever a student's path to UNCA, many participants also saw other another characteristic of the students. "A

dominant identity of our students are those students in high school who were not in the mainstream social group," said Haggard. Fox put it similarly:

> A lot of students that may have felt like they didn't belong in high school feel like they belong when they come here. They feel like they find their place, and they feel like they find their group and that they're not ostracized like they might have been in high school.

In various ways, most participants described UNCA as a place where students who had felt marginalized or socially isolated before they got to college could find a welcoming community.

External Identity Influences

External Stakeholders

All colleges and universities encounter expectations from external sources like the general public, prospective students and their families, and potential employers. When considering external influences that directly affected UNCA, however, participants brought up most often the UNC System and its Board of Governors. Earle referred to the UNC System's strategic plan written under the administration of former UNC System President Margaret Spellings, which she described as including elements from all of the system's institutions and acknowledging their distinctive natures. Earle felt that, within the system, "it [was] really encouraged to be as distinct as possible." Fox offered another explanation for UNCA's freedom to be distinct among the state systems member institutions: "There's some benefit to being not thought about a lot, because we can do a lot of things and it's not on their radar." Other participants, however, recognized the constant potential for the system to shape UNCA's identity—and for possible tension.

Haggard addressed enrollment growth as a point of concern. “In the public higher ed environment, bigger’s always better. You’re always talking about growth.” But for UNCA, Haggard said, “we’re just different, and that’s not how we measure success.” Broberg echoed this sentiment, saying that emphasis on enrollment growth “could be seen as counter to our mission as a liberal arts and sciences institution.” Beyond enrollment numbers, participants felt like the UNC System communicated expectations to find efficiencies in other areas as well. Himelein illustrated the system office’s potential influence through the issue of online learning. The system could push for online learning because of its cost efficiency. “But then,” Himelein asked, “how do you become the residential liberal arts college that we’ve aspired to if you still have a substantial part of your largely undergraduate curriculum online?” Regardless of the issue, Pearson summed it up: “The system and the hierarchy of the Board of Governors is a big influence on what we do.”

Reference Others

In addition to participants’ identifying sources of external pressure on UNCA’s identity, every participant also mentioned various *reference others*—other institutions that participants felt UNCA did or should identify with. These reference others help define participants’ understanding of UNCA’s own identity by offering sets of characteristics that UNCA shares or differs from. Being a public university in North Carolina builds in a natural comparison group with the 15 other UNC System universities.[3] Overwhelmingly, participants mentioned other state universities as points of contrast. As Bahls put it, “We’re always compared with them [other UNC System

[3] The UNC System has 17 member institutions, but the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics is a public high school.

members], but we're also an outlier in so many regards." Broberg shared the sentiment: "There is no other institution in the system that is like UNC Asheville." Haggard suggested that even the name "UNC Asheville" was misleading, implying that the school would be like the regional universities in the system, such as UNC Greensboro or UNC Charlotte, when those other campuses are much larger and offer different programs and experiences. Geography invited more specific comparisons with UNCA's two closest system neighbors. Western Carolina University is approximately 50 miles from UNCA, and Appalachian State University is under 90 miles away. Participants identified these school as competitors for prospective students, but as Bahls said, "they're such different schools than we are." Himelein noted Western's more recent growth in enrollments and its focus on professional pathways as two significant ways it differs from UNCA. Most of the participants expressed similar feelings, finding more points of contrast against state system members than similarities.

For similarities as well as for aspirational goals, participants more frequently pointed to comparisons with private liberal arts colleges. Overwhelmingly, the most common referent was Davidson College, a private liberal arts college about 120 miles from Asheville, just north of Charlotte, NC. Its in-state proximity, as well as its national reputation, has kept Davidson a referent for UNCA for decades. When considering specific features of Davidson, administrators pointed to Davidson's recruitment and marketing strategies along with its selectivity in admissions for comparison. Faculty more often noted the rigor and structure of Davidson's curriculum as possible sources of influence. Other regional private colleges were mentioned as peers, as well. Elon University and High Point University were two other NC institutions referred to by

participants. Furman University and Wofford College, both in South Carolina, offered other nearby comparisons, as well. Participants, however, did not always mention specific features of any of those institutions in interviews. Rather, the colleges were used as general models of a typical liberal arts experience that UNCA could offer at a more affordable price. A number of smaller private colleges exist in and around Asheville, which none of the participants considered true comparisons for UNCA for various reasons. Himelein observed that these small colleges

> …have really strong identities in different directions. Warren Wilson [College] is sort of the work model. They're kind of the Berea College model. And Brevard [College] has gone with an experiential learning kind of model. Mars Hill [University]'s a little bit bigger, but has been, historically, more religiously affiliated. Montreat [College] very religiously affiliated. So I don't think any of them have ever been peer comparison points.

COPLAC Membership

At UNCA, all the participants were aware of the university's membership in COPLAC, but responses and the strength of connection to that membership varied across individuals. Some members of the administration acknowledged that they had not engaged often or substantively with COPLAC. Sometimes, like for Swenson, being new to the university meant that there had not yet been the time to develop that connection. For others, priorities drew their focus elsewhere. Broberg's attention was on another group of institutions as she worked to construct "a broader, more private-sector sort of competitor cohort that's more aspirational for us." Mann described a different experience. In her role as director of UNCA's career center, she had looked to the other COPLAC

members to compare approaches to career development on the different campuses, but she found that there was still enough variety among COPLAC institutions that there was not one model or approach common to all schools or that might appropriate for UNCA. Among some faculty, as well, COPLAC was likewise not a strong influence. Bahls acknowledged the important role COPLAC membership played for some of his colleagues, but in his own work "[UNCA's] identity as a COPLAC institution really hasn't come into play for me personally."

Other participants felt the alignment with COPLAC more strongly. Fox found the relationship with other COPLAC institutions a much stronger connection than any with private liberal arts colleges. Similarly, Haggard felt that "the identity with COPLAC has been very, very important." Haggard recalled for UNCA Chancellor David Brown forming COPLAC explicitly to create a more appropriate peer group. And as Bahls mentioned, some faculty found their work strongly influenced by the association. In her role as director of UNCA's Center for Teaching and Learning, Himelein helped new faculty develop their own professional identities and their understanding of UNCA's identity through the use of *Roads Taken*, a collection of essays from faculty at different COPLAC campuses on their scholarly lives in a public liberal arts context. The text and her work with new faculty was so important because. As she said, "I really think COPLAC, on the face of it, is exactly where we belong." For Pearson, COPLAC's influence connected her with other campuses through collaborative programs and distance co-teaching, working with other faculty and institutions rather than just observing or modeling them.

Leadership

The participants agreed that UNCA's chancellor at the time, Nancy Cable, was a strong leader with a clear vision for the university. "Nancy Cable's an absolutely fantastic leader. I think she is a strong and effective advocate for liberal arts," shared Bahls. Swenson explained his decision to join UNCA because of the chancellor and noted her strategy to find other senior leaders with strong liberal arts backgrounds. Cable herself had held senior leadership positions at private liberal arts colleges including Davidson, Bates College, and Denison University. Garikai Campbell, who joined UNCA as Provost in 2019, had previously held positions at Knox College, Morehouse College, and Swarthmore College. These new leaders and others came with much experience in the private liberal arts sector, which seemed to have informed their goals for UNCA and their focus on an aspirational peer group of private liberal arts colleges. This shift meant less focus on COPLAC and its members as reference others. "With each chancellor, it's different," explained Earle:

> When we had Mary Grant as a chancellor, she was a big supporter of COPLAC. Her entire presidency at both institutions [UNCA and MCLA before that] was being part of COPLAC, and that's what she knew. And so we were really, really involved in thinking about what would it be that other schools are doing. But not so much right now.

Others noticed the move away from COPLAC, as well. Mann saw that shift across three chancellors beginning with Mary Grant. "When I got here," Mann said, "there was a lot of talk about COPLAC. And then [Joseph] Urgo was interim—there was a little talk. And then Dr. Cable came in, and I haven't heard about it since." While individual faculty and

staff members remained interested in and connected with COPLAC, participants observed the way that senior administration's attention on private liberal arts institutions as aspirational peers left the university's identification with COPLAC neglected.

Challenges

When discussing the challenges facing UNCA specifically, and even public liberal arts colleges as a group, participants often began with challenges that are common to many colleges and universities nationwide, chief among them being financial resources. More specifically, they brought up declining state support that affects many public universities. Specific to the UNC System, half of the participants also pointed to the NC Promise Tuition Plan as a challenge. This plan, designed to improve access and reduce student debt, lowers the tuition cost at 4 of the 17 UNC institutions to just $500 per semester (UNC System, 2024). UNCA was not one of the participating campuses, but Western Carolina was. With Western under 60 miles away from UNCA and offering a considerably lower tuition cost, as Pierce said, "you can see the kind of challenges that presents."

The resource strains of being a public institution in North Carolina—particularly one not participating in NC Promise—were further intensified when coupled with the resource-intensive nature of many liberal arts college features, leaving UNCA as a public liberal arts college at a uniquely difficult intersection. Pierce again pointed to the difficulty: "You would like to operate with a lot of coaching for students, for a lot of academic support, and so forth, and yet with thin resources, you know, we can't do all those things." Providing that additional support outside of the classroom was an especially important consideration for Pearson because of the students enrolling at

UNCA. With UNCA's greater access and lower selectivity, Pearson observed that many students enrolling at the university were less prepared for the transition and often needed additional assistance. The combination of UNCA public and liberal arts missions generated tensions for Broberg: "There's no way we're ever giving up our public mission. You know, we're deeply committed to that, but it does represent a challenge, I mean, just when you're looking at resources, right?"

Beyond resources, participants saw public understanding of UNCA's mission as another obstacle. For Swenson, "the term 'liberal arts' is just completely misunderstood." Himelein noticed UNCA faculty and staff "increasingly turning away from that, and sometimes just not even using the term 'liberal arts' because there's a fear that parents misunderstand and only hear the 'liberal.'" A misunderstanding or politicization of the term *liberal* creates obstacles for the university both with families in the college choice process and with a conservative state legislature like North Carolina's. For both audiences, *liberal* simply may suggest a political ideology that they do not align with, but those audiences might also infer a mission opposed to practical or professional education.

Conclusion

The variety of features and concerns included in interview responses suggest that collectively the participants may have been accurate when they posited that UNCA's identity is not as strong as it could be. If organizational identity is strengthened by the consensus of its members and their confidence that its identity claims are true (Ashforth & Mael, 1996), then UNCA's identity, as Haggard put it, "is an ongoing question." Many participants identified attributes that could be central to the university's identity, like the interdisciplinarity of a liberal arts college or the access of a public institution, but

opinions varied on how strong that attribute was, or should be, at UNCA. Some of this was due to tensions created by UNCA's hybrid identity. Interdisciplinarity was a priority, but more difficult to actually enact because of financial and bureaucratic constraints that accompanied being a public institution. Maintaining a highly residential campus, a typical feature of a liberal arts college, was important, but hard to accomplish while also maintaining access for non-traditional, part-time, or commuter students. Balancing these competing characteristics, for nearly all participants, seemed important and possible, but also required intentionality. Many worried that challenges like diminishing state funding were eroding some features that had long been part of UNCA's identity. The question arose of adding professional or graduate programs to attract more students when enrollments dipped. Small class sizes, too, began to creep up as a cost saving measure. Each change, even seemingly on the margin, raised questions about how well UNCA was preserving features central to its unique identity within the UNC System. Himelein worried that things might shift enough at the university "that kind of makes us not as different from a regional comprehensive as we'd like to believe we are."

It is often leaders' role to bolster confidence in an organization's identity and clearly define the set of attributes that should be most central for the institution. That definition comes in part from comparisons with other organizations or membership in associations. Participants at UNCA had experienced, in the few years prior to the interviews for this study, changes in university leadership and a subsequent shift in reference others and peer groups. Without the consistency of long-term top leadership, or even continuity of vision across succeeding administrations, members frequently were prompted to reexamine their organization's identity and reassess their own certainty in

understanding it. While participants understood the intention behind Cable's focus on aligning with a more aspirational set of peer institutions, some worried about how realistic those associations were. A reference group comprising entirely private colleges and universities could influence UNCA regarding liberal arts college-aligned characteristics, but such a group lacks reference for achieving more publicly aligned goals or overcoming the challenges of operating in a state system. COPLAC, however, being established to assemble institutions with this unique hybrid identity, offers UNCA and its members a chance to reflect on the university's identity as well as find support for balancing sometimes incompatible, yet indispensable, parts of itself.

