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INSTITUTIONS OF OPPORTUNITY: USING PRESIDENTS' NARRATIVES TO RE-TELL THE STORY OF PUBLIC REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	The purpose of this qualitative study was to provide an appreciative re-telling of public regional universities (PRUs) to advance the study of postsecondary education.
Background	Journalists, scholars, and policymakers frequently describe PRUs from a deficit perspective. The dominant narrative about PRUs influences how we prepare new higher education professionals, where faculty and staff members opt to apply (and stay), where students choose to study, how policymakers craft legislation, and where donors decide to give money.
Methodology	Guided by principles of appreciative inquiry, the study features organizational narratives through interviews with 19 active presidents of PRUs.
Contribution	This study underscores what is working well at PRUs—what appreciative inquiry calls the "positive core" of organizations. This positive core can be mined to advance these organizations and improve how we study postsecondary education, prepare new higher education professionals, and craft legislation.
Findings	Presidents' narratives revealed the positive core of public regional universities, which consisted of (1) serving marginalized student populations, (2) transforming lives through student success, (3) employing mission-driven teacher-scholars, (4) prioritizing low tuition and lean management, and (5) promoting the economic and cultural welfare of the region.
Recommendations for Practitioners	This study sheds light on the need to study PRUs in higher education administration graduate programs. Additionally, re-telling the story of PRUs can influence the ways in which higher education faculty members and staff think and communicate about their institutions by identifying possible strengths they can showcase and on which they can build.

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Recommendation for Researchers	This study calls on researchers to critically evaluate the language they use to describe PRUs and the extent to which they perpetuate the dominant narrative about these institutions. It also recommends the use of appreciative inquiry as a way to understand and enhance postsecondary education institutions. Lastly, this study recommends additional scholarly attention on PRUs.
Impact on Society	This study can elevate societal awareness of PRUs and increase public support for them. Additionally, this study can help to identify strengths at PRUs that can be leveraged to enhance these institutions and benefit the communities they serve.
Future Research	This study reveals several fruitful avenues for future research, including how PRUs serve Minoritized, veteran, adult, low-income, and first-generation students, the ways in which these institutions contain costs and keep tuition low, and the role of PRUs in the geography of college opportunity.
Keywords	public, regional, comprehensive, university, opportunity, narrative, president, qualitative, appreciative

INTRODUCTION

There are over 400 public regional universities (PRUs) in the United States (American Association of State Colleges and Universities [AASCU], 2018). Also known as "state colleges and universities" (e.g., AASCU, 2018), "public master's universities," (e.g., Titus, Vamosiu, & McClure, 2016), and "regional comprehensive universities" (e.g., Orphan, 2018), PRUs are located in every U.S. state and serve urban, suburban, and rural communities. PRUs educate over 20% of undergraduate students in the United States, including large shares of Minoritized, veteran, adult, low-income, and first-generation students (Orphan & McClure, 2018). According to AASCU (2014), an advocacy organization for the sector, PRUs "share a learning- and teaching-centered culture, a historic commitment to underserved populations and a dedication to research and creativity that advances their regions' economic progress and cultural development" (para. 1). Because of their role in advancing access and social mobility in postsecondary education, PRUs have recently been called "institutions of opportunity" (AASCU, 2018; McClure, 2017).

Despite their importance to postsecondary education, journalists, scholars, and policymakers frequently describe PRUs from a deficit perspective. For example, "undistinguished" (Selingo, 2015) and "amorphous" (Schneider & Deane, 2015) are two labels that have recently been employed in popular media and scholarly literature to describe PRUs. They are viewed as undistinguished because they often lack the traditional trappings of prestige in U.S. postsecondary education, such as highly selective admissions criteria, immense infusions of federal research money, and nationally-competitive athletics programs (Brewer, Gates, & Goldman, 2002). As a result, PRUs are frequently described as "second tier," "commuter schools," or "in the middle" of U.S. postsecondary education's resource-prestige hierarchy (Grubb & Lazerson, 2003; Henderson, 2007). They are viewed as amorphous because, lacking the resources to launch public relations campaigns and the history to forge nationally-recognized organizational identities, they are considered organizationally indistinct or generic (Morphew & Baker, 2004; Orphan, 2015). Even more forgiving epithets of PRUs, such as the "university next door" (Schneider & Deane, 2015), "colleges of the forgotten Americans" (Kinkeade & Katsinas, 2011), and the "people's university" (Henderson, 2007), convey plainness, anonymity, and convenience.

There is a dominant narrative about PRUs within the study of postsecondary education—one that undervalues these institutions and sometimes perpetuates partial-truths about them. Although it is easy to disregard the dominant narrative as little more than the sum of metaphors and headlines, nar-

ratives are a basic means by which people inside and outside organizations make sense of experience and structure cognition (Boland & Tenkasi, 1995). Organizational theorists (e.g., Boje, 2001; Rhodes & Brown, 2005) have demonstrated how narratives help organizational insiders infuse events with meaning to guide action, assist stakeholders with presenting information to secure resources and support, and aid leaders in communicating culture to constituents. Despite representing largely intangible, subjective accounts, the stories we tell about postsecondary institutions can influence how we prepare new professionals in postsecondary education, where faculty and staff members opt to apply (and stay), where students choose to study, how policymakers craft legislation, and where donors decide to give money. Given that humans are fundamentally storytelling animals, many actions and decisions hinge upon the narratives we tell about colleges and universities (Gottschall, 2013).

