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## **Chapter 14**

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Organizations, like individuals, are faced with the task of constructing an identity. To attract investors and consumers, a firm needs to develop a sense of “who we are” and “what we do.” Yet audiences may come to see the firm differently than how it desires. We address this alignment problem with a case study of the U.S. market for higher education. Identity verification is core to the research on individuals but peripheral in the literature on organizational identity, which instead focuses more on strategic identity construction. We use a network approach to capture both how schools view themselves (e.g., Yale nominates Princeton as a peer) and how the market responds (e.g., many schools view Yale and Princeton as peers). Results show that prestigious schools are more likely to (1) construct tightly controlled identities, (2) experience reciprocated nominations, and (3) define themselves in a manner consistent with the market’s response.

Keywords: Organizational identity; peer nomination network; identity verification, reciprocity.

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### **Controlled, Verified, and Understood: Identity and Status in the Field of Higher Education**

## **Introduction**

Organizations, like individuals, are faced with the task of constructing an identity. If an organization itself cannot make sense of who it is and what it does, how will the audience? This problem motivates much of the literature on organizational identity from the institutional perspective (see e.g., Glynn 2008; Greenwood et al. 2011:346–47). For example, Navis and Glynn (2011:480) argue that firms strive to develop a coherent and compelling “constellation of claims” around ‘who we are’ and ‘what we do.’ In the case of entrepreneurs, for example, an optimal set of claims—the set of claims investors and consumers are more likely to find plausible—contains a narrative for why the firm is at once conventional and distinctive (Albert

and Whetten 1985; King, Clemens, and Fry 2011; Navis and Glynn 2011; Whetten 2006). In short, this work argues that claims about self imbue an entity with meaning.

But even the most strategic organization is limited in its ability to shape how an audience interprets it. An organization can construct a convincing theory of ‘who we are,’ but it is the actors surrounding the focal organization who ultimately decide how to make sense of who *you* are and what role *you* play in the broader field or market (Zuckerman 1999). But what exactly is the link between the claims an organization makes and how others see it? To what extent does an organization wish to be seen ‘here’ when everyone else views it as belonging ‘there’? What kinds of organizations are most likely to have their self-claims verified or affirmed by others?

These questions address the interplay between self and the “response of other” (Mead 1934; Miyamoto and Dornbusch 1956), which speaks to social psychological approaches to self and identity (see Owens, Robinson, and Smith-Lovin 2010; Stryker 2008) and control theories (Robinson 2007) more broadly. For decades now, self and identity researchers have systematically examined identity from the perspective of a feedback system: the construction of self-held identity meanings and the effects of (non)verification (e.g., Burke and Stets 1999, 2009; Cast, Stets, and Burke 1999; Stets and Cast 2007). In this chapter, we seek to apply these insights to make sense of organizational identities in market settings.

Our empirical analysis is a case study of the field of higher education, and we measure identity from the perspective of *affinity claims* and *affinity attributions*. Starting in 2005, the U.S. Department of Education began asking schools to report reference groups for the purpose of providing schools with tailored performance feedback. As explained in detail below, these reported reference groups can shed light on *three* distinct aspects of an organization’s identity:

who the focal thinks are its peers, whether nominated peers reciprocate the focal's claim, and who the collective thinks are the focal's peers.

Drawing on the conceptual distinction of first, second, and third orders (Ridgeway and Correll 2004), we consider self-claims about peers as a first-order dimension of identity, reciprocation as a second order phenomenon, and peers assigned by the collective as third-order social facts. We then develop three hypotheses related to these constructs and the tension between them. First, we examine the extent to which first-order claims are tightly or loosely controlled (Cantwell 2011; Powers 1973). Then, accounting for tightness of control, we examine the extent to which first-order claims are (a) directly reciprocated and (b) in alignment with third order understandings.

We thus contribute to the literature on organizations and management by highlighting certain identity processes that have not traditionally been studied with respect to organizations and markets. In turn, we contribute to identity theory in social psychology by demonstrating how a network approach can be employed to create new measures of key constructs such as identity control and verification. In addition, our analyses help demonstrate the generalizability of identity theory predictions to organizational processes. Namely, we find that high status organizations, much like high status individuals, are better able to get others to see themselves as they wish to be seen (Cast et al. 1999; Stets and Harrod 2004).

