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Public Purpose Under Pressure: Examining the Effects of Neoliberal Public Policy on the Missions of Regional Comprehensive Universities

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Abstract

Neoliberal ideology that narrows higher education's purpose to strengthening the economy is a threat to the civic engagement agenda and public purposes of U.S. higher education. Regional comprehensive universities (RCUs) are broad-access institutions founded to embody public purposes of student-centeredness, access, and civic and economic engagement. These institutions educate 20% of all college students, including large proportions of low-income, first-generation, minoritized, nontraditional, and veteran students. This article presents a qualitative case study of four RCUs grappling with their public purposes within a state policy and funding context shaped by neoliberal ideology. Despite administrators' efforts, the universities abandoned aspects of their public purposes to address neoliberal demands from state policymakers. Given the important role these institutions play in expanding educational opportunity and strengthening regional civic life, these findings carry long-term implications for the future of community-engaged research, the civic education of students, and the public purposes of higher education.

Keywords: Public Purposes of Higher Education, Leadership, Public Policy, Regional Comprehensive Universities

Introduction

On Main Street of an imagined town filled with abandoned buildings bearing fading logos of defunct factories stands a university founded in the 1960s to improve civic and economic life and educational access. This institution, the only public university within 50 miles, educates three quarters of the region's schoolteachers and a majority of its elected officials, remaining an open door to those seeking a college degree, requiring simply that applicants have a high school diploma or GED. A majority of students are first-generation, and many others are Pell recipients, minoritized students, and working adults. Recognizing that its students are often less civically engaged, the university offers students opportunities to strengthen their civic skills. In addition to serving

students, the university collaborates with elected officials and community leaders to improve civic life, conducts community-based research, and serves as the region's largest employer. Ultimately, the university strives to be a steward of place, improving regional civic and economic life in equal measure.

The university described above, although fictional, presents a composite sketch of the public purposes of regional comprehensive universities *(RCUs; AASCU, 2002, 2016; Henderson, 2007; Orphan, 2015)*. There are 420 RCUs that educate 20% of undergraduate students nationwide, enrolling four million students annually, a majority of whom are minoritized, nontraditional, low-income, veterans, and first-generation. These universities have been called "democracy's colleges" in recognition of their public purposes and efforts to inculcate students with civic skills *(Henderson, 2007, p. 14)*. Despite the important role RCUs serve, they are understudied and face immense policy and finance challenges *(Mehaffy, 2010; SHEEO, 2016)*.

Theorists *(e.g., Berman, 2012; Brown, 2003; Giroux, 2002)* posit that neoliberal ideology within public policy poses an unprecedented challenge for public institutions such as RCUs, as this ideology overemphasizes the economic and private purposes of higher education at the expense of the system's public purposes. Scholars have asserted that neoliberal ideology expressed in public policy has led to declines in state appropriations, rising expectations, and erosions to shared governance *(Dunderstadt, 2000; Gumport, Iannozzi, Shaman, & Zemsky, 1997; Kirshstein & Hurlburt, 2012)*. Higher education institutions have long played both civic and economic roles *(Berman, 2012; Thelin, 2004)*, yet scholars argue that neoliberal ideology threatens the civic, democratic contributions of institutions as they increasingly focus on their private, economic contributions.

This article presents findings from a qualitative case study of four RCUs grappling with their public purposes within a state policy and finance context shaped by neoliberalism *(Berman, 2012; Henderson, 2007)*. To shed light on these processes, the performance metrics that each RCU identified in response to the state context were explored. Performance metrics were important data points because they represent formalized abstractions of goals, values, and purposes *(Colyvas, 2012)*. This article presents a framework for understanding how institutional strategy reflected in performance metrics affects the public purposes of RCUs *(Brown, 2003; Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b; Hartley, 2002)*. Findings show that RCUs have been forced to weaken aspects of their public purposes when responding to a neoliberal state context. The implications of these findings for

the future of community-engaged research, civic education, and the public purposes of higher education are discussed.

Literature Review

Three bodies of literature were surveyed for this study. First, I examined scholarship about RCUs and their purposes. To contextualize the environment in which RCUs in this study exist, I surveyed scholarship about the effects of neoliberal ideology on postsecondary institutions. Because the state under study employed performance funding, I conclude by discussing what is known about this funding model.

Regional Comprehensive Universities and Their Purpose

Regional comprehensive universities were established in response to local demand as community colleges, normal schools, branch campuses, minority-serving institutions, YMCA night schools, and veteran education centers *(AASCU, 2016; Henderson, 2007; Supplee, Orphan, & Moreno, 2017)*. Although their histories vary, common threads can be traced through the purposes RCUs embody *(AASCU, 2002)*. RCUs steward their region's secondary education system by training teachers and partnering with schools to improve student civic and professional outcomes. In 2002 and 2014, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), the sector's presidential association, released reports about RCUs' purposes as stewards of place. In 2003, AASCU launched the American Democracy Project (ADP), a national civic engagement initiative born from a concern that the sector's public purposes were under threat in a society increasingly focused on the private benefits of higher education. The association asserted that for RCUs to fulfill their purposes, they must find a balance between economic and civic engagement efforts when navigating funding cuts that may contribute to privatization. The stewards of place reports and ADP encouraged RCUs to use performance metrics that equally weigh civic and economic contributions.

The purposes of postsecondary institutions are derived from their missions, charters, histories, and cultures *(Hartley, 2002; Kotter, 1996; Scott, 2006; Simsek & Louis, 1994)*. Mission and vision are related ideas but distinct in operation *(Kotter, 1996)*. *Vision* refers to future directions and informs strategy, whereas *mission* concerns the reasons organizations exist. Vision, mission, and history culminate in purpose *(Hartley, 2002)*. How well purpose is reflected in day-

to-day operations is a question of mission coherence. When campuses change behavior, they are often met with accusations of mission drift, wherein stakeholders perceive a misalignment between organizational operations and purpose *(Dubrow, Moseley, & Dustin, 2006)*. Although research on RCUs is underdeveloped, there is evidence that mission drift has taken place in the sector. RCUs have historically presented low barriers for admission *(Henderson, 2007)*, yet some have increased requirements to privilege better prepared, less diverse students *(Zumeta, Breneman, Callan, & Finney, 2012)*. There is also evidence that the community engagement missions of some RCUs have been deemphasized, with resources formerly delegated for civic engagement being diverted to disciplinary research *(Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2012; Orphan & Hartley, 2013)*. Mission drift took place in response to public funding cuts.

Neoliberal Ideology and Higher Education

The public purposes of RCUs are emblematic of the larger U.S. postsecondary system *(Henderson, 2007; Thelin, 2004)*. Since the Morrill Land Grant Acts, colleges have engaged in economic development *(Bose, 2012; Giroux, 2002; Labaree, 1997, 2008)*. Colleges have also engaged in democracy building through community-based research and civic education *(Benson, Harkavy, & Hartley, 2005; Berman, 2012; Bringle, Games, & Malloy, 1999; Ehrlich, 2000; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011)*. Historically, efforts to balance public and private aims have led to tension within many institutions; however, scholars argue that this tension productively maintained equilibrium between these purposes *(Berman, 2012; Giroux, 2002; Labaree, 1997)*. In the 1960s, equilibrium began to erode in favor of higher education's private purposes *(Berman, 2012; Bose, 2012; Lambert, 2012)*. As research on human capital gained wide acceptance, Berman *(2012)* described how colleges came to be seen as places to cultivate human capital for the economy. In the 1970s and 1980s policymakers removed barriers for postsecondary institutions seeking private sector partnerships *(Berman, 2012)*. Arguably, the Bayh-Dole Act of 1980 cemented this shift by allowing universities to patent research findings *(Calhoun, 2006)*. This policy was enacted before the recessions of the 1980s that led to declines in postsecondary appropriations. In the 1990s and 2000s funding declines continued, exacerbated by the Great Recession.

