How Institutional Identity Shapes College Student Recruitment: The Relationship Between Religious Distinctiveness and Market Demand

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Abstract. Institutional diversity has long been recognized as a signature strength of the American system of higher education, yet the sector contributing most to this remarkable feature—small and midsized private colleges—currently finds itself under significant financial pressure as a result of recent social and economic disruptions. To overcome such challenges, campus leaders must understand the market positioning of the institutions they serve. This article investigates the relationship between market demand and organizational distinctiveness within one segment of the diverse private sector—religiously affiliated colleges. It draws upon longitudinal data from the membership of one national professional association, the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities, to develop an empirical typology of institutional religious distinctiveness and examine patterns of market demand over time. Results suggest that religious distinctiveness has a medium effect on student demand at both the application and matriculation phases of the admissions process. The

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article concludes by considering appropriate recruitment strategies for faith-based colleges and universities depending on their degree of religious distinctiveness.

Introduction

Institutional diversity has long been recognized as a signature strength of the American system of higher education. However, the sector contributing most to this remarkable feature is currently under significant financial pressure. Small and midsized private colleges represent a wide range of institutional missions and types; yet most share a common institutional profile—highly tuition dependent, less selective, and modestly resourced—which renders them particularly vulnerable to changes in the resource environment. Indeed, three successive events from the past decade—the Great Recession (Geiger 2010; Zumeta 2010), the "Demographic Cliff" (Grawe 2018), and the COVID-19 global pandemic (Jaschik 2020)—have disrupted the postsecondary landscape and exacerbated the already precarious financial position of many private colleges. As a result, the sector has been reshaped by a wave of program downsizing (Nietzel 2020), faculty and staff layoffs (Adams 2020), acquisitions and mergers (Seltzer 2018b), and even institutional closures (Seltzer 2018a).

For those who value the institutional diversity found within the American system of higher education, these developments are troubling. Moreover, they raise important questions about the long-term prospects and future character of smaller private colleges and universities. Is it possible for these institutions to achieve financial security while still pursuing their distinctive missions? If so, what conceptual frameworks might elucidate how different types of private institutions relate to one another and to the broader resource environment? With these relationships in mind, what practical strategies might empower campus leaders to succeed, given their institutions' unique character and positioning?

This article endeavors to answer these questions by investigating how market demand has shifted within one segment of the private, nonprofit sector of American higher education since the Great Recession. In particular, we explore the consequential role institutional identity plays in market positioning by examining how differing degrees of religious distinctiveness affect various measures of student demand for Christian higher education, a segment largely comprised of small and midsized private colleges and universities. After empirically validating a typology for evangelical colleges and universities, we analyze trend data to illuminate the contours of student demand for these institutions. Our analysis reveals three naturally occurring institutional types that vary according to both the level of religious commitment each requires of its students and the level of market demand each experiences at various stages of the admissions process. Our findings suggest that while faith-based institutions of higher education do not have to abandon elements of their identity to ensure financial survival, their leaders must have a clear understanding of the market implications of certain religious requirements and must craft expectations for performance accordingly. We conclude by recommending strategies that campus leaders serving in various types of Christian colleges and universities might pursue in order to successfully navigate the current resource environment.

Literature Review

Higher education refers to the interconnected network of colleges, universities, government agencies, associations, and private companies that comprise the expansive U.S. postsecondary system of education. Many scholars commonly identify higher education as one of the broad *organizational fields* found in society that fulfill a specific function, such as healthcare, fine arts, or manufacturing (Brown 2017; Wooten and Hoffman 2008). More specifically, an organizational field is "a collection of interdependent organizations operating with common rules, norms, and meaning systems" (Scott 1998: 130). The specific function of a field within society as well as its common norms and meaning systems help differentiate one field from another—higher education from the fine arts, manufacturing from healthcare. Moreover, the composition of an organizational field is made up of multiple *populations*, or "aggregates of organizations that are alike in some respect" (Scott 1998: 127). Examples of different populations within the organizational field of higher education include regional accreditors, lenders, and the colleges themselves.

The diverse population of American colleges and universities can be further understood when they are categorized into various groups, or segments. Categorizing a group of institutions occurs along dimensions that include geographic location (regional comprehensive universities), institutional control (nonprofit, not-for-profit, for-profit), institutional level (associate's, bachelor's, master's, doctorate), and historical origin (women's colleges, Hispanic-serving institutions, historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), religious) (Brown 2021). Many institutions are affiliated with formal associations organized along these dimensions. For example, community colleges often belong to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), many Hispanic-serving institutions belong to the Hispanic Association of Colleges & Universities (HACU), and evangelical institutions typically belong to the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). Institutions that strategically focus on a specific dimension of higher education are understood to be *distinctive* (Clark 1970; Townsend, Newell, and Wiese 1992; Roche 2017). Clark (1970: 258) noted that the narrow mission of a distinctive institution often creates a dichotomous tension for the organization:

> In emphasizing one value, they underplay, oppose, or ignore others. In securing the loyalty of one segment of society, they may secure the hostility of others. In committing the organization strongly to one path of action, they find it difficult at a later time to take another route or otherwise to adapt as new demands are made upon them.