### **Identity as Affinity Claims and Affinity Attributions**

In the (sociological) social psychology literature on self and identity, a long strand of research examines how interpersonal relations shape the self-concept (e.g. Turner 1978; Stryker 1980; Stryker and Burke 2000; see also McFarland and Pals 2005; Walker and Lynn 2013). First, role-

based identity implies interaction with another person playing a corresponding role (McCall and Simmons 1966; Stryker 1980). For example, the role of a teacher can only be performed through interacting with students (Burke and Stets 2009). Second, the development, maintenance, and realization of a self-concept requires feedback from others; indeed, discrepancy between how you see yourself and how others perceive you causes distress and anxiety (Burke 1991; Burke and Stets 2009). Finally, an actor's commitment to specific identities are revealed through the number of interaction partners associated with that identity, an actor's emotional investment in those alters (Stryker 1980, 2008), and the embeddedness of those alters in broader ego-centric networks (Walker and Lynn 2013). Thus the concept of identity is essentially relational in that it arises from the interplay of external social structure and the structure of the self (Stryker and Burke 2000).

In this paper, we focus on yet another aspect of the relationality of identity, namely, that actors can construct identities by claiming similarity to or affinity with other known (and complex) entities, without ever identifying the basis for similarity (e.g., I am like Jane, my university is like Harvard) (e.g., Labianca et al. 2001). Likewise, an audience often learns to identify an actor by comparing it to other known entities and making attributions about similarity (e.g., we think Jane is like Mary, we think Harvard is like Yale). We refer to the former as affinity claims and the latter as affinity attributions.

Identity vis-à-vis affinity perceptions is distinct from yet compatible with traditional approaches to conceptualizing identity. Previous work documents how actors construct identities not only on the basis of role relationships (e.g., teacher-student) but also by claiming membership with respect to attribute-based groups (e.g., student-athlete, American, Girl Scout) (see Owens et al. 2010 for a review). Self-identification based on belonging to a social category

is theorized within the framework of social identity theory, which proposes that “people cognitively represent a category/group as a *prototype*—a fuzzy set of attributes (perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors) that are related to one another in a meaningful way, and that capture similarities within the group and differences between the group and other groups” (Hogg 2013:508). Thus, social identity based on categorical claims implies that an individual perceives other members of the category as similar to herself.

Our approach is to examine claims of similarities directly in terms of how members of a group claim to be similar to other members (i.e., an actor-actor affinity claim as opposed to an actor-category membership claim). For example, an individual may identify herself in terms of being “very similar to Jane and different from Joe” instead of listing various attributes (teacher, female, heterosexual, wife, parent of two, low-middle class, middle-aged, white, Midwesterner, football fan, etc.). Examining identity through the lens of affinity claims effectively allows researchers to capture categories formed at the overlap between several roles, traits, or formal categories. Affinity claims are essentially complex perceptions of self boiled down to simple statements of actor-actor equivalence. From these individual social comparisons emerge social categories and boundaries that actors in that field consider meaningful (Abrams and Hogg 1998).

Organizational scholars, for example, often employ actors’ reference group choices to understand how organizations construct their own identities as well as what these identities reveal about segmentation in the industry or market (e.g., Labianca et al. 2001; McGee and Thomas 1986; Porac, Thomas, and Baden-Fuller 1989, 2011; Reger and Huff 1993; Vergne and Wry 2014). For example, Porac et al. (1989) report that organizations in the Scottish knitwear industry develop a business strategy depending on management’s perceptions of who are their competitors. Again, self-identification through reference group allows actors to accommodate

complexity and navigate contradicting institutional expectations produced by combinations of actors' multiple attributes and roles (e.g. Brown and Eisenhardt 1997; Greenwood et al. 2011; Kodeih and Greenwood 2014; Marquis and Tilcsik 2016).

In addition, audiences often interpret focal actors through the lens of affinity attributions. Heath (2010), for example, argues that new businesses should deliberately try to explain themselves to customers by using qualified affinity claims (e.g., "Netflix is like Blockbuster but by mail") as opposed to "from scratch" definitions based on first principles. In this example, Blockbuster is a known entity that serves as a cognitive anchor for consumers new to Netflix (Navis and Glynn 2011). The question at hand is whether the audience's attributions about an organization match the organization's own affinity claims about self. The two—self-claims and others' attributions—are conceptually distinct, even if they align empirically.

