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# The origins and evolution of academic drift at the California State University, 1960–2005

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**Abstract**
Academic drift has been a central concept in the study of higher education for the past half-century, with higher education scholarship locating the phenomenon in fieldwide status competition dynamics stemming from the postwar massification and neoliberalization of higher education. In this paper, I explore the origins and evolution of academic drift at the California State University (CSU) system between 1960 and 2005, finding that its name change from college to university and pursuit of doctoral-level education had endogenous origins grounded not in status competition but rather in a desire to repair an organizational identity breach with field stakeholders. This case suggests that organizational activities that look like they are in the pursuit of prestige may not in fact be grounded in prestige dynamics and that academic drift may be less inevitable and hegemonic than currently portrayed in the literature. Together, these findings advance understanding of a core phenomenon of interest to higher education scholarship.

**Keywords** Academic drift · Mission creep · History · Status competition · Organizational identity · California Master Plan

## Introduction

Academic drift has been a central concept in higher education scholarship for the past half-century, although the specific phenomena captured by the term have varied depending on the national and disciplinary contexts of the researcher. Across contexts, its general form can be stated as the process by which relatively lower-status colleges and universities adopt the organizational forms and practices of higher-status ones via processes of mimetic, normative, or coercive isomorphism (Tight, 2015).

Extant literature has located both the origins and the evolution of academic drift in fieldwide status competition dynamics (Brankovic, 2018) stemming from the postwar massification (Holmberg & Hallonsten, 2015) and neoliberalization (Orphan, 2018; Slaughter et al., 2004) of higher education. Colleges, in search of the financial resources that accompany the

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attainment of legitimated prestige markers, abandon vocational education (Harwood, 2010), become "universities" (Jaquette, 2013; Morphew, 2002), increase academic selectivity (Crisp et al., 2010), and increase the production of graduate and doctoral degrees (Baker et al., 2007). However, this process may be conflictual and contested. Starting new academic programs, for example, requires the support of the faculty and administrators, who may not be willing to abandon the teaching mission in furtherance of the research enterprise (Orphan, 2020; Orphan & Broom, 2021). Moreover, changing institutional names and starting new degree programs—particularly at public universities—can require regulatory or legislative changes, which can imply sustained political contest over the means and ends of higher education (Pusser, 2018; Slaughter et al., 2004).

Despite this progress in theorizing academic drift, higher education scholarship is yet to problematize status competition as the sole motivating factor explaining organizational activities commonly understood as being status-enhancing. In this paper, I explore the origins and evolution of academic drift at the California State University (CSU) system between 1960 and 2005, finding that its name change from college to university and pursuit of doctoral-level education stemmed not from status competition with the University of California but rather from an organizational identity breach (Jacobs et al., 2021) caused by how the California legislature implemented the principle of "mission differentiation" proposed by the 1960 California Master Plan for Higher Education.

In implementing the Master Plan's recommendations, the legislature institutionalized the "California State Colleges" and the "University of California" (UC) as two distinct segments of public higher education but granted the State Colleges the authority to award master's degrees while reserving the doctorate for the UC campuses. In doing so, it violated organizational identity beliefs held by State College faculty and leaders, which faculty and leaders fought by first claiming recognition of the "university" identity that they were inhabiting by virtue of awarding master's degrees and then claiming authority to award doctoral degrees as a categorical imperative of a university. Over five decades, as faculty and leaders made efforts to gain full recognition for an organizational identity they inhabited as a matter of daily practice, system, they encountered opposition at various times from the legislature, the governor, and the UC system. Ultimately, the State Colleges prevailed in the legislature, first obtaining the right in 1972 to the "university" title and then in 2005 the right to award a limited number of doctoral degrees, which have remained relatively self-contained over the last fifteen years.

Through this analysis, I find that the name change and doctoral degree production—key elements of academic drift—had endogenous origins grounded not in status competition brought about by neoliberal market pressures but rather in a foundational desire to repair a perceived identity breach—a difference between "who we are" and "who you should be." I argue that this case suggests that organizational activities that *look* like they are in the pursuit of prestige may not in fact be grounded in prestige dynamics and that thus academic drift may be less inevitable and hegemonic than currently portrayed in the literature (Geschwind & Broström, 2021; Tight, 2015). Together, these findings advance understanding of a core phenomenon of interest to higher education scholarship.