Thus, while the focused mission permits distinctive institutions to secure necessary resources by functioning within a narrower environment than peer institutions, the restricted emphasis also makes them particularly susceptible to changes within their broader environment.

Given their niche enrollment focus, distinctive institutions are most notably susceptible to two changes in their resource environment—population demographics and carrying capacity. For the most part, a college or university is a physically fixed organization that does not relocate, whereas its regional population is in a continual state of change due to processes of interstate migration, immigration, and births (Carnevale and Fry 2001; Grawe 2018). For example, an increase in interstate movement or a decrease in the birthrate will influence the number of students an institution may recruit from its regional market over time (Sevier 1992). Distinctive institutions are not only influenced by changes in their population but also by changes in other institutions. As peer institutions expand their various enrollment markets, the number of schools recruiting from the same geographic pool of students changes. Bess and Dee (2012: 138) highlight:

> [N]iches vary in their carrying capacity—that is, the number of institutions that can be supported. When carrying capacity of a niche declines, only those organizations best adapted to that niche are likely to survive.

In response to these two shifts in the environment—population demographics and carrying capacity—an institution will often modify its admissions and enrollment management strategy to secure the number of students necessary to maintain financial sustainability (Hossler and Bontrager 2014; Kalsbeek and Hossler 2009; Kraatz, Ventrescam, and Deng 2010).

Amidst changing environmental factors, colleges and universities must annually select an incoming class of students that sustains both the cultural and financial characteristics of the institution (Posecznick 2017; Selingo 2020; Stevens 2009). The most common measure of market demand for American colleges and universities is *selectivity*, an exclusion-based indicator of institutional prestige that is promoted by elite institutions, such as Ivy League schools, and by rankings in elite publications, such as *U.S. News & World Report* (Bastedo and Bowman 2010). By contrast, distinctive institutions apply an admissions approach that focuses on targeted populations of students. Instead of filtering out students through a process of exclusion, they focus on alternative interpretations of enrollment metrics that emphasize inclusion. While both elite institutions and distinctive institutions emphasize the overall acceptance rate, the interpretation of the rate differs significantly between the two types of institutions. Elite institutions aspire to achieve a low acceptance rate usually below 10 percent based on the number of students they reject—or exclude—from a broad pool of applicants (Hazelkorn 2015; Hoxby 2009; Zwick 2007). In contrast, distinctive institutions typically report a higher acceptance rate, usually above 50 percent, based on the number of students they accept—or include—from a more narrow but targeted pool of applicants (Brown 2021; Crisp et al. 2019). Thus, the admissions context of distinctive colleges requires a different understanding of measures traditionally used to accurately assess market demand.

Market demand for the distinctive college is assessed by employing three contextually appropriate measures of admission—total applications, acceptance rate, and yield rate—each becoming progressively narrower in scope as students arrive at an enrollment decision. First, the broadest measure of market demand for the distinctive institution is the *total applications* the school annually receives from its targeted student population. This figure highlights all students who submitted a full application to the institution and does not include partial applications or inquiries. The *acceptance rate* is a second and narrower measure of market demand for the distinctive institution. The acceptance rate is a measure of how many applicants an institution can reject and still meet its enrollment goals (Breneman 1994). Finally, the narrowest measure of market demand for the distinctive institution is *yield rate*. Yield rate indicates the percentage of admitted students who actually enrolled in the institution and is the strongest admissions measure of demand (Jamison 2017; McClain, Vance, and Wood 1984; Urban 1992). Given their inclusive admissions focus, these measures of market demand more accurately capture the enrollment context for distinctive institutions than admissions selectivity, an exclusive measure more appropriate for elite institutions.

Distinctive institutions monitor these measures as indicators of viability and financial health because the distinctive nature of these schools makes them particularly vulnerable to shifts in the external resource environment (Goddard et al. 2014; McClure and Fryar 2020; Taylor and Cantwell 2019). When an admissions metric continually signals enrollment pressure—such as limited applications or declining yield rates—a vulnerable institution can also be prone to modify aspects of its distinctiveness in order to recruit within additional student enrollment markets to maintain its overall financial health. Historically, this was the case when women's colleges began to admit men (Miller-Bernal and Poulson 2007; Renn 2014), when select HBCUs began to admit more white students due to the change in regional population demographics (Johnson 2020), and when some religious colleges lessened spiritual admissions requirements to expand their applicant pool (Burtchaell 1998). There remains a continual tension between securing the necessary financial resources for an organization and maintaining its distinctiveness—more succinctly, between money and mission.