In sum, as with all other types of identities, identification through affinity claims is negotiated in social interactions and (dis)confirmed by the audience. Precisely so, inspired by Ridgeway and Correll (2004, 2006), we distinguish between self claims regarding reference groups (first order), reciprocal affinity claims (second order), and affinity attributions—collective beliefs regarding a focal's reference group (third order).

### *Three Dimensions: Self-Claims, Direct Acceptance, and Collective Beliefs*

Self-Claims. When actor  $i$  perceives itself to be similar to actors  $j_1, j_2, j_3 \dots j_n$ , this constitutes a first-order affinity claim about self. These peers are likely nominated based on the focal actor's own definitions and beliefs about *actual*, *ideal*, and *ought* self (Higgins 1987). Focal actors are free to claim referents as they see fit, and curating a sense of self through referent selection constitutes a form of identity work.

In research on organizational behavior, organizational identity is often inferred directly from reference group choices (e.g. Labianca et al. 2001; McGee and Thomas 1986; Porac et al. 1989, 2011; Reger and Huff 1993; see Negro, Koçak, and Hsu 2010 for a review of categorization in the organizational field; see also Hogg and Terry 2000; Glynn and Navis 2013 for discussion of prototype-based categorization).<sup>1</sup> That is, organizational identity reveals itself in how an actor relates to and acknowledges the presence of other actors in a field. Attention is a scarce resource (Ocasio 1997), and for this reason, actors in most contexts must differentially attend to other actors.

Labianca and Fairbank (2005) claim that organizations monitor each other for the sake of learning and discuss four constructs that define the choice of whom to monitor: categorization (similar organizations), competition (rivals), emulation (organizations that the focal aims to equal), and imitation (organizations whose particular features the focal copies). In market spaces in particular, we can learn how an organization understands itself (*Who am I?*) in part by learning about those the organization claims as competitors (e.g., Porac and Thomas 1994; Kim and Tsai 2012; see also DiPrete, Eirich, and Pittinsky 2010). An actor in a market needs to define its reference group of rivals in order to define its competitive advantage through comparison and succeed in market competition (Porac et al. 1995; Porac and Thomas 1994). Since markets are imperfectly competitive, self-categorization is a cognitive process reflecting the socially-constructed market structure (Porac et al. 1989, 2011; Reger and Huff 1993). To summarize, to whom an actor allocates attention can be characterized as one dimension of that actor's identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Using affinity-based claims to study identity yields findings that are highly consistent with identity theory in social psychology. For example, Kilduff (1990) reports that MBA students who perceive each other as similar, tend to bid for job interviews with the same organizations, controlling for friendship ties, job preferences, and majors. The effect of aligning behavior with an identity standard is observed even when relational identity is constructed in terms of aspiration rather than similarity (e.g. DiPrete, Eirich, and Pittinsky 2010; Kodeih and Greenwood 2014; Porac, Wade, and Pollock 1999).

Like other types of identity meanings, affinity claims can be tightly or loosely controlled (Powers 1973). A loosely controlled identity contains a broader distribution of identity meanings. That is, an actor can accept greater discrepancy between her identity standard and reflective appraisals (Burke 1991; Cantwell 2011). In contrast, a tightly controlled (or over-controlled) identity implies that even a small departure from the standard will disrupt identity maintenance processes and cause the actor negative emotion associated with failing to confirm the identity (Burke and Stets 2009; Cantwell 2011). For this reason, an actor with a tightly controlled identity has to engage in greater management/monitoring of identity processes (Burke 1991; Burke and Stets 2009).

With respect to affinity claims, one form of active monitoring pertains to narrow versus broad definitions of self vis-à-vis peer group nominations. The more tightly an identity is controlled the less variance it can tolerate (Burke and Stets 2009), and a larger group of peers will most likely have a greater variance on any attribute than a smaller group will. Labianca and Fairbank (2005) discuss how organizations monitor their reference groups and, in particular, the breadth of interorganizational monitoring. They claim that each organization monitors three sets of other actors in the field that may or may not overlap—competitors, actors to emulate, and actors to imitate. The more the three sets overlap, the smaller the breadth of the interorganizational monitoring (Labianca and Fairbank 2005). If all three sets perfectly overlap, an organization is less willing to stretch the boundaries of acceptable behavior and thus has a tightly controlled identity. At the same time, overlapping sets will naturally include fewer actors than non-overlapping ones, all else equal. Thus, we argue that actors with a tightly controlled definition of self will likely choose smaller and hence more selective peer groups. In contrast,

actors with a loosely controlled identity are expected to choose larger (and thus by definition less exclusive) peer groups.

