The Emergence of Academic Capitalism at a Teaching University

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Abstract

This case study uses the theory of academic capitalism (TAC) to explore how a public university known primarily for undergraduate education is incorporating market-oriented practices and structures, and how those changes could impact its curriculum and enrollment profile. Through initiatives to establish an engineering college, expand graduate education, and expand international student recruitment, the university's initiatives bring it closer to its research-oriented sister institution, one with a much different curriculum and enrollment profile. The findings extend the scope of TAC beyond the limited set of institutional types and issues explored in most existing research. The findings also provide insight for policymakers and higher education administrators into how public institutions oriented toward undergraduate education may change in the face of declining state financing and increasing reliance on tuition revenue.

Keywords: *case study; higher education; academic capitalism; neoliberalism*

State funding of public higher education institutions (HEIs) in the United States has been on a long decline. From 2000 to 2015, spending per full-time equivalent student decreased 31% nationwide (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2019, p. 5). HEIs have responded in a variety of ways, such as creating new academic programs, targeting new student populations, changing admissions policies, and taking on new functions and services. The theory of academic capitalism (TAC) provides an important framework for interpreting these changes. According to TAC, HEIs aren't passive subjects in a market system; they may proactively develop capitalist organizational principles, operational structures, and partnerships. Such developments illustrate how HEIs are actively reshaping themselves in market-oriented ways.

Most TAC research focuses on how HEIs integrate into existing markets and produce goods, such as intellectual property and branded products, for consumption. This focus centers larger, more prestigious, research-oriented universities that are better equipped to engage in such practices. Some recent scholarship has begun expanding into more varied institutional types and issues. The present study contributes to this expansion by looking at a public university known for undergraduate education, Western Mountain University (WMU), as it emulates aspects of University of the Coast (UC), a prestigious public research university and sister school to WMU. WMU's plans to develop an engineering college, expand graduate education, and expand international student recruitment suggest a significant departure from its historical mission and identity. Close examination of these initiatives reveals how WMU is adopting market-oriented priorities like those

of UC, while sometimes modifying them to fit a distinct market niche. The results show how TAC can be extended beyond research institutions and traditional market activities to explore areas such as curricular content and enrollment profile. They also offer a preview of how such institutions may adapt to a higher education environment increasingly defined by revenue pressure and market-style competition.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

TAC was originally developed by Slaughter and Leslie (1997). They argued that as states began reducing higher education funding in the 1970s and 1980s, HEIs responded by finding ways to reach into capitalist markets, such as expanding patenting practices and technology transfer. Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) argued that changes in political policies and available resources led institutions not only to connect with capitalist markets, but to incorporate capitalist structures internally and become active market agents. The result was "colleges and universities…as actors initiating academic capitalism, not just…players being 'corporatized'" (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004, p. 12). For instance, to boost revenues in a global market, many HEIs developed branding strategies, patent and trademark offices, public-private partnerships, and other revenue-generating methods. These developments required new infrastructure and administration, including whole offices and divisions devoted to market research and private sector cooperation. HEIs also adopted capitalist operating structures to reduce costs, such as increasing the proportion of cheaper contingent academic labor. In a recent literature review, Sigahi and Saltorato (2020) found five key concepts across current TAC research: new circuits of knowledge, such as research and development groups for new products; new funding streams, such as patents, royalties, and new forms of instruction; intermediating organizations, such as professional associations and forums to promote research and development; interstitial organizations, such as offices that manage distance education or public-private partnerships; and extended managerial capacity, such as enrollment managers and non-university support personnel. These systems develop goods and create organizational structures to promote and distribute those goods inside and outside of institutions.

The scope and function of TAC can be better understood by contrast with a more familiar theoretical approach to capitalism: neoliberalism. "Neoliberalism" is a widely used and rarely defined term. Shear and Hyatt (2015) note that neoliberalism appears both "heterogenous in its manifestations yet coherent as a project…, a sort of master signifier that gathers together a motley mix of social processes and deleterious conditions in the social field" (p. 4). They identify within it a core set of concepts including "marketisation, privatisation, responsibilising individuals, auditing and accountability, and entrepreneurialism," which are manifested in "the relationship between global-capital, international and state policies, and university transformations" (Shear & Hyatt, 2015, pp. 6-7). Studies of neoliberalism primarily focus on macro-level policy development and ideology; in these areas neoliberalism promotes market-based ideologies, nurtures and strengthens capitalist markets, and disenfranchises opponents of marketisation. Giroux (2014) argues that in a neoliberal education system "[p]rivatization, commodification, militarization, and deregulation are the new guiding categories through which schools, teachers, pedagogy, and students are defined" (p. 36). Rather than cultivating informed citizens or the examined life, education is organized to support capitalist systems. According to Lojdová (2016), in a neoliberal system "everyone in the university is transformed into an entrepreneur, customer, or client and every relationship is ultimately judged in cost-effective terms" (p. 614). These and other authors tend to use neoliberalism in an evaluative and mostly negative way, as when Giroux (2015) suggests that neoliberalism in

higher education is part of a "war on youth" reflecting authoritarian political shifts in the United States (p. 5), or when Shear and Hyatt (2015) say that "by calling attention to and revealing the workings of these agendas…we can become better equipped to understand and resist the conditions that we are in" (p. 4).