The ongoing tension between money and mission that confronts distinctive institutions is notably palpable within the religious college segment of the private nonprofit sector (Weisbrod et al. 2008). The religious college segment is comprised of different types of faith-based institutions that categorically differ from one another, much like the established typologies of institutions that characterize other sectors, including Hispanic-serving institutions (Núñez et al. 2016), broad access institutions (Crisp et al. 2019), and community colleges (Barringer and Jacquette 2018). In his religious college typology, Benne (2001) contends there are four types of faith-based institutions that can be ordered on a continuum from strongest connection to founding tradition (orthodox colleges) to weakest (accidentally pluralist colleges). Orthodox and critical mass institutions use what Benne (2001: 50) calls a "Christian account of life and reality" as their organizing paradigm, while the intentionally pluralist and accidentally pluralist institutions use secular frameworks. Furthermore, these four religious college types differ from one another according to nine dimensions of practice that capture how an institution's religious identity is expressed, such as membership requirements and governance, among others.

Benne's (2001) typology elucidates the complexity of the faith-based segment of American higher education. Although originally founded by Christian traditions, today's religiously affiliated institutions vary considerably in their organization and practice and, consequently, in the markets they serve. Moreover, the dimensions of institutional difference from Benne's typology most likely to affect student demand are those requiring certain beliefs or actions in order to become a member of the campus community and remain in good standing. Examples of this are campus membership requirements, curricular requirements in religion/theology, and the character of the institution's chapel program. In the context of scarce resources, campus leaders at faith-based colleges and universities must be cognizant of the market implications of institutional policies. To do so, however, these leaders must first understand the competitive landscape in which their institutions operate.

Methodology

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

Our study sought to map the contours of this competitive landscape by exploring how an institution's religious distinctiveness relates to market demand. In particular, we wanted to empirically examine previously identified theoretical dimensions of religious distinctiveness that went beyond institutional expressions of identity to require certain beliefs and/or behaviors of prospective students. Our hypothesis was that the characteristics of an institution's prospective student pool would vary depending on its degree of religious distinctiveness.

We drew our sample from the institutional membership of the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCU), a national association of evangelical institutions whose members orient their practice according to Christian frameworks and therefore naturally align with elements of Benne's (2001) orthodox and/or critical mass types. The CCCU membership offers an attractive sample because its institutions have voluntarily chosen to publicly associate with one another and abide by a common set of requirements, thereby forming a de facto organizational field. However, the CCCU ranks include a wide range of institutional types, academic programs, geographic locations, and denominational traditions that provide the variability necessary for robust analysis (Glanzer, Rine, and Davignon 2013; Rine 2012, 2018). In addition, CCCU institutions typically reflect the tuition-dependent, less selective, and modestly resourced character of the wider private nonprofit sector of American higher education (Rine 2012, 2018). They have thus been subject to the same financial pressures felt by the sector as a whole (Adams 2020).

To maximize both the size and variation of our sample, we examined the CCCU membership as of December 2011, the point at which the largest number of members (n = 115) adhered to a common set of institutional requirements regarding institutional type and accreditation, Christ-centered institutional mission, employment policies, institutional cooperation, and financial integrity (Rine 2012). To examine the relationship between religious distinctiveness and market demand within the CCCU membership, our study sought to answer the following three research questions:

1. Do CCCU institutions empirically cluster into natural groups according to dimensions of religious distinctiveness that relate to student expectations?
2. How does the market demand vary over time for each of the resulting groups?
3. Has the relative positioning of the groups remained the same or shifted over time?

Data Sources and Variables

Two data sources were consulted to conduct the study. The first was a dataset developed from the 2011 CCCU Campus Life Study (Rine 2012). That study gathered data regarding student expectations via content analysis of each CCCU member institution's website. In cases where institutional policy was unclear or ambiguous, the office of student life was contacted for confirmation. This approach resulted in complete data for every CCCU member institution (n = 115). These data enabled quantification of the three dimensions of religious distinctiveness from Benne's (2001) typology most likely to affect student demand, namely, campus membership requirements, curricular requirements in religion/theology, and the character of the institution's chapel program—the italicized items in highlighted boxes Table 1.

The second data source consulted was the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), a publicly available online portal providing institutional responses to 12 annual surveys administered by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Of particular interest were annual surveys related to admissions and enrollment, which provided multiple years of data

Table 1

Dimensions of Institutional Difference for Religiously Affiliated Colleges

Public Relevance of Christian Vision	Public Rhetoric	*Membership Requirements*
Religion/Theology Department	*Religion/Theology Required Courses*	*Chapel*
Ethos	Support by Church	Governance

Source: Benne (2001).

that could be used to measure changes in institutional market demand over time for every CCCU member institution (n = 115). The resulting aggregate dataset included the following variables.