Reciprocated Claims. While self-claims may persuade others to view a focal in a certain way, how a focal actor sees herself is conceptually distinct from how others (specific others, the collective) view the focal. The views of self and the views of others are theorized to evolve iteratively (Burke and Stets 2009) and can highly correlate in certain empirical contexts. But if they do not, the misalignment leads to negative emotions, distress, and anxiety that motivate the actor to engage in identity work towards correcting the discrepancy (Burke 1991). Indeed, the consequences of misalignment between self-meanings and the feedback of others is a major area of research in social psychological approaches to self and identity (e.g., Cantwell 2011; Stets and Tsushima 2001; Thoits 1991).

One type of feedback is whether each of  $i$ 's nominated referents reciprocates the gesture. For example, say  $i$  nominates  $j_1$  as a peer. Does  $j_1$  also nominate  $i$  as a peer? If  $i$  nominates 10 peers, what proportion reciprocate the nomination? Reciprocity in this context is a form of congruent feedback regarding the focal's affinity claims, akin to an accepted invitation. A high rate of reciprocity, in effect, verifies and affirms the focal's sense of self. We equate reciprocity with second-order feedback because it constitutes a direct response from a specific other.

Third-Order Facts. The collective provides another form of feedback. Again, actors make affinity claims to help define themselves (*I belong with these peers*). But with whom does the collective say you belong? Shared understandings (i.e., cultural beliefs) about a focal's peers are social constructions that impose tangible constraints on focal actors. For example, even if an actor is

committed to upholding a certain set of expectations, she is constrained in her ability to do so if everyone else holds her accountable to a different set of expectations. A focal actor who selects one set of peers but is assigned a different set by the collective has received incongruent feedback regarding her identity. But when the focal actor and the collective agree on the focal's "natural" peers, the focal's identity is once again affirmed and verified.

The questions thus arise, what shapes how actors develop affinity claims? What types of actors are more likely to have their first-order claims directly accepted? And who is most likely to experience alignment between their first-order affinity claims and third-order understandings about them? We expect that all three outcomes depend on the focal organization's status. Status is grounded in perceptions of worth (Jasso 2001; Ridgeway 2014). For example, in organizational studies, an organization's status in the market has been defined as "the perceived quality of [...] its products in relation to the perceived quality of [...its] competitors' products" (Podolny 1993:830). As implied by this definition, evaluations of worth or importance are relative in nature and thus produce a hierarchical ordering of actors in the field (Piazza and Castellucci 2014; Sauder, Lynn, and Podolny 2012).

Affiliations with lower-status actors may undermine the focal actor's position because the field perceives it through the prism of its connections (Podolny 2001; Sauder et al. 2012). Thus, as a way of protecting their positional resource, high-status actors have greater incentive to construct more tightly controlled identities. In contrast, lower-status actors may expand the boundaries of their affinity claims to include higher-status organizations in an attempt to improve their position in the field (e.g., Delmestri and Greenwood 2016; Kim and Tsai 2012; Porac, Wade, and Pollock 1999; see also Vergne and Wry 2014:78–79 for review of studies on

“strategic categorization”). Thus, we expect an inverse correlation between an organization’s status and the number of peers it chooses.

We also expect that an actor’s status facilitates success on both forms of identity verification (direct reciprocity and alignment between claims and attributions). Identity theory scholars demonstrate that higher-status actors are more likely to have their identities confirmed by others (Burke, Stets, and Cerven 2007; Cast et al. 1999; Stets and Harrod 2004). In addition, higher-status actors have more resources at their disposal, and access to resources is found to positively correlate with identity verification (Stets and Cast 2007). Porac et al. (1995) show that producers that are larger and more typical to an industry—both attributes indicate higher status—are disproportionately cited as rivals by other firms in the industry relative to smaller and less typical firms. Finally, high-status actors attract more attention from the field (Sauder et al. 2012), and thanks to this visibility, their identity boundaries may be clearer to the rest of the actors and thus more likely to be confirmed.