## Literature review

The term "academic drift" as used in this paper, meaning the process by which higher education institutions discard perceived low-status category markers for higher-status ones, is generally traced to the work of Burgess and Pratt in the 1970s, who studied

how non-degree polytechnic schools in the UK moved away from technical education and towards higher-status academic instruction (Tight, 2015, p. 87). In the decades since, this phenomenon has been studied under an umbrella of terms including "mission creep" (Henderson, 2009) and "mission drift" (Jaquette, 2013), with the majority of scholarly attention paid to understanding colleges renaming and rebranding as universities (Jaquette, 2013; Morphew, 2002), moving from vocational to academic instruction (Harwood, 2010), from teaching to research (Geschwind & Broström, 2021), and from undergraduate to graduate degree production (Baker et al., 2007).

Common to this scholarship is a theoretical framing of academic drift as an example of fieldwide homogenization through coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphic processes as elaborated by DiMaggio and Powell (1983). Because higher education is a "pluralistic" field—i.e., it interfaces with multiple other institutional fields (Kraatz & Block, 2008)—and plays an important role in national political development because it sits "between citizens and the state" (Loss, 2012), this homogenization recursively shapes and is shaped by broader sociopolitical contests between the state, the market, and the academy (Pusser, 2008). The most relevant of these contests for present purposes is the sustained postwar marketization of higher education research and teaching activities resulting from the decline of the welfare state and the ascendancy of neoliberal ideology in the political economy (Ordorika & Lloyd, 2015; Orphan, 2018; Slaughter et al., 2004). In an era of retrenching state financial support for higher education, colleges and universities compete with each other for students, faculty, and research grants (Krücken, 2021). However, because "quality" in higher education is an opaque concept (Dicker et al., 2019), status signals serve as proxies, and "accreditations, ratings, alliances, awards, and…even 'academic drift,' are inextricably linked with status dynamics," (Brankovic, 2018, p. 636).

Thus, the field of higher education is canonically theorized as a status hierarchy which drives strategic action on the part of lower-status universities to adopt the degree offerings, knowledge production, and symbolic elements of their more elite counterparts in efforts to move up the hierarchy (Fumasoli et al., 2020). In doing so, they cast away lower status student-centered teaching missions (Gonzales, 2012; O'Meara & Bloomgarden, 2011) in favor of research activities, aiming to position themselves within the higher-status and better-resourced "research university" category (Geschwind & Broström, 2021; Holmberg & Hallonsten, 2015). Seeking to maintain the status hierarchy, regulators may penalize, and elite institutions may contest the legitimacy of, lower-status universities' actions (Warshaw et al., 2019) and engage in strategic action of their own to move the goalposts. However, "the informed view remains…[that] in the medium to longer term academic drift is inevitable" (Tight, 2015, p. 93).

Recent research has, however, suggested that it may be possible for higher education institutions to escape this "competition trap" (Naidoo, 2018). Studies of broad-access, regional public universities in the USA have revealed that these institutions engage in strategic actions to more deeply embed themselves in their lower-status, broad-access, teaching-intensive missions (Orphan, 2020; Warshaw et al., 2020) and that even when there is movement towards higher-status activities, this movement may be relatively modest (Warshaw et al., 2019). This may be because faculty and leadership at these organizations identify with and are committed to the institutional mission despite its perceived lower prestige in the broader status hierarchy of higher education (McClure, 2018; Zerquera, 2021) and exercise agency to limit the scope and pace of status-enhancing activities when they are perceived as countervailing the institutional mission (Orphan & Broom, 2021). Collectively, this research has problematized narratives about academic drift as an inevitable and

uncontested organizational process and—implicitly—granted a key casual role to organizational identity dynamics.

Organizational identity resides in a set of claims made by organization members to answer the question "who are we (as an organization)?" (Albert & Whetten, 1985), which can take the form of "categorical imperatives" about actions the organization must take to "avoid acting out of character" (Whetten, 2006, p. 221). Although a full treatment of the literature on organizational identity is out of scope for this paper (see Gioia et al., 2013 for a review), most relevant for present purposes is the idea that because organizational activities—and therefore, identity claims—are circumscribed by the norms of an organization's institutional field (Besharov & Brickson, 2016), organizations must verify their identity claims by "exchanging symbols" with their institutional environment in an exercise of mutual recognition (Pratt & Kraatz, 2009, p. 393). Through this "sense-exchanging" process (Ran & Golden, 2011), organization members' construction of "who we are" as an organization is rendered recognizable to field stakeholders, whose subsequent legitimation of the identity claims circumscribes the range of activities that meet the categorical imperatives of that organizational identity. When, however, there is a lack of fit between organizational identity ("who we are") and institutional expectations ("who you should be"), organization members may perceive an "identity threat" (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006) or an "identity breach," (Jacobs et al., 2021) which can set off a prolonged political contest between organization members and institutional stakeholders to "pursue one's own identity beliefs and related interests to influence the prevailing views about organizational identity" (Jacobs et al., 2021, p. 952).