Scholars have pointed to the appeal of neoliberal ideology as encouraging disequilibrium between higher education's private and public purposes, and describe its manifestations in academic culture *(Apple, 2009; Berman, 2012; Brown, 2003; Giroux, 2002;*

Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Berman and Slaughter and Leslie described a shift in thinking around profiting from research. Whereas previously, academics believed it improper to patent findings as discoveries should be publicly accessible, after Bayh-Dole and cuts to funding, academics were encouraged to conduct research that supported institutional fiscal health *(Hursh & Wall, 2008)*. Giroux *(2002)* observed that at times, corporations influenced research agendas and curricula, raising implications for academic freedom. As professors increasingly acted as academic entrepreneurs, they moved away from community engagement and "values such as altruism and public service, toward market values" and profitable research *(Slaughter & Leslie, 1997, p. 179)*. Scholars of neoliberalism have observed that those disciplines, particularly within the liberal arts *(Bose, 2012)*, that struggle to generate revenue are deemphasized. Scholars also assert that neoliberal ideology poses a threat to shared governance as administrators consolidate power in order to efficiently meet market demands *(Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004)*. Giroux *(2002)* wrote that neoliberal ideology threatens the civic education of students "that allows them to recognize the dream and promise of a substantive democracy" *(p. 451)*. Neoliberal ideology views students as customers purchasing a service, and many administrators reflected this view by marketing college as a path to higher salaries. Finally, scholars assert that neoliberalism fortifies the walls of the ivory tower, supporting academics as they pursue profitable research while not concerning themselves with less lucrative community-based research. Encouragingly, federal grants have begun emphasizing community-engaged research; however, the federal government is becoming a minority investor in research as the interests of corporations and private foundations gain influence *(Hartley, 2011)*.

The cultural changes in postsecondary institutions were reinforced by policymaker demands for economic development *(Berman, 2012; Harvey, 2007)*. As campus stakeholders emphasized higher education's individual benefits, policymakers questioned public investment in individual prosperity and cut funding, causing institutions to raise tuition *(Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004)*. This funding trend has continued, with the balance between public and private investments shifting so that individuals pay more for public higher education than the public *(SHEEO, 2016)*. Another result of funding cuts is increasing reliance on part-time non-tenure track faculty and declining numbers of tenure-line faculty *(Bose, 2012; Harvey, 2007)*. This shift has strengthened the power of administrators and eroded shared governance. Slaughter

and Leslie *(1997)* used resource dependency theory to explain why cuts to public funding contributed to market rationale on campuses, positing that institutions mimic the behaviors of private revenue sources. However, this argument fails to account for the societal allure of neoliberalism, expressed in public policy, that has affected postsecondary education. Lambert *(2012)* described these trends as a "conundrum," saying,

> The two missions driving public research universities need not be mutually exclusive, but in a market-based system many of these institutions find the state to be a less-reliable partner and, as a result, have begun to seek alternative revenue sources and greater autonomy and control. *(p. 6)*

Performance Funding

Performance funding is used to allocate funding to universities in 32 states *(Dougherty & Natow, 2015; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2015)*. Performance formulae emphasize course and degree completion in economic growth areas, addressing racial disparities, and institutional mission differentiation. Rising expectations coupled with cuts and changes to funding have dramatically changed the policy and funding landscape for higher education *(Harvey, 2007; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004)*. These trends have been particularly difficult for RCUs to navigate as they have undergone severe funding cuts while being held to higher expectations *(AASCU, 2016; Mehaffy, 2010; Orphan, 2015)*.

Despite widespread policymaker support for performance funding, research demonstrates that it fails to meet its objectives and carries unintended consequences *(Hillman, 2016; Hillman, Tandberg, & Fryar, 2015; Hillman, Tandberg, & Gross, 2014; Tandberg & Hillman, 2014)*. In his analysis of 12 studies about performance funding, Hillman *(2016)* determined that degree production, research funding, and equity suffered as institutions raised admissions standards and shifted from need-based to merit-based aid to enroll students more likely to persist. Specific to RCUs, a sector that struggles with low retention and completion rates *(Schneider & Deane, 2014; Skomsvold, Radford, & Berkner, 2011)*, an assumption underlying performance funding is that institutions will improve when forced to compete for resources. Hillman critiqued this assumption, noting that RCUs have historically been underfunded and thus have weakened capacity to implement proven strategies to

improve student outcomes, including small classes taught by tenured professors and enhanced student supports.

With the exception of the scholarship described herein, insufficient research has examined administrative strategy at RCUs or how they enact their purposes. Much of the research about RCUs concerns their tendency to strive for prestige *(e.g., Gonzales, 2013, 2014; Henderson, 2009, 2013)*. To date, no studies have examined how a neoliberal state context affects the public purposes of RCUs, yet this phenomenon has implications for civic education, engaged research, and educational opportunity. This study aims to address this knowledge gap.

Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

I used Hartley's *(2002)* conceptualization of institutional purpose, Chaffee's *(1985a, 1985b)* framework for organizational strategy, and neoliberal theory *(Brown, 2003; Giroux, 2002; Harvey, 2007)* to analyze the responses of RCUs to their state policy and funding context. Institutional purpose encapsulates a campus's values system and informs daily operations and mission enactment *(Hartley, 2002)*. RCUs were founded in a variety of ways and derive different meanings from these legacies *(Harcleroad & Ostar, 1987; Henderson, 2007)*. Regardless of origin, three elements of purpose, called by AASCU "stewardship of place," are present within RCUs: student-centeredness, educational access, and regional engagement *(AASCU, 2002, 2016; Henderson, 2007; Orphan, 2015)*. I conceptualize the purpose of RCUs as stewards of place to be twofold: (a) private and concerned with regional economic development and (b) public and democratic, concerned with regional educational access and civic and democratic betterment.

Chaffee *(1985a, 1985b)* proposed a taxonomy of organizational strategy in response to external challenges and opportunities that considers the role of purpose and comprises three styles: linear, adaptive, or interpretive. An organization exhibiting linear strategy emphasizes profit and productivity and views the external environment as less important than pursuing internally derived performance metrics. Given its emphasis on profit, private businesses tend to enact linear strategy. Organizations enacting adaptive strategy are concerned with survival through responding to the external environment and securing resources. Proposed programs or performance metrics are acceptable if they maximize resources and ensure external alignment. Organizations engaging in adaptive or linear strategy do not consider purpose. By contrast,

organizations enacting interpretive strategy embody a social contract among stakeholders concerning the organization's purpose. Leaders leverage communication, relationship building, and culture to shape member attitudes and create enthusiasm for purpose. Members change practice and performance metrics when they fear their organization's credibility is threatened due to misalignment of operations and purpose. Chaffee found that organizations can enact more than one style of strategy; however, one tends to dominate. Interpretive organizations are most resilient during times of stress and more likely to experience mission alignment. Echoing Chaffee's findings, scholars assert that although organizational change in response to external contexts is expected *(Zemsky, Wegner, & Massy, 2005)*, mission coherence predicts success *(Eckel & Kezar, 2006; Fjortoft & Smart, 1994)*.