### **Case Study: U.S. Higher Education**

The field of higher education in the United States includes over 3,000 four-year institutions and is divided into several major types of institutions. The Carnegie Classification system, which was last updated in 2015, divides the field into several organizational categories (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching 2011). The first form includes research universities that award twenty or more doctoral degrees per year. These institutions are further divided into three subgroups (R1, R2, and R3) depending on the level of research activity measured by research and development expenditures, number of science and engineering research staff, and the number of doctoral degrees conferred. The second form is master’s

colleges and universities. Institutions in this category award fifty or more master's degrees per year but fewer than twenty doctoral degrees; based on the number of degrees awarded, this group is subdivided into larger, medium, and smaller programs. The third form is constituted by baccalaureate colleges awarding fewer than fifty master's degrees per year; they are subdivided into two categories. One sub-group in this category includes arts and science-focused colleges that award half or more of their degrees in liberal arts disciplines (commonly referred to as liberal arts colleges).

In 2005, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) started asking all schools to publicly nominate a set of peers. IPEDS uses these reference groups to create data feedback reports (DFR) for the focal institution. DFRs compare the focal institution to the peer group medians with respect to a set of attributes chosen by IPEDS (e.g., degrees awarded, average net price, faculty salaries) and held constant across all DFRs. The information on peer group nomination is available to the public either in the form of official DFRs (2005-2009) or as a data that can be downloaded directly from IPEDS (starting 2010).

These peer group nominations offer unprecedented access to studying U.S. schools' affinity claims (first order). In addition, they allow us a unique window into the second and third orders. Specifically, from these data, we can ascertain (1) size and composition of first order (tightness of control), (2) the number of nominees who reciprocated (verification type I), and (3) the extent of alignment between peers claimed and peers assigned (verification type II). For example, in 2010, Harvard and Yale selected each other as peers, meaning that they each claimed affinity to the other and mutually confirmed the other's claim. Independent of this reciprocal nomination, 23 other schools nominated both Harvard and Yale together, and by doing so, attributed affinity to the two universities. In contrast, Harvard and Columbia University were co-

nominated 21 times, even though Columbia did not submit a custom-identified peer group and Harvard did not nominate Columbia; in this case, affinity claims are absent while affinity attribution is present.

### *Hypotheses*

H1: High status schools are more likely to nominate a smaller peer group. Exclusiveness with respect to affinity claims is evidence of a tightly controlled identity.

H2: High status schools are likely to experience a higher reciprocity rate. That is, high status school are more likely to experience the affirmation that comes from attracting the “right” attention.

H3: High status schools are more likely to experience greater alignment between peers claimed versus peers assigned. This is because high status schools are more likely to get the audience to understand them the way they desire to be understood.

### **Data**

Our empirical analysis draws on several large-scale data sources. Basic institutional characteristics are compiled from IPEDS, a clearing house for data on post-secondary institutions maintained by the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Since 1993, each college, university, and vocational institution that participates in federal student financial-aid programs has been required to submit institutional data annually. We augment these data with institutional selectivity ratings from Barron’s Profiles of American

Colleges and rankings from *U.S. News and World Report*. To construct the affinity claims and affinity attributions, we employ IPEDS reference group data collected in 2010.

Our empirical analysis is limited to private institutions in the two Carnegie subfields in which schools are highly attuned to their peers: Doctoral/Research universities (n=82) and Baccalaureate Colleges with an Arts and Sciences focus (henceforth, BAS colleges, n=171). These two subfields are ranked by the *U.S. News and World Reports*, a third-party organization that has been the focus of much sociological research (Espeland and Sauder 2007, 2016, Sauder 2006, 2008). We hone in specifically on private institutions within these two playing fields because public higher education governance organizations often constrain public universities' peer choices (Weeks, Puckett, and Daron 2000). On average, research universities nominated 21 peers ( $sd=16.9$ ,  $max=100$ ) and BAS colleges nominated 23 peers ( $sd=15.7$ ,  $max=99$ ).

### *Outcome Measures*

**Total Number of Peer Nominations:** This is the total number of peers the focal institution nominated in 2010. This includes all nominations, regardless of their Carnegie classification. We use peer group size as a proxy for tightness of control; a larger number of peers indicates less control.

**Number of “Outside” Nominations:** This is the number of peers the focal nominates who belong to a different Carnegie type than the focal. For example, if a Doctoral/Research institution nominates 8 other Doctoral/Research schools and two BAS colleges, the total number of peers nominated is 10 and the number of “outside” peers is 2. This is arguably a stronger measure of “tightness of control” compared to total peer group size. Actors maintaining a tightly controlled identity should be far less likely to choose “outsiders” as peers.