The organizational sociology literature has demonstrated the salience of these organizational identity dynamics in explaining firms' financial outcomes (Voss et al., 2006), labor negotiations (Glynn, 2000), fieldwide competition (Kammerlander et al., 2018), and responses to changes in the policy environment (Ernst & Schleiter, 2019). In parallel, the higher education literature is increasingly recognizing the organizational dimensions of university activities as a "meso-level intervening variable between the macro variable (the environment) and the micro variable (the management)" (Fumasoli et al., 2020, p. 306). In this context, despite the recognition of the potential salience of organizational identity in explaining field dynamics in higher education—"the university…gains to be analyzed as operating in a field rather than a market, because competition is mainly concerned with the norms that legitimately define the fundamental and distinctive character of university activities" (Dumay & Draelants, 2017, p. 112; see also Stensaker, 2015; Boliver et al., 2018)—the literature yet lacks empirical treatment of organizational identity in explaining the dynamics of status competition and academic drift at the meso-level.

## Research setting, data sources, and analytic methods

As a historical case study, this paper investigates a particular phenomenon (academic drift) in a particular context (the California State University system) over an extended period of time (1960–2005), "making the past present" (Wadhwani et al., 2018, p. 1666) to develop theory about that phenomenon (Merriam, 1988, pp. 24–28). Within the bounds of the temporally and institutionally bound case (Yin, 2014, pp. 33–34), I periodize the process of academic drift within the CSU system, underscoring the role of temporality and historical contingency in the dynamics of its fieldwide contestation (see Cooke & Kumar, 2019, pp. 23–24). The case presented below is structured narratively, grounded in source material

triangulated across thousands of pages of primary source documents, memoranda, and oral history interviews archived and publicly accessible at the California State Archives and the California State University archives. The main archival sources for this study come from the Inventory of the Donald R. Gerth Papers at that CSU Archives. These papers, donated by Gerth, the former chancellor of Sacramento State, include correspondence, memoranda, and transcripts of interviews conducted with key informants as he wrote *The People's University*, his part memoir, part chronicle of the history of the CSU system (Gerth, 2010). Because Gerth devoted a full chapter of his book to the evolution of graduate education within the CSU system (2010, pp. 221–240), his papers and the book offer a unique insight into a CSU insider's analysis of the evolution of academic drift within the system (although he does not use the phrase).

Because historical sources are "fragments or traces of evidence from the past" (Kipping et al., 2013, p. 306) and each archive reflects the biases of its own creation (Decker, 2013), I triangulated my interpretations of the Gerth papers with documents physically archived at the California State Library, oral histories digitally archived at the Bancroft Library Regional Oral History Office, and the archived California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC) website (last accessed: December 2020). Between 1960 and 2005, CPEC served as California's higher education coordinating agency and wrote several influential and informative reports about faculty workload and graduate and doctoral education in the state. These reports served as important building blocks in locating CSU's academic drift within a broader history of higher education in California. To gain a sense of fieldwide discourses and debates about CSU's name change and graduate education ambitions, I also consulted contemporary and retrospective newspaper reports electronically archived in the California Digital Newspaper Collection and in ProQuest's historical newspaper database.

In addition to the archival and newspaper sources described above, I also drew inferences from 30 hours of original retrospective oral history interviews I conducted as part of a broader project exploring the evolution of higher education governance in California. These interviews were conducted with 21 key stakeholders who had first-hand experience with the inter- and intra-organizational dynamics described in the narrative below and of whom 7 individuals had served multiple faculty, staff, and/or leadership roles within and outside the CSU and UC system, thus providing important insider/outsider perspectives and illuminating the lived experiences and subjective motivations of key protagonists.

## Academic drift at the CSU system, 1960–2005

### From state college to university: 1960s–1970s

The California State University system traces its history back to the mid-nineteenth century, when the first California State Normal School was established to train elementary school teachers, eleven years before the California legislature established the first campus of what would become the nine-campus University of California system (Gerth, 2010, p. xviii). Over the next century, the seventeen State Normal School campuses would grow under the administration of the State Board of Education, until united as the California State College system by the 1960 California Master Plan for Higher Education. When the Master Plan was being negotiated in 1959 by members of the state's higher education elite, the focal issue was to determine how to govern the state's three public "segments" of higher education—the elite University of California (UC), the more regionally focused

state colleges, and local community colleges—and how to plan for orderly growth given the expected increase in postwar student enrollment (Douglass, 2000). Beneath the surface of this ostensibly "rational" planning exercise, however, lay an intense effort by UC President Clark Kerr to preserve the UC system's hegemony over research and doctoral education, which was contested by the State Colleges who insisted that the older of the two higher education segments merited both the "university" title and the provision of doctoral degrees (Douglass, 2000).