The purpose of this study was to shift from a deficit-based narrative to an appreciative re-telling of PRUs in an effort to advance the study of postsecondary education. Guided by principles of appreciative inquiry (Cockrell & McArthur-Blair, 2012), I collected narratives through in-depth interviews with 19 active presidents of PRUs. Rather than emphasize challenges and problems, this paper underscores what is working well at these institutions—what appreciative inquiry calls the "positive core" of organizations. There are several reasons why re-telling the story of PRUs through the lens of appreciative inquiry is important. One calculation estimates that over 70% of students enrolled in public, four-year institutions attend PRUs (Fryar, 2015). The fact that so many students attend PRUs, despite the dominant narrative, is partly a consequence of these institutions (1) being geographically dispersed and within reach for students wanting to stay close to home (Hillman, 2016) and (2) offering a comprehensive array of degree options responsive to the regional economy (Orphan, 2018). If the dominant narrative insufficiently acknowledges the contributions of PRUs, there is risk of under-appreciating decades of thought-leadership in making college accessible and affordable for millions of students (Finnegan, 1991). In a time of retreating state support for postsecondary education, narratives can influence how policymakers and donors perceive, evaluate, and fund PRUs. It behooves journalists and scholars who write about and study postsecondary education to critically examine if we are painting a complete portrait of these institutions to ensure that students, faculty, and staff are being appropriately recognized and resourced.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Most scholarly attention in higher education is directed towards research universities, selective liberal arts institutions, and community colleges (Kirst, Stevens, & Proctor, 2010). Nevertheless, there are numerous scholarly contributions to our understanding of PRUs on which this study builds. With a few notable exceptions (e.g., Orphan, 2015, 2018; Orphan & Miller, 2016), the literature on PRUs consists of five groups: (1) historical studies; (2) introductory and classificatory studies, (3) backdrop studies, (4) faculty experience studies, and (5) striving for prestige studies. This section reviews each group, noting broad themes and any gaps to which this study responds.

HISTORICAL STUDIES

One group of studies addresses the institutional antecedents and the historical evolution of PRUs (Finnegan, 1991; Grubb & Lazerson, 2005; Henderson, 2007; Ogren, 2003, 2005). These studies shed light on the institutions that became what we today recognize as public regional universities, such as normal schools, branch campuses, and YMCA colleges (Finnegan, 1991; Ogren, 2003). Historical studies also demonstrate the students served by these earlier institution types, underscoring how access has been central to PRUs from the very beginning. As Finnegan (1991) and Ogren (2005) showed, these institutions often removed barriers to postsecondary education for Minoritized student populations, including women, working adults, and African Americans, by providing specialized curricula that trained individuals for particular professions or occupations demanded by the regional labor market. Historical studies reveal PRUs' role in the development of mass postsecondary education in the United States and highlight these institutions' long history in educating marginalized and

"non-traditional" student populations. It is important to bring these strengths into the present and situate them within the challenges of the contemporary postsecondary education context.

Introductory and Classificatory Studies

Introductory studies provide a descriptive overview of the missions of PRUs and attempt to identify differentiating characteristics for classificatory purposes (e.g., Fryar, 2015; Henderson, 2007, 2009; Kinkeade & Katsinas, 2011; Schneider & Deane, 2015). Perhaps the most-cited example in this group is Henderson's (2007) introduction to the state comprehensive university, which he wrote as a guide for new faculty members at these institutions. Some introductory studies assume that readers are unfamiliar with or not knowledgeable about PRUs. Schneider and Deane (2015) succinctly reflected this theme, asking: "If necessity is the mother of invention, why, in this case, did it yield a product [PRUs] that is best known for being unknown?" (p. 5). A common refrain in this group of studies is that PRUs have unclear missions, such that it is easier to define these institutions by what they are not (Henderson, 2007; Schneider & Deane, 2015). To aid in classification, these studies also tend to compare PRUs to research universities. Although introductory and classificatory studies serve an important purpose, there is need to move beyond providing an overview of these institutions or comparing them relative to better-known institution types.

Backdrop Studies

A third group of studies primarily utilizes PRUs as an institutional context to study something else, such as institutional spending, cost efficiency, or persistence to graduation (Doyle, 2015; Hedrick, Wassell, & Henson, 2009; Rodriguez, 2015; Titus et al., 2016; Yin, 2015). I refer to this group as "backdrop studies" not because they are insignificant, but rather because PRUs serve as a context or location to explore a question of greater interest to the authors. Several of these studies are financial analyses (e.g., Titus & Egan, 2016; Titus et al., 2016), which suggest that PRUs are efficient institutions that cannot graduate more students without additional resources. Backdrop studies often treat PRUs as a homogenous whole, inadequately capturing the diversity within the sector. PRUs vary widely in terms of institution size, student demographics, mission, history, culture, selectivity, and geography. As was true with historical and introductory studies, backdrop studies provide valuable insights about PRUs, but their tendency towards aggregation reinforces the trope that these institutions are identity-less (Orphan, 2015).

Faculty Experience Studies

Many studies of PRUs center on the experiences of faculty members employed at these institutions (Finnegan, 1993; Gardner, 2013; Gonzales, 2013, 2014; Henderson, 2007, 2009; Henderson & Buchanan, 2007; Henderson & Kane, 1991; Youn & Price, 2009). Examining the challenges that faculty members face at PRUs as a result of mission drift and shifting tenure expectations is a common theme in these studies. Unlike the previous two groups, faculty experience studies are less likely to essentialize PRUs. However, they are limited to a single—albeit important—group of stakeholders. Faculty experience studies utilize qualitative methods that better attend to the ways in which PRUs change and allow for more complex portrayals of the professional opportunities and challenges at these institutions. A similar attention to story-telling needs to be applied to other stakeholders and to PRUs more broadly.