**Proportion Reciprocated:** This quantifies the percentage of total nominations that are directly reciprocated. For example, if a focal institution nominates 10 peers, and 6 of those peers also nominate the focal, the rate of reciprocity equals 60%. We adjust, however, for the fact that some alters do not reciprocate because they did not submit any peer nominations. Specifically, proportion reciprocated is equal to the number of reciprocated nominations divided by the number of nominations sent to alters who reported custom peer groups in 2010 (multiplied by 100). For example, say focal institution  $i$  nominates 10 alters, 8 of whom also submitted their own peer nominations. If 6 of those alters reciprocated, then the proportion reciprocated for focal  $i$  is  $6/8 = 75\%$ .

**Proportion Aligned:** To what extent are the peers nominated by a focal the same as the peers assigned to the focal by the collective? Note that in our dataset first-order claims are binary; focal  $i$  either nominates or does not nominate alter  $j$ . In contrast, third order attributions are weighted. That is, we know *how many* schools  $k$  co-nominate  $i$  and  $j$  (e.g., 21 schools co-nominated Harvard and Yale, 3 schools co-nominated Harvard and Boston College, and only 1 school co-nominated Harvard and Williams College). We can therefore rank assigned peers by co-nomination intensity.<sup>2</sup> We then calculate alignment between the first and third orders with respect to the focal's top 10 (strongest) assigned peers. Specifically, proportion aligned equals the number of top-10 assigned peers who are also peers claimed by the focal itself, divided by 10. For example, say focal  $i$  nominates 15 schools. Who are those peers in relation to ranking of

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<sup>2</sup> Co-nominations are derived from first-order claims. First-order claims form a binary, non-symmetric nomination network ( $i \times j$ ), where  $i$  represents focal schools who are selecting peers (nominators) and  $j$  represents schools that are nominated (referents); a tie indicates that  $i$  nominates  $j$  as a peer. If the raw nomination network is defined as matrix  $\mathbf{A}$ , then  $\mathbf{A}'\mathbf{A}$  is a square co-nomination network (referent x referent) with valued ties. The off-diagonals of  $\mathbf{A}'\mathbf{A}$  reveal the number of times a pair of referents were nominated together by other schools.

assigned peers? If say, only 6 of those nominations go to peers on the top 10 list of assigned peers, then proportion aligned is  $6/10=60\%$ .

If the focal nominates fewer than 10 peers (i.e., outdegree <10), then the denominator is replaced with actual outdegree. For example, in 2010, Harvard nominated three schools as peers: Yale, Princeton, and Stanford. All three are schools that the collective also views as salient peers; Harvard's top 10 assigned peers are Yale (co-nominated by 21), Princeton (21), Cornell (20), Columbia (19), Stanford (19), Brown (18), U Penn (18), MIT (16), U Chicago (16) John Hopkins (15). Thus, proportion aligned for Harvard is  $3/3=100\%$ .

### *Covariates*

**Full-time Equivalent (FTE) Enrollment:** FTE enrollment is a commonly used measure for calculating an institution's student-body size. This metric is calculated by adding full-time student headcount to weighted part-time student headcount.

**Status & Quality Index:** Higher education institutions have long been differentiated with respect to their "quality" and status. Both of these constructs frequently measure educational *inputs*, including financial wealth, faculty-student ratio, and students' performance in high school and on standardized tests (Winston 1999). Status measures, such as the *U.S. News and World Report* ranking, additionally include reputation scores that are generated through subjective assessments by other institutions (Bowman and Bastedo 2009). Traditional measures used to assess quality and status are highly correlated. We consequently create a status-quality index that includes two status-related measures (USN rankings and peer nomination popularity) and four quality-related measures (ACT performance of student body, endowment level, admissions rate, selectivity rating). After standardizing each variable, reverse coding the Barron's selectivity

score, and the admissions rate, we calculated the mean score for each institution. Cronbach's alpha is .94 and .90 for Research universities and BAS colleges, respectively. Each index component is further described in Table 1.