The enacted compromise Master Plan acknowledged that the UC system had the "sole authority to award the doctoral degree" but could "agree with the state colleges to award joint doctoral degrees in selected fields" (1960 Donahoe Act, 1960, secs. 22550, 22552). However, despite explicitly prohibiting the state colleges from independently awarding doctoral degrees, the Master Plan institutionalized the "primary function of the state colleges" as the "provision of instruction for undergraduate students *and* graduate students… through the master's degree" (1960 Donahoe Act, 1960, sec. 22606, emphasis added). This apparent contradiction created friction between "who we are" and "what we do" for State College faculty and leaders. If they were allowed to award graduate degrees, then why were they colleges rather than universities? And if they were functionally universities, then why weren't their faculty allowed to fully enact the university identity and award doctoral degrees? "The California State Colleges," noted Chancellor Glenn Dumke, "are retaining the title of 'college,' although their development and present status is much the same as that of institutions in other states which currently bear the 'state university' name" (Dumke, 1963, p. 104).

The non-verification by the legislature of either of the State Colleges' two potential organizational identities—a fully undergraduate teaching college or a comprehensive state university—created turmoil among State College faculty. In a 1966 report to the academic senate, a Sacramento State College faculty member complained about "the placing of the State Colleges in a perpetually and invidiously subordinate position to the University" despite their "nearly identical functions" (Tool, 1966, p. 7). As that report railed against the "unwarrantably advantageous position" afforded to the UC system by the Master Plan, other State College faculty members "complain[ed] of having been relegated to 'second-class academic citizenship'" (quoted in Joint Committee on Higher Education, 1969, p. 64).

In response, Dumke and the State Colleges engaged in a two-pronged effort to have the legislature recognize the State College campuses as full universities but with identities distinct from those of the more research-oriented UC campuses. In 1967, reflecting on the awarding of the first UC-State College joint doctoral degree, Dumke noted that the joint doctorate was "an intermediate step toward our own solid Ph.D.'s," and that "sooner or later the state colleges can and should give their own doctoral degrees" (Trombley, 1967a, pp. G1-2). In that interview, Dumke was at pains to reject competing for status with UC, noting that "the academic profession is very status-minded…the solid Ph.D. has and will continue to have precedence. Our job is to produce solid Ph.D.'s who are less research minded than some have been in the past." This, for Dumke, meant educating doctoral students who would be "especially competent in undergraduate teaching" (Trombley, 1967a, p. G2), consonant with the State Colleges' history as Normal Schools and their identities as teaching universities.

Simultaneously, Dumke and the state college Trustees sponsored legislation in 1967 and again in 1968 to rename the system from the California State Colleges to the California State University (Gerth, 2010, p. 544). These legislative proposals were strongly opposed by field stakeholders, who saw them as violating the categorical imperatives of

the State Colleges' identities as undergraduate teaching colleges. Arthur Coons, a member of the Master Plan negotiating team, noted in an interview that "whether you start with the change in mission and then change the name, or change the name then hope you can change the mission, the results are the same" (Trombley, 1967b, p. 3). Governor Ronald Reagan's chief education advisor Alex Sherriffs recalled fighting the proposals "tooth and nail…in the first place, most of the campuses are not, by any definition I've ever seen, a university. A university…includes several colleges and is heavily engaged in scholarship and research. It gives the doctoral degrees" (Sherriffs, 1984, p. 84).

Dumke and faculty were caught in a bind. Without the ability to independently award doctoral degrees, they could not meet all the categorical imperatives of a university. And because they did not meet the categorical imperatives of a university, their ambition to independently award doctoral degrees was seen as a violation of their identities as undergraduate teaching colleges. But given that State College faculty were routinely, and without opposition, provisioning master's level instruction, the University name seemed inevitable absent a viable alternative categorization. However, when, the following year, the State Colleges again sponsored legislation to secure the University name, the debate in the legislature was sharp. "I ask you, I plead with you," argued bill sponsor Richard Barnes, Republican of San Diego, "on behalf of the graduates of these outstanding institutions who are denied the word university on their diplomas," even as a Republican colleague argued that the university identity should be reserved for " the great University of California and its worldwide reputation of achievement" (both quoted in "Bill," 1970).