Striving for Prestige Studies

The rationales, processes, and consequences of institutional striving for prestige constitute the final group studies on PRUs (Finnegan, 1993, Finnegan & Gamson, 1996; Gardner, 2013; Henderson & Kane, 1991; Kinne-Clawson, 2017; Morphew 2000, Morphew & Baker, 2004; O'Meara, 2007; Orphan, 2015). The primary claim in these studies is that PRUs pursue prestige by seeking better rankings or to be reclassified as research universities. In this group of studies, PRUs drift away from their

teaching-centered cultures, sometimes intentionally to secure status and resources and sometimes unintentionally as a result of hiring faculty members trained at research universities. Recently, several studies have complicated the view that all PRUs strive for prestige. Kinne-Clawson's (2017) dissertation found that a complex combination of factors motivated growth in graduate education at PRUs, including the desire for additional state funds and meeting regional economic needs. Orphan (2015) argued that some PRUs strive for prestige in ways that affirm or reinterpret their public service mission. An important contribution of Orphan's work is showing that PRUs possess distinct organizational identities that inform unique institutional strategies in the midst of public policy challenges.

This study owes a debt to these important precursors, yet it attempts to address omissions and shortcomings in the literature by centering the contemporary assets and contributions of PRUs as organizations.

AN APPRECIATIVE RE-TELLING

There is a discernible "appreciative turn" in higher education research, with studies attempting to cast new light on institutions whose contributions and assets have not been completely or accurately captured in popular treatments, such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (e.g., Esters & Strayhorn, 2013; Gasman & Bowman, 2011) and Hispanic-Serving Institutions (e.g., Garcia, 2016, 2017; Nuñez, Hurtado, & Calderon Galdeano, 2015). There is also a growing body of scholarship that attempts to correct for systematic neglect in research and policy of broad-access institutions (e.g., Crisp, Doran, & Salis Reyes, 2018). Although these efforts to varying degrees refrain from deficit-based approaches to studying institutions, none of them utilizes an explicitly appreciative conceptualization.

The conceptual framework for this study draws upon principles of appreciative inquiry (AI) (Cockrell & McArthur-Blair, 2012). AI is an organizational development theory and approach whose application in the study of U.S. postsecondary education has been limited (Calabrese, 2006; Giles & Anderson, 2008; Giles & Kung, 2010; Neville, 2008). In explaining the connection between AI and postsecondary education, Cockrell and McArthur-Blair (2012) argued: "The news and world around us are filled with the problems of higher education and questions like, 'What is wrong with higher education?' We ask a different question: 'What is the positive core of higher education, and how can that core be mined for the future of education?'" (p. 2). In this way, AI highlights what is working well (i.e., it is appreciative) and engages people in asking questions and telling stories (i.e., it engages in inquiry).

One principle of AI is that it is problematic to focus intensively on the deficits in an organization or system. Focusing too intently on problem identification and solution (what Cockrell and McArthur-Blair, 2012, call the "problem-solving paradigm") can create something of a self-fulfilling prophecy: "If we recognize that our worlds are socially constructed and that what we focus on generates the next act and the future, then there are real and serious issues in focusing only on the problems" (p. 5). The end results of a deficit-based approach to understanding and developing organizations include low morale, frustration with the lack of change, and "recycling problems over and over rather than moving to better futures" (p. 18). The problem-solving paradigm is common in the study of postsecondary education and contributes to the deficit-based narrative of PRUs. As an alternative to the problem-solving paradigm, AI does not advocate that organizations or scholars ignore problems. Rather, AI seeks to reframe the approach to organizational development by better understanding the desire driving the identification of problems, such as improved outcomes for students or financial sustainability.

In lieu of focusing on deficits, AI calls on educators, researchers, and policymakers to assume that every organization has "something that works right—things that give it life when it is most alive, effective, successful, and connected in healthy ways" (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003, p. xvii). The inquiry process, then, is designed to unearth this positive core and highlight it in ways that

"heighten energy, sharpen vision, and inspire action for change" (Cockrell & McArthur-Blair, 2012, p. 13). When people and organizations are recognized and rewarded for what they do well, they are motivated to do more of that, as opposed to being discouraged by the constant drum of failures and weaknesses. Another important principle of AI is that inquiry and change are inextricably bound, such that asking questions leads to organizational development. However, the type of question posed matters, and questions that enable appreciative evaluation better foster positive change. A third principle of AI focuses on narratives and stresses the importance of story-telling in surfacing the goodness of an organization.

AI informed the study at several points. First, as a way of seeing the world, AI helped to reveal the ways in which a deficit-based perspective has been routinely applied to PRUs in the study of postsecondary education and underscored the promises of an alternative path. Second, AI shaped the data collection strategy, which focused on collecting narratives from individuals whose job it is to tell the story of the PRU they lead—active presidents. Additionally, AI informed the type of questions I asked of interview participants, which largely created opportunities for presidents to discuss successes, innovative practices, and things that gave their institutions life. Lastly, AI provided language for the ultimate goal of this research, which was to move from an excessive focus on problems at PRUs to illuminating the positive core in order to advance postsecondary education research and policy.