By contrast, TAC research (a) emphasizes institutional structures and specific actions over broad policy trends, (b) frames institutional motivations in terms of responses to economic and competitive pressures rather than overarching ideology, and (c) is descriptive rather than evaluative. For instance, a case study focused on neoliberalism might investigate the ideological orientation of administrators and the broader political environment; link these to institutional developments; and suggest forms of critique or resistance. A case study using TAC, on the other hand, may focus on institutional responses to specific pressures and policies in the economic or higher education environment, investigating how those responses integrate capitalist structures into the institution. As such, TAC offers a more fine-grained approach to institutional behavior that also has less risk of normative assumptions impacting the analysis.

TAC has its own limitations. One is that it largely leaves curriculum and students out of the discussion. Sigahi and Saltorato's (2020) literature review revealed few ways that curriculum and students factor into TAC. Most studies were directed toward areas such as research, professionalization, globalization, and corporate links. Focusing on these areas centers institutions with high visibility, well-funded research programs, and large numbers of graduate students—in short, prestigious research institutions. As a result, institutional types like liberal arts colleges, community colleges, and undergraduate-oriented "teaching" universities were rarely studied. As Sigahi and Saltorato (2020) remarked, those using TAC "often draw on the general—still narrow—idea of AC" (p. 96).

Recent work has started expanding TAC's reach. Pavlidis (2012), for instance, discussed academic capitalism's role in shaping curricula by shifting institutions away from much of the liberal arts and emphasizing disciplines' relationship to labor markets, "making universities primary sites of shaping the commodity of 'labour power'" (p. 12). Hill's (2019) study of new arts and humanities programs at three regional universities explored how liberal arts disciplines may respond to academic capitalist pressures, such as by emphasizing marketability and job preparation as justifications for new programs; mixed with conventional views of the liberal arts was a vision of students competing with graduates from other academic programs, using the liberal arts to develop superior employment skills. Perry (2018) found that increasing emphasis on enrollment and a transactional approach to students at one community college led to an institutional shift toward convenience and job preparation, a shift some administrators questioned or resisted. Ralston (2020) and Wheelahan and Moodie (2021, 2022) found that the rise of micro-credentials, such as non-degree certificates, reflected a push to "unbundle" university curricula, shifting emphasis from coherent disciplines to narrow vocational skills and goals.

The present case study uses TAC to explore how a public "teaching" university, defined here as a university focused primarily on educating undergraduate students in a broad range of academic disciplines, is undertaking curricular and enrollment changes that appear to mimic the priorities of its sister research university. The findings highlight familiar features of TAC at an institutional type rarely studied under the TAC framework, and approach aspects of higher education rarely discussed in TAC, particularly curriculum and enrollment profile. The results suggest areas for further exploration and raise questions about how similar institutions could change in the years to come.

Research Methods

This case study focuses on three initiatives at WMU related to curriculum and enrollment profile that are more suggestive of research institutions than teaching institutions. The research questions are: Do WMU's initiatives incorporate practices and concepts found in TAC? How might these initiatives, if successful, impact WMU's curriculum and student profile? Can TAC, as it exists, account for the full impact of the initiatives?

Case studies provide an important means for exploring complex institutional behaviors and testing the applicability of theories. Advantages of case studies include exploring data in greater depth than other methods allow (Zainal, 2007), bringing multiple data types to bear on a research question (Kohlbacher, 2006), and the ability to interpret data through its context (Yin, 1984; Kohlbacher, 2006). Kohlbacher (2006) suggests that "case studies seem to be the preferred strategy when "how" or "why" questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context" (p. 5), all of which apply in the present case. On the other hand, their narrower focus means that case studies provide less basis for generalization (Yin, 1984; Kohlbacher, 2006), and variation in cases and available data means that careful research design is important (Kohlbacher, 2006). Rules of data collection and analysis must be consistent, and limitations made clear, to reduce risk of bias and ensure results withstand scrutiny.

Case studies can employ a wide variety of data sources, such as interviews, official documents, news items, personal recollections, statistics, and more, with studies frequently using several at once. Each type has advantages and disadvantages; each is collected and analyzed in different ways; and many can be approached both quantitatively and qualitatively (Stemler, 2001; Kohlbacher, 2006). In this qualitative case study, documents are the primary data source. As Bowen (2009) argues, "document analysis is particularly applicable to qualitative case studies—intensive studies producing rich descriptions of a single phenomenon, event, organisation, or program" (p. 29), where analytical depth is critical. The core of qualitative document analysis is thematic analysis and interpretation of data (Bowen, 2009; Cardno, 2018). The researcher typically employs analytical categories or codes, either by generating them in an initial document review and refining them through further rounds of review, or using categories derived from a theoretical framework. TAC provides the theoretical foundation in this study, with the core concepts listed in Sigahi and Saltorato (2020) serving as analytical categories. At the same time, the second and third research questions suggest the possibility of new categories in TAC, and the analysis includes consideration of themes appropriate to academic capitalism but not found in existing TAC research. Qualitative document analysis allows for this—the theory can be simultaneously employed and critiqued based on the findings.

Unlike quantitative document analysis, which focuses on numerical frequencies of words in a document, qualitative document analysis accounts for context, implication, and other aspects affecting interpretation and communication of information (Kohlbacher, 2006; Cardno, 2018). The result is a "less rigid, more flexible" analysis that "allows for a more holistic study of content" (Cardno, 2018, p. 633). While lacking the numerical precision of quantitative analysis, this approach is useful when, for instance, the language in documents varies from that used in the theory, or when motivations are assumed or hidden rather than stated. For instance, it is unlikely that an institution pursuing "new circuits of knowledge," a TAC concept, will use such words; and "extending managerial capacity" does not sound as positive as "expanding student support," even if it's the result. Finally, qualitative document analysis is better equipped to reveal facets of academic

capitalism that don't fit existing theory. For instance, if existing TAC literature does not speak to curricular content, qualitative analysis allows for flexibility in identifying and categorizing such material when appropriate.