In the political negotiations that ensued, an amendment was added requiring the State Colleges to change their names on a campus-by-campus basis and in accordance with criteria established by the state's coordinating agency, and the amended bill was signed into law by Governor Reagan in November 1971. Five months later, the criteria governing name changes had been established, and despite UC President Charles Hitch's assertion that these criteria were not "in any general sense a definition of a university" (Trombley, 1972, p. C1), 13 state colleges became universities, and the California State Colleges became the California State University and Colleges.

### "A normal function of any complicated university": the 1980s and 1990s

By 1982, all State College campuses had become universities, and the California State University and Colleges were collectively referred to as the California State University (CSU) system. To the extent that CSU faculty and leadership hoped that the university name would bring with it the categorical imperative of increased doctoral instruction, they were soon proven mistaken. Between 1970–1971 and 1980–1981, the UC and CSU systems awarded just 58 joint doctoral degrees (Gerth, 2010, p. 225), and in 1981, the state's influential Legislative Analyst's Office minced no words in recommending their elimination: "The joint doctoral programs…have failed to live up to their promise of becoming an integral part of [CSU]'s educational mission…we must seriously question whether [the joint doctoral program] serves any meaningful purpose in enhancing the system's educational status" (Legislative Analyst's Office, 1981, pp. 1357–1358).

In 1985, with support from the CSU academic senate and Board of Trustees, CSU Chancellor W. Ann Reynolds announced her intention to seek legislation authorizing the system to independently award the doctoral degree in education (henceforth, the Ed.D.). Despite Reynolds' explicit assurances that "we are not trying to move into the area of doctoral research…we are not research universities…we do not aspire to be [research

universities]" (Roark, 1985, p. 22), the proposal generated immediate fieldwide opposition. "Nothing could be more damaging" to the Master Plan, declared Edward Carter, member of the UC Board of Regents (Santa Cruz Sentinel, 1985). Patrick Callan, executive director of the California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC), called it "the most significant departure from the master plan…in the past 25 years" (Savage, 1985, p. 33). Privately, UC President David Gardner met with Reynolds to let her know that the UC would deploy the full extent of its political power to oppose the proposal (Gardner, 1997, p. 522). By 1987, despite negotiations between CSU and UC leadership to resolve the "tension" around the issue ("Compromise," 1987), it soon became apparent that CSU would not be able to overcome the fieldwide opposition to its effort to independently award a doctoral degree. Seemingly closing the door on the issue, a 1989 report released by a bipartisan legislative committee reviewing public higher education in California rejected the "perception of hierarchy" among the public segments as "misleading and wrong" and reinforced joint doctorates as the appropriate mechanism for doctoral education in the CSU system (Joint Committee for Review of The Master Plan for Higher Education, 1989, pp. 9, 14–16).

Reflecting on her leadership of the CSU system several years later, Reynolds explained her pursuit of the Ed.D. as a need for acknowledgement of an organizational identity held by CSU faculty as a function of their involvement in master's level instruction and joint doctoral training: "I still think that being able to offer a doctorate is a normal function of any complicated university; any sophisticated university, *which CSU is*" (Reynolds, 2004, p. 20, emphasis added). A similar sentiment was shared by a high-ranking CSU official who worked under Reynolds at the time: "The reality was…during that time, faculty from Cal State Los Angeles were also on the faculty at UCLA teaching their graduate doctoral programs. And the same was true with several others…the faculty were capable" (personal communication, 2020). But what CSU leadership and staff saw as necessary acknowledgement of categorical imperatives that they were meeting as a matter of daily practice, external stakeholders saw as a status-seeking drift away from CSU's "original" identity as an undergraduate teaching institution enshrined in the 1960 Master Plan. In 1993, the California Research Bureau released a report critiquing the CSU's drift away from undergraduate instruction, increased graduate enrollment and faculty involvement in research, and CSU's push for the independent doctorate as evidence of the influence of "a dominant national value system that favors research and graduate education at the expense of undergraduate instruction" (Knutsen, 1993, p. 45).