FAITH REQUIREMENT. Categorical variable that measured whether a student had to be a professing Christian to enroll in the institution. Although institutions expecting Christian faith varied in how they required students to affirm that commitment, the variable was coded as binary (1 = faith required; 0 = faith not required).

LIFESTYLE COVENANT. Categorical variable that measured whether a student had to abide by a lifestyle covenant that governed both on- and off-campus behavior while enrolled at the institution. Although the content and extent of these covenants varied by institution, the variable was coded as binary (1 = lifestyle covenant required; 0 = lifestyle covenant not required).

CHAPEL REQUIREMENT. Continuous variable that measured the total number of chapel services enrolled students were required to attend per semester. Responses for CCCU members ranged from no chapel requirement to 70 required chapels per semester. The latter amounted to requiring students to attend chapel services every weekday of the 14-week semester.

BIBLE/THEOLOGY COURSE REQUIREMENT. Continuous variable that measured the total number of credits each student was required to complete in Bible and/or theology courses in order to earn an undergraduate degree from the institution. Graduation requirements for CCCU members ranged from three Bible and/or theology credits as part of the general education curriculum to 42 Bible and/or theology credits for a mandated college major.

TOTAL APPLICATIONS PER ENROLLMENT. Continuous variable measuring the total number of applications for admission received from first-time, full-time undergraduate students, divided by the institution's total full-time undergraduate enrollment to control for institutional size.

ACCEPTANCE RATE. Continuous variable measuring the percentage of total first-time, full-time undergraduate applicants accepted by the institution.

YIELD RATE. Continuous variable measuring the percentage of accepted first-time, full-time undergraduate applicants who actually enroll in the institution.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the 2011 CCCU Campus Life Study dataset began with calculation of basic descriptive statistics to provide an overview of the CCCU membership for each of the four variables used to quantify institutional religious distinctiveness, namely, faith requirement, lifestyle covenant, chapel requirement, and Bible/theology course requirement. Next, a cluster analysis was performed using SPSS version 25 to explore the natural groupings occurring within the dataset according to these four variables. To accommodate the categorical and continuous nature of the variables under study, two-step cluster analysis was selected, with a silhouette test performed to assess the cohesion within and separation between any resulting groupings, and descriptive statistics generated to show differences between said groupings and the overall CCCU membership (Wendler and Gröttrup 2016).

To ensure no institutional outliers were present in the sample for future analyses, the characteristics of each CCCU member were examined. As an identity-based national association, the CCCU includes members with diverse institutional forms, some of which are inappropriate for inclusion in an analysis of market demand as defined by the study. Four such outliers were identified—a member of the Work Colleges Consortium that charged no tuition, two institutions with open admission, and one institution whose exponential growth in online undergraduate programs would unduly influence the trend data—and were removed from subsequent analyses, resulting in a sample of 111 CCCU members.

Attention next turned to trend analysis of the three identified measures of market demand, namely, total applications per enrollment, acceptance rate, and yield rate. Values for each variable from the first academic year following the Great Recession (2009–2010) to the most recent publicly available year at the time of analysis (2017–2018) were downloaded from the IPEDS online portal, resulting in a final sample of 107 institutions with complete data for all nine years. Data smoothing was employed to reduce potential bias introduced by extreme individual data points, with three-year rolling averages calculated for total applications per enrollment, acceptance rate, and yield rate at each institution. Results for each of the three measures of market demand were then grouped by cluster to examine their change over time.

Finally, the group means for each measure of market demand were compared to determine whether the relative positioning of each cluster had shifted or remained constant. A one-way ANOVA was used to test for significant differences in the group means at the beginning and end of the time series, as well as related effect sizes. Extreme outliers falling beyond three times the interquartile range were identified within each cluster and assigned a value one unit larger or smaller than the next most extreme score in the distribution (Tabachnick and Fidell 2007). Homogeneity of variance was examined through use of Levene's test for equality of variances (Lomax 2007). In cases where the assumption of homoscedasticity was violated, Welch's correction was applied (Tabachnick and Fidell 2007). Finally, post hoc tests were performed to examine specific differences between group means for variables where the one-way ANOVA returned a significant F-statistic.

Findings

Research Question 1

Our first research question considered whether CCCU institutions empirically cluster into natural groups according to dimensions of religious distinctiveness that relate to student expectations. A two-step cluster analysis was performed using the categorical variables of faith requirement and lifestyle covenant as well as the continuous variables of chapel requirement and Bible/theology course requirement, and the analysis produced three different subgroups of institutions, as shown in Table 2. The analysis also returned a silhouette value of 0.6, which is a measure of cohesion within and separation between each cluster, and this result suggested that the three clusters returned were high quality (Wendler and Gröttrup 2016). In other words, the sample institutions did appear to naturally form three distinct subgroups according to the variables we had specified. In addition, the three clusters were similar in size, such that the ratio of the largest cluster to the smallest cluster was only 1.11.