The primary weakness of qualitative document analysis is greater vulnerability to interpretive bias and weakly supported inferences between content and categories. This is countered through triangulation, the use of multiple data and information sources in conjunction to bolster individual data streams. "In qualitative research, validation takes the form of triangulation. Triangulation lends credibility to the findings by incorporating multiple sources of data, methods, investigators, or theories" (Stemler, 2001, p. 5). Data types used here include documented institutional history; statistical information about institutional size, enrollment, and finances; university planning documents including strategic plans, administrator presentations, and Board of Trustees records; news items and public interviews with university administrators; and promotional materials for the university (and, in a couple instances, a for-profit company). These were selected, first, because they convey the arc of development for what are ongoing projects, and second, to focus on the relationship between institutional context (such as history, enrollments, and finances), administrative motivations, and implementation. Institutional history was taken from an official written history of WMU. Enrollment and student data, and some financial data, were collected primarily from each institution's online data warehouses, with some collected from news releases. Official documents were collected from university repositories. News releases, interviews, and promotional materials were collected through online search engines, campus newspapers, and local community newspapers; search terms consisted of the institution name and terms identifying the three initiatives being studied (such as "WMU engineering college"), with a result harvested when the initiative was identified within it.

Institutional history and statistical data were used primarily for context and comparison. The main data sources were official documents and news items, which were analyzed through the process of "skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpretation" (Bowen, 2009, p. 32). First, documents were *skimmed* to locate terms that indicated the initiatives. Relevant sections were *read* in depth to better understand whether and how the initiatives were discussed; if other materials were indicated in the document as being important, these would be located and analyzed in turn. Relevant sections were then *interpreted* using TAC, first narrowly in terms of existing TAC concepts, then broadly to determine if content relevant to TAC but not captured in existing concepts was present. As an example of the former: articles about international students regularly discussed WMU's partnership with a private student recruitment company, falling under the TAC category "public-private partnerships." As an example of the latter, a more complex process: a news article about a summit attended by the WMU president mentioned the engineering college. Skimming revealed discussion of boosting enrollment and concern over an engineering shortage. Deeper reading showed that the president linked the engineering college to the shortage and, in discussing the shortage, emphasized the arrival of new industrial manufacturers in the community. The president thus directly connected curricular development to local capital. The relationship between curriculum and local capital divides HEIs, from "vocational schools" and workforce-oriented community colleges on one end, to liberal arts colleges on the other, with teaching-oriented institutions somewhere in between. Existing TAC concepts, which mostly ignore curriculum content, are inadequate for exploring such connections. Further evidence of such connections could suggest a new area of exploration within TAC.

The three initiatives studied—establishing an engineering college, expanding graduate education, and expanding international student recruitment—were chosen for several reasons. First,

they have received substantial attention and resources at WMU. Second, if successful they could substantially affect the institution's curriculum and enrollment profile, thus its educational identity. Third, they lead WMU in a direction typically associated with research institutions rather than teaching institutions. The final point is highlighted by comparing WMU with its sister institution, UC. UC has a prestigious engineering program, a large graduate student population, and a large international student population. Given the entwined history of these institutions and their relative positions in a typology of HEIs, comparison provides further context and insight into the case. The focus is on WMU; data from UC is primarily historical and statistical, used for context and comparison. Findings focus on how WMU's three initiatives fit into its history, organizational structure, and academic profile; how they are framed by administrators to internal and external audiences; and how they are to be implemented. The analysis discusses what TAC concepts can be identified in the initiatives and whether the findings suggest new areas of exploration for TAC.

The institutions are anonymized; "Western Mountain University" and "University of the Coast" are pseudonyms. Statistical and historical data is kept at a general level, precise enough to portray the institutions accurately but not enough to identify them. Public documents are typically paraphrased rather than quoted. When quotations that might identify the institutions are used, structure and word choice is altered to prevent identification while keeping the essential meaning and thrust of the quotation. Anonymization serves several aims. First, it allows findings to be more easily interpreted in terms of broader institutional types. While each institution has its unique circumstances, much in this case study speaks to general features of institutions like WMU and UC. Second, while TAC is only descriptive, one might be tempted to make evaluative judgments based on the data. The aim of this study is not critique, but exploration of changes at an institution; all the same, the findings and analysis could support evaluative claims in other contexts. For these reasons, individuals referenced in the study are also not named.

Findings

Background

Founded in the second half of the 19th century, Western Mountain University is a public comprehensive university known primarily for undergraduate education and some professional education; as a former teacher's college, it maintains a high reputation for K-12 teacher training. The nearby University of the Coast, founded around the same time, is among the most prestigious public research universities in the region and highly regarded nationally and internationally; it is known for STEM, especially engineering. The two institutions have a complex historical relationship. WMU was considered a top institution in its home state until the end of the 19th century, at which point state support of UC expanded rapidly while WMU's stagnated. A WMU historian notes that, if money talks, then this was when WMU lost its status as a premier public institution; it never returned to its former status, in terms of either reputation or state appropriations.

Present-day WMU and UC cut very different profiles. WMU's current student population hovers around 20,000 students. Of those, approximately 15% are graduate students and just under 3% are international students. By comparison, UC's enrollment is over 50,000, of whom over 35% are graduate students and nearly 25% are international. Recent ACT composite scores for WMU undergraduates were near 24 at the 50th percentile, while at UC they were close to 32. WMU was recently ranked around 200th place by *U.S. News and World Report* for national universities, while UC was close to 50th.

