Proposed Strategies for Classifying Regional Institutions That Promote Social and Economic Mobility and Regionality within the Carnegie Classifications

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About the Carnegie Classifications White Papers

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the American Council on Education (ACE) partnered in February 2022 to reimagine the future of the Carnegie Classifications. As part of this collaboration, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and ACE are working to develop new and refined versions of the classifications that better reflect the public purpose, mission, focus, and impact of higher education.

An aspect of this work involves learning from experts about key topics that can inform future methodological and data decisions. The Carnegie Classifications White Papers series aims to contribute to the body of knowledge and research about the impact of the historic Basic Classification, areas of consideration for a new Social and Economic Mobility Classification, and the role of classification systems. The analyses and takeaways from these papers provide guidance for potential updates. All released white papers can be found at carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu.

Reimagining the Carnegie Classifications is made possible by a cohort of funders that are dedicated to utilizing the classifications to help postsecondary education advance students' social and economic mobility through learner-centered outcomes. Partners include ECMC Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Imaginable Futures, the Kresge Foundation, Lumina Foundation, Mellon Foundation, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, and Strada Education Foundation, as well as a donor who wishes to remain anonymous.

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Introduction

The Basic Classification of the Carnegie Classifications uses data on student enrollment, degree offerings, and research activities to classify colleges and universities. While these are important indicators of institutional type, they fail to capture two other significant aspects of institutional distinctiveness: how regionality shapes an institution's mission and strategic activities and how institutions promote social and economic mobility (SEM) among students and communities. At the same time that the Carnegie Classifications must preserve clarity of design and legibility of the metrics it uses in its Basic Classification, the system must also avoid imposing a narrow set of criteria onto institutions that may unintentionally flatten their missions or homogenize the postsecondary system (Ruef and Nag 2012). The Carnegie Classifications' commitment to recognizing institutional contributions to SEM among students and communities creates an opportunity to consider how regionality and geography influence institutional mission.

An example that illustrates the importance of geography and regionality in efforts to classify postsecondary institutions is that of regional public universities (RPUs). As geographically focused postsecondary institutions established to serve specific regions, RPUs make important contributions to SEM among the students and communities they serve (de Alva 2019). RPUs often enroll large shares of low-income students, students of color, and first-generation college students who experience important benefits from becoming upwardly mobile (Orphan, Wetherbee, and Duncan 2022). The current Carnegie Classifications unintentionally render the regional service mission of RPUs and other regional institutions invisible by excluding measures of regionality.

Regions are geographic areas that can be distinctive and exert influence on the identities of people and communities who reside within them. Geographers define regionality and regions using indicators such as regional topography, culture, and identity (From and Olofsson 2016). People form and reform regions through their relationships with one another, exchange networks, occupancy on land, cultural practices, political processes, and commerce. For the purposes of this paper, I define regionality in higher education as an institution's commitment to embracing and engaging their locale.

Regional institutions have missions to foster regionality, and several types of institutions exhibit regional missions, including RPUs, community colleges, and minority serving institutions. Leaders of regional institutions often have a service area that they see themselves as serving. In some cases, this service area is bounded by a single county or multiple counties (e.g., Community College of Aurora and Metropolitan State University of Denver). Some regional institutions serve substate regions, and their names often identify this region by using a compass directional (e.g., *Western* Kentucky University and *Central* State University). And still other regional institutions see themselves as serving a specific type of geographic area (e.g., rural-serving regional institutions, including Eastern Oregon University and Middle Tennessee State University; urban-serving regional institutions, including Wayne State University, Morgan State University, and Portland State University). Finally, a limited number of regional institutions see themselves as serving an entire state when the state is geographically small, as is the case for Rhode Island College. This paper explores the history of regional institutions and describes how they exhibit regionality. It concludes by proposing metrics and strategies that the Carnegie Classifications might use to classify institutions based on their regionality. Ultimately, this paper argues for the Carnegie Classifications to include metrics that surface an institution's regionality when developing its SEM metrics.