### The Au.D. and the Ed.D.: late 1990s–2005

The next push for the Ed.D. came during the turn of the millennium. In 1998, Charles B. Reed, the former chancellor of the State University System of Florida, was appointed as CSU's systemwide chancellor. He soon formed a strong relationship with state assembly member and former Pasadena City College president Jack Scott, an advocate for community colleges within the legislature. Scott was frustrated by what he saw as the UC system's unwillingness to engage in applied doctoral education, and Reed saw an opening for legislative verification of the identity that CSU had been seeking for the three decades. Scott and Reed made common cause, and in 1999, the state legislature passed a bill sponsored by Scott that directed CPEC to study the state's "capacity" for applied joint doctoral degrees with a particular focus on the state's production of Ed.D. degrees (AB-1279, 1999). While CPEC studied the issue, Reed organized the legislative caucuses, framing the CSU's intention to independently award the Ed.D. as central to CSUs identity as a regional

comprehensive university serving historically marginalized student populations. In a later interview, Reed recalled "organizing the caucuses and sharing with them about how people of color couldn't get an advanced degree in California, and how few people got it, [and] those that did how much they had to pay for it at the private institutions" (Reed, 2006, p. 7). In the same interview, he noted that he neither viewed the push for the Ed.D. as a prestige-enhancing move, nor did he have a desire to emulate the research mission of the UC system: "I spent 14 years [in Florida] saying 'no' to the want-to-be's... I don't compare CSU to UC" (Reed, 2006, pp. 1, 9).

In December 2000, in a report that ran over 300 pages, CPEC concluded that the state's current production of Ed.D. graduates was sufficient to meet current demand and that "no new State policies are needed to promote increased production to maintain the current demand for doctorates" (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 2000, p. 266). Undeterred, Reed wrote to UC President Richard Atkinson informing him that the CSU system intended to seek the authority to award the Ed.D. "It is time to recognize the overwhelming evidence," he wrote, "that the joint approach has failed to produce the number of high-quality education doctorates the state should expect from its public universities.... I have…come to the conclusion that it is critically important for CSU to have the authority to award the Ed.D." (Reed, 2001, p. 2). Meanwhile, CSU released its own report rebutting CPEC's recommendations. The supply of Ed.D. degrees, argued CSU, had been "artificially suppressed," and the only way to solve this problem would be for the legislature to recognize CSU's identity as a doctoral-level university whose categorical imperatives it fulfilled as a matter of daily practice:

> Continuing the state's current policies for producing education doctorates is likely not only to fail to close the gap between supply and demand...but also to fail to produce a desirable level of ethnic, racial, and gender diversity among those holding such degrees.... Improving California's education system is a core function and mission of CSU. Without a doctoral-degree-granting capability, CSU cannot fulfill its role completely...[CSU] should be given authority not just to offer doctoral-level education programs—*as it does already*—but also to grant an applied Doctor of Education degree (The California State University, 2001, pp. 27, 35, emphasis added)

At the same time, now-Senator Scott and fellow Senator Dede Alpert introduced legislation granting CSU the authority to independently award the Ed.D. As it had before, the UC system mobilized in opposition, this time enlisting in the effort UC President emeritus Clark Kerr. In a letter to Alpert, Kerr acknowledged his disappointment with the underproduction of the joint doctoral degrees but was apocalyptic in his assessment of the implications of a CSU Ed.D.: "Approval of an independent CSU doctorate would be a major example of 'mission creep'... Once set in motion, mission creep is nearly impossible to reverse. It has cost taxpayers in most states millions of dollars because it has generated unproductive competition, overbuilding, and duplication of effort in public higher education systems around the country" (Kerr, 2001, p. 3). In the public press, UC leadership attacked CSU's intentions as an attempt to "threaten the integrity of the master plan" (Selingo, 2001, para. 7). And although Reed was confident that he had the votes in the legislature, Governor Gray Davis, who shared a strong relationship with Atkinson, had made it clear that he would defer to UC's opposition and veto any legislation that made it to his desk (Gerth, 2010, p. 228).

However, the setback proved temporary, as a confluence of events gave CSU a new opening to push for the Ed.D. In October 2003, Atkinson retired. In November, Governor Gray Davis was recalled by special election, and Arnold Schwarzenegger was sworn in as

the new governor. In December, Clark Kerr passed away. The elevation of Schwarzenegger as governor was particularly advantageous for Reed and the CSU system. Reed had come to know Eunice Shriver, Schwarzenegger's mother-in-law, who had asked him to serve as an informal advisor to the incoming governor on educational matters (Mathews, 2009). Meanwhile, the accrediting associations for professional audiologists had changed their certification requirements to require the attainment of a professional doctorate (the Au.D.) by 2007 (La Belle, 2004, p. 10). With only one UC/CSU joint doctoral program in audiology operational in the state, CSU's governmental relations staff sensed an opportunity to finally get the independent doctorate—if not the Ed.D., then the Au.D.