In a recent fiscal year, WMU's revenues totaled approximately $500 million. Of that, close to half came from tuition and slightly under 15% from state appropriations. The remainder includes bonds, some grants and government contracts, and other mixed sources. Yearly gifts average about 5% of revenues, and its endowment is $150-200 million. WMU's per-student state appropriation is less than half that of UC; despite this, only 8% of UC's budget comes from appropriations, as its yearly revenues surpass $3 billion. Approximately 30% of revenues come from tuition, 5% from gifts and endowment spending, and as a major research institution UC receives substantial revenue from grants and contracts. UC's total endowment is approximately $4 billion. Overall, UC has almost twice the per-student state appropriations of WMU, far more students paying thousands more in tuition, and an endowment over nineteen times higher. These gaps, and the history behind them, set the stage for three major WMU initiatives that by all appearances would make it much more like UC: establishing an engineering college, expanding graduate education, and expanding international student recruitment.

Establishing an Engineering College

The biggest recent initiative at WMU is the development of a new academic college of engineering. WMU currently has a few engineering majors and major concentrations scattered across different academic units, and the development process began with an internal committee studying the possibility of expanding these programs. The steering group commissioned two private consultancies: one to determine the feasibility and market demand for expansion, and another to begin developing structural plans. Preparatory research involved visiting engineering programs at other institutions and consultations with corporate stakeholders, such as local and regional industrial companies. As the plan unfolded, it grew from expanding existing programs, to creating new majors, to developing a full college.

In presentations to the WMU Board of Trustees and academic senate, administrators offered three main justifications for the college: meeting workforce needs, boosting student recruitment (with international students singled out), and becoming a more comprehensive institution. In more public-oriented forums, the justifications narrowed. In interviews and speeches to the media, for instance, labor needs were most often cited. In particular, the college was linked to the imminent arrival of major industrial employers in the community and a purported shortage of engineers in the state. In representative remarks, the university president suggested that WMU "can help overcome an engineering shortage that existed even before [two large manufacturers] arrived in the local community. One is expected to hire at least 1,000 people at its local plant, including for several specific engineering roles." In its official authorization of the college, the Board cited projections of drastically increasing need for engineers in the state.

The other justification regularly cited by both administrators and the Board was student recruitment. In presentations, administrators frequently referenced declining high school graduate numbers, projected enrollment declines, and fear of a nationwide enrollment crash. Top on the list of ways to "beat the crash" was the new engineering program. (Two other strategies, expanding graduate education and recruiting more international students, are discussed later in this study.) The Board's authorization referenced anticipated enrollment declines and interest in engineering from WMU admits who chose other institutions; like the administration presentation, it drew specific attention to international recruitment. The third type of justification, expanding WMU's comprehensiveness, was noticeably absent in most presentations, public news items, and the Board's authorization.

Tying new program development to workforce needs is not unusual, particularly for institutions such as community colleges, which often have close ties to local employers, and research universities, which frequently train students for high-status technical professions. What is unusual is the scale and process of development at an institution like WMU. Local manufacturers, both present and incoming, were regularly consulted in the development process and cited in justifications, something more typical of community colleges than larger comprehensive universities like WMU. Further, the scale of the initiative likely entails substantial curricular impacts outside the new college. The proposed engineering curricula involve several other academic colleges providing prerequisite courses, while for the new majors themselves electives are contracted as much as possible, with required major and prerequisite courses taking up three quarters of total credit hours. The administrators themselves also noted that a new college creates a "new academic culture and identity," without elaboration.

Beyond the close relationship with local capital and implications for curriculum, student recruitment was an important justification, with international students given repeated mention. Again, what stands out is not the idea of developing programs to attract new students, but the scale of development and its place at an institution like WMU, a university historically more focused on education and service professions. Rather than merely mimicking UC's engineering program, however, WMU adopted a distinct angle. Presentations and other materials strongly emphasized that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) would be foundational to the college. On the one hand, this may represent an increasing emphasis in DEI across higher education generally. On the other, local factors—specifically, the presence of UC—suggest a more nuanced picture. In their argument to the Board, WMU administrators noted that UC's prestigious engineering programs reject over 10,000 students each year. Recall that at WMU, overall ACT scores are near 24 at the 50th percentile. UC's high ACT scores are even higher in their engineering college, nearing 35 at the 50th percentile. Replacing WMU's fragmented engineering programs with a high-visibility college could help draw students who aim for, but do not get into, UC. This provides one possible explanation for why UC's president wrote a letter of support for the new college—WMU is not directly competing with UC for students. By hosting a program that is physically near UC but possesses a distinct identity and selects at a different (but still high) achievement level, the college could both promote itself as DEI-forward and boost WMU's prestige by drawing students who rank above the institution's average.

Expanding Graduate Education

As a former teacher's college, WMU's sole purpose for over a century was to train primary and secondary school teachers. Graduate school was considered by most such institutions to be unnecessary. In the 1930s, a WMU president surveyed teachers' colleges across the country and found fewer than half a dozen offering graduate degrees. WMU's present graduate offerings are largely at the Master's level, with half of its limited doctoral programs being for education fields. UC, by contrast, has long been a renowned doctoral institution, with top-ranked programs in STEM fields and doctoral-level study in dozens of other disciplines.