History and Evolution of Regional Institutions

Several types of postsecondary institutions were founded with regional service missions. The earliest forms of RPUs were normal schools and teachers' colleges that educated schoolteachers for rapidly expanding elementary and secondary school systems throughout the United States (Henderson 2006; Ogren 2005). Federal grants established land-grant institutions, which originally had regional service missions (Thelin 2019). Land-grant institutions engaged in cooperative extension to support the agricultural and economic development of their

states. Regional leaders established community colleges and Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) night schools to provide flexible programs of study to working class adults, and these degrees and certificates were aligned with regional workforce needs, which leant these institutions a regional service mission (Finnegan and Cullaty 2001). Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were created to promote racial uplift for their communities and to promote civic engagement and political activism among their students (Gasman, Spencer, and Orphan 2015), and Tribal Colleges and Universities were created to promote tribal nation sovereignty by preserving Indigenous languages and cultures (Stein 2009). The number of regional institutions grew rapidly following World War II with the advent of federal programs—such as the Pell Grant—intended to promote college access for low-income students and veterans (Gumport et al. 1997), which caused demand for higher education across the U.S. to swell.

As the U.S. postsecondary system has evolved, many colleges and universities have become national and international and less regional in their focus, and in the process, they have amplified their efforts to produce basic research and scientific advancement while recruiting students nationally and internationally (Thelin 2019). Some people view regionality as a source of stigma that is in tension with nationalization and internationalization goals that many colleges hold (Kitagawa 2005; Shinners 2022). This view of regionality and regional institutions has encouraged some postsecondary leaders to mimic the behaviors of national and international institutions, which has contributed to mission drift among regional institutions and land-grant institutions. Beyond mission drift, becoming nationally known and ranked is now a signal of institutional maturity and prestige, which has diminished the importance of regionality in higher education and caused the status of regional institutions to suffer. Nonetheless, many regional institutions remain committed to serving their regions and enrolling students locally despite pressures to become national or international (Orphan 2020; Suplee and Orphan 2023).

The original creators of the Carnegie Classifications did not consider how regionality might shape institutional mission and give rise to unique institutional types, instead relying on highest degree awarded and enrollment size to classify institutions. As a result, RPUs were situated in the taxonomy's middle—first as "comprehensive institutions" and later as "master's degree granting institutions"—and community colleges have always occupied the taxonomy's bottom. Scholars have argued that these early choices flattened the distinctiveness of RPUs and community colleges and diminished the status of both sectors (McCormick and Zhao 2005; Ruef and Nag 2011). This positioning also failed to account for the unique ways regional institutions serve their communities and promote SEM.

Geographers assert that regions require maintenance (Jones 2022), and regional institutions foster regional wellbeing by encouraging workforce and economic development (From and Olofsson 2016; Shinners 2022); supporting regional public health; improving K–12 schools; conducting community-based research (From and Olofsson 2016); and hosting museums that document regional culture, among other activities. Regional institutions often have a bounded geographic area leaders see themselves as serving (Orphan 2018), and these institutions contribute to SEM within their communities by aligning degree offerings with regional economic and cultural needs, enrolling students from their regions, and adapting academic programming and community engagement to meet regional and student needs. Regional institutions also contribute to the identity and culture of their region, and in turn, the region's culture and identity shapes campus life (Miller 2020). In this way, regional institutions and their regions enjoy mutually shared fates, with the region's success contributing to the campus's success and vice versa.

Regional institutions explicitly state their regional engagement mission in strategic documents and campus programming such as mission and vision statements, campus policies, strategic plans, professional development opportunities, assessment activities, and curricula (Driscoll 2014). When needed, regional institutions are committed to advancing "place-based change" to address local challenges (Shinners 2022, 522). Regional institutions tend to focus more on responding to students' and regional needs rather than pursuing prestige,

and leaders assess student and regional outcomes and regions to continually improve their contributions to both (Brewer, Gates, and Goldman 2002). In summation, regional institutions are defined by their regions while also filling a unique niche within their regions (Arthur 2016; Brewer, Gates, and Goldman 2002).