Research Design

Utilizing principles of appreciative inquiry, I decided to pursue a qualitative research design that focused on story-telling and tapped into direct experience of PRUs. This study was not primarily interested in individual experience, but rather the assets and contributions of organizations as articulated by a group of well-informed organizational stakeholders—active presidents. Thus, my research design draws from narrative approaches to organizational studies (Boje, 2001), which I refer to as organizational narratology. Although there has been growing interest in using narratives in organizational studies since the 1990s (Rhodes & Brown, 2005), there are several seminal works in higher education scholarship dating back to the 1970s that use the approach. Most notably, Clark (1970) emphasized that stories, myths, sagas, and other narrative forms were an invaluable data source to understand colleges and universities as organizations.

Falling under a social constructivist paradigm, organizational narratology sees organizations as narratively constructed (Rhodes & Brown, 2005). According to organizational narratology, storytelling is "a way that people reflexively make sense of organizations and organizational life and infuse their working lives with meaning" (Rhodes & Brown, 2005, p. 171). Organizational narratology has been used to examine the stories that people within organizations tell themselves or others to describe past events, anticipate the future, analyze relationships, and respond to success or failures. Furthermore, organizational theorists have argued that stories can be "diagnostic aids that people use to understand organizational norms and values…and as a means for helping people envision potential future realities from creative interpretations of the past" (Rhodes & Brown, 2005, p. 173). A key feature of organizational narratology is that it does not treat organizations as static or homogenous entities, but rather processual and complex networks. Consistent with AI and organizational narratology, this study sees PRUs as organizations that are "subjectively and intersubjectively constructed through the stories told by researchers and organizational stakeholders" (p. 178). I sought to co-construct our understanding of PRUs and revise the dominant narrative through re-telling the narratives of active presidents.

Data Collection and Analysis

One of the main empirical materials in organizational narratology is the semi-structured interview (Boje, 2001). Accordingly, I conducted 19 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with active presidents of PRUs. I elected to interview presidents because one of the main responsibilities of presidents is to tell the story of their institutions to a wide range of constituents, including donors, policymakers,

and students. Moreover, in light of AI, I was interested in helping to uncover what is working at PRUs, and presidents are frequently tasked with developing strategic plans that leverage the strengths of their campuses. Presidents, provosts, deans, and other upper-level administrators fit common definitions of "elites" in the context of qualitative research (McClure, 2017). Research using interviews with elites is less common because of difficulties related to power imbalances and gaining access (Harvey, 2011).

In order to gain access with presidents for this study, I attended two meetings for leaders of PRUs hosted by a national organization. I also relied upon well-connected higher education policy experts to introduce me to presidents, and I reached out to presidents with whom I had no connection in order to achieve representation from diverse geographical regions and institution sizes. Table 1 provides basic information about the 19 presidents without offering too many details and compromising confidentiality. Most interview participants were white men, which is discussed in the limitations. Presidents typically have busy schedules and travel frequently. For this reason, I intentionally set aside a long time period for the study and offered to conduct an interview at any point over a four-month period. I conducted all interviews by phone, which reduced my ability to note shifts in expression or body language. However, as Harvey (2011) explained, elites appreciate the convenience of interviewing by phone, and "in many instances, the alternative to a phone interview is no interview" (p. 435).

Table 1. Interview Participants – Demographic and Other Information

Gender	Race	Years in Position
Man	White	7
Man	White	4
Man	Native American	3
Woman	White	18
Man	White	8
Man	White	2
Woman	White	1
Man	White	2
Man	White	1
Man	White	2
Man	White	2
Man	White	1
Man	Latino	5
Woman	White	1
Woman	White	3
Woman	White	2
Woman	White	7
Woman	White	3
Man	White	5

Elites in higher education often expect a knowledgeable or expert-level interviewer (McClure, 2017). To increase the success of interviews, I tested my questions with a retired president of a PRU and incorporated his feedback. I prepared for each interview by downloading the strategic plan, historical information, as well as basic enrollment and completion data for each institution from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. Interviews lasted 35-75 minutes. I asked open-ended questions that allowed participants to narrate their experiences and viewpoints, and questions were largely strengths-based, in keeping with principles of AI. For example, all interviews started with a question that asked presidents to tell the story of how they came to lead their institution. Subsequent questions asked what made interview participants' campus special or what practices and policies demonstrate commitment to student success. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Rather than break the narratives up into small segments of text through a traditional coding process, I utilized Jones, Torres, and Arminio's (2014) steps for narrative analysis. First, I read each interview transcript and noted themes, keeping in mind how themes related to each participant's narrative yet also cut across interviews/institutions. This led to the second step of analysis, which was to re-read transcripts to develop a story that both captures the whole (i.e., PRUs as a sector) and the patterns in the story (i.e., assets and contributions that comprise themes). Themes emerged from labeling sections of text without breaking apart the stories. Lastly, I connected the themes to the literature and theory, thinking through the ways in which the stories presidents told reflected or deviated from prevalent understandings of PRUs. In the presentation of findings, I phrase themes as gerunds to convey the processual nature of PRUs, as described in organizational narratology (Rhodes & Brown, 2005). Moreover, I accompany description of themes with quotations from presidents to support the claims (Jones et al., 2014).