Theorists argue that neoliberalism causes public institutions to overemphasize their private purposes while weakening their public purposes, through submitting

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

Performance funding can be understood as neoliberal for several reasons. First, in neoliberalism, "the market is the organizing and regulative principle of the state and society" *(Brown, 2003, p. 41)*. It would follow, then, that in a neoliberal state policy context, the market dictates funding allocations, as is clear from the emphasis in performance funding formulae on alignment between degree production and economic forecasts *(Education Commission of the States, 2017)*. Second, neoliberalism encourages competition among institutions that is assumed to improve quality, and this ideology is present in performance funding. Third, neoliberalism prizes standardization and assessment—also goals of performance funding—with institutions measured by the same formulae regardless of purpose *(Berman, 2012; Bose, 2012; Giroux, 2002; Lambert, 2012; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997)*. Finally, Hursh and Wall *(2008)* argued that performance funding is contrary to the public good; it is "rather a push to use assessment to hold higher education accountable for neoliberal goals" *(p. 12)*.

The enactment of purpose involves structural (policies and performance metrics) and ideological (values and beliefs) elements *(Hartley, 2002)*. Hartley's conception of purpose relates to Chaffee's theorization of interpretive strategy as a social contract of values that dictates responses to external contexts. The state's neoliberal policy and funding environment is an external context in which RCUs exist and must navigate *(Brown, 2003; Giroux, 2002)*. Because the mission of public institutions prevents them from operating with a profit motive *(Albert & Whetten, 1985; Hartley, 2002; Zemsky et al., 2005)*, this study used adaptive and interpretive strategies to analyze RCUs. Interpretive strategy reflective of an organization's purpose and social contract influences policies and performance metrics identified by that organization *(Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b; Colyvas, 2012)*. Interpretive strategy thus draws on ideological elements when responding to external contexts. Alternatively, institutions enacting adaptive strategy may identify performance metrics that demonstrate efficient and expedient alignment with the external context without consideration for how these metrics reflect purpose.

The implementation of performance funding requires that RCUs identify performance metrics to respond to changes in the dispersal of state appropriations *(Hillman et al., 2015; Hillman et al., 2014)*. Following Colyvas's *(2012)* assertion, I understood performance metrics as formalized abstractions that illuminate the style of strategy being employed, and how this strategy affects each RCU's tripartite purpose *(AASCU, 2002, 2016; Colyvas, 2012; Henderson, 2007; Orphan, 2015)*. For example, an RCU enacting adaptive strategy might identify performance metrics for admissions, tenure and promotion guidelines, and community–university partnerships that improve its standing in performance funding without reckoning with how these strategies affect purpose. Alternatively, RCUs enacting interpretive strategy may identify performance metrics that reflect and strengthen purpose. Because RCUs were founded with a regional economic engagement mission, I did not interpret fulfillment of this mission as mission drift when there was evidence that the civic, democratic mission was equally emphasized *(AASCU, 2016)*. When an RCU's pursuit of its economic purpose caused its community engagement mission to weaken, however, I understood this strategy as adaptive. This study posed the following research questions:

1. How does a neoliberal state policy and funding context affect the public purposes of that state's RCUs?

2. Within a neoliberal state policy and funding context, what style(s) of strategy (adaptive or interpretive) are enacted by RCU stakeholders?
3. How are the performance metrics identified by administrators reflective of adaptive or interpretive strategy and institutional purpose?

Research Methods

The population of interest was RCUs, of which there are 420 *(AASCU, 2016; Orphan, 2015)*. I used the following criteria, reflective of the sector's purposes, to differentiate RCUs from other institutions *(AASCU, 2002; Harcleroad & Ostar, 1987; Hartley, 2002; Henderson, 2007; Standard Listings, 2017)*:

- founded as branch campus, normal school, YMCA night school, regionally focused Historically Black College, or community college;
- 4-year institution;
- historically open enrollment with acceptance rates at or above 60%;
- Carnegie classified "masters," "baccalaureate," or "baccalaureate/associate" institution (Note: RCUs occasionally attain "doctoral" classification due to teaching or applied research doctoral programs that respond to regional needs [Supplee, Orphan & Moreno, 2017] I consider these institutions RCUs);
- Carnegie undergraduate profile classification of "inclusive";
- emphasis on teaching and student-centeredness and applied research with little to no disciplinary research;
- at least 80% of students from the region and at least 30% first-generation;
- evidence of stewardship of regional economic and civic life and civic education of students; and
- membership in AASCU.

Qualitative methods allowed for "use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or a group ascribe to a social or human problem" *(Creswell, 2007, p. 37)*. I was interested in understanding how RCUs respond to a state's policy and funding context, and how responses affected public purpose *(AASCU, 2002, 2016)*. Given that a phenomenon within a bounded system (strategy at RCUs within a neoliberal state con-

text) was studied, I chose case study methods, which allowed for exploration of how stakeholders navigated the context *(Yin, 2014)*.

State Policy and Funding Context

I first identified a state that had a policy and funding context reflecting neoliberal ideology *(Brown, 2003; Giroux, 2002; Perna & Finney, 2014)*. I used Perna and Finney's *(2014)* framework for analyzing state policy and funding contexts, which considers leadership and governance, policy levers and public funding, and structure and capacity of the postsecondary system. I sought evidence of neoliberal ideology in governance documents, including system-wide master plans, speeches by elected officials, and other artifacts that exposed the ideology of elected officials. The state chosen has a board of governors that identifies policy objectives and dictates appropriations. The governor was influential in higher education policy and saw the system as a tool for strengthening the state's economy. Neoliberal ideology was also evident in the rhetoric used by policy leaders. For example, policymakers couched investments in higher education as investments in the economy, demanded greater efficiency and competition, and emphasized vocational training while ignoring the liberal arts *(Orphan, Gildersleeve, & Mills, 2016)*. In policy documents and speeches, I saw no evidence of policymaker attention to higher education's civic, democratic contributions. To understand the levers used by policymakers, I analyzed legislation and policy documents. Without exception, these levers aligned with efforts to improve the economy and included cuts to public funding and the use of performance funding for over 50% of appropriations. Additionally, there were numerous incentives for workforce development and private-sector partnerships, but none for civic engagement. Accountability metrics reinforced economic goals. I elaborate on the fourth element of Perna and Finney's framework—the capacity of the RCU sector—in the case descriptions.

The State's RCU Sector

I held the policy and funding context constant and employed a cross-case study design to examine four RCUs in a single state *(Yin, 2014)*. A bounded time period (2010–2015) was selected during which state appropriations declined by 50% and policymakers implemented performance funding and heightened expectations for economic development *(SHEEO, 2016)*. The state has fewer than 10 RCUs; four were selected that represent founding legacies

typical of the sector. A second selection criterion was geographic location, as RCUs have been called "compass schools," a term that speaks to the importance of geography in shaping institutional purpose *(AASCU, 2002; Schneider & Deane, 2014, p.6)* I included RCUs that were geographically distributed in urban, suburban, and rural settings. The RCUs selected are representational of the broader sector, which allowed me to surface commonalities and differences in institutional responses to the state context.

Case Descriptions

Table 1 describes the selectivity, retention, and graduation rates of each institution before performance funding and after it had been in place for 5 years. Also included is information about each RCU's history, size, and location.