CHAPTER 6

CASE FINDINGS: UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE & ARTS OF OKLAHOMA

The University of Science & Arts of Oklahoma, located in Chickasha, OK, is the smallest university in Oklahoma's state system of higher education. The university's mission statement identifies USAO as "the state's sole public liberal arts college" (USAO, 2018a, "Mission"). Beyond its formal mission statement, the university also published a list of objectives that further highlights its organizational emphasis on delivering a liberal arts education. These objectives include providing a strong general education program in the liberal arts, delivering interdisciplinary team teaching, assembling faculty dedicated to the liberal arts mission, and offering only baccalaureate programs—all features typical of liberal arts colleges. USAO's special designation from the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education and the university's specific liberal education objectives reflect its unique position at the intersection of public and liberal arts institution types.

Institutional History

Created in 1908 by Oklahoma's first state legislature, USAO began as the Oklahoma Industrial Institute and College for Girls, one of the few state-supported collegiate institutions for women in the U.S. (Lewis, 1949). Not long after its founding, the school began evolving. Its third president, J.B. Eskridge announced a name change in 1912 to the Oklahoma College for Women (OCW). This change served two purposes. First, it prevented the common occurrence of people mistaking it for a correctional

institution. Further, it announced the school's intention to focus on college-level courses of study. During the 1912 convocation, Eskridge announced, "We shall dedicate ourselves to the task of making this institution what it must be, the 'Vassar of the West'' (quoted in Hobbs & Finck, 2022, p. 47). That same year, provisions were made for a four-year college, which offered courses for both a technical degree and an academic degree, and the college awarded its first bachelor's degrees in 1915 (Emmons, 1953; Hobbs & Finck, 2022).

OCW grew quickly, both in enrollment numbers and in legitimacy. The number of faculty grew by more than a third, and student enrollments more than doubled from 1914 to 1920. In 1920, OCW gained accreditation from the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, becoming just the third accredited college in the state after the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University. The secondary department was discontinued by 1926, leaving OCW an entirely collegiate institution (Coffelt et al., 1966). The continued growth of student enrollments as well as the physical plant during the 1920s and 30s helped OCW's fifth president, Mell Nash, realize his vision of "creating an outstanding residential community of teaching and learning" (Hobbs & Finck, 2022, p. 132).

Enrollments peaked at over 1,000 students in 1941, but progress slowed and enrollments declined for OCW in the 1940s, due in part to the entrance of the U.S. into World War II, as well as diminishing popularity of state women's colleges generally. To supplement enrollments, the college began admitting men to some programs in 1943 and enrolled more local commuter students through the 1950s, shifting the culture of the college. Continuing enrollment struggles raised concern about OCW from the state,

which identified the college as an underutilized campus. Despite negative public opinion, in 1965, the Oklahoma legislature made the college coeducational to improve enrollments. At the same time, the college's name was changed to the Oklahoma College of Liberal Arts (OCLA) (Coffelt et al., 1966; Hobbs & Finck, 2022).

In a self-study of Oklahoma higher education conducted shortly after this significant change, Coffelt et al. (1966) described the resolution from Oklahoma's State Regents that changed OCW to OCLA as also declaring that "the new college [would] be experimental in nature…and [would] enroll a selective group of students whose aspirations and abilities fit them for an intellectually rigorous and accelerated course of study" (Coffelt et al., 1966, p. 8). This directive aligned the newly renamed OCLA with recognizable liberal arts college attributes like selective enrollments and rigorous curriculum. Feaver (2020) contended that "USAO's formal 1965 state designation as a public liberal arts institution is the oldest in the United States" (p. 10).

As part of the development of the liberal arts program, the college established its Interdisciplinary Studies (IDS) Core Curriculum in 1967, which remains a central feature of USAO's curriculum. Despite the establishment of that enduring program, internal disputes about the direction of the college grew until 1973, culminating in a call for the resignation of the president and the OCLA Board of Regents. A group of dissenting faculty were dismissed, bringing the problems at OCLA to the attention of the state government. With high profile campus controversy, a subsequent legal battle over the faculty dismissals, and another period of declining enrollments, the Oklahoma state legislature changed the name of the institution again, this time from OCLA to the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma. While Hobbs and Finck (2022)

dramatically described the name change as the "premature death" of OCLA and a "substituting of USAO in its place," (p. 178) they also noted that this failure "helped guide the current USAO faculty to a new understanding of what constitutes a liberal arts education" (p. 179).

In the 1980s, USAO shifted to become "much more collegiate than the liberal arts college it replaced" (Hobbs & Finck, 2022, p. 195). After decades of being grouped in the "regional university" tier of the state university system where it struggled to distinguish itself, USAO installed its twelfth president, John Feaver, in 2000. When he assumed the presidency, Feaver inherited a university with "a lack of a clear institutional identity" (Hobbs & Finck, 2022, p. 210). To clarify that identity, Feaver and USAO launched a mission enhancement plan (MEP) in 2005, reasserting itself as "a high quality public liberal arts college" (Feaver, 2020, p. 1). The MEP included actions such as raising admissions standards, hiring more quality faculty, and expanding recruitment efforts statewide. USAO's distinctiveness was amplified when the State Regents reclassified USAO within the state system, moving it from the "regional university" tier and designating it the only "public liberal arts university."

Findings

Institutional Identity Attributes

Over half of the participants at USAO, when describing the identity of the university, referred to its history, going back to the school's founding as a women's institute. This invocation of its history, for some participants, provided support for the university's uniqueness. While women's institutes and seminaries in the U.S. date back to the early 19th century, USAO could claim distinction as one of just a few public women's

colleges in the country. This intersection, like its current status as a public liberal arts college, also means that USAO has had a statewide mission from its beginning as well. Stephen Weber, then Chair of the Division of Arts and Humanities and professor of music, noted that "faculty are pretty aware of our institutional history." He attributed this in part to university leadership: "Our university president, whenever possible, does talk about the pedigree and the history of the institution." Indeed, then-President John Feaver, now president emeritus of the university, described USAO's "historic DNA" as a liberal arts college –first for women and then after gaining coeducational status in 1965. Others on campus saw an enduring distinction as well. "I think for us, providing a different education than everybody else, it's in our bones," said Amy Goddard, Director of Marketing & Communications. "It's how we were created."

Mission and Values

Many of the participants highlighted the intersection of USAO's publicness and its liberal arts focus in describing the institution. They saw the publicness and its accompanying lower cost of attendance as offering access to a particular educational experience for students. As Dany Doughan, professor of chemistry, explained, "the idea of it being a public institution is that of accessibility, to give students who wouldn't typically afford the tuition at a private institution, to be able to get that same experience in college." Other participants, both faculty and administrators also echoed the sentiment that it was a "private school education at a public price." Professor Lewis[4], a faculty member in humanities, saw some tension between minimizing cost to the student and offering a liberal arts experience, however. USAO touts its Fast Track scholarship

[4] Professor Lewis is a pseudonym for a participant who chose to remain anonymous.

program, in which students can finish a bachelor's degree in three years. A streamlined path to completion may increase affordability, but it shifts attentions attention away from the academic exploration familiar in a liberal arts education and focuses instead on finishing quickly in order to "move into the job market with a valuable degree minus 25% of the cost of achieving it" (USAO, 2018b). Goddard pointed out, however, that USAO's affordability means students can still take four years and spend time to experiment and learn about themselves without incurring unreasonable amounts of debt.

Participants also recognized that being accessible and offering a unique educational experience in the state obligated USAO to serve a statewide mission. Again, Feaver looked to USAO's history of serving the entire state, first as the only public women's college and then later as the only public liberal arts college. Nancy Hughes, then Dean of Students, noted that the statewide mission was reemphasized in USAO's 2005 mission enhancement plan (MEP) as well. Members of the university's enrollment management staff also clearly defined the state as the upper limit of USAO's service focus. Sheppard McConnell, then Dean of Admissions & Recruitment recalled advising President Feaver against a national recruitment campaign before the local and state relationships were strong. Balancing a statewide mission with a more local service area also required careful attention. "There is an inherent tension," Feaver described, "that's involved between an institution that's located in a relatively small community in Oklahoma…and the fact that that institution has a statewide mission." Some of that tension comes from USAO's past, when the university was viewed more as a regional institution. For McConnell in recruiting and Goddard in marketing, the focus has been

strengthening the relationship within Chickasha and expanding their message with more support from the city.

In recruiting statewide for students, USAO seeks "academically and artistically talented students while offering students the advantages of an interdisciplinary, liberal arts program" (USAO, 2018a). Those advantages include educational outcomes often associated with the liberal arts like critical thinking and communication skills. Nancy Hector, then professor of education, recalled her own time as an undergraduate at the university and how it developed her own cultural appreciation and made her more well-rounded. Hughes described the professional satisfaction she felt when "seeing that freshman come in and you see the transformation as they develop and as they become this well-rounded, critical thinking student." Others connected some of these liberal outcomes with the more publicly aligned mission of professional preparation as well. "What employers are looking for are critical thinkers and people that communicate," said Professor Clark,[5] then a faculty member in business administration. Hector saw the professional benefit of liberal education for teacher candidates as well. Lewis expressed concern that "faculty, for the most part, see themselves as preparing students for careers" rather than following a purely liberal approach to teaching. But the blending of the liberal and vocational may be necessary to meet the career development interests of students and the state at an institution with so few specifically professionally oriented majors.

Curriculum

One hallmark of a liberal arts education is an interdisciplinary approach that facilitates students' engaging with various subjects and perspectives to develop a well-

[5] Professor Clark is a pseudonym for a participant who chose to remain anonymous.

rounded understanding of the world. At USAO, a central feature of its curriculum is the Interdisciplinary Studies (IDS) core curriculum, which was established in 1967. Rather than a "cafeteria style" general education program, IDS is a 46-credit-hour program of interdisciplinary courses that runs throughout a student's career at the university. IDS is interdisciplinary not only because of the variety of subjects covered within the program's courses, but also because many of those courses are team taught by instructors from different departments, reinforcing the interconnectedness of disciplines. Through this structure, then-Provost Donna Gower described, "the students get this broad overview of how all the pieces to the puzzle fit together, rather than individually learning about history, and individually learning about economics and never seeing where the two connect." The team-teaching aspect of IDS is a challenge for the university because of the high cost, but Director Wilkinson,[6] a high-level administrator, described it as "the place where we don't want to be efficient, because we make the biggest impact."

That special, and long-standing, commitment to IDS posed some challenges for others. When discussing innovations he was interested in, such a more flexible freshmen experience course, Weber observed, "change is difficult when it comes to the IDS core. It really is." Lewis viewed the rigid structure of IDS in a different way. They described a culture "still oriented around majors" that led to students being advised "within majors. We don't advise them for the college more broadly." Under that approach, students often took only the minimum required IDS courses and then concentrated heavily on their majors without taking electives across a variety of disciplines. Weber, Lewis, and others, however, recognized a contingent of faculty who were pushing for more innovation and

[6] Director Wilkinson is a pseudonym for a participant who chose to remain anonymous.

interdisciplinarity across general education and within majors. Lewis offered two examples of newer faculty who were shaping new or existing majors to accept a greater variety of courses to count toward the major and that integrated disciplinary connections with broader topics like ethics and social justice. Doughan, Hector, and Clark all described ways that they themselves strove to make new associations for the students and highlight the interconnectedness of areas of study in their courses, suggesting that the kind of teaching USAO expects from the IDS program does take place on campus. It simply relies on individual faculty to implement.

Campus Features

For a university as small as USAO, enrollment size was unsurprisingly the most frequently mentioned observable characteristic about the institution. All the participants mentioned enrollments and pointed to size as a key feature of the school. Most broadly, the small size engendered a much more personal atmosphere on campus. As Lewis put it, "really what demarcates the college is its size and its intimacy." As the smallest public university in Oklahoma, USAO is certainly distinct from the research and regional institutions, but for President Feaver, higher admissions standards, rather than just small enrollments, have been the way USAO distinguishes itself within the state. Feaver recalled the lower admissions criteria of the 1970s and 1980s specifically, when the university "operated very much like either a community college or a regional institution." In its era of lower admissions standards, USAO enrolled twelve to fourteen hundred students, according to Feaver. An initial consequence of increasing standards as part of the Mission Enhancement Plan in 2005 was a dip in enrollment numbers, and enrollments for the past decade have remained below one thousand students each year. The higher

standards, however, have helped USAO curate the student body it wants. “The kind of student that we’re getting here now,” Feaver said, “is coming because of the mission and not because of its geography or its convenience.” As more prospective students across Oklahoma understand the university’s mission, McConnell felt optimistic about growing enrollments. Multiple participants mentioned an enrollment goal of approximately 1,200 students, which was limited only by the university’s facilities. With a small, historic campus and no plans to expand it, USAO’s small student body is likely to remain an enduring feature of the institution.

In addition to shaping the campus environment broadly, USAO’s small enrollment size impacts its students’ academic experience. The effects appear noticeably in the classroom. As it does at many small schools, overall size has translated to small class sizes at USAO, as well. Doughan contrasted his experience teaching at USAO against previous experience at a large institution with sections of 300 students or more. “The experience felt very impersonal,” he said. With USAO’s small classes, “you can have the kind of discussion in class that would allow for more time per student to participate.” Greater student engagement and interaction with faculty extended outside of the classroom, too. Clark described their role as a faculty advisor as another “way to build that personal relationship with students.” For Clark, serving in both teaching and advising roles allowed them to get to know their students better and to demonstrate their commitment to the students’ success. While participants, both faculty and staff, did acknowledge the additional work it required to maintain those mentoring relationships, they all understood that frequent interaction with students in and outside of class is what many students coming to USAO are looking for from the school.