Positionality, Trustworthiness, and Limitations

Jones et al. (2014) noted that in narrative analysis, "the researcher also 're-storys' [the] narratives through analysis and interpretation" (p. 85). This means I made decisions about how to represent the voices of participants, placing me in the role of narrator. For this reason, it is crucial that I recognize the ways in which I am positioned relative to the people and places I studied. I am a faculty member at a PRU and designed this research because of my perception of a chasm between popular treatments of these institutions and my experiences at one of them. Although I pay close attention to power dynamics in my research, as a white, cisgender, heterosexual man, I acknowledge the ways in which my privileges may have influenced what I asked and did not ask in the interviews, heard and did not hear in the analysis, as well as what I wrote and did not write in the re-telling process. As organizational narratology underscores (Rhodes & Brown, 2005), this appreciative re-telling is a subjective co-construction of PRUs.

A concern that often surfaces with elite interviews is the extent to which the data can be trusted. Presidents are politically savvy, and it is not unusual for them provide rosy descriptions of their institutions, or to be cautious in responding because of their position (McClure, 2017). One strategy I used to ensure trustworthiness was to re-ask or re-word challenging questions that presidents avoided or sidestepped during interviews. Following interviews, I tested my interpretations and solicited feedback from the presidents to further increase trustworthiness. I also corroborated presidents' assertions by looking up initiatives, accolades, and figures referenced during interviews. Lastly, I asked several experts on PRUs in academic and policy spheres to read this manuscript and offer comments on my interpretations.

I acknowledge several limitations to the research design that should be noted prior to transferring the findings. First, the data includes only one president from an officially recognized minority-serving institution (an American Indian and Alaska Native-Serving Institution). I reached out to presidents at several HBCUs but was not able to secure their participation. Minority-serving institutions constitute an important segment of PRUs, and telling the story of these institutions completely requires the

voices of leaders at more of these institutions. Second, organizational narratology emphasizes that organizations are constituted by a plurality of narratives (Rhodes & Brown, 2005). This re-telling must be viewed as partial until narratives from a wider range of stakeholders at these institutions can be collected and analyzed.

RE-TELLING THE STORY OF PRUS

The stories that presidents told about their institutions eschewed recycled problems and highlighted the unique assets and contributions of PRUs. The themes of (1) serving marginalized student populations, (2) transforming lives through student success, (3) employing mission-driven teacher-scholars, (4) prioritizing low tuition and lean management, and (5) promoting the economic and cultural welfare of the region represent the positive core of PRUs.

SERVING MARGINALIZED STUDENT POPULATIONS

A common frustration shared by presidents in this study was the perception that PRUs provide lower-quality postsecondary education, which is often assumed to be a function of their accessibility. In fact, one president argued that PRUs were frequently victims of "quick and easy assumptions about the quality of education" because they admit more students than they reject. Presidents contested assumptions about educational quality derived from the accessibility of their institutions and stressed PRUs' commitment to the success of marginalized student populations.

In describing the type of student served at his institution, one president concluded: "We are a first-generation institution of opportunity for the underserved." Many other presidents similarly described their institutions as serving first-generation students. "We serve a significant number of first-generation students," explained one president, "We serve a significant number of students who come from rural backgrounds. We have kids who graduate from tiny schools, and from very small school districts." Several presidents emphasized that their students' "parents were coal miners or farmers or work in the factories of the region" or they "are coming from migrant worker families." The majority of presidents highlighted the role of their institutions in educating low-income students. As one president explained, "we have the highest percentage of low-income students [in the state]. So, Pell eligible students come to [this university]." Another president shared that "many of [the students] are not just Pell eligible, they are...very low-income." For the presidents included in this study, educating first-generation and low-income students was intricately weaved into their institutions' mission of access. Importantly, several presidents believed that, in the absence of their institution, opportunities for these students to pursue a four-year degree would be scarce.

Presidents also highlighted the ways in which their institutions served non-traditional students and students of color. One president noted that "last year's data showed that 80% of the students who go to school here work while they're in college, and 40% work full-time." In the same vein, a president shared, "many of our freshmen and sophomores that come are themselves even non-traditional students in the sense that almost all our students work. Many of them, including the younger students, are married and have children." Presidents also shared a range of statistics demonstrating the racial diversity of their campuses. For example, one president shared that 38% of students at his campus were Latinx, and the same was true of 30% of students at another institution included in this study. In one of the few instances when *U.S. News and World Report* was evoked positively, a president shared: "*U.S. News and World Report* has us as the most diverse campus in the South and we've had that distinction for many, many years." Two other presidents described receiving "Higher Education Excellence in Diversity" awards because of the number of students of color they graduate. One facet of the story of PRUs, according to active presidents, is a story about creating opportunity for students whose opportunities have been historically and structurally constrained.

Transforming Lives through Student Success

Although presidents were clearly proud of their institutions' commitment to marginalized student populations, they acknowledged several institutional challenges inherent to educating significant numbers of first-generation, low-income, and sometimes underprepared students. Because of the high proportion of first-generation students at her campus, one president explained, "[students] come ill equipped to navigate the higher education institution, they need our help more to do it. We take that need very seriously." Another president reflected, "Our typical students tend to be the students who are, I'm not going to say 'low performers,' but they would not do well at a [research university]." Many presidents spoke of needing to provide substantial academic assistance once students arrived at their institutions. While describing efforts to implement a summer bridge program for students with "borderline GPAs," one president explained:

> I'm sure [research university in the state], their students don't need this…This is something...as a regional university, looking at [a rural part of the state], we feel obliged to pursue and to incorporate into what we offer our students in terms of student success.