By the time Senator Scott introduced legislation in April 2005 seeking to grant the CSU system authority to award clinical and professional doctoral degrees (SB-724, 2005), CSU already had the votes in the legislature and the support of the governor. "When we introduced our bill, we had over 50 co-authors. We already had the votes in both houses as a result. We had spent six months working with legislators at home, with campus presidents and others," recalled a CSU governmental relations executive (personal communication, 2020). The UC, however, was not ready to concede. Stephen Arditti, the UC System's Assistant Vice President of State Governmental Relations, wrote to Scott expressing the UC system's strong opposition to the bill's "effort to eliminate one of the most important features of the Master Plan for Higher Education" (Arditti, 2005, p. 3). But even as UC's representatives lined up their supporters in opposition to the bill, they faced an uphill battle:

> The argument against it [the bill] was hard. It was based on pretty much the master plan and the rationale for the master plan. And when people said, 'well, why do you care so much about [Audiology]? It's just a little thing, a little topic over here. Your people really haven't been all that interested in this anyway, they won't do it, why are you so [against it]?' It was a difficult argument to make as to why they [CSU] should not be able to do this. (UC government relations executive, personal communication, 2020).

As negotiations continued through the summer of 2005, the bill was reframed as an "exception" to the Master Plan, with a scope narrowed from "clinical and professional" doctorates to just the Ed.D.—jettisoning the Au.D. that had motivated the bill in the first place. "[That was] a pure read of the votes and the politics. Members of the [legislative] committee were persuaded about the K-12 and community college need. Audiology was not as prevalent in their mind" (CSU government relations executive, personal communication, 2020). With this narrower scope and framing, UC dropped its objections to the bill, which eventually passed in September 2005. By March 2006, the CSU system had selected seven campuses to admit the first cohort of students (Simoes, 2006), and in 2007, nearly half a century after their first attempt, the first cohort of Ed.D. students were admitted into a professional doctoral program independently administered by the California State University.

## Discussion

The nearly five-decade long arc of academic drift within the CSU system forces reconsideration of the assumption that academic drift is solely driven by status competition dynamics stemming from postwar neoliberalization of higher education (Brankovic, 2018;

Naidoo, 2018). Rather, the above narrative draws attention to the role of meso-level organizational dynamics (Fumasoli et al., 2020) and in particular the temporal and political contestations between organizations and their external stakeholders in bridging a lack of alignment between organizations' identity claims ("who we are") and expectations from the institutional environment ("who you should be") (Jacobs et al., 2021).

CSU staff and leaders believed, right from the signing of the Master Plan in 1960, that by provisioning graduate instruction, they were fulfilling the categorical imperatives of a university and thus deserved both legislative recognition of that name and the ability to inhabit all parts of that identity. Other stakeholders in the field—the legislature, the governor, CPEC, and the UC system—did not, however, see the State Colleges as "universities" and, therefore, as fulfilling those imperatives. As CSU faculty and leaders gained reflexive awareness of this contradiction, they attempted to resolve it by seeking to acquire recognition for the identity that they felt the organization held as a matter of daily practice. Thus, their desires for the name change and the authority to independently award doctoral degrees were motivated not by an aspirational desire to attain a new research-oriented identity and engage in status competition with the UC or to shed a lower-status identity for that of a research university. Rather, the origins of academic drift at CSU lay in faculty and leaders' need for verification of their identity as a "sophisticated" teaching-oriented university whose categorical imperatives they wished to fully inhabit, but which they were legislatively prohibited from doing. To this end, CSU's arguments emphasized the system's teacher- and administrator-training missions and their desire to offer a practical education in the professions, rather than in the disciplines that served as the foundations for UC's organizational identity. Each chancellor who pushed for the authority to grant the doctorate was explicit that they were not trying to attain greater prestige or emulate the UC system; they were, however, trying to gain recognition and authority to more fully inhabit the organizational identity that they already held. Indeed, nearly twenty years after first gaining the authority to award the Ed.D., academic drift within the CSU system has been remarkably limited. The CSU system currently offers only four doctoral degrees, all of which are practitioner oriented, in Audiology, Education, Nursing Practice, and Physical Therapy, and which made up fewer than 0.5% of all degrees awarded by the CSU system in 2020–2021 (California State University, n.d.).