In its most recent strategic plan, WMU's graduate school proposed ambitious goals that would make WMU a much more graduate-oriented institution. They included growing graduate enrollment to 3,500 students—a 40% increase from the number at the time—and ensuring that the graduate school be considered essential to the institution, especially to enrollment management.

These goals would be advanced primarily by developing new programs. They would not be prestigious doctoral programs, as one might expect if WMU were fully imitating UC. Rather, the graduate school and WMU administrators emphasized non-traditional credentials like accelerated Master's degree programs and certificates.

A major push has been made at WMU for creating accelerated Master's degrees. The aim of such programs is to take students from incoming Freshman to Master's degree holder in five years at a single institution. Doing so relies on courses being simultaneously counted for undergraduate and graduate credit. Since the proposed degrees involve double-counting credits in WMU undergraduate and graduate programs, a student must be a WMU undergraduate to participate, and to make the right course choices the student must begin this route early in their undergraduate career. WMU's administration argued that these programs benefit all parties: students would have a quicker route to a Master's degree, while WMU would retain "its most capable students for a further year of study." While students pay less for two degrees by double-counting courses, they pay WMU for more courses total, with both financial and prestige-related ("most capable students") impacts. Several accelerated degree programs were launched in the first years of the initiative, with more in development.

Beyond accelerated Master's degrees, the plan called for expanding other non-traditional credentials and degree pathways "to meet the needs of the workforce," including "professional Master's degrees, online programs, and sub-degree credentials like badges and certificates." Such options, typically tied to workforce preparation, have proliferated nationwide. Already there are many graduate certificates available at WMU, several of which can be completed entirely online. Some are tied to professional endorsements or licensure requirements, while others are promoted as supporting a career path without requiring a full degree; only two, in women's studies and gerontology, do not identify a career connection directly in their names or descriptions.

Not all programs and fields appear to be equal in the graduate school's vision. The graduate school's ten-year plan called for looking into new programs that satisfy job market needs while simultaneously reviewing "underperforming" programs. The plan's SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis included, among opportunities, attending to programs "in growth mode" as opposed to those declining. Threats included access to fewer tuition waivers, a history of accepting only students with tuition assistantships, and the "misperception" that the graduate school is a financial drain on WMU. Without naming programs, this language appears to implicitly contrast "growth" programs oriented toward the workforce with humanities and social sciences programs, which are less workforce-oriented, more often include institutionally funded assistantships with tuition waivers, and have in many cases been declining nationwide. Financial efficiency, both perceived and actual, is a persistent concern in the graduate school's plans. Jessop (2018) argues that one effect of emerging capitalist markets in higher education is "the rationalization of . . . production based on tight control on costs and their recovery" (p. 105). Short-term certificates and professional degrees unlikely to have tuition waivers allow WMU's graduate school to expand choices for prospective students while simultaneously reducing costs.

Expanding International Student Recruitment

It is commonly, and justifiably, said that international students contribute to higher education both inside and outside the classroom. It is also commonly said that they pay well: "International students, especially those at the undergraduate level, have been especially attractive as a

source of revenue…Although rationales for attracting more international students vary, the potential for economic gain is a common, although not universal, motivation" (Cantwell, 2015, p. 515). Like most institutions, WMU and UC charge non-residential students, including international students, far higher tuition rates than residential students. In a competitive and increasingly global higher education environment, international students provide multiple benefits, offering ways to bolster culture, prestige, and revenues simultaneously.

WMU has stated very ambitious goals for international recruitment. In 2016, WMU's president proposed increasing international student enrollment from less than 3% of total enrollment to 10%, an increase of over 1,000 students, within a decade. This goal was framed in comparative terms, with the president saying that it would bring WMU to the level of regional and national peers. To meet this goal, WMU partnered with a private company, Entryway, that boasts of "the widest-reaching…and best-organized international recruitment force out there, with contacts in almost 100 nations." Entryway acquired office space on WMU's campus staffed by its own employees, including many former WMU employees. It also employed teaching staff for the many Entryway recruits who lack functional English skills. Entryway offered three "tracks" for students at different levels: an intensive English preparation track for the least prepared, a track combining English preparation with for-credit courses at WMU, and direct admission to an academic program. An "Entryway WMU Center" was established to run recruitment, marketing, admissions, the tracks, the English prep courses, and "practical support for students, from airport pickup to campus community and academic success." In some ways, recruits appear to be Entryway students at least as much as WMU students.

The competitive market for international students requires heavy investment in recruitment and promotion, which can be challenging for institutions like WMU. In exchange for substantial control and a share of revenue, Entryway offers existing connections and an integrated promotion, recruitment, and onboarding process; its website promises "a global recruitment network, digital tools, and research that will strengthen an institution's presence in emerging markets." The goal for WMU is to create a cycle where recruits become WMU brand promoters back home; WMU's head of international recruitment suggested that international students "are our best spokespersons when they talk about their experiences here." A system where WMU students return home and build interest through word of mouth would benefit both WMU and Entryway.

Unlike WMU, UC is an international recruitment powerhouse. It has a global reputation and a huge international student population in absolute and proportional terms; UC has almost as many international students as WMU has total students. Further, half of UC's international students are undergraduates, an uncommon but financially beneficial situation. Since undergraduate international students lack the tuition-waiving options available to some graduate students, they are more likely to pay full cost of attendance. Cantwell (2015) found that "[e]nrolling additional international undergraduate students yielded additional revenue when holding constant the number of all national (in-state and out-of-state) students enrolled" (p. 520). This effect was modest and held only at doctoral and research institutions like UC, not institutions like WMU. Regardless, WMU is following UC closely in this regard. WMU administrators claimed to the Board that in the long term up to 50% of Entryway recruits would be undergraduates. That goal is still some distance away: according to the most recent Board report mentioning Entryway, only 20% were undergraduates. Notably, the last few years of Board reports do not mention Entryway, and its physical presence on WMU's campus has declined. It continues to provide recruitment services for WMU, however, and WMU continues to heavily invest in international recruitment.