Students who had a particular educational experience in mind was something many participants identified about USAO's study body as well. Feaver reiterated his observation about students choosing to attend not just because of proximity or some other convenience, but because they understood USAO's unique mission and wanted the curriculum that the university offered. McConnell saw this as well, noting that many students chose USAO because they were "interested in academics over the student life experience." Other faculty members shared the sentiment about the academic talents and interests of the students, but Lewis described a little more variation among students' motivations. Lewis figured those students who "really embrace the liberal arts mission of the college" made up about a third of the student body. They also pointed out the growing group of student athletes who were more focused on playing their sport and having a more social college experience. A third group, for Lewis, comprised students who didn't necessarily understand the liberal arts mission but came to college because of a general sense that it was the next step after high school. Regardless of students' motivations, their demographics did reflect a more traditional liberal arts campus. Faculty, administrators, and student affairs staff all described a campus of primarily full-time, first time, traditional age students, many of whom lived on campus. Still, participants did mention the diversity of the student body. None mentioned specific racial or ethnic groups, but McConnell mentioned specifically that USAO had "a lot of students that are identifying in many different ways." Regardless of the ways students there differed, many participants described a safe and accepting campus where students feel comfortable to be themselves. As Weber speculated, "I think they enjoy this climate because we encourage them to just be themselves and celebrate who we are as individuals."

External Identity Influences

External Stakeholders

State systems of public higher education are often thought of as homogenizing influences on individual campuses, but overwhelmingly, participants at USAO saw both the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education (OSRHE) and the university's own governing Board of Regents (BOR) as highly supportive of the institution's unique mission. Instead of feeling pressure for USAO to look more like other universities in the state, Feaver described conversations from early in his presidency with then-Chancellor Paul Risser about how to strengthen and promote USAO's distinctive mission within the state. The support from the OSRHE and the subsequent mission enhancement plan to distinguish the institution as a liberal arts college was a big change from the threats of merger or closure that USAO faced decades earlier. Gower was confident that "our chancellor [then Glen Johnson] really understands our mission and is supportive of it." None of the participants expressed any sense of pressure from the state governing board to conform with the larger regional universities.

The renewed emphasis on a unique statewide liberal arts mission did, however, strain USAO's relationship with the local Chickasha community. Feaver described a community "that would prefer to have easy community college access, open access." The higher admissions standards that accompanied the mission enhancement plan did restrict access and even led to declines in enrollment at a time when, as Wilkinson explained, the community was interested in the university bringing more people to the area, which in turn would contribute to Chickasha's economic growth. Goddard saw the tension that the 2005 MEP had created with the city but was encouraged by the progress the university

had made rehabilitating its relationship with the community. Feaver, too, saw that "the community [was] generally beginning to understand that they can't have a school in Chickasha unless it's different."

Although local community members were increasingly understanding and even appreciative of USAO's distinct mission, participants were also wary of the broader state political context. Lewis described the predicament: "We depend on public funding in a state that's highly conservative, and so we can't alienate our legislature." For Feaver, state politics created two related challenges. As president, he first had to contend with "this assumption on the more practical side of thinking that the liberal arts really don't apply to the workforce development priorities that we see in the legislature." For help with the first challenge, Feaver had relied on the OSRHE and his BOR to advocate for the university statewide. Oklahoma's Republican governor, Kevin Stitt, however, had begun appointing political supporters as regents who were much more local to the Chickasha area, creating a second challenge. While the regents themselves were still supportive of USAO's mission, they did not have the same statewide influence as previous regents that could help Feaver in the same way to promote the university across the whole state.

Reference Others

Because of support from the OSRHE, USAO has not felt pressure to resemble the other public universities in Oklahoma. As points of reference, then, the state's research and regional institutions serve primarily to highlight the ways that USAO is different from the other public universities. Some participants mentioned having to keep an eye on policies and standards for programs that extended across the system, like the course

equivalency program for transferring credit, that required consistency among universities. More often, though, participants focused on USAO's differences from this group. While McConnell enjoyed the freedom to innovate that came from the OSRHE's support for USAO's unique identity, he acknowledged the benefit, especially in his work marketing and recruiting, of having models at other institutions he could emulate. He pointed to the advantages that the University of Oklahoma had in those areas from their football program—a feature that USAO could not leverage in marketing campaigns. One place USAO did look to the research universities in the state for comparison and emulation was admissions standards. For Feaver and the mission enhancement plan, aligning USAO's admissions standards with those of the flagships was an important signal to prospective students that USAO was different from the regional universities that might have been more accessible. Beyond those specific similarities with even a few of the other public institutions in the state, participants only mentioned other state universities to highlight differences. As Goddard summed it up:

> We're not a Rogers State University; we're not a University of Oklahoma. We don't need to look like them, we don't need to try to be like them, because we don't compare. I mean, you're comparing apples and oranges.

Without similar institutions among the state universities, another group that USAO might consider for association as a small liberal arts institution is the small private colleges within Oklahoma, but most participants expressed little sense of connection to that group. Some participants described personal relationships they had with individual faculty or staff members at one of Oklahoma's private universities, but at the organizational level there were no close comparisons. Participants' discussion of Oklahoma's private

universities suggested a shared belief that USAO was already enacting a liberal arts college mission more authentically than the private schools. National liberal arts colleges were hardly mentioned either. Only Lewis identified colleges like Amherst, Bates, and Bowdoin as exemplars of places offering a liberal arts curriculum to which USAO might aspire. But Feaver explained that, although the university was grouped with those colleges by *US News & World Report* following its Carnegie reclassification, USAO did not have the resources to keep pace with the wealthier private colleges along metrics like instructional expenditures.

COPLAC Membership

Although neither the public nor the private universities in Oklahoma offered a strong peer association, another group of institutions did seem like a better fit for many participants. All the participants were aware of USAO membership in the group, which was an important part of the mission enhancement plan the Feaver had developed. "The COPLAC relationship," he said, "has helped to better inform students and faculty and staff as to what we are." Although participants still noted the difference in enrollment size between USAO and most of the other COPLAC institutions, they acknowledged other similarities, including sharing the same kinds of struggles. As Gower saw it, "we still have the same needs, still have the same thoughts. So I think they're all very similar in a lot of ways." One struggle common to the COPLAC members that Lewis observed was actually enacting a strong liberal arts mission. They described the group as asserting liberal arts identities while retaining features more typical of comprehensive universities, namely the buffet-style general education requirements that did not reflect a strong interdisciplinary focus. Lewis did identify the Evergreen State College as one COPLAC

member that offered a model for an experimental liberal arts experience, but they also noted that USAO's administration had not encouraged the faculty collectively to look at those models to inspire curricular change at USAO. Implicit in that critique, however, was the shared challenge of delivering a liberal arts education in the context of a conservative state political climate or to parents or students who could be alienated by more progressive programs. COPLAC was the group, for most participants, where they could find support for the difficulties that arose from balancing the public and liberal arts identities.

Leadership

Participants universally acknowledged the impact of President Feaver's leadership on USAO's identity. "We have a president," Wilkinson described, "who really holds to our core values and our mission, and he hasn't wavered in that." Feaver himself explained that emphasizing USAO's distinctiveness had become critical when he became president. His predecessors had aligned USAO more with the regional universities in the state as a strategy for survival, but that approach was not appropriate for the state context Feaver himself encountered as president. Just as identity change can be an adaptive response to external challenges, so too can "identity endurance" (Scott & Lane, 2000b, p. 143). Others at the university attested to Feaver's intentionality and consistency in asserting USAO's mission and identity to various audiences. Gower described his advocacy of USAO to the state regents and his success securing their support, financial and otherwise. Wilkinson recalled Feaver's clarity about strengthening the university's relationship with the Chickasha community, especially when greater understanding was necessary following the implementation of the mission enhancement plan. Doughan

highlighted Feaver's consistent internal communication, as well, to ensure that faculty, staff, and students understood USAO's mission. Lewis sensed some conservatism that accompanied USAO's assertion of its mission, describing an administration that was averse to further curricular change. Lewis conceded that this wariness stemmed to some degree from the local and state political climate and therefore could be a strategic decision in some ways, but they were nonetheless dismayed that the administration did not encourage more experimentation, looking to COPLAC peers and other liberal arts colleges for innovative programs. Despite some critique, Feaver and USAO's strategy of identity persistence has seemed to be successful, both in responding to past challenges and in preempting future dangers. Gower described more recent considerations at the state level regarding merging universities, stressing that "we have never come up in the conversation."

Challenges

Despite some progress regarding institutional security from the OSRHE and improved awareness of USAO's mission, participants still identified numerous challenges. One immediate concern was the diminishing funding from the state. Although this is a challenge that nearly all publicly supported colleges and universities face, decreasing state funding for USAO was even more sharply felt in light of the expectations created by 2005's mission enhancement plan. The MEP included increasing faculty salaries and adding new faculty lines to recruit and retain talented faculty to deliver quality education. It also raised admission standards at USAO which led to lost revenue that would have been generated by higher open-access enrollments. Initially a five-year plan for additional special funding, the state ending funding for the MEP after

2008's global recession. State appropriations for the university have still not recovered. Considering these lower appropriations, USAO has had to rely increasingly on non-state resources. Initially part of the MEP anyway, USAO has built a stronger fundraising apparatus in the USAO Foundation. Feaver described the success the university has seen since the start of the MEP in private fundraising, growing the university's assets remarkably. That success, ironically, has brought its own questions about how much of the state's resources the university needs if it can generate revenues through private sources. While increased overall revenues allow USAO to deliver the educational experience it wants for its students, the shifting source of its funds challenge its publicness and the level of support it should expect to see from the state.

While concerns about financial resources are ever present in higher education, participants saw the issue of public understanding as a challenge more specific to USAO's identity. One source of confusion has been the word 'liberal.' "Oklahoma's a very conservative state politically speaking," explained Hughes, "so any time people hear the word 'liberal,' they automatically associate that with political thinking." To avoid the confusion, Goddard, in Marketing & Communications, had moved to explaining liberal arts without using the word. Instead, she focused on describing the outcomes of the educations. "Whenever we talk in terms of critical thinking, communication skills…you know, all of these things that a liberal arts education provides," she said, "that's when you start seeing their brains turn and it starts clicking." An outcomes-based explanation of liberal education also helped address misunderstanding about the liberal arts generally, as well, regardless of any political inferences. In recruiting efforts, McConnell found himself having to explain a liberal arts education to prospective students. That

explanation could also help distinguish USAO from the other state universities, since Goddard noticed that "the general public—they look at us like we are just a regional university and don't quite understand how we are different." While Feaver and others recognized the progress in promulgating USAO's identity statewide since the MEP, there is still work to be done.

Conclusion

Overall, the members of USAO's faculty, staff, and administration expressed confidence in the strength of the university's identity. Further, discussion of its identity included features found both in public universities and liberal arts colleges. Among its liberal arts-focused features, recognizing its small enrollment size was almost unavoidable. At under 1,000 students, USAO is the smallest public university in Oklahoma, offering students a closer community with small class sizes and frequent faculty interaction. USAO's Interdisciplinary Studies (IDS) core curriculum also contributed to the liberal education experience on campus. IDS focuses on the interconnectedness of the disciplines, which it reinforces through the team teaching of many IDS courses. Participants cited IDS's significance to USAO's current identity, but many also invoked its history at the institution. IDS was established in 1967 when the college had just gone coeducational and become the Oklahoma College of Liberal Arts. Intermingled with descriptions of these liberal arts features, though, were considerations of USAO's public mission. As Oklahoma's only public liberal arts institution, USAO offered this distinct education to students across all of Oklahoma. Additionally, in service to its mission of access and affordability, it did so at a cost significantly lower than the private universities in the state. The frequency with which these attributes, both public

and liberal arts, appeared across interviews suggests that USAO and its members have a clear understanding of the kind of place it is.

Because one of the university's goals is to be a distinct institution, particularly within Oklahoma, participants did not often look to other universities for comparison or to highlight similarities. Specifically, the 2005 mission enhancement plan identified ways to set USAO apart from other Oklahoma public universities. It underscored the statewide service area, rather than a smaller intrastate locale. It sought to attract a more select student profile, partly through raising admissions standards but also through promoting its special mission across the state. Though participants depicted a strong identity, many also noted lower visibility within the state. Goddard and Hughes each independently described USAO as Oklahoma's "best kept secret." As the institution sought to differentiate itself from universities in state, it had to look nationally for closer peers. Its membership in COPLAC in 2007 both further distinguished USAO within Oklahoma and helped President Feaver communicate its special mission to students, faculty, and staff. Having both membership criteria and other member institutions as models has helped refine individuals' understanding of USAO's identity internally.