Ensuring student success and increasing graduation rates was one of the clearest themes in the interview data. As one president noted, "when I try to tell the story of the university I talk about it being a student-centered university. That the focus is on the students and...our responsibility is to ensure that they do have success." More than simply providing access, one president affirmed that faculty and staff members at his institution "are thinking more systematically than they ever have in the past about how to make sure that more students are successful." Presidents indicated that PRUs are bringing in a remarkably diverse population of students, but they are also working diligently to ensure that these students graduate.

In light of the types of students served at PRUs, and the determined efforts to help them succeed, many presidents described the work of their institutions as transformational and touted their own measures of success. One president explained that they calculated predicted graduation rates annually based on student demographic data. "For years, if you did what's called actual graduation rates versus predicted, our actuals are always higher than the predicted," he explained, "We are a value-added institution." Another president celebrated that they were highly ranked not for selectivity, but rather for "the difference we made in students' lives." As one president succinctly summarized: "we are definitely transforming the lives of our students." In many respects, it would easier to achieve student success by becoming more selective in admissions: "If you want to have good statistics then let's just say we only take a GPA of 3.2 and greater and ACT of 20. And I promise you my retention and graduation rates will go up dramatically." Instead, many of the presidents in this study stressed their desire to remain accessible and help students succeed, even if there were costs to prestige. One president reiterated this point, sharing, "I'd rather graduate more students and be a little less in *U.S. News*, and that's our goal, and we're comfortable in our own skin, make no mistake about that." The stories that presidents told about PRUs did not merely center on access; access was also paired with helping students—many of them unfamiliar with and underprepared for college—graduate and achieve social mobility. Presidents underscored the ways in which quality does not have to suffer when an institution promotes access.

Employing Mission-Driven Teacher-Scholars

Presidents' narratives about student success invariably included descriptions of faculty members as dedicated teacher-scholars. In describing the distinctive features of his institution, one president related: "faculty know the personality, the motivations, and the talents of their students," an approach he compared to a small liberal arts college. Several other presidents compared the learning experience at their institutions to small private or liberal arts colleges because of small class sizes and the relationships between faculty members and students. "We almost feel like a private institution because of the scale," explained one president, "We don't teach using graduate students. We teach with faculty in

every class that we deliver." Presidents took pride in recruiting faculty members whose interests and abilities align with the mission of their institutions: "over the last 10 or 12 years...we've been attracting the most incredible faculty to come to teach [here], who really buy into…the importance of the undergraduate experience." Another president echoed this view, celebrating how "faculty have continued to hire people that buy into [the] vision." One president even suggested that faculty members play a more important role in the institutional mission at PRUs: "[there's] a component of faculty playing a role that I don't think you would see in a large research...institution just because they are not designed that way." According to presidents in this study, faculty members at PRUs excelled in ways consistent with the individual missions of their institutions.

Although presidents shared that faculty members at research universities produce more research than faculty members at PRUs, they were quick to point out that their faculty members were unparalleled when it came to conducting research *with* undergraduate students. Several presidents referred to their faculty members as "teacher-scholars": "we use the teacher-scholar model. Our students are very active in research but it's with their faculty members and the like so it's very hands-on." Another president reiterated the unique research opportunities for undergraduate students at her institution: "the faculty are using their research as experiential learning opportunities for the students...it's a very student-centered campus." This may be one approach to research where PRUs outperform research universities. As one president put it:

> There's a general assumption that students are going to be exposed to more research at a major university. That's not necessarily true. Since we don't have doctoral programs, and relatively [few] graduate students at this institution, our faculty have undergraduate students as part of their research team.

Presidents made clear in their narratives that simply teaching more was not what defined a faculty career at their institution. It was, in the words of one president, "the personal attention, and time, and level of care" faculty members provide to students in the classroom and as part of applied research opportunities. Part of what makes PRUs special, according to presidents' narratives, is that they actively recruit, hire, and reward dedicated teacher-scholars who buy into the mission of helping marginalized students succeed.

Prioritizing Low Tuition and Lean Management

Transforming students' lives and keeping talented teacher-scholars could be an expensive proposition for PRUs in this study, especially in the midst of decreasing state support. In the words of one president:

> [State funding cuts] are a huge pressure, because the educational model I'm talking about is an incredibly expensive one. It's way cheaper for [a research university] to put 900 kids in a freshman class and put a doctoral student in front of it, than it is for me to put 30 students in the same class and put a full professor in front of it.

Several presidents shared that budget cuts were a formidable challenge, along with state funding inequalities. For example, one president shared that the state legislature "funds the research universities first. The research universities get a lot more per student than...comprehensive universities do. Always have, probably always will." More frequently, presidents found that they were not in direct competition with research universities for state funding, but research universities were better able to weather budget cuts. As one president put it, "the research universities mask our [funding] problems...they look resilient and able to finance their own future." Another president explained: "I could not make a case that we have been hit harder than, say, the research institutions. However, I do think it's fair to say that our options for managing that steady erosion [of state funding]...our options are more limited than they are at our sister institutions." The result has been that, according to several presidents, PRUs have been forced to become more tuition dependent while remaining affordable for the students they serve.

Despite increasing tuition dependence, PRUs have paid close attention to affordability and managed to keep prices low for students. Nearly every president interviewed for this study noted that their tuition is among the lowest in their state. For example, one president boasted, "We are the lowest cost in the state...and this year it looks like we will increase that gap a little bit." In the words of another president, "Full time tuition and fees at [this institution] annually is about $5,500 or so which is about 40% below the national average for public four-year institutions." Affordability is, for several presidents, a key strategy to ensure access, retain students, and promote financial sustainability. Describing how they ensured accessibility, one president noted "part of it is to keep the tuition as low as we possibly can. The [state university system's] tuition is among the lowest tuition fees in the United States and we've sought to keep it as low as possible." Keeping tuition low for students required that presidents seriously examine cost-containment and efficiency.