The first subgroup of 41 CCCU members was the most religiously distinctive. Every institution in this subgroup required students to profess Christian faith in order to enroll, and the overwhelming majority (85 percent) required students to abide by a lifestyle covenant that governed both on- and off-campus behavior. In addition, institutions in the first subgroup maintained the most extensive chapel attendance expectations (nearly twice a week) and Bible/theology course requirements (nearly 14 credits). CCCU members in the second subgroup (n = 37) did not require students to be professing Christians to enroll, but each required student adherence to a lifestyle covenant. This second subgroup of institutions could be viewed as moderately distinctive, as its chapel attendance expectations and Bible/theology course requirements most closely mirrored those of the full sample. Institutions belonging to the third subgroup were the least religiously distinctive members of the CCCU, as they did not limit their student body to professing Christians nor did they employ a lifestyle covenant, and they also required the fewest chapels (fewer than once a week) and Bible/theology credits (nine) of the three subgroups.

Research Question 2

Our second research question focused on how market demand has varied across the three CCCU subgroups since the Great Recession. Rolling averages were calculated by subgroup for three measures of market demand: total applications per enrollment, acceptance rate, and yield rate. Results presented in Figure 1 indicate a gradual increase in total applications per enrollment for all three groups, reflecting a wider upward trend experienced among colleges and universities throughout American higher education as a result of an increase in applications per capita among first-time freshmen (Clinedinst 2019). However, clear differences between the three subgroups were evident, with the same pattern manifesting for every time point: the least distinctive CCCU members received the most total applications per enrollment, followed by the moderately distinctive CCCU members, and the most distinctive CCCU members received the fewest total applications per enrollment. Moreover, the difference between the most distinctive and least distinctive subgroups widened over time, with the range increasing from 1.23 total applications per enrollment in 2009–2012 to 1.42 total applications per enrollment in 2015–2018.

Table 2

Expectations of Students at CCCU Member Institutions

	Full Sample (115)	Most (41)	Moderate (37)	Least (37)
Christian Faith Required (%)	35.7	100	0	0
Lifestyle Covenant Required (%)	62.6	85.4	100	0
Chapels Required per Semester (No.)	19.7	26.6	18.8	13.0
Bible/Theology Credits Required (No.)	10.7	13.6	9.4	9.0

Note: Most = most distinctive subgroup. Moderate = moderately distinctive subgroup. Least = least distinctive subgroup. Numbers in parentheses = sample size.

As with total applications per enrollment, acceptance rates were higher at the end of the time series for all three subgroups, which also reflected a wider trend within American higher education (Clinedinst 2019). Unlike the trends for total applications per enrollment, however, acceptance rates declined at various points for all three subgroups, resulting in two changes in positioning for the moderately distinctive and least distinctive subgroups during the period examined, as shown in Figure 2. In addition, the difference between the most distinctive and least distinctive subgroups narrowed over time, with the range declining from 5.34 percent in 2009–2012 to 4.07 percent in 2015–2018.

Reflecting steady declines seen across American higher education during the same period (Clinedinst 2019), Figure 3 shows that all three subgroups experienced decreases in yield rates for nearly every time point examined. As with total applications per enrollment, clear differences between the three subgroups were evident, only in