Strengthening that understanding externally has been a unique predicament for USAO, as well. In addition to challenges commonly faced by public liberal arts colleges, like balancing resource intensive instructional practices against diminishing state appropriations, USAO has worked to rehabilitate its relationship with the local community in Chickasha. Resentment in the community arose in the early 2000s after the university raised admissions standards as part of the MEP. Not solely a response to USAO's public liberal arts identity, the resentment came instead from the contrast of the

USAO's strong reaffirmation of the identity against decades of easier access and more local student enrollment. As the community has begun to understand better that USAO's special mission is what enables to the university to remain in Chickasha – really to survive at all – they are embracing that difference moving forward.

CHAPTER 7

FINDINGS – SONOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

Sonoma State University, located in Rohnert Park, CA, is the largest COPLAC member university with over 8,500 enrolled students in Fall 2019.[7] In its mission statement, SSU immediately asserts its publicness, identifying itself as "a regionally serving public university committed to educational access and excellence" (SSU, n.d.-c, para. 1). While the mission statement also includes "a commitment to the liberal arts and sciences" (para. 1), it does not mention any designation as a public liberal arts college or a member of COPLAC. The SSU Academic Senate, however, presents a strong claim as both on their website, *We are COPLAC*:

> Sonoma State University is a public, liberal arts and sciences, student-centered, residential campus. We manifest our liberal arts and sciences identity in a variety of ways, including service learning, close relationships between faculty and students, student research opportunities, first year experience, and high impact practices for learning. We distinguish ourselves among the other COPLAC institutions by being a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and infusing diversity, equity and inclusion in all our university efforts and programs. (SSU, n.d.-d, para. 2)

[7] Since interviews for this study were conducted, enrollment at Sonoma State declined further, and in Fall 2022, its total enrollment was 6,637 students. Although this was a significant decline, SSU remained the largest COPLAC member institution.

Through this statement, the university, or at least its Academic Senate, both aligns itself with other public liberal arts institutions and distinguishes itself within that group by highlighting another facet of its identity.

Institutional History

Sonoma State University began in 1956 as the Santa Rosa Center, an extension site of San Francisco State College, located in Santa Rosa, CA. Initially, the Center was dedicated primarily to providing education for elementary school teachers. In 1960, the campus was separated from San Francisco State when California state legislation established California State College, Sonoma as part of the California State Colleges system (now The California State University [CSU]). Opening for classes in 1961, the new college initially admitted only students in the junior and senior classes and offered courses leading to the completion of degrees in elementary education. Those students were joined the next year by Cal State Sonoma's first freshman class, who were beginning as liberal arts majors (Biebush, et al., 2011). From its start, "the development of Sonoma State University was marked by a strong emphasis on undergraduate training in the liberal arts" (Mason & Schatzki, 1983, p. 4). It took more time, however, to develop other features of a liberal arts college, like a residential campus. At first, there was no campus housing available, so all the students at Cal State Sonoma in its early years were commuters (Biebush, et al., 2011).

A college committee in 1968 developed the "cluster school" concept for the college as part of a major revision to its academic master plan, and in 1972 the first residential complex was constructed. This cluster model imagined grouping no more than 750 students together in semi-autonomous schools, and although this plan was never fully

realized, Sonoma State did develop three cluster schools (Biebush, et al., 2011). The first, the Robert Maynard Hutchins School, began in 1968 as the "Tutorials in Liberal Arts and Science Program" (SSU, n.d.-a). Warren Olson, professor of philosophy and humanities, proposed naming the school after Robert Maynard Hutchins because of his belief in the importance of education to democracy. Features of the Hutchins School mirror many of those found at small liberal arts colleges, including small seminar courses, interdisciplinary courses of study, and diverse faculty trained in multiple fields. SSU still touts the Hutchins School as a distinctive feature of the university (SSU, n.d.-a).

The original cluster school model was designed to help maintain close student interaction and a smaller school feel in the context of the college's ambitious enrollment goals. Administrators in the 1970s had hoped to grow the college to 12,000 students by 1980 (Biebush, et al., 2011). Although the school never met its goal of 12,000 students, enrollments continued to increase in the early 1970s, and with that growth came the addition of professional programs on campus. Cal State Sonoma began programs in both nursing and counseling in 1972. From their beginning, "both programs were designed to emphasize the role of a liberal arts education as a basis for the professions" (Biebush, et al., 2011, p. 26).

As Cal State Sonoma continued to grow, so did The California State University and Colleges, whose evolution brought more change for the college. In the mid-1970s, the state legislature renamed several of the California State University campuses, and in 1976, Cal State Sonoma was renamed Sonoma State College. Not much later, in 1978, it gained university status, one of the last campuses in the system to do so, becoming Sonoma State University (CSU, n.d.). In 1982, the young university faced a crisis when

its then president, Peter Diamandopoulos, laid off 24 tenured faculty members, primarily in the humanities and social sciences. Diamandopoulos explained the layoffs had been due to "a significant shift in student interest" which had led to "a shortage of faculty members in such areas as accounting, marketing, computer information, and media studies" (Mason & Schatzki, 1983, p. 4). Aside from the disconcerting unilateral actions of the president, which ultimately led to censure from the American Association of University Professors (Finkin, 1983), the changing interests of prospective students away from the liberal arts raised questions about Sonoma State's mission as well as concerns for its financial health in the face of fewer enrollments.

After declining enrollments in the late 1970s and early 80s, the number of students began to grow again in 1985. When Ruben Armiñana became president of SSU in 1992, he brought a focus on developing the university into a more residential campus. During his tenure, Sonoma State added a new residential village, a new student recreation center, and the Green Music Center. By 2009, the university enrolled approximately 8,500 students, but with space on campus for only 3,100 residents, it was still a majority commuter campus (Biebush, et al., 2011). In other ways, too, it has been blending its commitment to liberal arts education with goals of career preparation through selected professional programs and access for first-generation and underrepresented minority students (Springmier, 2020). In recognition of this liberal arts commitment, as well as the challenges of balancing liberal arts and public identities, SSU was invited to join COPLAC in 1999 (SSU, n.d.-b).

Findings

Institutional Identity Attributes

In its relatively short history, Sonoma State has gone through significant changes, and participants in this study from the university suggested that its evolution is ongoing. The range of features that participants described encompassed a liberal arts focus, a strong public mission, an experimental hippie past, and new leadership. For Karen Moranski, Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs, that meant the university was "renegotiating what it means to be a liberal arts and sciences public institution."

Mission and Values

"Where it is unequivocal, the public character of [Sonoma State], which might be different from the private schools, is this notion of access." Then-Chief of Staff Jerlena Griffin-Desta described Sonoma State's emphasis on access and opening opportunity for more students as a decidedly public mission. Moranski echoed that point and further ascribed its publicness to connection with the access mission of the entire California State University system. Despite this stated mission of access, however, Sonoma State had drifted into a reputation for being exclusive and homogenous. Mario Perez, Vice President for Advancement, depicted an era under previous leadership when the university had focused its attention on students from affluent areas and from families with the ability to pay. Moranski, Perez, and others credited then-President Judy Sakaki's arrival in 2016 with recentering access as a priority for SSU. They described the president's passion for including traditionally underrepresented students in the university's efforts to improve access and noted Sakaki's success especially in achieving Hispanic-Serving Institution status for SSU just one year after she arrived. Joyce Lopes,

then Vice President for Administration and Finance, included Sakaki's focus on serving more Pell eligible students, too, as another way of making campus more inclusive. Ryan Henne, Dean of Students, attributed SSU's more diverse campus to "the access that's provided through a public institution and public tuition costs."

Sonoma State's publicness also leads the institution to consider where in the state its students come from. The Master Plan for Higher Education in California, which established what is now the CSU, managed institutional competition among the individual campuses by designating service areas within the state to each. Lopes referred to the Master Plan when she described the six-county area from which Sonoma State was expected to recruit the majority of its students. The university, however, has looked beyond its region at different times in its history. Moranski explained that when SSU was building up its residential campus, it did recruit broadly across California. That strategy "brought in a largely white, middle-to-upper class group of students, and that garnered some criticism in the 2000s." Elisabeth Wade, Dean of what was then the School of Science and Technology, acknowledged the large portion of students still coming from southern California, but said that becoming an HSI and refocusing on underrepresented populations had returned attention to the local area. Slowing recruitment in areas beyond SSU's designated counties may have contributed to a dip in enrollment numbers, speculated Jean-Francois Coget, then-Dean of the School of Business and Economics. He and others imagined Sonoma State finally leveraging its unique liberal arts mission to justify expanding recruitment again—both to boost enrollments and to distinguish itself within the CSU. Asserting a special statewide mission, like the polytechnic universities and the CSU Maritime Academy do, would allow SSU to expand its recruitment area

while avoiding some of the territorialism that sometimes exists among the CSU's. Moranski perceived the tension created by the two competing strategies: "We're trying to serve the local community more, while we're still trying to attract those students from a broader area. And I think that's hard because you're still trying to be all things to all people." For Sonoma State, deciding how best to meet its public obligation as part of the CSU is a constant question.

Curriculum

The challenge of building a truly interdisciplinary course of study is the integration of general education or elective courses with the requirements of different majors on campus. Often, universities have left general education to cover some breadth of knowledge but lose the interdisciplinarity within majors associated with a liberal education. Sonoma State struggled with that both in general education and in the majors. Wade observed less room even within the general education curriculum for students to explore because of the many requirements imposed on students at all campuses by the CSU. Sometimes it was students' majors instead that imposed the requirements and constrictive structure that limited a more integrated general education program. Stephanie Dyer, chair of the Hutchins School for Liberal Studies, described working on a curriculum revision for general education at SSU and meeting some pushback from certain majors. Nursing especially, with is strict schedule of courses and required practicums, did not leave time for taking general education requirements in the upper division. Even under the best circumstances, Dyer explained, these curricular decisions were difficult. Ultimately, she said, students should be allowed to pursue the majors and future careers that interest them, and the university should deliver programs that enable

that. Even when there is more room to build a more interdisciplinary curriculum, both in general education and within majors, Moranski observed that "the budgetary setup of the CSU really lends itself to competing for FTES [full-time equivalent students], really lends itself to siloing."

That siloing has contributed to the persistence of what Wade and Moranski separately saw as a very traditional portfolio of degrees. Examinations of the portfolio raised questions for Wade about identity. She wondered whether SSU offered either the right degrees for the students it wants to serve or any degrees that were distinctive for SSU within the CSU. Even within the Hutchins School, known for its interdisciplinary approach to learning and which offers a liberal studies major, Dyer saw students more focused on professional preparation. The liberal studies major through the Hutchins School can be blended in different ways with earning teaching credentials, so many of the students in Hutchins plan to become teachers. "A lot of the students who are very pre-professional in that way," she said, "are not necessarily on board with the liberal arts integration approach to the coursework." Other pre-professional majors at SSU drew a lot of students as well. The business administration major in the School of Business and Economics has been one of the most popular at the university for years. The school also houses one of SSU's distinctive programs, the Wine Business Institute, which conducts research in the field and offers degrees specifically in wine business. Lopes described the Institute's importance to the university as a distinctive program that attracts renown as well as revenue from private donations. Its significance on campus suggests that the Institute will remain a prominent feature of the university even though, as Lopes said, "that has very little to do with liberal arts." As dean of the School of Business and

Economics, Coget acknowledged the tension that could sometimes exist between a more conservative wine industry and the identity of a liberal arts university, but he also saw the ways that the liberal arts can complement business, so even in disciplines not traditionally linked to the liberal arts, some faculty at SSU worked to bring the two together.

Campus Features

Although many participants at Sonoma State described the university as small, that descriptor holds a different connotation in the context of the CSU. With a total enrollment at the time of around 8,500 students, Sonoma State was one of the smallest CSU campuses, which gave some participants cause for concern. The university was master planned to serve 10,000-12,000 students, explained Lopes, so its enrollment of 8,500 was not by design. Dyer agreed with that assessment of the university's enrollment goals. She saw those goals as shaped in response to the CSU funding formula: "Our funding is premised on us actually growing every year, so there's no commitment to staying small." But the relatively small enrollment, however intentional, did have some benefits. "I think our students like the small," speculated Moranski. "I think that's one of the things that is attractive to students." In addition to appealing to students, the smaller size also aligned SSU more closely with other liberal arts colleges. Some participants worried about its low enrollments as part of the CSU, but others like Hollis Robbins, then-Dean of Arts and Humanities, found the size more appropriate for a liberal arts institution. The small overall enrollments, though, did not necessarily translate into other features typical of liberal arts colleges, like small class sizes. Dyer saw an administration worried about costs and efficiencies in the face of declining enrollments, which led to increases in class sizes. For Dyer, as chair of the Hutchins School, that was a constant

concern for her because of the school's liberal arts approach to instruction. Robbins, too, would have liked to see smaller class sizes, especially for experiences like capstone classes. Although preserving the small class sizes was challenging, participants saw its importance, since it was a feature appealing to prospective students.