City State University is located in the state's second-largest city and is the city's largest landowner. Since White flight in the 1960s and 1970s, the city has struggled with segregation and inequity between White neighborhoods and neighborhoods of Color. City has Carnegie's "high research" designation and is a diverse campus with 18% African American students, 3% Asian, 5% Hispanic and Latino, and 3% multi-racial. Thirty-six percent of students are first-generation and 45% are Pell recipients. In 2014, the university received $71 million in state appropriations that accounted for 20% of its budget. This was down from a high of $83 million in 2009 when appropriations accounted for 40% of the budget. A centerpiece of City's purpose is its status as an urban-serving institution that facilitates engaged learning and research. Indeed, the president often describes the university as "of the city, not just in the city." The university has historically committed to providing supports for commuter students, including a parent support group and commuter student lounge. City has also long recognized that its students have often been disenfranchised from the political system and has implemented education programs to inculcate students with civic skills.

River State University is located in a small town in the state's southern, Appalachian region. River is situated next to a river that was once a manufacturing hub and has become less important as industry located to other states. Many of the town's residents live below the federal poverty level, and their educational level is 20% lower than the national average. The university holds the Carnegie designation for high nonresidential undergraduate enrollment. Eighty percent of students are first-generation, some are preliterate,

Table 1. Institutional Characteristics of RCUs

RCU	Retention rates		Graduation rates		Enrollment	History	Location
	2010	2015	2010	2015	2015		
City State University (CSU)	66%	71%	29%	39%	14,210	Founded in 1875 as YMCA night school. Repurposed as university in 1965.	Urban
Thunder State University (TSU)	57%	51%	19%	22%	2,270	Founded in 1885 as normal school for African Americans. Repurposed as land-grant university in 1965.	Rural
Inventor State University (ISU)	70%	66%	45%	39%	14,425	Founded in 1963 as branch campus. Gained autonomy as university in 1965.	Suburban
River State University (RSU)	59%	64%	26%	36%	4,776	Founded as a community college in 1975. Repurposed as university in 1985.	Rural

Note. RCUs in this study were assigned pseudonyms related to notable regional or institutional features. River is next to an important river for state commerce, City is in the state's second-largest city, Inventor is named for the region's culture of innovation, and Thunder is named for the university's resilience after a natural disaster that nearly closed the university.

and many are first-generation high school graduates. Thirty-seven percent of students have an expected family contribution (EFC) of zero, and 40% receive Pell grants. The university is predominantly White, with 5% African American, 1% Latino or Hispanic, 1% Native American, and 2% multi-racial students. Since 2012, the university

has cut $8 million from its budget in response to declining appropriations. For a university with a budget of $50 million, this is a significant loss. An important touchpoint of the campus's public purpose is its familial culture, which is influenced by Appalachia's emphasis on family, and its commitment to teaching and student-centeredness. River's president often describes its purpose as being "a university of opportunity." The university established a center to encourage service-learning and engaged research focused on the unique circumstances in Appalachian communities, but due to funding cuts the center was closed and efforts to increase service-learning ended.

Inventor State University is located in a suburb of the state's fifth-largest city. The region has a history of innovation, with multiple inventions created just miles from campus, although manufacturing has begun leaving the region, creating economic difficulties. The university is predominantly White with 14% African American students, 3% Asian American, and 3% Hispanic or Latino. Forty percent of students receive Pell grants and 40% are first-generation. The state share of instruction has declined from a high of $92 million in 2010 to $84 million in 2015. A centerpiece of Inventor's purpose is its innovative spirit and fully accessible campus for people with disabilities. The university was founded as an access point for blue collar communities and has a culture of student-centeredness. Students are required to take at least one service-learning course before graduating, and many are involved in civic cocurricular activities.

Thunder State University is located in a rural area in the eastern middle part of the state and is one of the oldest HBCU land-grants in the country. It holds the baccalaureate colleges: diverse fields Carnegie Classification. In the 1970s, the region experienced a natural disaster, and Thunder played an important role in rebuilding the area. Following the disaster, regional median incomes remained low. Ninety-five percent of students are Black or African American, 67% receive Pell grants, 80% have an EFC of zero, and half are first-generation. State appropriations fell from a high of $20 million in 2008 to $14 million in 2014. An important feature of Thunder's purpose is providing access to Black and African American students, maintaining traditions and organizations celebrating African American cultures, and offering holistic supports for students. Campus members believe that the university's small size and tight-knit community supports the variety of needs students bring. The university was open enrollment until the late 1990s, when it raised admissions requirements and began

admitting 60% of students. As a land-grant university, Thunder assists with agricultural and community development, and under the new president has committed to deepening its civic engagement with the region.

Fieldwork and Data Collection

After IRB approval was obtained, data collection involved observations, interviews, and document analysis *(Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2014)*. I took field notes to capture impressions about campus life during site visits and conducted 71 semistructured interviews with key stakeholders. (See Table 2 for a list of interviewees.) I asked participants to reflect on their RCU's current and historic purposes, how it engages with regional civic and economic life, and how admissions and enrollment management work. I also asked participants to describe how their RCU had responded to state policy mandates, funding cuts, and performance funding, and what performance metrics were used to assess progress toward meeting institutional goals. Participants included administrators who could speak to strategic planning, mission enactment, and the identification of performance metrics; faculty who could speak to support for community engagement and the faculty role in responding to policy and funding mandates; and staff who could speak to admissions and civic and economic engagement efforts. Community members were also interviewed, including nonprofit directors, school principals, presidents of chambers of commerce, and mayors. I asked these participants to describe the university's regional engagement. Two members of the state's board of regents were also interviewed (the state policy director and the vice president for finance and data). These policymakers were key informants who shared the rationale behind policy and funding strategies. I asked policymakers if there was a role for higher education in improving democratic, civic life. I also asked them to describe their goals for the system. Finally, I interviewed four national experts—AASCU staff members who offered insights about the national context for RCUs, and a State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) staff member who offered historical perspective on performance funding in the state. Interviews lasted 60–90 minutes and were conducted during site visits or over the phone.

Table 2. Interviews Conducted

Thunder State University	
Administrators	• President (emeritus and current) (2) • Provost (1) • Chief financial officer (former and current) (2) • Vice president, enrollment management and student affairs (1) • College dean (2)
Professors	• Full professor (1) • Associate professor (3) • Assistant professor (1)
Staff	• Director of government relations and civic engagement (1)
Community members	• Mayor (1) • Volunteer coordinator, partner organization (1) • Owner, small business (1)
Total participants	17
City State University	
Administrators	• Provost (1) • Vice president, enrollment management (1) • Associate provost for academic affairs (1) • Special assistant to the president (1) • Vice president, multiculturalism and civic engagement (1) • College dean (1)
Professors	• Associate professor (3) • Assistant professor (1)
Staff	• Directors, civic engagement centers (3)
Community members	• President, regional philanthropic organization (1) • High school nurse (1)
Total participants	15

Note: Continued on next page

River State University	
Administrators	• President (1) • Provost (1) • Chief financial officer (1) • Vice president, enrollment management (1) • Vice president, student affairs (1) • College dean (2) • Executive director, development foundation (1)
Professors	• Professor (1) • Associate professor (2) • Assistant professor (1)
Staff	• Director, institutional finance (1) • Director, student career services (1) • Director, center for international education (1) • Director, admissions (1)
Community member	• President, chamber of commerce (1)
Total participants	17
Inventor State University	
Administrators	• President (1) • Vice president, multiculturalism and civic engagement (1) • Vice president, enrollment management (1) • Chief financial officer (1) • Assistant vice president, institutional effectiveness (1) • College dean (2)
Professors	• Professor (2) • Associate professor (1) • Assistant professor (1)
Staff	• Librarian (1) • Director, civically engaged center (same participant as full professor) (1) • Director, women's center (1) • Director, center for international education (1)
Community members	• Volunteer coordinator, partner organization (1) • Owner, small business (1)
Total participants	16

Note: Continued on next page

National Experts and State Policymakers	
National experts	• AASCU (3) • SHEEO (1)
State policymakers	• Board of governors (2)
Total participants	6

I collected strategic plans, tenure and promotion guidelines, admissions requirements, mission and vision statements, policymaker speeches, legislation dictating the implementation of performance funding, state appropriations, and university budgets *(Yin, 2014)*. These documents illuminated the state context, institutional strategy, and performance metrics.