Figure 1
Total Applications per Enrollment by CCCU Subgroup

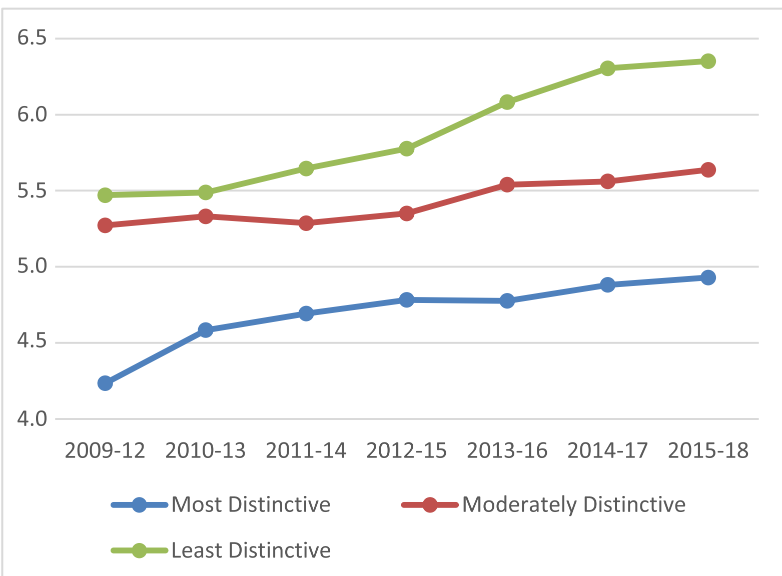
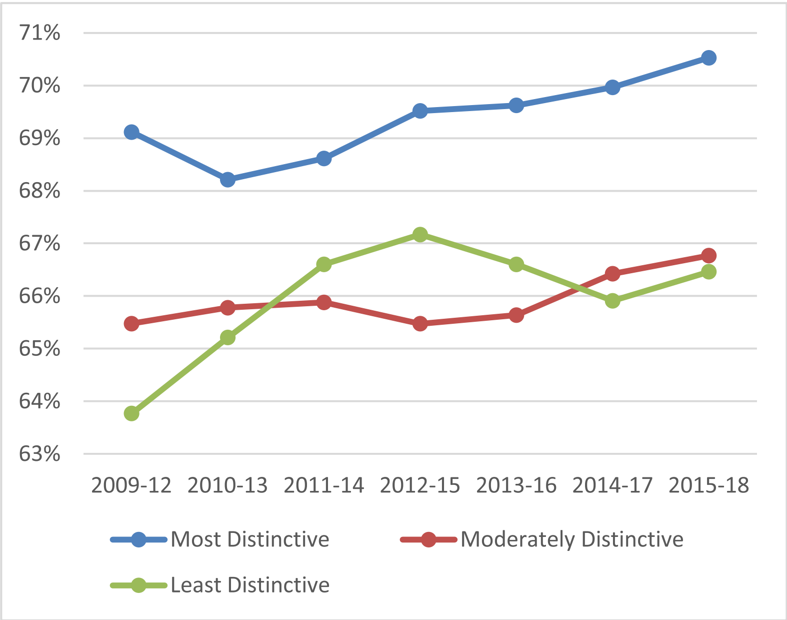


Figure 2
Acceptance Rates by CCCU Subgroup

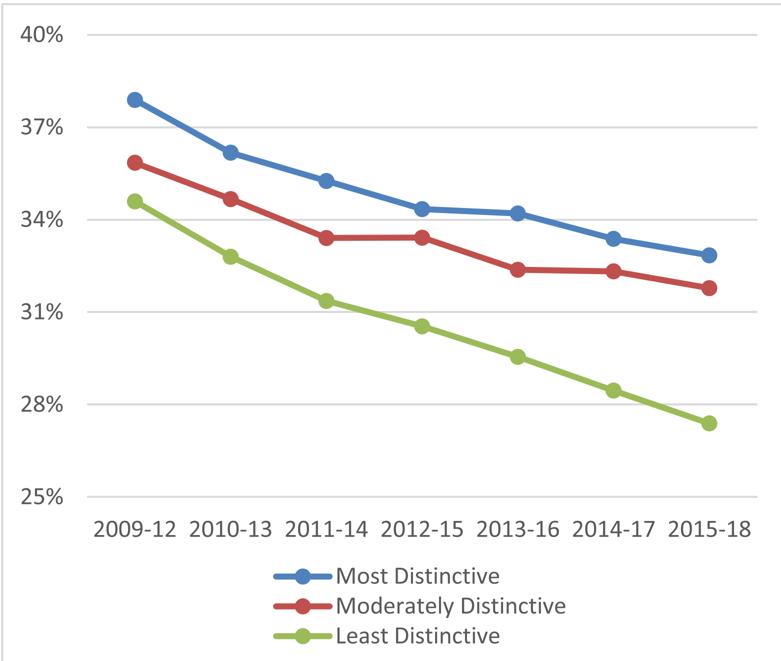


reverse: at every time point the most distinctive CCCU members enjoyed the highest yield rates, followed by the moderately distinctive CCCU members, and the least distinctive CCCU members reported the lowest yield rates. Moreover, the decline was most dramatic for the least distinctive institutions. Consequently, the difference between the most distinctive and least distinctive subgroups widened over time, with the range increasing from 3.3 percent in 2009–12 to 5.45 percent in 2015–18.