Other features of the university also struck participants as central to SSU's identity, yet still double-edged. Participants often described SSU's location in this way. Despite being only 50 miles north of San Francisco, Sonoma State's campus in Rohnert Park, CA, could feel far removed for prospective students as well as faculty and staff. Perez described it as "a serene campus in a great location" but still recognized that it felt farther away from bigger cities than it actually is. For professionals, the distance could feel isolating, stifling connections to other campuses or even professional associations. Griffin-Desta saw the isolated location as a barrier to attracting a more diverse student population as well. Others cited the area's lack of racial diversity as another challenge, describing SSU's county of Sonoma and neighboring Marin and Napa counties as very white. For some students, however, the small campus and quieter setting were a draw, despite being different from their previous experience. When they begin at SSU, most students live at least their first year on campus, and each year over forty percent of students reside on campus, according to Henne. That proportion of on-campus students sets Sonoma State apart from the other CSU institutions, which are mostly commuter campuses. For Wade, the residential campus factored strongly into Sonoma State's identity: "the idea that many of our students are on campus, they're present, they're here, they're engaged. That, I think, is definitely part of our identity as a liberal arts college." Greg Sawyer, then Vice President for Student Affairs, described the on-campus housing

at SSU as not just offering students accommodation but connecting the university to the wine culture of the region. The residential villages on campus are all named after varietals or wine regions, including Beaujolais and Sauvignon. The villages are all apartment-style or suite-style housing, as well, giving the university what Lopes described as "a private liberal arts feel."

The university had been working to move past other parts of the stereotypical private liberal arts image and their own history of enrolling primarily white, middle- and upper middle-class students from across California. Many participants cited SSU's 2017 designation as a Hispanic-Serving Institution as evidence of progress the university had made in diversifying the student population. The renewed focus on recruiting students from the local area also led to increased attention to previously overlooked populations. In addition to increased visual diversity, Lopes and Moranski both pointed to SSU's goal of and progress in improving experiential diversity on campus, too, working to serve more first-generation, Pell-eligible, and transfer students. Dyer, more specifically, described how the university can and does integrate a liberal arts teaching approach and serving non-traditional students. The Hutchins School, arguably the most liberal arts-focused place on campus, offers an alternative degree completion pathway for working adults, including online seminars and Saturday in-person meetings. The students that Dyer had encountered, however, have not been interested in pursuing Hutchins' liberal studies major. Instead, that student population has been more concerned with concrete pathways to careers, highlighting the challenge public liberal arts colleges sometimes face of offering liberal arts opportunities while meeting students' desire for more direct professional preparation.

External Identity Influences

External Stakeholders

Much of the external influence on Sonoma State that participants described related to its public mission of workforce development and professional preparation. Local business and prospective students alike shaped participants' thinking about how the university enacted its mission. When Audra Verrier, then Coordinator of the Career Center, first arrived at SSU, she encountered concerns from local employers that the university's graduates were underprepared. She cited improvements in employer satisfaction over her time at the university but still felt that the school itself could be doing more for the area broadly: "A public institution should be strongly rooted in its region, and our majors are lagging behind what our region needs." Similar concerns regarding degree and career alignment have come from prospective students and families as well. Many participants described prospective students as much more career minded. With the cost of attendance increasing for students and families, they want to be more certain that their degree will lead to a job. Coget pointed to the pre-professional nature of some of SSU's most popular majors, including business and nursing, as evidence of that concern.

Sonoma State inherits many of these public-serving goals from the CSU, and even the ways that Sonoma State can work to meet those goals are shaped by the CSU's strong influence. As a system of 23 campuses serving nearly half a million students, the CSU leaves little room for uniqueness at any one campus. Sawyer identified some differences, especially in size, between the individual campuses, but Moranski described feeling "a sense in which the CSU is really fostering regional comprehensive institutions, not liberal

arts and sciences." In a tightly controlled system that struck most participants as very bureaucratic and "top down," SSU has found limited ways it could enact its more liberal arts mission. The CSU's expectation of parity across campuses and directives that must be followed uniformly by all campuses preclude SSU's distinguishing itself through a unique core curriculum or other special academic programming. Efforts that SSU has made to realize the liberal arts aspects of its mission have come without explicit support from the CSU. Rather, it has meant Sonoma State resisting forces of homogeneity from the larger system.

Reference Others

Because of the tight governance structure of the CSU, participants often referred to the "other CSUs" collectively when considering which campuses or universities they looked to as referents, only occasionally naming an individual institution for sharper contrast. This applied to different characteristics of the universities as well. Sonoma State was more residential than the other CSUs, or it had a lower percentage of Pell eligible students than other CSUs. Even when there were similarities to be found, different underlying reasons often explained those similarities. Participants identified several others along with Sonoma State as the few small CSU campuses, but as Dyer pointed out, those others were small for different reasons. CSU Channel Islands was a much younger campus and would likely continue to grow. Humboldt was more remote and had a much smaller student pool from which to recruit. Henne discussed looking to Chico State and Cal State San Marcos sometimes. Both are in the bottom half of CSUs for size, despite still being considerably larger than Sonoma State. But both were also such heavily commuter campuses that they could not be strong referents for programs like campus

housing. Griffin-Desta and Coget both identified CSU campuses that had special missions, like Cal Maritime and the polytechnics, which granted a correspondingly special statewide service area. In this regard, earlier descriptions of Sonoma State's regional service area and recruitment focus suggested that SSU's liberal arts mission was not yet strong enough to distinguish it in a similar way from the larger group of CSUs. Overall, participants described Sonoma State as neither totally similar nor totally different from fellow system campuses, and the one feature that some would have liked to differentiate SSU from the group did not seem strong enough to achieve a special statewide distinction.

Participants also did not specify many close referents among private liberal arts colleges. Griffin-Desta clarified that SSU did not look to private liberal arts colleges just because that was what they were. Rather, looking to those institutions depended on the issue Sonoma State was facing and whether the private colleges were dealing with similar questions. Henne described talking with deans of students at smaller institutions like the University of the Pacific rather than colleagues at a large public university like UC Berkeley because of similarities in campus size. Even with similarities, Henne explained, he often felt unable to emulate an innovative program or a successful solution because of the difference in available resources. Moranski offered another explanation: "It's really hard to find influences. I think that's part of the problem at Sonoma State is that there are not a lot of peer institutions that are close by that we can emulate or borrow best practices from." With few nearby private peer institutions for SSU to consider at an organization level, Griffin-Desta observed that the individual members of Sonoma State brought their own experiences from private colleges across the country to consider in their own work.

Henne had years of experience at several private colleges. Lopes, too, referred back to her time at Colorado College, but found few points of similarity. SSU's campus, amenities like the Green Music Center and the setting in Sonoma County reminded Lopes of Colorado College, but the differences in areas like the costs of attendance, the financial resources, and the makeup of the student bodies were too great for Lopes to feel like it was a reasonable peer comparison.

COPLAC Membership

Without institutions that felt like close referents in the CSU or among the northern California private colleges, Sonoma State has looked to COPLAC to find a network of similar institutions. For Moranski, "it's a network from which we can borrow best practices." In fact, other participants pointed to her individual engagement with COPLAC as influential at SSU. Moranski brought years of COPLAC experience with her when she joined SSU in 2016, having previously served as Associate Vice Chancellor for Undergraduate Education at University of Illinois Springfield, another COPLAC member. Some participants saw Sonoma State as an outlier in COPLAC, partly due to its enrollment size, but Moranski suggested that COPLAC's own evolution had led to a more inclusive vision for public liberal arts colleges. She described COPLAC's initial focus on a "notion of kind of elite public institutions—small, private-like institutions," which mirrored SSU's vision for itself under President Armiñana when it joined in 1999. Since then, COPLAC had shifted away from applying strict criteria like size and toward what Moranski called "a more philosophical kind of definition of public liberal arts. Towards a more student-centric definition." Dyer, too, found strong support from COPLAC, along with guidance on enacting a meaningful liberal arts mission at SSU. The

association's influence, however, did not extend fully across campus. "I think COPLAC has helped particularly with our academic colleagues," Sawyer said, "more so than we have been engaged in terms of student affairs." Others in academic affairs, like Coget and Robbins, both relatively new deans at Sonoma State, had little awareness of COPLAC prior to joining the university and were still determining how best to engage with the association. Nonetheless, with senior administrators like Moranski as provost engaging with other member institutions to share insights and practices, COPLAC has informed Sonoma State's identity as a as public liberal arts college.

Leadership

Participants' depictions of both past and current leaders illustrated the influence of leadership on Sonoma State's identity. Multiple participants described former president Ruben Armiñana's vision for SSU as an "Ivy League of the West" or a "public ivy" campus, emphasizing campus amenities like the residential villages and the Green Music Center, rather than a strong curricular focus on the liberal arts. This was accompanied by a recruitment strategy targeting students from more affluent families and regions of California, which in turn cultivated a less diverse student body over Armiñana's tenure from 1992 to 2016. When Sakaki began in 2016, she recentered Sonoma State's attention on building a more diverse and inclusive campus, both among students and employees. The university returned to recruiting primarily within its six-county service area, aiming to serve more local students from underrepresented populations. Together with then-Provost Lisa Vollendorf, Sakaki led SSU to HSI status in 2017, reflecting its success in diversifying the student body. Leadership at that time was less focused on the liberal arts component of SSU's identity. One participant described

Vollendorf as "really dubious about SSU as a public liberal arts institution." Instead, Vollendorf focused on students' interests in more clearly defined career pathways. Sakaki, too, had initially imagined SSU as more of a regional comprehensive university, which Moranski ascribed to Sakaki's long career at other CSU campuses. Moranski herself encouraged Sakaki to think more about a public liberal arts identity and how the university's goals of diversity and inclusion could work together with a liberal arts approach. Indeed, Griffin-Desta, Lopes, Sawyer, and others all identified Moranski as a champion for SSU's public liberal arts identity and its increased engagement in COPLAC. That interest in liberal arts and COPLAC had not yet spread to all of campus. Verrier explained the influence of leadership in Student Affairs this way:

> Leadership in the division is really driven by somebody who's been in the CSU for a long time and is very connected to other vice presidents and presidents in the CSU and the movement of public education. So when it comes to liberal arts, it's like, that's not really part of our conversation.

Just as Sakaki's own CSU experience shaped her initial vision for Sonoma State, the senior leadership team that she first assembled comprised administrators with considerable experience from other CSU and UC campuses who also brought that impression of SSU as a regional university. Including more leaders from other systems or institution types, like Moranski from another COPLAC member or Wade and Robbins with experience at private liberal arts colleges, could engender a stronger collective sense of Sonoma State as a liberal arts institution.

Challenges

Sonoma State faces challenges common across US higher education. Most prevalent among the participants was their concern over declining enrollments. Coget cited two major causes for the decline. First, he explained the changing demographics of California and the impending enrollment cliff. Moranski, too, pointed out that those demographic shifts were affecting northern California, including SSU, more sharply than other regions of the state. Another reason for declining enrollments, this one more specific to liberal arts colleges, was students' uncertainty about the value of higher education generally and of the liberal arts more specifically. With ever increasing concern over the benefit of college as a pathway to work, students were less sure of how liberal arts programs connected to future careers.

Beyond those common sources of struggling enrollments, Sonoma State faced additional obstacles. Sakaki and the university's recommitment to the CSU-designated service area effectively contracted the pool of prospective students even further. As Lopes put it, "We don't produce enough students in these counties to fill a campus our size." The reality, then, was that Sonoma State still needed students from southern California and beyond. But that introduced another barrier to growing enrollments: its remote location. For students coming from Los Angeles and other large cities, rural Sonoma County might seem like a nice place to visit, but not a place they could see themselves staying for four years.

Because of the CSU's funding model, Sonoma State's low enrollments also become a financial challenge. In a system that expects and rewards growth, declining enrollments felt dire for participants. Less available funding in turn led to cuts on

campus, with administrators paring course offerings, increasing class sizes, and reducing other student supports in search of efficiencies. In a setting where faculty and staff already felt they lacked the resources to provide students the attention and support they needed, these additional losses were discouraging.

Addressing enrollment challenges and the accompanying budget difficulties also introduces questions about balancing SSU's multiple missions. One strategy for attracting more students has been to develop new programs and majors that align more clearly with future careers. While this also serves a public mission of workforce development, adding more professional programs to the university's portfolio challenges its liberal arts character—a common dilemma for liberal arts colleges generally and COPLAC members especially.