Discussion and Analysis

Do WMU's Initiatives Incorporate Practices and Concepts Found in TAC?

WMU's initiatives illustrate several TAC concepts at an institutional type, undergraduate-oriented teaching institutions, rarely discussed in TAC.

Most evident is an emphasis on new funding streams, apparent in all three initiatives. In TAC this typically involves research and brand-related initiatives like licensing, royalties, and business incubators. However, it also includes new forms of education and new student markets—the aspects of TAC most closely connected to curriculum and enrollment profile—both of which are central in WMU's initiatives.

Consider, first, the graduate school's emphasis on "micro-credentials" like certificates. Ralston (2021) argued that a nationwide shift toward such credentials reflects an atmosphere where "education resembles a commodity, a product, or service marketed and sold like any other commodity" (p. 84). Micro-credentials allow institutions to unbundle and fragment curricula, creating smaller programs that can appeal to a broader range of students with less overhead expense. Wheelahan and Moodie (2022) argued that such fragmentation supports a "human capital" perspective, which shifts "the ends of education from the development of knowledge to the development of productive workers" (para. 33) through emphasis on job skills and employment. For WMU, micro-credentials can serve as both marketing strategy and efficient form of educational delivery. Since such credentials are shorter term and lack the accreditation requirements of full degree programs, WMU can be more flexible in response to changing interest and market needs. The graduate school's strategic plan went so far as to suggest creating entire degrees by stacking certificates and other sub-degree components—a full degree based on fragmented market-oriented credentials.

Second, all initiatives involve new student markets: engineering students above WMU's average academic level, post-baccalaureate students seeking quicker professional credentials, and international students. These all represent shifts from WMU's more traditional, regional, academically average student population. Jessop (2017) argued that increased economic engagement among HEIs results in "intensified global competition for talent—including undergraduates and masters' students, doctoral and post-doctoral researchers, [and] skilled knowledge workers" (p. 855) among others. Recall, for instance, that part of WMU's argument for the engineering college involved the number of engineering students turned away from UC. Such students represent a distinct, academically desirable student group for WMU. An engineering college not only provides links to private capital and claims to preparation for high-status careers; it allows WMU to reach for higher-status students, boosting metrics like incoming student grades and graduate incomes that affect institutional prestige.

Finally, the expansion of interstitial organizations, public-private partnerships in particular, is a major theme in the engineering college and international student recruitment initiatives. The engineering program is being developed in regular consultation with existing and incoming local capital—as the latter expand their local presence, WMU will presumably be sending out its new engineering graduates. For many new international students, much of the enrollment process would be managed by a for-profit company, such involvement potentially extending to curriculum and student life. This arrangement is like those of many Online Program Managers (OPMs), a rapidly expanding group of for-profit companies that offer services including recruitment, enrollment, curriculum development, and even full instruction for online programs. While the scholarship on OPMs is still small, such programs have come under scrutiny for opaqueness, such as

masking their degree of control over some programs; predatory recruitment activities, such as aggressive advertising to marginalized students; and questionable revenue arrangements, such as contracts that give OPMs most of the revenue generated and are difficult to terminate (Hall, 2022; Hamilton, 2022). OPMs represent an assertive expansion of the for-profit sector into non-profit institutions (Hall, 2022; United States Government Accountability Office, 2022), and they share several analogies to Entryway.

Each of these topics could be explored at great length. Suffice to say that academic capitalism is present at WMU in several ways. How might these developments affect WMU's historical identity? Addressing this involves turning to curriculum and enrollment profile.

How might these Initiatives, if Successful, Impact WMU's Curriculum and Student Profile?

When it comes to students, the effects of these initiatives will likely reinforce each other. For instance, international students tend to be overrepresented in graduate programs and vocationally oriented programs such as engineering and business. At both WMU and UC, liberal arts colleges enroll the highest percentage of undergraduates. This is also true for graduate students at WMU, while at UC the engineering college rises to the top. The business colleges rise at both. These initiatives also dovetail with smaller developments at WMU, such as new cybersecurity and video game design majors, which draw from similarly oriented populations. The students gained through these cumulative efforts will likely be less local, more vocationally oriented, and more interested in high-paying technology and engineering careers than service-oriented careers such as teaching.

WMU's relationship to UC provides important context here. Even after becoming a full university, WMU focused primarily on broad education and preparing undergraduates for middle-class service professions; its motto references the joy of teaching. UC started as an agricultural university and grew into a STEM-oriented research juggernaut; labor is central in its motto. UC is a prestigious public institution with elite programs, researchers, and students from around the world. In many ways WMU's chosen road follows UC, but not fully. The engineering college is not designed to rival UC—a daunting task—but to draw students ranked between the two institutions, allowing WMU to increase prestige without direct competition. WMU does not aim to create top doctoral programs like those at UC, but smaller, flexible programs and credentials with less overhead. Rather than try to become UC, WMU is carving out a distinct niche by adapting elements of UC to its own purposes, targeting students who are positioned, in academic and cultural terms, between WMU at present and UC.