Research Question 3

Our final research question examined whether the relative positioning of the CCCU subgroups remained the same or shifted since the

Figure 3
Yield Rate by CCCU Subgroup



Great Recession. While our earlier analysis presented the basic patterns in market demand within the CCCU membership, we wanted to test whether the differences we had observed between the subgroups were statistically significant at the start and end of the time series. Although the mean values varied by subgroup for each of the three measures of market demand, results of the one-way ANOVA performed on the first rolling average (2009–2012) revealed no statistically significant differences between the subgroups for total applications per enrollment (F (2, 104) = 2.475, p = .089), acceptance rate (F (2, 104) = 1.601, p = .207), and yield rate (F (2, 65.445) = 1.181, p = .314). Results of the one-way ANOVA performed on the final rolling average (2015–2018), however, revealed statistically significant differences for two of the three measures of market demand. While mean differences in acceptance rates for the three subgroups were not statistically significant ($F(2, 65.381) = .931$, $p = .399$), ANOVA results showed that the mean differences in total applications per enrollment ($F(2, 104) = 3.234$, $p = .043$) and yield rates ($F(2, 104) = 3.155$, $p = .047$) were both significant at the $\alpha = .05$ level.

Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean value for total applications per enrollment for the least distinctive subgroup of CCCU members ($\bar{x} = 6.23$, $s = 2.53$) was significantly higher than that of the most distinctive subgroup of CCCU members ($\bar{x} = 4.93$, $s = 1.95$) in 2015–2018. Thus, while the average total applications per enrollment had increased for both subgroups since the Great Recession, the least distinctive CCCU members experienced steeper growth (+.88 vs. +.69), such that the difference between the two subgroups became statistically significant over time. An effect size of $\eta^2 = .059$ suggests that religious distinctiveness exerts a medium effect on total applications per enrollment at CCCU institutions (Cohen 1988).

Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test also revealed that the mean value for yield rate for the most distinctive subgroup of CCCU members ($\bar{x} = 32.84$ percent, $s = 9.53$ percent) was significantly higher than that of the least distinctive subgroup of CCCU members ($\bar{x} = 27.39$ percent, $s = 8.43$ percent). Thus, while the average yield rate had decreased for both subgroups following the Great Recession, the least distinctive subgroup suffered a more precipitous decline (–7.2 percent vs. –5.05 percent), resulting in a statistically significant difference between the two subgroups for the final period in the time series. An effect size of $\eta^2 = .057$ suggests that religious distinctiveness exerts a medium effect on yield rate at CCCU institutions (Cohen 1988).

Study Limitations

Two notable limitations should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings of our study. First, although unlikely, it is possible that some institutions in our sample could have made policy changes during the period in question that would have affected their group membership. For example, a CCCU member classified as belonging to the most distinctive subgroup might have eliminated the requirement that all undergraduate students profess Christian faith in order to enroll at some point during the period under examination, which would have shifted that institution into the moderately distinctive subgroup. While we were not able to confirm the institutional policies of the sample institutions at the end of the time series, our experience suggests that these sorts of institutional changes are rare.

Second, our analysis did not take into account potential confounding variables that could have affected the various measures of market demand we examined. For example, an institution might have experienced an uptick in applications during the time series we examined because it joined the Common App, or an institution could have instituted significant changes to its recruiting processes that resulted in an increased yield rate. In addition, the tumultuous years following the Great Recession have witnessed substantial changes to academic programs and tuition-pricing models, which also could affect market demand. These potential confounding variables limit our ability to completely isolate the effect we examined.

Discussion and Recommendations

The results of our analysis yield important implications for future research and practice. First, study results demonstrate that CCCU member institutions naturally cluster into three subgroups according to their differing religious expectations for students. The institutional characteristics defining each subgroup form the basis of a new empirical typology of the evangelical segment of private higher education. While less extensive than some existing conceptual typologies of faith-based higher education, this empirical typology avoids one limitation that often surfaces during the application of conceptual typologies, namely, the tendency to force institutions into predefined categories that may fail to capture every nuance inherent in a particular college or university (Benne 2001). Future research in this area should explore empirical relationships between additional pertinent institutional characteristics, refine the model presented in this study, and apply the resulting typology to dimensions of institutional interaction with and response to the external resource environment. In order to better understand the ways in which faith-based colleges and universities balance institutional identity maintenance with financial survival, further study of innovative recruiting practices, new academic program development, and alternative tuition-pricing models are warranted.

The results of our study also illustrate that an institution's market demand will vary according to its degree of religious distinctiveness. In particular, less distinctive institutions can expect to receive relatively more applications for admissions, while more distinctive institutions can expect to realize relatively higher yield rates. Thus, the practical consequences of varying levels of religious distinctiveness provide distinct affordances and limitations. It is critical, therefore, that leaders of evangelical colleges and universities be cognizant of their institutions' positioning within the segment when making adjustments to policy and practice, understanding that certain actions could signal to prospective students that the institution's type is changing and thus shift market demand. Indeed, while individual administrative decisions may seem unrelated, campus leaders ought to be mindful of how certain markers of institutional identity contribute to the college's market niche. While institutional policy and practice should always emanate from institutional mission and identity, such an intentional approach is imperative to avoid negative market consequences in an increasingly competitive resource environment.