The finding that academic drift within the CSU system was motived by organizational identity dynamics may also help explain why some regional comprehensive universities in relatively lower-status fields do not strive for prestige but instead work to strengthen their "equity" and student-serving missions (Orphan, 2020; Zerquera, 2021). It might be the case, for example, that the identity claims that regional comprehensive universities make, and the categorical imperatives they fulfill, are shared with their key stakeholders. Thus, 'an identity at rest stays at rest until acted upon by an external force' may offer a counter-narrative to arguments about the phenomenological inevitability of upward drift and status competition in higher education (Geschwind & Broström, 2021; Tight, 2015). In the present case, a meso-level organizational analysis revealed that the identity breach of mismatched internal conceptions of "who we are" and external stakeholders' views of "who you should be" spurred organizational actions that looked like they were prestige-seeking but were better understood as identity-legitimating.

The second contribution of this paper is to explore the political and temporal dynamics of these conflicts about organizational identity. In the case of public universities such as CSU, which are institutions of the state (Ordorika & Lloyd, 2015; Pusser, 2018) and embedded in semi-hierarchical relationships with each other (Zusman, 1986), the ensuing political dynamics and power struggles over symbols (the meaning of the word

"university") and materials (the ability to award a doctoral degree) render the actual attainment of any status-enhancing (or identity-legitimating) action ambiguous and historically contingent. When the categorical imperatives that field stakeholders believed CSU should fulfill did not match the imperatives that university leaders believed it should fulfill, the mismatch led to conflict as field stakeholders perceived the State Colleges' attempts to change their name, and CSU's attempts to award doctoral degrees, as illegitimate while faculty and university leaders chafed at the non-recognition of their identity. To resolve this mismatch, CSU had to court symbolic and political support from stakeholders both within and outside the field to counter the powerful opposition from the UC system, the governor's office, and the legislature.

Thus, CSU's ability to grant the independent doctorate, although decades in the making, was attained only because a once-in-a-lifetime gubernatorial recall, the death of an influential higher education statesman, a leadership transition within the UC system, and a change to the accreditation requirements for audiologists opened a historically contingent window of opportunity. This is not to say that the past forty years of attempts were irrelevant—rather, they built the foundation from which CSU mounted its successful attempt for recognition of its categorical imperatives. Each time that CSU mounted an effort to gain the authority to award the doctoral degree, the UC system presented the same defense: that such an action would be a violation of the organizational identities institutionalized by the 1960 Master Plan for Higher Education. Yet, was the influence of the Master Plan the same in 2005 as it was in 1965, with many of its writers deceased and the document itself a historical artifact? Could the window of opportunity that opened in 2005 have opened in 1965, and would legislators have made an "exception" to a plan so recently negotiated?

These questions are indeed counterfactual, but their consideration leads to the conclusion that academic drift may need to be theorized with attention to its temporal dynamics—as the result of "multiple temporal processes operating together…at a particular moment" (Wadhwani & Bucheli, 2013, p. 10). For example, the signing of the 2005 legislation that awarded CSU the authority to award Ed.D. degrees can be explained by the historically contingent intersections of a long-term process (the waning influence of the Master Plan), medium-term processes (the relationship between Reed and Scott; the decision by the accrediting board of audiologists), and a momentary event (the recall of Governor Gray Davis). Moreover, these temporal dynamics draw attention to the interplay between the symbolic and the material in the processes of identity recognition and academic drift. It is telling, for example, that in the 1960s, after the State College representatives had failed in their attempts to get both the doctoral degree and the name change institutionalized in the Master Plan, Chancellor Dumke focused his attention on the name change first. As a largely symbolic action, the acquisition of the university title laid the foundation for future leaders to then advocate for the material authority to award doctoral degrees—which Chancellor Reynolds framed in the 1980s as meeting the categorical imperatives of a "complicated" university.

## Conclusion

As a historical case study, this paper suffers from the limitations inherent to the methodological approach—most notably, the ability to generalize across higher education systems and the fraught nature of making inferences from the past to the present: "the past is gone, so it cannot be ontologically real in the present" (Cooke & Kumar, 2019, p. 24). Yet,

even if as a "black swan" (Flyvbjerg, 2006), this paper identified the limitations of status-competition explanations of academic drift, developed a meso-level explanation rooted in the verification dynamics of organizational identity, and explored the temporally contextualized and politically contested nature of those dynamics over an extended time period. Thus, rather than generalize the findings of this case study to all universities, or even to all public university systems in the USA, this paper contributes to the "cumulative refinement of contingent generalizations" (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 112) about the origins of academic drift within universities and the nature of its evolution over time. Collectively, these findings develop a more nuanced understanding of academic drift as a political, temporal, and contested process, uncertain in outcome, and linked to concepts of organizational identity that have not yet been granted an analytical role in explaining the phenomenon.

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