What would these initiatives mean for WMU's curriculum? TAC says little about such a question, but the broader recent TAC research suggests some possibilities. Pavlidis' (2012) discussion of curricular impacts of academic capitalism included shifting away from the humanities, social sciences, and theoretical natural sciences, which are less market-oriented, and toward "tradeable skills and qualifications, preparing [students] for the struggle for survival in an ever-changing labour market" (p. 143). The present study, especially in the engineering and graduate initiatives, shows a consistent emphasis at WMU on market-readiness in new curricula. On the one hand, there are no direct attacks on, or cuts to, non-vocationally oriented programs; at most, there is an ambiguous reference to eliminating underperforming graduate programs. On the other, there is no clear investment in growing such programs, either. If they stay the same while vocationally oriented programs grow, and if graduate and international students tend toward the latter as they usually do, the result would be a decline in the relative size and status of the former. This would

match UC—while it has large humanities and social science programs, they are dwarfed by those on the vocational side.

Hill's (2019) study of new arts and humanities programs explored one way such programs might respond. In Hill's (2019) three cases—an Artistic Media Technologies major, a digital humanities minor, and a writing major—career readiness and employment skills were offered as justifications for creating the programs. WMU's liberal arts college promotes something similar at a smaller level: "career readiness sequences," sets of courses across liberal arts departments leading to certificates in areas such as "Administrative Communication" and "Human Resources." These sequences, which combine vocationally oriented curriculum organization with micro-credentials, suggest that liberal arts programs at WMU have at least partially accommodated a vocational orientation. In an alternative scenario, faculty and administrators might ignore or resist such framings instead of accommodating them. Perry (2018) found a range of reactions by community college administrators to the growing emphasis on enrollment and the "customerization" (p. 35) of students at their institution. Many accepted career readiness as important while refusing to give it a sole or primary institutional role, citing other purposes that they thought were central to higher education. Perry's (2018) research was at a community college with vocational preparation as a substantial part of its mission. At a former teacher's college that became a comprehensive university, by contrast, one might assume greater ambivalence and perhaps even hostility among faculty and administrators as WMU pursues initiatives in tension with its historical identity. If such reactions are kept private, the result could be an outwardly pro-market orientation that masks deeper internal disagreement.

Can TAC, as it Exists, Account for the Full Impact of the Initiatives?

While existing TAC concepts have been valuable for this case, they are not exhaustive—in particular, the educational side of institutions is underrepresented in existing TAC research, and prestige, a frequent point of interest in the findings, is underemphasized. The findings point to ways these might be brought under an expanded form of TAC. While findings from one case may not be sufficient to develop fully articulated new categories, they are enough to suggest areas for further exploration and emphasis.

Curriculum as Promotional Tool, Source of Prestige, and Public-Private Intersection Point

TAC research shows how curriculum may be reorganized to reduce costs and reach into new student markets. Curriculum itself is underexplored, both in terms of proactive development to take advantage of market dynamics and reactive response to market pressures. With the engineering college, for instance, curriculum serves multiple market-oriented purposes: reaching new student markets; raising institutional prestige by drawing stronger students; promoting the institution as a place for high-level vocational preparation; and building connections to local capital. Entryway offers its own enrollment system and some privately run courses in ways that mirror OPMs. These developments, in turn, create pressure on the rest of the curriculum. As WMU's administrators noted, most WMU colleges would have to adjust course offerings and curriculum to accommodate the new engineering students, something no less true for large numbers of new graduate and international students. Can the humanities find a place in market-oriented institutions? How might administrators work with, or against, those opposed to a market orientation? How far might private companies penetrate public institution curricula? Curriculum is core to any

HEI. It is also a means to recruit, signal, and build external connections—in short, it can be a powerful market tool. TAC research should explore these dynamics.

Enrollment Profile as Status Signal, Promotional Resource, and Competitive Space

TAC research recognizes students as sources of tuition revenue and consumers of products through their university affiliations. Less recognized are students themselves as tools of market competition and activity. The status significance of enrollment profile at elite institutions is well-known. In such schools, great effort is spent creating class compositions specified along lines of racial diversity, academic status, athletic ability, and other categories in ways positive and negative (Karabel, 2005; Stevens, 2007; Tough, 2019). Even a small change in acceptance rates, average test scores, or diversity can damage an institution's image and ranking. The shift from admissions offices to "enrollment management" speaks to the complexities of balancing status, revenue, student financial need, and other factors (Tough, 2019). Such issues are largely absent from TAC research. This omission becomes stranger as tuition increasingly becomes the main source of revenue at public institutions like WMU. Nation-wide competition for international students simultaneously reflects attempts to increase diversity—a major prestige marker—and grow revenue; higher academic profiles from new engineering admits could raise institutional rank; faster job-ready graduate credentials could boost application counts at low cost. At the same time, changing the student body means changing the student experience. Can WMU build the infrastructure to support an influx of international students? How would hundreds of incoming graduate, international, and engineering students change campus culture? Without students there is no institution, and a theory of HEIs that does not attend to their experiences is incomplete.

The above areas reflect two broad gaps in most TAC research. First and most significant, TAC focuses on non-educational aspects of higher education, those most easily connected to existing capitalist structures, at the expense of studying the educational experience itself. Recognizing these non-educational aspects represents an important insight into the expanding roles of HEIs in recent decades. However, it is no less important to see how the educational core shifts in response to the same pressures and the resulting institutional responses. Second, the findings in this study show the importance of status, even below the elite level. Whether in terms of student academic profile, student diversity, provision of career-ready credentials, or other criteria, greater prestige is a broad and consistent concern in a competitive higher education marketplace. TAC does not ignore prestige altogether, but its importance for WMU and its intersection with other aspects of TAC—one cannot, for instance, separate the value of institutional branding from status—suggest it deserves much greater attention.