Finally, the results of our study suggest that faith-based institutions of higher education should adapt their recruitment strategies to address phases of the college search process during which they are most likely to experience lower levels of market demand. For example, the more religiously distinctive colleges and universities could focus their efforts on generating a larger number of applications by establishing new connections and strengthening existing ones with so-called kindred spirits that share or naturally connect to the institution's religious identity. After conducting internal data analysis to profile their current students, these institutions might examine third-party data to determine opportunities for building natural pipelines to similar prospective students. Of particular interest are nonprofit organizations that naturally attract these prospective students, such as church congregations, Christian secondary schools, and parachurch ministries. Faith-based colleges and universities can develop meaningful partnerships with these organizations by working to understand and then meet their needs. For example, church congregations can benefit from Christian education materials and subject matter expertise, parachurch ministries can benefit from internship placements and volunteer support, and Christian schools can benefit from customized dual-enrollment programs (Hanover Research 2014).

Once a new relationship has been established, more religiously distinctive institutions should intentionally connect the new pipeline to dedicated personnel within the admissions office who can actively cultivate prospective students by shaping the institutional message and shepherding institutional processes. Beginning early in the admissions cycle, agents of the institution should emphasize the college's religious identity, accentuate key market differentiators, and explain why those differentiators matter. As prospective students move through the admissions process, they should receive customized messaging that addresses their unique interests and needs while also containing consistent threads that highlight key elements of institutional identity and weave a cohesive institutional narrative (Vander Schee 2010).

More religiously distinctive colleges can also increase their total applications by creating relevant programming that reaches student segments they do not currently serve. This tactic requires a high degree of institutional flexibility and openness to change, as it often involves adopting new majors or modalities, such as hybrid or online education, offering new degree levels, such as graduate programs, and engaging new student populations, such as adult learners. Institutional reach can also be extended through collaboration with content partners that operate beyond traditional academic sources, such as noncredit-bearing educational providers and workforce development programs (Business-Higher Education Forum 2013).

For the less religiously distinctive college or university, the challenge is to improve yield rates. This goal can be accomplished by taking three sequential steps to strengthen recruitment processes. First, a full audit of recruitment strategies and tactics should be undertaken to optimize institutional performance and maximize institutional resources. In particular, six areas should be examined:

1. Pipelines: Which lead sources have the highest yield rates?
2. Personnel: Are the right people associated with each prospective student population?
3. Practices: Are the personnel engaged in the right activities?
4. Processes: Are the right activities systematically pursued?
5. Policies: Do existing policies make sense for each prospective student population? and
6. Technology: Is automation of lower-level tasks in place to scale?

Second, admissions offices should take a customized approach to establishing and building relationships with prospective students. From the very start of the admissions process, prospective students should experience personalized interactions and receive communications tailored to their individual needs and interests. Finally, institutions should develop a specific yield strategy for each academic major that leverages program partners and alumni in the field to demonstrate the tangible value of the degree to admitted students (Vander Schee 2010).

Conclusion

The social and economic disruptions of the past decade have exerted increased financial pressure on small and midsized private colleges in the United States, many of which are religiously affiliated. As the leaders of these organizations grapple with new fiscal realities, a common question that may be raised in board rooms and planning meetings concerns the advantages and disadvantages of altering the institution's religious character. Some campus leaders may advocate becoming less distinctive as a means of appealing to a greater number of students, while others may wish to emphasize the institution's distinctive identity in order to secure a certain denominational base.

Although such changes to institutional character may increase market demand on one particular measure, our results suggest that they may also lead to decreases on others. Evangelical colleges naturally cluster into three different subgroups, each of which have varying levels of market demand at different stages of the admissions process. Therefore, successful navigation of the current resource environment is unlikely to take the form of a college simply becoming more or less religiously distinctive, which may have the effect of merely moving the institution into a new subgroup with its own limitations. Instead, a more promising approach would be to take stock of the market positioning that results from the institution's preferred character, and then adopt targeted strategies that address the weaknesses inherent in that positioning.

In addition to supporting the organizational persistence of the colleges and universities they serve, campus administrators who lead from institutional mission while being mindful of the broader competitive environment make an important contribution to the wider profession as well. Institutional diversity, a hallmark of the American system of higher education, is best advanced when colleges actually commit to maintaining their institutional distinctiveness, rather than moving to homogenize with competitors that are perceived to be more successful. Moreover, variety in postsecondary organizational types will ultimately be preserved not by the institutional exemplars in each sector, but by the purposeful actions of individual campus leaders committed to preserving a distinctive form of education in the midst of fiscal challenges. In so doing, these leaders not only steward their institutional legacies, but they also contribute to the intellectual vibrancy, pedagogical variety, and philosophical diversity of American higher education, thereby supporting the educational opportunity, choice, and representation essential to the health of our democratic society.

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