Data Analysis

Audio files were transcribed, and documents and transcripts were anonymized to protect the identities of participants and institutions. As is standard practice for qualitative research (*Creswell, 2007; Saldaña, 2012; Yin, 2014)*, data analysis involved coding. I used a set of 10 a priori codes derived from the theoretical framework, research questions, and prior research *(Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013)*. These codes reflected the tripartite purpose of RCUs (e.g., the code "CIV" related to civic engagement, "ECON" related to economic engagement, "ACC" related to the university's access mission, "NEOLIB" captured neoliberal ideology), as well as each RCU's strategy (e.g., "ADAPT" concerned adaptive strategy, "INTER" concerned interpretive strategy, "PM" concerned performance metrics). After data were a priori coded, I engaged in emergent coding to gain a nuanced understanding of how these broad ideas were playing out at a micro level. During emergent coding, I saw patterns of strategy that affected purpose and identified codes to reflect these strategies (e.g., I used the "RAISE" code when an RCU had raised admissions standards, "STPART" when an RCU had strengthened a partnership).

After coding was complete, I wrote case descriptions that captured each RCU's evolution over the time period studied *(Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013; Yin, 2014)*. Case descriptions allowed for cross-case analysis, which surfaced the uniqueness and similarities of institutional approaches year to year. I was also able to see how RCUs with different founding purposes and regional circumstances reflective of the broader RCU sector navigated this particular state context.

Limitations and Trustworthiness

Because this was a qualitative case study, a clear limitation was its scope—just four universities in one state were studied *(Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2014)*. Using four cases, a less in-depth analysis took place than would be expected with a single case study. Although this research focused on a single state, AASCU staff I interviewed shared that RCUs across the United States, particularly those in states that employ performance funding, are experiencing similar challenges *(AASCU, 2016)*. It is my belief that findings illuminate institutional practice within state contexts beyond the state studied. That said, the findings are most relevant to RCUs within state contexts similar to the one studied and are not generalizable. Another benefit of including four cases was the creation of a robust theoretical understanding of the research questions. I was able to apply adaptive and interpretive strategy and purpose theories to individual cases while theorizing about RCU responses to a neoliberal state context that captured broad trends. A final limitation concerned obtaining candid responses from participants. Fortunately, the universities are public, so there was ample public documentation to triangulate interview data.

Findings and Analysis

The RCUs evidenced adaptive and interpretive strategy with regard to the three elements of their public purposes when responding to the neoliberal state policy and funding context *(Berman, 2012; Brown, 2003; Chaffee, 1985a, 1985b)*. Two universities tended more toward adaptive strategy, and two tended more toward interpretive strategy. First, I describe findings related to the first research question: How does a neoliberal state policy and funding context affect the public purposes of that state's RCUs? I use case summaries to explore this first question. I then use Chaffee's framework to conduct a cross-case analysis of how the public purposes of RCUs were affected by the state context. When describing interpretive strategy, I illuminate instances of adaptive strategy found in the cases. I then describe the ideological leadership and symbolic management of administrators and activities that interpretive strategy inspired. By using this framework, I was able to interrogate the study's second research question: Within a neoliberal state policy and funding context, what style(s) of strategy (adaptive or interpretive) are enacted by RCU stakeholders? I then describe the performance metrics used by universities in order to answer the study's third research question: How are the performance metrics identified by administrators reflective of adaptive or interpretive

strategy and institutional purpose? I conclude with a framework for understanding how the responses of RCUs to a neoliberal state context affect their public purposes.

RCU Responses to State Policy and Funding Context

Table 3 summarizes each RCU's response to the state context with regard to its public purpose.

Table 3. RCU Responses to State Context

Thunder State University	
Regional access	• Elevated admissions standards • Transitioned scholarships to award merit instead of need • Recruited of out-of-state and international students • Created linkages with K-12 schools and community organizations • Developed articulation agreements with community colleges • Created holistic admissions process that recognizes perseverance and leadership • Targeted student recruitment efforts applicants outside the region
Regional economic engagement	• Increased emphasis on producing STEM graduates and alumni employment • Sought commercialization and private sector partnerships • Fostered partnerships with regional leaders to ensure economic interdependence
Regional community engagement	• Increased emphasis on community partnerships • Encouraged community partner participation in strategic planning • Increased number of service-learning courses • Created cabinet-level position for community engagement

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Student-centeredness	• Eliminated student support positions • Reduced tenure-track faculty; increased reliance on non-tenure track faculty • Adopted evidence-based remedial education strategies • Directed students to community colleges for remediation • Added mentoring program for first-generation students • Maintained communication with students to encourage them to reenroll • Cut faculty development • Implemented intrusive advising, early alert system, and student tracking
River State University	
Regional access	• Instituted requirement that applicants submit standardized test scores • Transitioned scholarships to award merit instead of need • Targeted student recruitment efforts toward applicants outside the region • Established GPA minimums for majors • Solidified linkages with K-12 schools and community organizations
Regional economic engagement	• Established student career center • Sought commercialization and private partnerships • Assessed alumni employment • Enhanced professional development for students
Regional community engagement	• Dismantled center for community engagement • Abandoned community partnerships • Maintained cocurricular student community engagement • Eroded supports for service-learning courses • Launched mobile health clinic for residents

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Student-centeredness	• Added student success personnel and disability services • Adopted evidence-based remedial education strategies • Strengthened programs for preliterate students • Implemented student success curriculum for first-generation students • Improved distance education and credit for prior learning • Reduced tenure-track faculty; increased reliance on non-tenure track faculty • Cut funding to Center for Teaching and Learning • Instituted parking fees • Hired additional advisors • Increased class sizes and faculty teaching loads
City State University	
Regional access	• Shifted away from commuter students (raised parking fees) to entice traditional applicants • Increased selectivity • Offered bus passes to students from region • Established GPA minimums for majors • Increased out-of-state and international student enrollment • Improved distance education • Created linkages with K-12 schools and community organizations

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Regional economic engagement	• Conducted economic impact studies • Eliminated degree programs with priority given to degrees that create economic impact • Established division for regional economic engagement • Sought commercialization opportunities • Established degree pathways that help students and employers understand employability of liberal arts degrees • Partnered with anchor institutions to strengthen economic impact
Regional community engagement	• Provided civic engagement grants for faculty • Reshaped tenure and promotion guidelines to emphasize community engagement • Implemented development for community engagement • Increased service-learning courses • Established vice president position for community engagement and diversity