Classifying Regional Institutions

The Basic Classification has become a *de facto* prestige hierarchy with research intensive universities occupying the system's apex. The hierarchical nature of the Basic Classification system and the early placement of RPUs in the taxonomy's middle and community colleges in the taxonomy's bottom have caused these sectors to be defined by what they are not (i.e., national/international institutions with extensive doctoral programs and research profiles) instead of by what they are and who they serve. This reality underscores the importance of classifying regional institutions by their regionality rather than their research activity and highest degrees awarded. Reshaping the Carnegie Classifications to acknowledge regionality would also legitimize this important institutional type by naming it in a powerful national classification system.

In 2005, Carnegie introduced its Elective Classification for Community Engagement (Pearl 2014), which recognizes institutions that serve their local communities and foster mutually beneficial campus/community relations (Driscoll 2014; Ward et al. 2013). Carnegie also offers the Elective Classification in Leadership for Public Purpose that recognizes institutions that contribute "to the health and vitality of a free and open democratic society" (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching 2024, 1). While both elective classifications represent positive steps toward acknowledging the regional engagement of institutions, national and international colleges and universities without regional missions have earned both designations, which means that the elective classifications do not surface regionality among institutions. Of the 352 institutions that hold the Elective Classification for Community Engagement, 139 are listed as having "very high research activity" or "high research activity" (colloquially known as R1s and R2s), which means over a third are national or international universities rather than regional institutions. As such, the Carnegie Classifications have yet to identify regional institutions as a unique institutional type.

The *U.S. News and World Report (USNWR)* rankings system assesses regional institutions, but the rankings are problematic for several reasons. First, *USNWR* does not neutrally categorize institutions but instead ranks them, which creates winners and losers and inspires competition and homogenization among postsecondary institutions as leaders seek higher rank. Second, the metrics *USNWR* uses are misaligned with the missions and financial realities of many regional institutions. While the rankings include the number of Pell recipients an institution graduates, they also rank institutions by their admissions rejection rates, which is contrary to the mission regional institutions hold to promote postsecondary access. *USNWR* also considers several measures of institutional wealth, which fail to acknowledge the funding inequities RPUs face when compared with national and international institutions (Taylor and Cantwell 2019).

Washington Monthly magazine ranks colleges and universities "based on what they do for the country" (Washington Monthly Editors 2022), and some of these metrics ostensibly account for aspects of regionality, including the number of students and alumni who serve in AmeriCorps; the proportion of federal work study hours spent on community service; attainment of the Elective Classification for Community Engagement; and degrees awarded in health, education, and social work. While these are interesting metrics to consider when examining a campus's regionality, the *Washington Monthly* ranking equally emphasizes traditional measures of research that do not expose regionality. Additionally, the rankings include the number of faculty who have attained prestigious research awards, and the majority of faculty who attain these forms of recognition are employed by national or international research universities. The rankings system also does not consider how many in-state students an institution enrolls, which may indicate how accessible or regionally focused it is in its enrollment efforts. It is unsurprising then that the highly ranked institutions mirror those that are highly ranked by *USNWR* (e.g., national universities including Harvard, Yale, Stanford, etc.) and that hold the "very high research" Basic Carnegie Classification.

In 2022, the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC) introduced its Rural Serving Postsecondary Institutions (RSI) metric to identify colleges and universities that serve rural communities (Koricich et al. 2022). The RSI metric employs variables revealing an institution's location as well as the degrees awarded in areas of rural economic need. Orphan and colleagues identified and defined RPUs using 138 variables, including degrees awarded, student enrollment variables, RSI scores, tuition and fees, teacher education programs, institutional membership in national associations such as the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, admissions accessibility, and institutional revenue (Orphan, Wetherbee, and Duncan 2022). These last two classification metrics represent promising approaches to identifying regional institutions that may inform efforts to categorize institutions by their regionality within the Carnegie Classifications (Arthur 2016).

Reshaping the Carnegie Classifications to Incorporate Regionality

There are two possibilities for including regionality in the Carnegie Classifications: 1) changing the Basic Classification to include regionality or designing a new universal classification that includes regionality; or 2) creating an elective classification. This section proposes metrics and changes to the Carnegie Classifications for both approaches.