Conclusion

Sonoma State's status as a campus of the CSU informed participants' perspectives on nearly every other aspect of the university's identity, suggesting that CSU membership was a very central feature for SSU. Encompassing some of SSU's history through to its currently reality, Dyer put it plainly: "Sonoma State is a creature of the California State University system." As such, it has inherited the CSU values and mission of access as well as diversity and inclusion, which university leadership had enacted to shift the composition of the student and employee populations on campus. One feature that participants cited as contributing to the liberal arts facet of SSU's identity was its residential campus. Located in the wine country of Sonoma County, the campus is one of the most residential in the CSU, which encourages students to stay more engaged with their peers, staff, and faculty. Its geographic location has yielded strong

partnerships, too, which aligned SSU with local industry and economic development. The Wine Business Institute is one of the university's signature programs, which connects the campus to the more affluent areas of SSU's service area and offers preparation for careers in a niche market. Coupling that experience on a campus with students coming from lower income and first-generation backgrounds made the university feel "a little schizophrenic."

Even when imagining external referents that might shape Sonoma State's identity, the influence of the CSU was unavoidable. Participants often turned first to other CSU campuses for comparisons, mostly looking ways SSU was different. Because many of its goals and values, as well as policies and procedures, were handed down from the CSU, participants often presumed the shared missions of access and inclusion. Physical features, instead, were more common points of difference. SSU was smaller, more residential, set in a more picturesque location. No one feature, like an experimental general education curriculum, set Sonoma State apart from other CSU campuses, though, so the aggregate of small differences usually served to create the distance. To find more similar peers, some participants looked to COPLAC and other public liberal arts colleges. Moranski, who was a campus champion for COPLAC participation, brought prior experience at another COPLAC member institution, working especially with underrepresented and non-traditional students. Engaging with peers that deal with similar challenges of system pressures or shifting student demand could help Sonoma State envision strategies to pursue CSU and liberal arts goals that effectively blend the two identities.

Sonoma State's position as a public liberal arts institution presented several challenges, some more common than others in the national higher education landscape. For many liberal arts colleges, public or not, effectively communicating the value of a liberal arts education has grown increasingly important. Especially as students' desire for clear pathways from degree to career grows, convincing them of a liberal arts degree's relevance in the job market becomes more challenging. One response for SSU, and many colleges, has been to offer more professionally oriented degree programs. Diversifying their degree portfolio has helped SSU recruit more students, especially in their service area, but it has also had a homogenizing effect, with SSU looking more like the other regional comprehensive CSU campuses. As Wade explained, however, "the public identity kind of trumps the liberal arts identity," particularly in the face of student demand and CSU pressure. Finding ways to balance both results in the unique opportunity for SSU as a public liberal arts college to deliver a small college experience and liberal arts education to more students at a much more affordable cost than at many private institutions.

CHAPTER 8

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

> No matter what we call it, we will always be interested in how organizations define themselves. Similarly, questions about why a person or organization exists resonate in research on meaning, purpose, and vision, just to name a few. (Pratt, 2016, p. 183)

This study explored the organizational identities of three public liberal arts colleges, and its multicase design offered benefits for more fully understanding this small niche in the broader U.S. higher education landscape. The three universities included—University of North Carolina Asheville (UNCA), University of Science & Arts of Oklahoma (USAO), and Sonoma State University (SSU)—were all members of the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC), yet they reflect the range of institutions that belong to this association, exhibiting considerable differences across multiple identity attributes. Interviews with staff, faculty, and administrators at each of the three institutions revealed the ways that key organizational members understood their respective universities' identities and demonstrated how consensus or divergence of those understandings contributes to the strength of the organizations' overall identity.

Cross-Case Findings

This study used organizational identity theory as the framework by which to examine these institutions more systematically. Following the structure offered by the

theory "to define and characterize certain aspects" of the case institutions (Albert & Whetten, 1985, p. 264), the following research questions shaped by concepts from organizational identity theory helped to explore the three case institutions separately and collectively.

1. Which attributes or characteristics of public liberal arts institutions emerge for individual members as significant to their understanding of their institution's organizational or collective identity?
2. How do external referents help shape institution members' understanding of their university's identity? Do peer institutions or membership associations such as the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges influence organizational identities?
3. Does a hybrid public liberal arts identity create unique opportunities or challenges for a university or its individual members? If so, how?

The exploration of each case individually yielded a greater understanding of key characteristics and relationships to their respective identities. Now, considering the findings collectively helps distill those attributes most salient to the construction of a public liberal arts prototype. This discussion proceeds through a presentation of data as response to the study's guiding research questions.

Research Question One: Internal Identity Attributes

Constructing identity in the absence of core internal attributes is difficult to imagine. In their original conception of organizational identity, Albert and Whetten (1985) did not define a universal list of those attributes, but later research has suggested that most frequently described features include mission, values, and history (Ashforth &

Mael, 1996; Gioia et al., 2013). These conceptual attributes often inform subsequent concrete characteristics, helping explain why organizations look the way they do or why they made the decisions they have. In this study, participant responses centered on several key features, both intangible and material.

Mission and Values

For participants at all the case institutions, their universities' publicness implied a mission of access, opening up the opportunity for higher education to broader populations of students within their respective states. For Mario Perez, Vice President for Advancement at Sonoma State, the mandate was clear: "We are part of the CSU system, and we are part of the mission of access." When thinking about access, though, participants often defined more specific just what it was their universities were offering access to. A common refrain from participants at all three campuses was that their university increased access to a quality liberal arts education. Bill Haggard, then Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, described UNCA as "want[ing] to provide the liberal arts education to a population that might not otherwise get it," suggesting that the private colleges that offered this kind of education were often out of reach for many students because of their higher costs of attendance.

That blended mission and the specific liberal arts focus within their states' public systems were typically distinct enough for participants to claim a statewide service area. While serving the whole state was an important feature in all three cases, participants described different realities. At USAO, the understanding of statewide service was clear. For President John Feaver, the scope of service had historical roots in USAO's previous unique mission as a public women's college. At Sonoma State, realizing a statewide

service area was much more difficult. The university, in its own published mission statement, defines itself as "a regionally serving public university committed to educational access and excellence" (SSU, n.d.-c, para. 1). Then-Chief of Staff Jerlena Griffin-Desta described testing those boundaries some by capitalizing on SSU's liberal arts identity but acknowledged that that would mean "pushing the envelope a little bit." At UNCA, participants' understanding of the service area varied more. Lisa Mann, Director of the Career Center, understood the statewide mission but viewed the university as still trying to escape a public image as a regional university. At the other end, then-Chief of Staff Shannon Earle and other senior leadership had sights set on recruiting across the U.S. South and more nationally. These differing perspectives begin to demonstrate the influence of both internal leadership and external stakeholders on shaping the institutions' self-conceptions.

Curriculum

To illustrate the ways that they were implementing their liberal arts missions, participants at all three universities referred to their curriculum. With the separation of general education and the major over a century ago across U.S. higher education, general education programs have typically been the locus of attempts to preserve liberal culture on campuses (Veysey, 1965). The institutions in this study similarly relied on their respective general education programs for that purpose, to varying degrees of success. The Interdisciplinary (IDS) Core Curriculum at USAO emerged as one of the most central features of any of the universities. Nearly all participants at USAO described its emphasis on interdisciplinarity and its distinct inclusion of team-teaching through the curriculum. Similarly, at UNCA, faculty described the Liberal Arts Core program, which

is a more structured approach to general education, as central to UNCA's curriculum. Sonoma State faced more challenges establishing a general education program, in part due to the curricular demands of some of their pre-professional degrees.

Sonoma State's strong connection to the public mission of the CSU and its role as a regional university also influenced its portfolio of majors. Stephanie Dyer, Chair of SSU's Hutchins School, noted that many of the largest majors on campus were professionally oriented. Indeed, Joyce Lopes, then Vice President for Administration and Finance, found it surprising that one of the university's most distinctive programs was in wine business. It was, she described, a unique and successful program, which the university was unlikely to move away from, but it did raise questions about fit at a liberal arts institution. UNCA also offered majors less traditionally associated with liberal arts, but as then-Vice Chancellor for Budget and Finance John Pierce explained, "even the engineering program has requirements that are aligned with UNC Asheville's identity." He suggested that the Liberal Arts Core and other requirements maintained an emphasis on interdisciplinarity. This mix of liberal and professional majors reflected the general influence of public goals and a responsiveness to local economic needs as well as the direct influence of state legislatures and state systems of higher education. While participants from UNCA and SSU described pressure or even mandates from their state systems to add professional majors, USAO was an example of a campus protected by the state system from drift in its portfolio. Although it provided business programs and pathways to teacher licensure, USAO offered limited professional programs by design from its state regents, which preserved its liberal arts focus.

Campus Features

With so many possible observable features to describe on a college campus, there was more to consider among participants' responses. Nearly universally, though, participants in all cases mentioned the enrollment size of their respective institutions. As might be expected from the literature on liberal arts colleges (Astin, 1999; Baker et al., 2012; Blaich et al., 2004; McPherson & Shapiro, 2000; Oakley, 2005), participants also framed their campuses as small. Notions of "small," however, are relative, and the institutions studied here varied considerably in enrollment size. USAO, at approximately 800 students, and Sonoma State, at over 8,000 at the time of participant interviews, both felt small to the respective members. At USAO, Dany Doughan, professor of chemistry, suggested that the small size did matter for delivering a liberal arts experience, but Stephen Weber, then chair of the Division of Arts and Humanities, believed USAO could increase its size and "still do what we do really effectively with a much larger population." Weber's "much larger population," though, referred to USAO's goal of returning to an enrollment of 1,200 students. Even if it grew by nearly 50%, USAO would remain the smallest public university in Oklahoma and one of the smallest COPLAC members, running little risk of being "too big" to be a liberal arts institution. At Sonoma State, the question of size seemed to create more tension. Nearly all the SSU participants acknowledged that the university was small compared to the other CSU campuses, but Dyer, Lopes, and others also pointed to the university's interest in growing enrollments to fill its campus, which was master planned for 12,000 students. Some participants acknowledged that liberal arts colleges were typically smaller than SSU was

and that SSU was an outlier in COPLAC because of its size, they felt the administration was more concerned with meeting the CSU's expectations for SSU as a regional university.

Whether large or appropriately small for a liberal arts institution, each university faced the question of selectivity and the ways that interacted with enrollment size. At UNCA, where the enrollment of approximately 3,600 put them at the mean of COPLAC member enrollments, participants wrestled with selectivity the most. Melanie Fox, then-associate dean of students at UNCA, recognized senior leadership's interest in increasing selectivity, but also asked, "if we change this much of ourselves to make ourselves more like the private institutions, does that take away a big part of our mission?" Haggard suggested it may not be that easy to become more selective anyway, noting that UNCA's lack of professional degree programs made it increasingly challenging to recruit students to the university. With a similar lack of professional programs, USAO faced the same challenge of maintaining enrollments but chose to increase admissions standards and selectivity anyway. With the support of their state system, USAO pursued what Gioia et al. (2013) described as identity persistence. In asserting its distinctive identity, and especially separating itself from the regional universities in the state, USAO preempted possible challenges to its identity. Feaver, Weber, and others at USAO saw the increased standards as contributing to the drop in enrollments but remained committed to maintaining that selectivity. For Sonoma State, the mission of the CSU generated its interest in growing enrollments and precluded any increase in selectivity. Historically, the California Master Plan expected CSU campuses to admit the top third of all California high school graduates (Callan, 2012). Though admissions standards have evolved since

the 1960s, the mission of the CSU is still "to provide access to an excellent education to all who are prepared for and wish to participate in collegiate study" (CSU, n.d.-b, "The mission" section). No participants at SSU suggested that the university was interested in greater selectivity, highlighting instead the focus on growing enrollments.

Regardless of why the universities were small, participants identified advantages that were more often facilitated by small enrollments, like small class sizes and greater student-faculty interaction. Perhaps most prevalent was the sense of community engendered by the small campus size. Deans of Students Ryan Henne at SSU, Nancy Hughes at USAO, and Melanie Fox at UNCA all described the welcoming campus communities that were accepting of diverse student populations. The campuses were also diverse in different ways. Moranski, Perez, Dyer, and others highlighted Sonoma State's receiving HSI designation in 2017 as a result of the-President Judy Sakaki's push to increase the diversity and inclusion on campus. Participants at UNCA and USAO admitted their campuses' lower racial diversity but noted the growth of other underrepresented student populations on their campuses. First-generation students, rural students, and LGBTQ students were all described as finding their place at these institutions. Fox, at UNCA, reflected many participants' sentiments: "a lot of students that may have felt like they didn't belong in high school feel like they belong when they come here."

Leadership

While not an attribute of the university per se, leadership is an integral factor in identity construction. Though all members of an organization contribute to the formation and strengthening of the collective identity, leaders often have an outsized influence in

the process (Ashforth & Mael, 1996). These leaders make decisions about which groups to align with as well as sensegiving to other members about their collective identity (Scott & Lane, 2000a). Cole Woodcox, Executive Director of COPLAC, shared the same understanding of leadership when discussing the interaction between COPLAC and an institution's CEO to strengthen an identity: "How COPLAC can go ahead and help an institution think of itself as a public liberal arts-focused or mission-driven institution depends on a number of variables. One of those immediately will be, how does the CEO work with that."