In one of the most surprising themes of this study, most presidents described their administrative operations as "lean." For example, one president reflected, "for people to imagine that universities are these bloated places where money is just wasted right and left, I wish they could spend a few days with us, and kind of follow us around here. They would see just how lean universities can operate." Another president echoed this view: "to continue to position ourselves to be affordable we have to run an extremely lean, tight, highly effective organization." As a result of these efforts, many presidents were proud that a small percentage of their students graduate with debt, or they graduate with small amounts of debt. One president went so far as to say that the extreme debt that was the subject of stories in the *New York Times* "doesn't happen at a comprehensive public university."

Promoting the Economic and Culture Welfare of the Region

In their narratives, presidents often painted vivid portraits of the regions in which their institutions were located, as well as the important role their institutions play in the economic and cultural welfare of the region. One president described the location of his institution as follows: "[This] county is one of the poorest, if not the poorest, probably is the poorest county in [the state]. This is where we live. [This] county is one of the five poorest counties in the United States." When this president told the story of his institution to donors, he explained: "we're really playing up on the idea of being an anchor institution of economic development in [the state]." He continued, "We're telling this not just to donors, we're telling it to legislators. If we want to change the economy in [this county], you have an engine, you have a mechanism, you have an institution." Another president shared, "We're in a financially depressed area, but we're also, I mean, that's both a challenge and our strength, because we're looked at as a beacon of hope in this part of the state." Particularly following the Great Recession, this president recounted, "We were the only thing building here…We have so much support from the region, because electricians, plumbers, carpenters, would have lost their homes if it wasn't for [us] building." In this way, presidents underscored the role their institutions play in regional economic development. In some rural areas, public regional institutions did not just support the local economy—they were the local economy.

For those institutions in rural areas, one president explained, "there's a much closer emotional tie to regional universities." At universities in rural areas, according this president, "there's a sense that the community owns the institution," and people are unhappy if the president is not visible. Similarly, a president at an institution with deep roots in agricultural education shared how she is "tying the economic needs, health needs, people's aspirations for their community right into the heart and soul of what we're doing." When this president applies for grants, the money goes towards the "wealth and the health and wellbeing of the county." Presidents spoke in terms of the counties that they serve, and many of the institutions enrolled a majority of their students from a small number of counties in the immediate area. For example, one president related: "The emphasis really is on the region and the growing of the region…We serve nine counties and we try to get the jobs for our students in nine counties." Along the same lines, another president noted: "Our mission is very much to serve this

service area...primarily, we serve these two counties. About ninety percent of our students come from these two counties and they're about equally divided between them."

The opportunity for community members to attend a four-year institution would likely be starkly different in some areas in the absence of a PRU. "[Students] come for the most part from one of the poorer parts of a poor state," explained one president, "Literally hundreds, maybe even thousands of students just do not have access to a four-year degree if [this university] wasn't here." For certain parts of the country, the existence of a PRU may make the difference between students attending college or not.

DISCUSSION

Narratives about postsecondary education institutions are important because the stories we tell can powerfully shape how we order events, make sense of experience, solicit resources and support, and understand the unique value of an organization (Rhodes & Brown, 2005). The flow of state appropriations, applicants, talented workers, and media attention can hinge upon the stories deployed to describe colleges and universities. For this reason, it is crucial to consider the dominant narrative of PRUs in popular and scholarly treatments, which describes these institutions as "undistinguished," "second tier," and "commuter schools." The narratives that presidents employ to describe their institutions paint a different picture, and when viewed through the lens of appreciative inquiry, cast new light on these organizations.

This study sought to re-tell the story of PRUs and, consistent with appreciative inquiry, uncover the positive core of these institutions. Distilling the assets and contributions identified through in-depth interviews with active presidents, this study found that an important part of the positive core of PRUs consists of (1) serving marginalized students, (2) transforming lives through student success, (3) employing mission-driven teacher-scholars, (4) prioritizing low tuition and lean management, and (5) promoting the economic and cultural welfare of the region. According to appreciative inquiry (Cockrell & McArthur-Blair, 2012), once the positive core is revealed and properly promoted, it can be developed and expanded in order to achieve institutional improvement and/or sustainability. This study contends that efforts to improve PRUs and, more broadly, improve postsecondary education access and attainment in the United States should leverage these assets.

The findings of this study corroborate and extend important arguments and findings in the literature. Several studies make clear that PRUs are accessible institutions that serve marginalized student populations and admit more students than they reject (Henderson, 2007, 2009; Orphan, 2015; Schneider & Deane, 2015). This appreciative re-telling underscores that PRUs do not merely admit a majority of applicants, but also make college opportunity possible for students who have faced obstacles and discrimination in postsecondary education, including women, students of color, and immigrants (Fryar, 2015; Ogren, 2005, Orphan, 2015). Unlike popular treatments, which sometimes reduce the purpose of PRUs to producing credentials (Orphan, 2015), presidents' narratives paired accessibility with student success to conceptualize their efforts in terms of "transforming lives" as "institutions of opportunity" for first-generation, low-income, underprepared, and adult students. Research indicates that that the percentage of students with "non-traditional" characteristics has and will continue to grow in postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2015) PRUs, which possess significant experience in educating students who have been underserved or systematically neglected.