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Student-centeredness	• Reduced tenure-track faculty; increased reliance on non-tenure track faculty • Increased class sizes and faculty teaching loads • Charged for parking; demolished parking lots to build dormitories • Emphasized full-time enrollment • Surveyed students to understand challenges faced; created programs that addressed challenges • Implemented intrusive advising, early alert system, and student-level tracking • Instituted cuts to cocurricular budget • Capped number of credits students can take without incurring extra fees • Established retention committee with goal of debunking deficit-based views of students held by faculty and staff • Centralized student advising and early alert system
Iventor State University	
Regional access	• Elevated admissions standards • Established GPA minimums for majors • Targeted recruitment to increase diversity • Solidified linkages with K-12 schools and community organizations • Developed articulation agreements with community colleges • Created transfer student resource center • Shifted toward merit aid instead of need-based aid • Strengthened out-of-state and international student recruitment

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Regional economic engagement	• Built neuroscience research building • Established economic engagement centers • Conducted economic impact studies • Hosted economic summits • Rewrote university mission statement to include economic engagement along with community engagement • Recognized faculty involvement in economic impact • Increased commercialization • Strengthened professional development for students
Regional community engagement	• Established vice president position for community engagement and diversity • Increased emphasis on preparing students civically • Equalized allocation of funds to research, community engagement, and teaching • Enhanced community engagement to address regional health and education • Increased service-learning opportunities • Educated business leaders and students about value of community engagement • Assessed campus/community partnerships to ensure reciprocity • Included community engagement in tenure and promotion guidelines

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Student-centeredness	• Established cultural centers to support minoritized students • Built student success center • Conducted student survey to understand challenges faced; created programs that addressed challenges • Involved undergraduate students in research • Cut student support staff • Increased class sizes • Reduced tenure-track faculty; increased reliance on nontenure track faculty • Reshaped remedial education to adopt evidence-based strategies • Implemented student success curriculum • Implemented intrusive advising, early alert system, and student-level tracking

As the table demonstrates, each university took different approaches in responding to the state context; however, there were commonalities across the four campuses. First, all elevated admissions standards in some way. Additionally, all reshaped remedial education. Some (e.g., River) curtailed community engagement to direct resources toward economic development. Others established senior administrative positions for community engagement and diversity. The following paragraphs discuss how these decisions affected the tripartite public purpose of each institution.

Access mission: Adaptive strategy. At each RCU, there was pervasive rhetorical and ideological support for access that is representative of interpretive strategy's management of meaning; however, this rhetoric did not always match reality, as described by City's vice president for community engagement and multiculturalism:

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

River's provost expressed a common sentiment common among participants faced with having to respond to performance funding:

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

These comments illuminate the contrary impulses at work on campuses that lead to adaptive strategies. With the implementation of performance funding, Inventor, Thunder, and City instituted minimum GPAs and test scores for admission. Although River admits everyone who applies, students are now required to submit ACT scores, an unfamiliar process for the region's Appalachian culture that has effectively raised admissions standards, as described by the director for institutional finance:

> We do not require a minimum score. . . . In high schools, if there's a need, there is assistance available to cover the cost of the exam but if you've been out of school, a year, two, five, 10, you're going to have to fit [*sic*] the bill yourself. That has been a natural screening.

The universities also allocated larger shares of merit-based instead of need-based aid to attract better prepared students. Administrators used the number of academically prepared students enrolled, retention and graduation rates, and acceptance rates as performance metrics for these strategies. Adaptive strategy is evident in these decisions, as they were made to ensure fiscal stability within performance funding *(Chaffee 1985a, 1985b)*. This form of strategy is exemplified in the following quote from River's director of institutional finance:

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

Given diminishing appropriations, the RCUs increased out-of-state and international enrollments. For River and Thunder, this growth was subtle, with just 30 or fewer international students. At City and Inventor, as much as 17% of the student body was inter-

national. The proportion of out-of-state students has grown most at Thunder, with 43% of students from out of state. Given the regional access mission of RCUs, these strategies are adaptive. This change was described by River's chief financial officer:

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

Performance metrics used in this strategy are enrollment targets for international and out-of-state students. Administrators determine targets through budgetary analyses, demonstrating how this strategy is adaptive and concerns financial survival instead of purpose.

The universities have historically welcomed commuter students, as was described by a City dean:

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

In the 5 years under study, each university shifted the number of nontraditional and traditional students so that fewer commuters enroll. Administrators cited commuter tendencies to enroll part-time and at multiple institutions as the reason for this shift *(Capps, 2012)*. These behaviors show the savvy of students juggling multiple responsibilities, yet performance funding penalizes institutions for these behaviors. To grow traditional student populations and address budget shortfalls, parking structures were removed to build dormitories, and parking fees were increased. City's director of the teaching and learning center described these changes, saying:

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

RCUs use the proportions of traditional and nontraditional students as performance metrics for this strategy.

The universities also began requiring students to achieve minimum GPAs to enroll in some degree programs. Stakeholders assert that students should demonstrate ability to perform academically before pursuing certain degrees. The unintended consequence of these policies is that students may gain admission to the university yet not be admitted to a college. To address this issue, two RCUs offer general studies degrees, and a third directs students to major in "organizational leadership." River's director of institutional finance described this strategy, saying,

> There's selectivity in the individual programs on campus. . . . You have a two-year nursing program but it could take you three or four years even if you're successful in being admitted. Then we have others who try to get admitted to a two-year program for four years. Age limit kicks in and they're stuck. . . . I like to know the students could at least leave us with a credential of some sort.

These strategies mean the university is meeting state demands for degrees; however, it is questionable how these degrees are regarded by employers. For universities allowing differential GPA requirements, academic units use student GPAs and retention rates as performance metrics.

Access mission: Interpretive strategy. Interpretive strategy was also evident with regard to each university's access mission. Although City elevated admissions standards, there are no plans to raise them further. The provost affirmed the university's desire to remain relatively open access, saying,

> Sometimes there's an inclination to [raise admissions standards]. . . . [City] has raised the admission standards to where it is, I think our concern is how many people you cut out when you do that. It can disproportionately affect minority students.

The provost's concern for minoritized students shows attention to the university's access mission. Administrators identified student diversity as a performance metric for this strategy.

Interestingly, Thunder is engaging in interpretive strategy even though it was the most selective of the four universities by including noncognitive measures in admissions to discern student civic leadership and resilience, as was described by the director of government relations:

> Kids who may not necessarily have the academic, the 2.0s and the 17s [ACT], now we're looking at, "What did you do in high school? Were you on student council? Did you play sports? Were you in the choir? Did you volunteer in your church?" Some of those other variables that might lend themselves to pursuing or staying with us until they get their degree—persistence.

Staff hope these efforts will preserve Thunder's commitment to enrolling minoritized students who may not meet academic admissions minimums while improving retention and graduation rates.

The universities also evidenced interpretive strategy as they negotiated their regional access mission. Staff solidified partnerships with K-12 schools and funneled resources to improving curricula to ensure graduates are better prepared. These actions not only improve the academic preparation of incoming students, they also ensure that RCUs are fulfilling access and regional engagement missions. Moreover, given that RCUs have longstanding missions to strengthen K-12 schools, these efforts are reflective of their teacher education roots. Finally, the four universities solidified articulation agreements with community colleges so that students are able to transfer without losing credits. These strategies are interpretive in that they are guided by each university's access mission. The performance metrics used to assess these strategies include students who are ethnically diverse and from the region, and the quality of partnerships with K-12 schools.