The association with COPLAC helped Feaver at USAO preserve coherence within the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1996). He explained, "I will say that the COPLAC relationship has helped to better inform students and faculty and staff as to what we are." At UNCA, Mann observed this effect of leadership to direct members' attention elsewhere. When Mann first arrived at UNCA, then-Chancellor Mary Grant associated the university closely with COPLAC, while Chancellor Nancy Cable looked more toward private referents like Davidson College. Then-Director of University Communication Sarah Broberg confirmed that redirection and attributed it to Cable's more aspirational goals for the university. President Sakaki also wielded a strong influence at Sonoma State. Many participants there cited the considerable change that she led on campus, particularly regarding the diversification of the student body. Again, this leadership is strong, but did not necessarily align the identity of Sonoma State with the public liberal arts college sector. Rather, her decision followed the direction of the CSU and SSU's more public mission. These different executive approaches demonstrate how leadership can direct as well as strengthen an organization's identity.

Research Question Two: External Stakeholders, Referents, and Associations

The leadership that was so influential on each of the campuses was also the force that drove many of the external connections and defined the peer groups that ended up being viewed as most relevant. The "reference others" that leaders select for an organization provide common sets of characteristics that an organization can choose to align with (Gioia et al., 2010).

State Systems

By their nature as public universities, none of the three case institutions had any choice regarding their membership in their state systems of higher education. Participants, and university leaders in particular, had more discretion in how they chose to view their own institutions and the other state systems members. The examples of leadership decisions above are relevant again here. Many of the participants at Sonoma State noted the incredible influence of the CSU on its individual campuses, and Greg Sawyer, then Vice President for Student Affairs, in particular drew the direct connection between the CSU and SSU's public values: "I can tell you that diversity, equity, and inclusivity are values of the CSU." They were also the values that many participants saw guiding Sakaki's work at the university. For Henne, describing Sakaki's success increasing diversity on campus, "it's almost like it's a brand-new university because it's so different." Elisabeth Wade, Dean of then-School of Science and Technology, mentioned Sakaki's focus on increasing other student populations, like Pell-eligible students, to bring those proportions more in line with the rest of the CSU campuses as well. With such a focus on the goals and values of the CSU, it took Sakaki longer to

imagine how SSU might distinguish itself within the system through its liberal arts focus, according to Moranski. At USAO, strengthening similarities with other state universities was never a priority. Instead, Feaver sought in nearly all ways to remain different: "I have made every effort in the world to argue the case for whoever I'm talking to, to argue the case for the distinctive mission of the college." With a state coordinating board supportive of USAO unique mission, they have largely escaped comparisons with the other Oklahoma publics. Internally, too, those comparisons to define USAO's identity felt to many like "apples to oranges." Participants at UNCA largely viewed their university as different from the fellow North Carolina publics, as well, but some reported feeling the effect of the system. For Ellen Pearson, professor of history, that influence manifested as administrative constraints. Because of system policy, UNCA had less flexibility to innovate curriculum or pedagogy. Haggard recalled pressures to increase enrollments coming from the system office. But Fox attributed UNCA's relative success preserving its identity within the state system not to leadership or a system supportive of its unique mission, but to mostly just flying under the radar.

COPLAC Membership

Overall, participants described their university's membership in COPLAC as important to the organization as a whole, but its relative import to each individual varied. In all three cases, engagement with COPLAC was driven by key stakeholders. At UNCA, involvement was less organizational and more individual. Pearson described her years of experience collaborating with colleagues at other COPLAC member institutions and participating in COPLAC-directed projects. These were opportunities from which Pearson felt UNCA could learn a lot, but she questioned how much the administration

had done to cultivate campus connections to the group. Moranski, in her role as provost, viewed COPLAC and SSU's membership as a real opportunity to make intentional decisions about the centrality of the liberal arts on campus. She pointed to COPLAC's own "evolution toward a more philosophical kind of definition of public liberal arts" and they ways it had helped SSU navigate multiple identities. For USAO, their membership in COPLAC had arguably the strongest organizational impact. Joining COPLAC was pillar of USAO mission enhancement plan in the early 2000s, allowing Feaver to communicate USAO's distinct identity to both internal and external audiences. The three cases here demonstrate how alignment with this association can help both individuals and organizations understand themselves and their roles in larger systems.

Research Question Three: Unique Challenges

Looking back to the challenges of both liberal arts colleges and public universities explored in Chapter 2, many of the difficulties that participants in this study described were familiar to one or both of the other institution types. Participants in all cases expressed concern over their institution's declining enrollments as well as diminishing state funding. One way that challenges became even more acute for the case universities is through their convergence. Participants acknowledged that less available state funding was common to many public institutions, but the problem was compounded at UNCA or USAO or SSU because of the resource-intensive nature of their instructional approaches. Wilkinson, an upper-level administrator at USAO, spoke specifically of the investment required to implement team teaching across much of USAO's interdisciplinary core requirement. UNCA's Melissa Himelein, professor of psychology, described the challenge of delivering more expensive programs at a smaller campus that does not

benefit from economies of scale like larger universities do. In her description of SSU's response to budget restrictions, Dyer hit on an important consequence of adaptations like increasing class sizes. The threat to liberal arts colleges that Breneman (1994) described decades ago was not simply about those colleges surviving, but more specifically about surviving *as liberal arts colleges*. If administrators at these colleges cut expensive liberal arts programs or increase class sizes or add professional degrees in response to student interest or regional economic need, they can ensure the survival of their organization, but they may not be able to preserve their organizational identities.

Implications

The primary goal for this study was to draw attention to an underexplored sector in the higher education landscape. An improved understanding of the ways that the threads from both private liberal arts and public university traditions interact to create a distinct institution type contributes to a conception of a more diverse field of higher education institutions generally. The existence and health of multiple institution types particularly within the public sector enriches the ways that state systems of higher education can benefit students, offering greater access to a wider array of educational experiences. Achieving that variety of outcomes for systems begins with understanding the natures of the institutions that constitute it. To that end, this study suggests several directions for future research and applications for administrators.

The most straightforward path into future research is a deepening of the examination of public liberal arts colleges themselves. This study offered initial insights and comparisons of three such institutions, but it included only some of the many perspectives at each of the case universities that actually constitute their respective

identities. Whether at any of the three institutions studied here or at other public liberal arts colleges, further investigation should include more organizational members. If organizational identity is strengthened through consensus among members (Ashforth & Mael, 1996), the inclusion of more member perceptions of the organization is the path toward more accurately gauging the strength of an organization's identity. A primary group not included in this study was students. Including this group of organizational members would yield valuable insights into the sensemaking and sensegiving that occurs at a college, exploring how these institutions communicate their identity to incoming members. Including more faculty, staff, and administrators, as well, would further reveal the level of consensus around a college's identity, while also addressing other questions about a college's ideographic or holographic nature (Albert & Whetten, 1985). If organizational identity is constructed by aggregating the beliefs of individual members (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991), assembling a larger collection of members' beliefs should lead to a greater understanding of the features that constitute a public liberal arts college identity.

Beyond a clearer understanding of the set of internal attributes that constitute a public liberal arts college's identity, collecting the perspectives and impressions of various stakeholders would also facilitate the exploration of organizational identity dynamics in this field. This study focused only on the perceptions of organizational members of the case institutions, but external stakeholders also play an important role in identity construction and maintenance (Brown, et al., 2006). Including the perspectives of parents, local business leaders, policymakers, and others in future research would allow

researchers to examine how concepts like identity, desired image, and reputation all interact to shape an institution and inform the decisions and behaviors of its members.

Future research on public liberal arts colleges might also extend beyond the individual organization as the unit of analysis. While this study included some consideration of state systems of higher education as external stakeholders in the shaping public liberal arts colleges' identities, there is likely much more to be explored at the system level regarding these colleges. Imagining state system offices or governing boards as social actors, they are entities that determine the goals and the composition of a system as a whole—including how much and what kind of institutional diversity should exist within the system. Although one public liberal arts college might pursue that special mission, system support is critical in the college's fully realizing it, as it was in the case of USAO. Questions remain about the state systems' own interests and priorities as well as their organizational decision-making processes in even broader social and political contexts.

Finally, additional research might also extend into continued consideration of public liberal arts college as an institution type. That the institutions examined in this study diverge considerably along dimensions like size and academic program portfolio suggests that revisiting the utility of the public liberal arts identity prototype is in order. As student demographics and interests change along with structural constraints like state funding, public liberal arts colleges find themselves adapting through changes of their own. Thinking beyond the construct of a public liberal arts college and including new models could allow researchers and practitioners to envision even greater institutional diversity within state systems. Although Marcy (2017) focuses on private small colleges,

her range of contemporary models of small colleges imagines more possibility and flexibility to match models with the unique histories and contexts of small colleges. At the core of this small college landscape remains the traditional undergraduate, residential, liberal arts college, but the New American College model, first proposed by Ernest Boyer in 1994, offers a structure that may reflect more accurate the structure of some small public colleges. While keeping the liberal arts at its core, the New American College model also includes some pre-professional and graduate programs to respond to student demand and promote enrollment—an adaptation implemented by many of the COPLAC member universities already.

Further research in any of these directions would not only contribute to organizational studies and the scholarship on institution types. It would also have practical applicability. The kind of exploration undertaken in this study can be an important part of a process of reflection for public liberal arts colleges and their leadership. If organizations are in a constant process of becoming, as Ashforth and Mael (1996) suggested, then regular self-reflection enables organizations and their members to make intentional decisions about how they want to enact their identities. Institutional leaders could use organizational identity as a framework to guide that reflection, investigate the internal consensus around their college or university's identity, and to better understand the dynamics with external stakeholders that impact that identity.

In an era of skepticism around higher education generally and the liberal arts specifically, these institutions are especially vulnerable to external public and governmental pressures. Despite their significance in providing access to a particular kind of educational experience to more and diverse students within their respective states,

many public liberal arts colleges walk a fine line between executing their special mission and adapting to the political and economic interests of state governments. Clear understandings of their distinct identities and the characteristics contained within them equip these colleges and organizational associations like COPLAC to support and advocate for their special role within state systems and the higher education landscape. If change is inevitable for colleges and universities, as their histories suggest, "identifying the essential elements of institutional mission allows transformation to be focused on preserving the campus, rather than changing it into something that is not recognizable" (Marcy, 2017, p. 4).

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APPENDIX A: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR CASE SELECTION

Table A1

Descriptive Statistics for COPLAC Members and Individual Case Institutions

	COPLAC Group			Case Institutions		
	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	UNCA	USAO	SSU
Year Founded	1905	1828	1969	1927	1908	1960
First COPLAC membership year	1999	1992	2016	1992	2007	1999
Total enrollment	3,559	726	8,887	3,600	800	8,887
Percent of undergraduate students	91.7%	62.6%	100%	99.6%	100%	91.6%
Percent of full-time students	81.23%	55.42%	99.86%	84.36%	90.88%	87.59%
Percent of applicants admitted	76.59%	53%	98%	84%	64%	91%
Total price for in-state students living on campus	$25,363.52	$19,200	$32,404	$20,555	$19,200	$28,268
Percent of first-time undergraduates who are in-state students	79.86%	39%	99%	87%	87%	99%
Percent of full-time, first-time students awarded Pell grants	38.78%	18%	56%	38%	49%	37%
Percent of student who are	68.07%	44%	85%	75%	54%	44%

White, non-Hispanic						
Student-to-Faculty ratio	14	7	22	13	12	22
Per FTE instructional expenditure				$9,493	$9,328	$8,454

With variables less suited to consider means and ranges, particularly Carnegie Classifications, examining frequencies helped in the case selection process, as well.

Table A2

Carnegie Classification 2018: Basic for COPLAC Members and Individual Case Institutions

	Frequency	Percent	UNCA	USAO	SSU
18: Master's Colleges & Universities: Larger Programs	4	14.81			X
19: Master's Colleges & Universities: Medium Programs	5	18.52			
20: Master's Colleges & Universities: Small Programs	4	14.81			
21: Baccalaureate Colleges: Arts & Sciences Focus	11	40.74	X	X	
22: Baccalaureate Colleges: Diverse Fields	3	11.11			
Total	27	100.00			

Note. UNCA and USAO both fall into the expected category of Baccalaureate Colleges: Arts & Sciences Focus, which is the most typical among COPLAC members. Sonoma

State reflects the range of possibilities with its classification as a Master's University with larger programs.