1. **ACT 75<sup>th</sup> percentile** measures an institution's student "quality," a key component in educational "quality" (Winston 1999). The composite ACT score is based on a student's performance on all test sections.
2. **Endowment assets per FTE enrollment** includes non-expendable institutional funds that are invested in order to provide additional income and yearly interest. Endowment per FTE measures funds per 12-month FTE enrollment. This metric represents an institution's ability to finance activities beyond the capacity that only tuition revenue offers.
3. **Admissions rate** is equal to the percentage of applicants accepted for admission. Admission rate indicates an institution's ability to curate its undergraduate enrollment by admitting some students while denying others.
4. **Barron's selectivity rating** is a six-category ranking that rates institutions from noncompetitive (6) to most competitive (1) admissions (Rutherford & Rabovsky 2014). Barron's calculates each institution's rating using a proprietary formula that includes a set of admissions statistics, including ACT and SAT scores, students' high school GPAs, and students' high school class ranks. Data were obtained from the Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data file located in the restricted ELS dataset.
5. **Indegree** is equal to the number of times other institutions nominated a focal institution in 2010. A high indegree suggests that the focal institution received a significant amount of attention (in the form of nominations) from others in the market.

6. *U.S. News and World Report* ranking provides annual rankings of National Research Universities and National Liberal Arts Colleges (as defined by the Research University and Baccalaureate A&S Carnegie categories). While the precise ranking formula is proprietary and changes slightly each year, it consistently uses organizational variables such as graduation rate, admissions statistics, student qualifications, and faculty support. *U.S. News and World Report* rankings are one of the most widely-used measures of status in higher education and have been empirically demonstrated to have social consequences on colleges and universities (Askin and Bothner 2016; Bowman and Bastedo 2009; Espeland and Sauder 2016).

## Results

Our first research question concerns peer group size. We posit that a smaller group of self-claimed peers is a proxy for a more tightly-controlled identity. We hypothesized that higher-status-quality institutions would engage in more identity management, thus nominating fewer peers. We measure peer group size in two ways: (a) the total number of peers nominated by focal and (b) the number of peers nominated with a different Carnegie classification than the focal. For both outcomes, negative binomial models are used to examine whether number of peers is correlated with the status-quality index, controlling for organizational size.

Results shown in Table 2 support the hypothesis that higher status organizations (which in this case is virtually synonymous with higher-quality organizations) claim more tightly controlled identities. For Research universities, total peer group size is negatively correlated with the status-quality index ( $p < .01$ ), and the same pattern exists with number of “outside” peers ( $p < .001$ ). As for the BAS colleges, the first hypothesis is supported in relation to nominating

outside peers: schools of higher status and quality and higher FTE enrollment include fewer schools that are not BAS colleges in their lists of peers.

The second question pertains to reciprocity. When modeling reciprocity, we include, in addition to organizational size, the total number of peers nominated by the focal school as a control variable. Without this control, the expected positive relation between status and the likelihood of identity confirmation could be confounded if higher status actors are more likely to nominate fewer peers and to be nominated more often, which would mathematically increase the likelihood of confirmation. Thus, controlling for the number of nominations sent (i.e., size of peer group), what proportion are directly reciprocated? Results of a fractional probit model for proportion reciprocated are shown in Table 3. Because interpreting these coefficients is complex, we graphed status-quality effects for BAS colleges in Figure 1a. Again, as predicted, the status-quality index is a strong positive predictor of percent reciprocated. For example, a school that is three standard deviations above the mean vis-à-vis our standardized status-quality index is expected to have 75% of its nominations reciprocated (95% CI: [63%, 84%]). In contrast, the model predicts that a reciprocity rate of only about 27% (95% CI: [25%, 31%]) for average schools (status-quality index score = 0).

Finally, the third issue addresses the tension between the first- and third-order dimensions of identity. What types of organizations are more likely to get others to see them as they see themselves? Table 3 and Figure 1b summarize the results or a fractional probit model for proportion aligned, controlling for total number of peers nominated and organizational size. These results, too, strongly support the notion that higher status actors have more opportunity for identity verification. Proportion aligned is expected to be roughly 75% (95% CI: [61%, 90%])

for schools that are three standard deviations about the mean on status-quality index but only 43% (95% CI: [38%, 47%]) for schools of average status and quality.