Student-centered mission: Adaptive strategy. The student-centered mission of each university was under pressure. RCUs often conceive of themselves as places of second chances *(Henderson, 2007; Orphan, 2015)*, and remediation has historically been an important pathway for academic success for many students. Indeed, as much as 60% of students at RCUs require remediation. Because the state policy context discourages universities from offering remediation, RCUs have changed remediation. Administrators couch their rationale for these changes in the need to respond to performance funding, as is demonstrated by River's president:

> With the new performance metrics, we no longer offer college developmental education courses. That is sunk, and we are going to partner with the community colleges to offer that support so that my faculty and staff—the students we are now recruiting are more college

> ready and can move quicker through the college experience. . . .

Three of the universities have eliminated remedial English. Students have access to tutoring to become remediated, although these resources are limited due to staffing cuts, as described by a Thunder dean: "I would have more staff members so that we can turn this place into a state-of-the-art tutoring center. Tutoring, tutoring, tutoring—just more tutors." Performance metrics used to assess these strategies are the number of incoming students that require remediation.

The teaching mission of each RCU was also under pressure. City and Inventor enhanced faculty development opportunities, but Thunder and River, due to budgetary challenges, decreased faculty development. Additionally, all four universities increased class sizes, eliminated tenure-track positions, added non-tenure track positions, and increased faculty course loads. These decisions evidence adaptive strategy as they focus on institutional survival and increased efficiencies. In determining the efficacy of these strategies, performance metrics concern financial savings and increased efficiency.

Student-centered mission: Interpretive strategy. There was also evidence of interpretive strategy with regard to each university's student-centered mission. Indeed, a number of administrators, like City's provost, expressed ideological support for student-centeredness:

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

As this quote demonstrates, many administrators and faculty encourage campus stakeholders to see student success as their responsibility. As a result of this ideological leadership, stakeholders, to varying degrees, were placing students at the center of retention efforts. At times, this meant recognizing the cultures students bring with them, as a River professor described: "Appalachian people tend to be very family oriented. Family is involved in what they do, so they like to be a part of what's going on with [students]." Campus stakeholders also engaged in student-level tracking to

reconfigure supports, as is described by Thunder's chief financial officer:

> What percent of our classes are graduating? What percent of our classes are . . . being retained? What has been our course completion rate? Before it gets published through another source, we already know. We've already engaged students. . . . So, we're looking at every single aspect of student [life because of] the performance based [funding] model. . . .

Institutions have developed cultures that recognize that many students, due to class backgrounds, need help understanding professional behavior, as is clear from this quote from a City professor: "The unwritten curriculum is to teach professional behaviors and things like being to class on time, dressing appropriately for public appearances."

Administrators also changed student advising and reinforced student-centeredness. Each institution has instituted intrusive advising, a strategy recommended by Complete College America that increases interactions between advisors and students and ensures individualized supports *(Earl, 1987)*. City and Inventor created intake centers for community college transfer students. Each university has historically represented the next step for community college students, and this strategy deepens commitments to supporting students. Administrators track student use of services and stakeholder investment in student success as performance metrics for these strategies.

Curricular changes also evidence interpretive strategy. City, Inventor, and Thunder shared a recognition that most of their students were less civically engaged than middle-class students whose parents had gone to college. In light of this recognition, two of the universities were active members of AASCU's American Democracy Project, and all three had been strategic about including civic experiences in the curriculum. Additionally, all four RCUs reshaped remediation to be evidence-based. City and Inventor are experimenting with offering credit for prior learning to nontraditional students, which deepens the university's commitment to these students. River's success curriculum evidenced interpretive strategy as it meets the unique academic and information needs of first-generation students. City and Inventor collected data to better understand the student experience and provide targeted supports. As a result, City allows students to register for

the entire academic year at once, making it easier for students to plan ahead, and offers financial incentives to encourage students to persist. These responses are interpretive in that they reflect the ideological commitment to providing individualized supports for students. Widespread stakeholder involvement in student life and student success, as well as the growing civic efficacy of students, are performance metrics for these strategies.

Regional engagement mission: Adaptive strategy. Finally, the regional engagement mission of the universities experienced pressure from a state context that rewards economic development while failing to incentivize civic engagement. Although economic engagement has always been an important element of the regional engagement mission of RCUs, some administrators at Thunder and Inventor conflated community engagement with economic development. This conflation runs the risk of overshadowing the civic component of each university's regional engagement mission. River provides an example of how this conflation can overshadow community engagement. Administrators dismantled the Center for Community Engagement to create the Center for Professional Development to respond to policymaker pressure to strengthen workforce development. In the aftermath of this change, a majority of the community–university partnerships were abandoned, and there was no institutional support for service-learning. In adapting institutional operations and forgoing this important aspect of the civic engagement mission, the university evidenced adaptive strategy. The performance metrics used to assess this strategy were measurable economic contributions and the number of students graduating with in-demand majors.

Regional engagement mission: Interpretive strategy. Each of the universities evidenced ideologies tied to regional community engagement, and three of the four had strengthened this mission in the face of policymaker demands for economic development. Thunder's director of government relations evidenced this ideology, saying:

> We want to show the community that we are producing students who are mature, academically focused, socially engaged. [The strategic plan] was [the president's] way of branding to the community that, "Whatever happened prior to me, whatever interaction you have with Thunder before I got here, I cannot address, but I can address your interactions moving forward."

Thunder administrators invited community members to participate in strategic planning and hired a director of community engagement and government relations. Faculty also increased their community engaged research, as was described by a dean:

> There is a professor . . . who's looking at how the air pollution around transportation systems are affecting African-Americans in large cities. [O]ne professor is researching using snake venom attracting the proteins from the snake venom for a cure for prostate cancer. Yeah, and there is a professor in geography who is looking at how to help disparities for African-Americans using GIS.

These efforts evidence interpretive strategy as the university strengthens its regional engagement mission.

City and Inventor also deepened regional engagement due to the ideological leadership of administrators. City's provost described the importance of reciprocity in community partnerships, saying, "The true definition was that university and communities come together in a symbiotic relationship, respectfully recognizing the knowledge and the wisdom that's in both." Inventor's president also evidenced ideological civic leadership in this quote:

> It starts with the way we started—by a grassroots group of blue collar people saying: We need you. We've never lost track of who we were designed to serve. We've had great leadership, not just presidents but provosts—people who have maintained that sense of purpose.

Both universities provided office space and expertise to nonprofit organizations, and included community leaders in campus governance. An Inventor community partner described these efforts, saying,

> I remember last year, getting an email . . . to take a survey about students and what they do for us and how we thought the partnership or relationship between Inventor and our organization was. It was nice to give them some feedback and tell them how beneficial the students are and how thankful we are for them.

In recognition of these efforts, City and Inventor achieved Carnegie's Community Engagement classification.

City responded to policymaker demands for workforce development by educating employers and students about the value of civic engagement in the curriculum so they better understood the university's mission. The performance metrics used by administrators include number of service-learning courses, quality and number of community partnerships, community-based research projects, and the attainment of the Community Engagement classification, which provided external validation for their civic commitments.

All four universities have expanded economic development activities through business incubation, aligning degree offerings with workforce needs, and expanding internship opportunities. City convenes business advisory boards to determine workforce needs and aligns curricula with these needs, as the provost described:

> We're inviting them [business leaders] sometimes by kind, but sometimes by size, and asking them what is it they need from us and how we can best respond to their needs. . . . You had to really get involved at the ground level and then just having the willingness to change the curriculum.