Table A3

Carnegie Classification 2018: Undergraduate Instructional Program for COPLAC Members and Individual Case Institutions

	Frequency	Percent	UNCA	USAO	SSU
6: Arts & sciences focus, no graduate coexistence	3	11.11			
7: Arts & sciences focus, some graduate coexistence	1	3.70			
9: Arts & sciences plus professions, no graduate coexistence	2	7.41			
10: Arts & sciences plus professions, some graduate coexistence	4	14.81	X		
12: Balanced arts & sciences/professions, no graduate coexistence	2	7.41		X	
13: Balanced arts & sciences/professions, some graduate coexistence	11	40.74			X
15: Professions plus arts & sciences, no graduate coexistence	1	3.70			
16: Professions plus arts & sciences, some graduate coexistence	3	11.11			
Total	27	100.00			

Note. Although the three case institutions cluster around the "center" of this range, their different classifications reflect some difference in either the balance between arts & sciences programs and professional programs or the presence of graduate programs.

Table A4

Carnegie Classification 2018: Size & Setting for COPLAC Members and Individual Case Institutions

	Frequency	Percent	UNCA	USAO	SSU
8: Four-year, very small, highly residential	2	7.41		X	
10: Four-year, small, primarily residential	3	11.11			
11: Four-year, small, highly residential	8	29.63			
13: Four-year, medium, primarily residential	8	29.63	X		X
14: Four-year, medium, highly residential	6	22.22			
Total	27	100.00			

Note. UNCA and SSU are classified as the same size and setting—medium, primarily residential—despite a difference of about 5,000 students. USAO, however, is more typical of the classical liberal arts college in these terms, classified as very small and highly residential.

APPENDIX B: SAMPLE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol – Multi-Case Study of Organizational Identity at Public Liberal Arts Colleges

Each interview was expected to last approximately 45 minutes. Participants included university administrators, program directors, and faculty across the disciplines. Due to the online format of conducting interviews, consent forms were signed by participants electronically and returned to the researcher before the interviews took place. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher reviewed the following points from the invitation and consent process:

Each question asked is meant to ascertain your personal opinions, judgements, and experiences. You are not being asked to speak on behalf of or offer comments as a spokesperson for your institution. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions I will ask, and you are welcome to refrain from answering anything that you would rather not discuss. You also may end the interview at any time.

You have the option to keep your identity confidential for this study. If you choose to do so, care will be taken to exclude your name and other identifying information from the data when it is reported. Because of the nature of the study, the identity of the institution will be disclosed, but we can protect your individual identity using a pseudonym or role-based identifier. You may change your decision regarding confidentiality at any time.

Do you have any questions before we begin? (If participant has agreed to audio/video recording:) I am going to begin recording our conversation now.

1. Does [UNIVERSITY NAME] have a strong identity?
2. What is that identity?
    a. What specific features of the university contribute to its identity?
    b. What about its identity sets [UNIVERSITY NAME] apart from other colleges or universities?
    c. Have you seen any changes in the university's identity over your time here?
3. What does it mean for [UNIVERSITY NAME] to be a public liberal arts college?
    a. Is it important to be a member of COPLAC?

    b. What other schools do you see as peers? Competitors?

4. How does belonging to the state university system affect the university's identity or work?

    a. Is the state system supportive of [UNIVERSITY NAME]'s unique identity/role?

5. How do you think [UNIVERSITY NAME] is viewed by external constituents/stakeholders?

    a. Other colleges and universities?

    b. The general public?

6. What are the benefits or challenges of being a public liberal arts college/university?

    a. Have there been any instances where the institution has made decisions that don't seem to align with its identity (in whole or part)?

7. How does being at a public liberal arts college/university affect your work specifically?

    a. How often are you actively considerate of the public liberal arts identity in your work?

    b. How often do you consider other COPLAC members or other peer institutions as models or guides in your work?

    c. Does [UNIVERSITY NAME]'s identity pose advantages or obstacles to making certain decisions or taking actions in your work?

8. How well do you feel the liberal arts side and the public side of the university's identity work together?

9. Is there anything I haven't asked about that we should discuss further?

APPENDIX C: QUALITATIVE CODE LIST

Code System	**Memo**
first answer	This category is used to identify a participant's answer to my first interview question of "What is the university's identity?"
identity attribute	This category is used when any feature or characteristic of the organization that contributes to its identity is mentioned. It is the parent category for specific attribute codes.
official designation	This category includes any mention of the university's official designation/recognition, from the state or otherwise, as THE public liberal arts college, or honors college, or something distinguishing it within the state system.
history	This category identifies any time a participant refers to the university's history.
mission and values	This category includes participants' statement on their university's mission and/or values. It is a parent category for codes regarding specific parts of the overall mission or specific values.
access	This category is used for any comment regarding the access prospective students might or should have to the university or how the university sees its prospective student pool. Separate codes apply to cost of attendance (affordability) and admission rate (selectivity), so this is distinct from those.
affordability	This category includes statements about the university's expressed commitment to its affordability. That does not necessarily include or reflect its actual price, but only statements about how affordable it should be or wants to be.
cost of attendance	This category is used when participants mention the price or tuition of the university, or any

	comment about how actually affordable it is to attend.
monetary value	Related to cost of attendance, this category applies to any mention not only to cost but to overall value of attending the university. Cost-benefit relationship.
inclusiveness	This category is used for any comment regarding the which students the university sees as serving or wanting to include.
liberal outcomes	This category is used for statements regarding the university's mission of providing students with a liberal education or any of its specific outcomes. It is a parent code for specific liberal education outcomes. It may also be used when a broad phrase like "liberal education" or liberal arts education" is used without any more specific outcome identified.
writing and communication	This category applies to statements regarding the liberal education outcome of writing and communication.
problem-solving	This category applies to statements regarding the liberal education outcome of problem solving.
creativity	This category applies to statements regarding the liberal education outcome of creativity.
lifelong learning	This category applies to statements regarding the liberal education outcome of lifelong learning.
civic engagement	This category applies to statements regarding the liberal education outcome of civic engagement.
leadership development	This category applies to statements regarding the liberal education outcome of leadership development.
cultural appreciation	This category applies to statements regarding the liberal education outcome of cultural appreciation, including appreciating differences between cultures, as well as appreciating cultural events or products (e.g., the arts).

critical thinking	This category applies to statements regarding the liberal education outcome of critical thinking.
holistic development	This category applies to statements regarding the liberal education outcome of holistic development - i.e., wanting students to be well-rounded people.
operational efficiency	Applied to discussion of the university enacting more business-like practices for efficiency, accountability, etc. These may be finance-related, but also just more managerial or bureaucratic.
professional preparation	This category is for any statement about the university's interest in preparing students for professional careers.
service area	This category applies to any statement of the size/scope of the area – e.g., region of the state, whole state, national - from which the university intends or expects to recruit and enroll students.
service to state	This category applies to comments about the university's service to the state through research activity or university programs such as extension.
social mobility	This category is used for any mention of the public purpose of higher education as a way to improve life circumstances and options.
undergraduate education	This category is used for statements about the university's mission and commitment to teaching undergraduate students.
curriculum	This category is for statements about the programs available at the university or components or features of the degree curricula. The parent code for more specific traits of the curriculum.
instructional profile	This category is used to identify statements about the university's instructional profile, including the distribution of degree programs across the liberal arts and professionally focused degree categories.
strong core	This category is for any mention of a core liberal arts or humanities curriculum that is a common experience for all students, regardless of major.
specific disciplines	This category includes any mention of the liberal arts as being specific disciplines.

interdisciplinarity	This category includes any statement describing the interdisciplinarity, or lack thereof, of the curriculum.
rigorous curriculum	This category is used any time a participant mentions the rigor of a curriculum, particularly as a feature of the liberal arts education.
campus features	This category is for statements about the programs available at the university or components or features of the degree curricula. The parent code for more specific traits of the curriculum.
athletics	This category is for any mention of athletics programs or culture around athletics at the university.
campus life	This category is used for comments about student activities or experiences outside of the classroom - excluding athletics.
class size	This category is for any statements about the size (number of students) of individual classes at the university.
distinctive programs	This category is used for any mention of the university's high impact or distinctive educational programs, curricular or supplementary (e.g., lecture series, conferences, etc.)
employee workload	This category applies to any discussion of the responsibilities of any individual participant, or of the general sense at the university of how many areas of responsibility one employee might have.
enrollment size	This category is for any reference to the university's total enrollment size.
faculty quality	This category applies to statements about the quality of the faculty, overall or individual members. Quality includes teaching ability, research production, mentoring, or other activity. It also includes comments about faculty rank (tenure track, adjunct, etc.), as well as their options for being at other types of institutions, etc.
funding	This category is used when the participant mentions sources and levels of funding for the university.

graduate coexistence	This category is for statements regarding the presence of graduate education at the university.
high impact practices	This category is for any mention of high impact practices (Kuh, 2005) at the university - study abroad, community service, etc. - other than undergraduate research, which has its own category.
in-state residence	This category is used for any statement about the number or proportion of in-state students attending the university.
location	This category is used for statements about the geographic location of the university.
online delivery	This category is used for any statement about the delivery of instruction online (especially as opposed to in-person class meetings), as well as online delivery of other experiences.
organizational culture	This category applies to any statement that describes “how we do things” at the university. Related to, but different from, organizational identity.
residential campus	This category applies to any statement about the residential component of the campus, including students of the university living on or off campus.
selectivity	This category is used when participants mention the university's selectivity or acceptance rates.
student population	This category is for any comment about characteristics of current students of the university or of the kinds of prospective students the university does, or would like to, attract.
student support	This category is used for any statement regarding the value of or existence of student support outside the classroom - academic, emotional, holistic.
student-faculty interaction	This category is for any statement regarding how much time or the closeness of interaction students have with faculty in or out of the classroom.
student-faculty ratio	This category is for any reference to the ratio of students to faculty at their university.

traditions	This category applies to any discussion of campus traditions that reinforce an identity through a potentially enduring nature.
undergraduate research	This category applies the any statement about opportunities for undergraduate research. It is a high impact practice that COPLAC highlights among its members.
university community engagement	This category is for statements about the ways the university as an organization interacts or engages with the community through formal or informal partnerships or otherwise.
external influences	This is a high-level code primarily used as an umbrella for external stakeholders, referents, and membership orgs
external stakeholders	This category is used when statements describe external audiences that the university may communicate their identity to. This includes the general public, the state government, and possibly others.
state government	This is a child code for external audience, used specifically for statements regarding the state government, distinct from the state higher education system, as an audience or potential influence on the university's identity – e.g., the governor or state legislature expressing goals or interests for the university.
state system	Anything related specifically to the administrative impact of the governing/coordinating board of the state system
stakeholder expectations	Any indication that the participant perceives different external groups (e.g., state authorities, prospective students) as wanting different things from the university.
reference others	This category is used when a participant identifies other institutions or groups of institutions as relevant for comparison. This is a parent code for more specific categories of reference others.
individual COPLAC referent	This applies to any mention of an individual COPLAC (or other public liberal arts) college.

private referents	This category is used any time a participant identifies a private institution as a reference other - a point of contrast or comparison that can shape the focal university's identity construction.
private in-state referent	This applies to any mention of a private institution within the case university's home state.
private national referent	This applies to any mention of a private institution outside of the case university's home state.
state system members	This category is used when a participant mentions the group of universities in the state system collectively or individually to provide comparison or contrast in the focal university's identity construction. This also includes any discussion of the university position in the state system of higher education, including the influence exerted on the university by that system.
membership associations	This is applied to any passage about connections to other universities through voluntary (i.e., not state systems) formal associations.
individual membership association	This category applies to a participant's membership in any professional association as an individual (e.g., NASPA, NACADA, disciplinary assocs., etc.).
organizational membership association	This category applies to mentions of the university's membership in any organizational associations (e.g., AAC&U, APLU, COPLAC).
COPLAC	Any mention of COPLAC, the university's membership, or its influence on the participant's work.
identity construction	This category is the parent category for codes that relate to a university's identity construction through internal or external influences. This group of codes is deducted from organizational identity theory.
multiple identities	Any time discussion of multiple identities or missions has created tensions or challenges.
leadership	Any mention of the university's leadership (i.e., president or chancellor, cabinet or executive council, or deans or chairs) influence the priorities

	of the university or the relative importance of different identity attributes.
challenge	This category is used when a participant identifies a campus attribute or other identity influence as a challenge.
resource intensive	Applied to any comment on how small colleges or liberal arts programs are more resource intensive and can't leverage economies of scale as much.
declining enrollments	Any time the participant mentions a challenge with declining enrollments - in higher education generally or at their own university.
public understanding	Any discussion of public concerns regarding the value of higher education generally or of the liberal arts.
identity strength	This category applies to any comment from a participant about how strong or not the institution's organizational identity is.
intended image	This category is used when a participant makes a claim about the image the university wishes to project to external audiences. That image may or may not be tightly aligned with the participant's perception of the university's identity. I'm also including statements about vision - goals for what the university's image or identity will be in the future.
construed image	This category is used when the participant describes how they believe external audiences understand the university's identity. This may also include instances of mirroring.
aspiration	This category is used for any statement that indicates what goals or aspirations the institution may have for what identity it wants to have or is striving toward.