Reshaping the Basic Classification

A first step in reshaping the Basic Classification would be to include variables that reveal an institution's regionality. The Basic Classification could include Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data exposing expenditures on community service and work study funding spent on community service as a proportion of an institution's overall budget. By considering the proportion of expenditures rather than a whole dollar amount, regional institutions with small budgets are not penalized or overlooked. The Basic Classification could also compare Classification of Instructional Program (CIP) data with Census data about regional workforce and industry indicators to determine alignment between degrees and regional workforce needs. Comparing CIP and Census data would entail a multi-step process. First, an institution's service area must be identified. One way to do this would be to identify the counties contiguous to an institution. Carnegie leaders could then use the Census Business Patterns dataset to identify the top five industries in the counties of a campus's service area. After county data are collected, the CIP codes should be categorized or themed by the 19 types of business establishments identified in the Census Business Patterns dataset. Finally, the correlation between degree offerings and the top industries within an institution's service area could be ascertained.

An institution's enrollment data could also be considered to show how accessible an institution is within its region. For example, the proportion of students who are Pell recipients, the representativeness of the student body's racial composition as compared with the racial diversity within the region (IPEDS and Census data), and the proportion of students who are in-state residents could be considered. These data would shed light both on institutional accessibility and student mobility, with regional institutions enrolling students who are less mobile than students who enroll in national or international universities (Jaquette and Curs 2015).

While these metrics would create a better understanding of how well an institution is serving its region, they would constitute a fairly blunt way to understand regionality. Additionally, many institutional leaders find utility in the Basic Classification's emphasis on level of degree awarded and would likely not want to be identified solely by their regionality. One way to address this issue would be to create two broad classifications—one for regional institutions and one for national institutions—and then to categorize institutions by degree levels and research expenditures as the current system does.

Developing an Elective Classification for Regionality

Reshaping the Basic Classification has the benefit of ensuring that all institutions are subject to this classification, although it has the downside of losing some of the precision and institutional information that might be collected through an elective classification. A second approach to classifying institutions by their regionality would be to develop an Elective Classification for Regionality. The primary benefit of an Elective Classification is that it can include nuanced data about how an institution serves its region. An Elective Classification for regionality should build on the application requirements of the other Elective Classifications without being duplicative to ensure that the Elective Classifications are meaningfully different. What follows is a list of indicators that could be included in an Elective Classification for regional institutions.

Regional Context

- Campus's definition of regionality

- Campus's service area (can be a list of counties)

- Description of institution's history and founding regional service mission

Quality of Regionality

- Assessment of campus service to region, including measures of alignment between institutional programming and regional community and economic needs

- Professional development opportunities for staff, faculty, and students to learn about the region's culture, history, community, and economy

- Evidence of systemic efforts by campus units, academic departments, and staff to embody regionality

Identity and Culture

- Evidence of regionality in mission and vision statements and strategic plans

- Campus-wide awards and recognition reflect regionality

- Executive leadership advances regionality; position in senior administration charged with regional engagement

- Campus-sponsored museums and cultural events reflect regionality and celebrate regional culture and identity

Infrastructure and Finance

- Budget allocations and line items dedicated to regional engagement

- Centers, structures, and staffing focused on regional engagement

Student Life

- Degree programs aligned with regional needs (economic, community, or other)

- Demonstration that campus serves as a regional postsecondary access point (e.g., majority of students are in-state, student racial demographics mirror regional racial demographics)

- Co-curricular opportunities aligned with regional needs

- Campus engagement with alumni in the region

The proposed changes described herein would foster greater accuracy in the Carnegie Classifications by classifying regional institutions as a distinctive postsecondary type. Such changes could also encourage greater mission-centeredness among regional institutions as they would be nationally recognized for their work to foster SEM among their students and serve their regions. More importantly, such recognition could in turn strengthen upward mobility and democratic life throughout the U.S. given the geographic spread of regional institutions throughout the country.

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