Implications and Future Research

This case study reveals limitations of TAC in terms of institutional types studied and conceptual range. WMU's engineering college, for instance, represents not just interest in a new market but a broader shift in institutional identity. Different students are likely to apply, and curriculum beyond engineering will change to accommodate them. Expanding graduate and international student populations affects more than revenue—international students have needs that may require adjusting curriculum and student services; graduate teaching assistants may become more common, impacting teaching at WMU; and so on. Even if such initiatives originate as responses to market pressures, consequences may surpass intentions. WMU and UC represent not just market

positions but visions of education—a regional university providing a wide range of students access to middle-class careers, and a national university with Nobel laurates preparing elite students for six-figure futures. Finding a middle point, as WMU appears to be attempting, means more than updating the brochure.

A more comprehensive version of TAC is needed, one that accounts for the educational side of HEIs and the importance of status. Such a theory would be better situated to connect with relevant research, such as the work on neoliberalism discussed in the literature review. On one side, TAC's analytical tools could sharpen analyses of institutions under neoliberalism. On the other, investigations of neoliberalism could help situate results from TAC in larger political and ideological forces, and provide avenues for shifting to evaluation and critique when appropriate.

In line with TAC research generally, this study is narrowly focused and descriptive; it leaves many questions unanswered, some of which were raised in the findings and analysis. For instance: What do WMU faculty and students think of these initiatives? How are individual administrative bodies, academic departments, and other units responding? What is the experience of students who enter WMU through Entryway? Are there other, less visible initiatives at WMU that follow similar directions? A comprehensive study of WMU would address these, but also greatly expand the scope of this study at the cost of focus. Many of the studies mentioned previously, such as Perry (2018), Hill (2019), and Ralston (2020), suggest possible answers to some of these questions, but as is so often the case, further research is needed.

This case study has several further limitations. First, like all individual case studies it sacrifices breadth for depth. While the benefits of depth are clear, a wider range of cases would strengthen generalizability of the findings and analysis. Second, the emphasis on documents limits available data and thus the findings. Triangulating documents with other data sources and discussing relevant existing research strengthen the findings and analysis, but the data still leaves gaps. Perhaps the most significant gap is the private and personal views of WMU administrators, faculty, and staff. Promotional materials and strategic plans rarely highlight internal subversion or resistance, for instance; personal interviews would be much more informative. Research such as Hill's (2019) provides a start, but further studies focusing on internal responses to academic capitalism's impacts, and studies employing other data types, are needed. Third, the absence of the student voice also deserves note. Are new international students integrating into WMU successfully? Are prospective students interested in the new engineering college? What of current students? Knowing their perspective is important to understanding whether WMU's initiatives are likely to succeed, and whether students are likely to support or resist academic capitalism more generally. This study's focus is on how and why upper administration developed these initiatives, but that represents only the beginning of the story. The next step may be asking how these initiatives will be received by those who teach and learn at WMU.

Limitations aside, this study suggests what may happen as public institutions face declining state support and increasing pressure to raise revenue. Over the last two decades, WMU went from 35% of its operating budget covered by state appropriations to less than 15%; over the same period, tuition jumped from just over 20% of revenue to almost 50%. WMU's three initiatives developed in this context. As public institutions nationwide face similar pressures, one can expect similar responses: recruitment strategies targeting groups, such as graduate and international students, who pay more; curricular changes emphasizing flexible credentials and career readiness; increasing partnership with private capital, whether in reshaping curricula for the workforce or providing support services to the institution; and greater attention to status. Policymakers should be alert to these possibilities, and the implications for students, when considering policies affecting higher

education. HEI administrators should be sensitive to how responses to present fiscal and policy developments may lead to unintended consequences down the road. Academic capitalism is more than grant proposals and brand campaigns; it can shift an institution's identity.

Conclusion

This case study uses TAC and data in context to understand how a teaching university is incorporating market strategies and structures, and how that may affect the institution's curriculum and enrollment profile. Besides identifying areas for future exploration within TAC, it raises questions about what these changes mean for the educational mission of institutions like WMU. If, in its push for revenue and prestige, WMU becomes more international, more graduate-oriented, and more defined by high-salary career preparation, further changes will almost certainly occur. What will these changes mean for its general education program, student experience, campus culture, internal politics, and institutional identity?

As one possibility, consider a cautionary tale from Sperber (2000), who argued that prestige in higher education is typically equated to research and graduate education. Being more prestigious means being more like a research university, and the late 20th century saw many institutions striving for prestige. This striving came at a cost: given finite revenues, greater support for research and graduate education typically meant less support for undergraduate education. Sperber (2000) pointed to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, a public flagship which, despite "very tight budgets throughout the 1980s and 1990s, continued to pour millions into its graduate programs and to neglect its undergraduate ones"; a student at the university wrote that "U of I is really a research park that allows undergraduates to hang around as long as they don't get in the way" (p. 74). Sperber (2000) compared U of I with Rutgers, a public university "on the make" (p. 75) that didn't succeed in reaching the elite, but did, based on his reading of Moffatt's (1989) ethnographic work, succeed in weakening undergraduate education. WMU isn't guaranteed to follow either of these examples. But if it does achieve its goals, it could find its identity as an institution considerably changed.

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