Performance metrics used to evaluate each university's economic contributions include economic impact indicators, number of private sector partnerships, faculty commitment to economic engagement, and students graduating with majors that meet regional needs.

Conclusion and Implications

How administrators enacted strategy in navigating a neoliberal state context carries implications for each campus's public purpose *(Berman, 2012; Brown, 2003)*. The cases demonstrate that administrative use of interpretive and adaptive strategy does not occur in a wholesale manner. This finding echoes Chaffee's *(1985a, 1985b)* that organizations can enact adaptive and interpretive strategies simultaneously. Each campus compromised elements of its public purposes. City and Inventor evidenced more interpretive strategy with regard to their public purposes, and Thunder and River evidenced more adaptive strategy. Incidentally, Thunder and River were the least well-funded of the universities, suggesting that there is a financial threshold at which RCUs can maintain their public purposes. For example, ISU and CSU had resources to establish

faculty grants for civic engagement and create vice presidents for community engagement with staffs to implement university-wide civic education initiatives, whereas TSU created a director for civic engagement who was charged with government relations, and RSU eliminated its civic engagement center due to funding cuts. Table 4 shows each university's use of adaptive and interpretive strategy along the three domains of public purpose. In most instances, a campus demonstrated both interpretive and adaptive strategy in a domain of public purpose. When determining whether a university was enacting adaptive or interpretive strategy within a domain, I sought a critical mass of activities reflecting a particular strategy by analyzing the rationale and rhetoric used, such as administrative messaging concerning survival and alignment with state demands (adaptive strategy) or concerning values and public purpose (interpretive strategy).

Table 4. Adaptive or Interpretive Strategy Along the Domains of Public Purpose at RCUs

	Regional engagement	Student-centeredness	Access
TSU	Interpretive	Adaptive	Adaptive
CSU	Interpretive	Interpretive	Adaptive
RSU	Adaptive	Adaptive	Interpretive
ISU	Interpretive	Interpretive	Adaptive

Building on this categorization, I propose a framework for understanding institutional responses to a neoliberal state context (Table 5).

When an RCU is enacting interpretive strategy with regard to its engagement mission, administrators send messages about the importance of balancing civic and economic engagement, and various staff and faculty respond by protecting this mission even when countervailing forces are operating within the state context. The institution's public purpose, then, acts as a prism through which the state context is refracted and institutional strategy and activities reflect purpose, not the state context. This was the case for City, Inventor, and Thunder. After stakeholders decide on a strategy that preserves a balance between civic and economic engagement, they create performance metrics that measure this balance. In this instance, the domain of public purpose is preserved and, in some ways, strengthened as a result of the institution's response to the neoliberal state policy and funding context. Alternatively, when

an RCU enacts adaptive strategy, it quickly reacts to an external force such as performance funding and changes operations to ensure survival, thus weakening its public purpose. This occurs, for example, when administrators require larger class sizes and rely heavily on non-tenure track faculty.

This research illuminates how a neoliberal state context affects the public purpose of RCUs, while also demonstrating promising strategies for preserving public purposes. Specifically, for administrators at an RCU—or any higher education institution—to preserve public purpose, they must consider how responses to external challenges and opportunities reflect the values of their institution. This work largely manifests through communicating the importance of public purpose to stakeholders so they embody it in their roles. That said, no institution in this study was immune to enacting adaptive strategy, and the public purposes of all four eroded, raising implications for civic education of marginalized students, a majority of whom attend RCUs, and the sector's public purposes.

There are also implications for educational access nationwide in these findings. Indeed, although all four institutions evidenced ideological rhetoric tied to access, all had raised admissions standards. This finding points to the necessity of aligning ideology and rhetoric with operational reality *(Hartley, 2011)*. The domains of each RCU's public purpose are also connected. When one falters, other domains risk faltering. For example, given that RCUs provide access to historically marginalized students who typically are less civically engaged *(Ehrlich, 2000)*, these institutions are important civic educators. Just by virtue of attending college, a majority of graduates are more civically engaged throughout their lives. Moreover, as Giroux *(2002)* wrote, neoliberal ideology threatens the civic education of students "that allows them to recognize the dream and promise of a substantive democracy *(p. 451)*." As neoliberal forces erode the ability of RCUs to maintain accessible admissions policies, the civic education of marginalized individuals is threatened. An increasing reliance on non-tenure track faculty members carries implications for civic education as these faculty often teach courses at multiple institutions and are constrained in their autonomy to craft civic experiences for students *(AAUP, 2013)*. The findings also raise implications regarding the agency that campus stakeholders have to enact interpretive strategy in the face of neoliberal public policy and finance. Public universities are required by law to respond to policymaker demands, and—as the

Table 5. Framework for Understanding Institutional Responses to a Neoliberal State Context

Neoliberal State Context

	Adaptive strategy	*Interpretive strategy*
Strategy and performance metrics (PMs)	*Access:* • Become selective • Recruit out-of-state students • Increase merit aid • PMs: Number of high-performing students; increased tuition revenue; retention or graduation rates *Regional engagement:* • Abandon community partnerships • Dismantle community engagement centers • PMs: Number of students employed and private sector partnerships *Student-centeredness:* • Hire non-tenure track faculty • Eliminate remedial education • Decrease faculty development • Decrease student supports • Remove parking lots and/or build dormitories • PMs: Number of remedial courses; proportion of traditional-age students; revenue from dormitories; institutional efficiencies	*Access:* • Strengthen regional student recruitment • Expand partnerships with K-12 schools • Enhance supports for students • PMs: Number of faculty and staff committed to access mission; diversity of students; number of students using supports *Regional engagement:* • Create balance between economic and community engagement • Create cabinet-level positions for regional engagement • Communicate professional skills gained through service-learning to business leaders • Assess university partnerships • PMs: Quality and number of partnerships; equal resources devoted to economic and civic engagement *Student-Centeredness:* • Increase individualized supports • Implement best practices for remediation • PMs: Students retained and graduated; faculty and staff commitment to student success
Public purposes	*Weakened public purposes*	*Strengthened public purposes*

Neoliberal State Context

findings show—are statutorily constrained in how they advance their public purposes.

The findings carry additional implications for support of community-engaged research *(Orphan, 2015; Orphan & Hartley, 2013)*. As policymakers demand greater economic development and private sector involvement, administrators may provide incentives for faculty to engage in technology transfer and broker private-sector partnerships, which diverts faculty attention from civic engagement *(Dunderstadt, 2000; Gumport et al., 1997; Kirshstein & Hurlburt, 2012)*. Performance funding formulae reward these behaviors.

Encouragingly, three of the four RCUs achieved balance in the economic and civic dimensions of their regional engagement missions, in large part due to the ideological leadership of administrators. In fact, there is a reasonable chance that the neoliberal state context was a catalyst for strengthening each campus's civic commitment. These findings, then, create a roadmap of sorts for administrators, faculty, staff and students interested in protecting and advancing the public purposes of public higher education in a neoliberal policy context. As Lambert *(2012)* wrote, the public and private aims of higher education need not be in conflict, so long as there is balance between both. In fact, research has shown that civic health and economic health in regions are strongly correlated *(National Conference on Citizenship, 2009)*. Perhaps with ideological leadership at all levels, RCUs might actually leverage neoliberal policy contexts to deepen their public purposes and ensure that all students and faculty are provided ample opportunities to engage civically.

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