The dominant narrative of PRUs often implies that the most talented faculty members work at research universities. By contrast, presidents' narratives depicted faculty members at PRUs as exemplary teacher-scholars who embodied and contributed to their institutions' distinctive missions of instructional excellence. Although substantial literature focuses on faculty members at PRUs (Finnegan, 1993; Gardner, 2013; Gonzales, 2013, 2014; Henderson, 2007, 2009; Henderson & Buchanan, 2007; Henderson & Kane, 1991; Youn & Price, 2009), the findings of this study emphasize the time that faculty members give to mentoring, getting to know, and caring for students, as well as the ways

in which faculty members combine their research and teaching in ways that support the institutions' instructional mission. This does not mean, of course, that faculty members were universally satisfied with the direction of their institutions or experienced zero pressures due to striving for prestige. Nevertheless, presidents' narratives mentioned few conflicts with faculty members and even fewer narratives that explicitly suggested their institutions were striving for prestige. Despite the number of studies that discuss striving for prestige at PRUs (Finnegan, 1993, Gardner, 2013; Gonzales, 2013, 2014; Henderson & Kane, 1991; Morphew 2000, Morphew & Baker, 2004; O'Meara, 2007), the data showed far more references to protecting institutional mission and provided additional evidence to counter the view that prestige-seeking drives much of PRUs' organizational identity (Kinne-Clawson, 2017; Orphan, 2015). Still, it was clear that presidents relied on research universities, not necessarily as a model to emulate, but rather as a reference in explaining the assets and contributions of their institutions

This study supports recent research that demonstrates the efficiency of PRUs (Doyle, 2015; Titus & Egan, 2016; Titus et al., 2016). Extending these prior studies, the findings suggest that the efficiency of PRUs may stem from cost-containment through lean management. There is reason to exercise some caution while interpreting this finding, as the lean management at many PRUs is a product of necessity due to retreating state support. Most presidents whose narratives are showcased in this study preferred to receive the state funding they needed to fully staff their campuses, and several argued that adequate state support would only increase their student success initiatives. Nevertheless, this study shows that, in an era defined by "doing more with less," PRUs are perhaps doing the most while receiving the least (Titus et al., 2016). In fact, PRUs are doing more than cheaply producing bachelor's degrees. Presidents told countless stories about how integral their campuses were to community wellbeing, representing a "beacon of hope" for job-seekers, employers, and students, particularly in rural and economically depressed areas. At a time when several states are considering merging institutions, the findings of this study suggest that the absence of certain PRUs could have devastating consequences, possibly creating or exacerbating postsecondary education deserts (Hillman, 2016).

Implications for the Study of Postsecondary Education

There are several ways in which this study can advance the study of postsecondary education. First, the identification of a dominant narrative related to PRUs calls for scholars and policymakers to critically evaluate the assumptions they apply and the language they use related to these institutions. For example, it is not uncommon for postsecondary education scholars to use "non-elite," "non-flagship," "non-selective," and "lower-tier" as shorthand for PRUs. These labels emphasize what PRUs are not instead of highlighting their potential strengths as regionally-rooted institutions of opportunity. Moreover, this language perpetuates deficit-based understandings of the sector that can result in neglect and inequities.

Second, this study reiterates the need for a new research agenda in the study of postsecondary education focused on appreciative approaches to understanding and improving PRUs. A particularly fruitful line of inquiry in this research agenda centers upon efforts aimed at student success at PRUs. All institutions must grapple with the challenges of graduating students who are under-prepared, working as they study, and/or the first in their families to attend college. Many PRUs have learned strategies to promote student success and reach high levels of retention and graduation—even as they admit 80% or more of their applicants. In short, there is reason to think of PRUs not as straggling behind research universities in terms of student success, but rather as professional homes for experts in helping traditionally underserved student populations find success. Another promising line of inquiry revolves around efficiency and lean-management at PRUs (Doyle, 2015; Titus et al., 2016). Future studies can pick up this thread and examine how PRUs have been able to keep prices low for students, identify efficiencies, keep administrative expenditures under control, and still meet performance expectations. In other words, the administrative and financial operations of PRUs may teach

lessons from which other institutions can benefit. Lastly, postsecondary education has recently become attuned to the importance of geography in college opportunity, as well as the ways in which institutions promote social mobility (Chetty, Friedman, Saez, Turner, & Yagan, 2017; Hillman, 2016). This research has suggested that PRUs are crucial to providing opportunity and encouraging social mobility, particularly in underserved areas, and additional research can shed additional light on these roles.

Building upon this initial effort to shift the conversation about PRUs can have important implications for how we teach about and fund postsecondary education. Although it is not uncommon for higher education administration graduate programs to offer courses dedicated to community colleges, research universities, liberal arts colleges, and minority-serving institutions, few courses examine PRUs. As a result, graduates from these programs may not appreciate the importance of these institutions, let alone have knowledge of their histories and missions as they enter the profession. Revealing and harnessing the positive core of these institutions can also help shape the ways in which influential stakeholders like faculty members, administrators, donors, and policymakers perceive, support, and communicate about PRUs. Policymakers may be more inclined to raise questions about the equity of state appropriations or even advocate for additional funding with the knowledge that PRUs are highly efficient and have fewer options in terms of generating revenues compared to research universities.

When viewed through an appreciative lens, PRUs are institutions of opportunity, and the stories we tell about these institutions should reflect the essential role they play in postsecondary education.

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