## **Discussion**

As a member of a field or social group, part of an actor's identity is having a sense of where it belongs vis-à-vis other members. Hence, the question "Who am I?" can be answered, at least in part, through the selection of referents (Hyman 1960; Merton et al. 1950): *Who is like me? Who do I want to be? Who are my peers?* Actors routinely compare themselves to others (Festinger 1954; Hyman 1960; Merton et al. 1950), and the audience routinely makes attributions as to which actors generally belong together and which actors do not. In this study, we use referential claims made by actors in one specific organizational field of higher education in order to approximate actors' identities. We then tested hypotheses about the effect of an organization's status on how tightly they control their identity and the likelihood of identity verification; the results consistently support our hypotheses and align with identity theory's propositions.

We predicted and found that higher status-quality BAS colleges and Research universities selected more exclusive peer groups, which supports the idea that higher status organizations form more tightly controlled identities. Findings for research universities indicated that institutions with high status-quality scores tended to select fewer "out-of-category" peers and selected smaller peer groups on average, meeting both dimensions of our definition for tightness of control. Higher status-quality BAS colleges were less likely to select peers outside of their own Carnegie category on average, meeting one dimension of our definition. Results also indicated that institutions with higher status-quality scores had a higher proportion of their peer nominations reciprocated. In addition, higher status-quality institutions scores were more likely

to have their peer nominations confirmed by the organizational field. Essentially, both specific institutions and the field as a whole tended to affirm high-status-quality institutions' affinity claims, even after controlling for the size of the focal institution's reference group.

Why do these findings matter? As noted earlier, misalignment between how you see yourself and how others see you is, at least for individuals, a cause of distress and a motivation to engage in identity work that corrects that discrepancy (e.g., Burke 1991, Cantwell 2011; Stets and Tsushima 2001; Thoits 1991). We suspect that, in a similar vein, discrepancy between the first and third order may motivate how colleges and universities pursue various decision-making strategies. For example, an institution may increase its tuition price, a strategy that businesses enact to combat status-threat, in order to persuade others to perceive them the way they perceive themselves (Askin and Bother 2016). An institution could also game rankings systems in order to accrue external validation and attempt to align audience perceptions with self perceptions (Espeland and Sauder 2007).

More generally, our findings push researchers in higher education to think more broadly about how college and university decisions are fundamentally both rooted in their organizational aspirations and constrained by the field's perceptions. To date, researchers have consistently tried to explain college and university behaviors based largely on institutional explanations (Bastedo and Bowman 2010; Morphew 2002; Taylor and Cantwell 2015), under the assumption that the organizational field is a single undifferentiated group, subject to the same social forces. The current study shows how organizations divide the field, both with respect to themselves (first order) and others (second order and third order). Thus, subsequent work should consider how identity positioning affects how post-secondary institutions pursue strategic action in the field (Scott 2015). Indeed, empirical studies have begun to demonstrate the utility of

contextualizing college and university behaviors with regard to both first-order (Miller 2016) and third-order (Lynn et al. 2016) identity processes.

Our research also contributes to the study of identity and organizations more broadly.

First, conceptualizing identity as referential claims sheds new light on old questions in identity theory. Our study adds to the discussion of identity negotiation and confirmation by distinguishing between first-, second-, and third-order identities. As we demonstrate, the concept of affinity claims can be employed to approximate tightness of identity control. Moreover, the distinction between two levels of identity verification—as direct reciprocation and as affinity attribution by a third party—provides new insight as to how verification can be achieved.

In organizational studies, the concept of reference group as an indicator of identity is more developed, but remains relatively disconnected from social psychological theories of how identity operates. We argue that the referential approach to identity is compatible with the propositions of social identity theory about categorization based on social comparison (Abrams and Hogg 1998; Hogg 2013), and our findings suggest that the same mechanisms underlie identity processes regardless of whether identity is conceptualized as affinity claims and affinity attributions or as roles and categorical attributes. Thus, we claim that not only organizational studies, but studies of identity within social psychology could benefit from employing referential approach to constructing actors' identity.

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Table 1.

	Research Universities		Baccalaureate Colleges (Arts & Sciences)	
	Mean or %	sd	Mean or %	sd
Total Number of Nominated Peers	20.70	15.89	23.04	13.90
Number of "Outside" Peers	3.99	4.57	4.53	6.36
Proportion Reciprocated	0.34	0.26	0.30	0.22
Proportioned Aligned	0.57	0.27	0.43	0.30
FTE Enrollment	11057.06	7543.94	1708.31	753.64
<b>Status &amp; Quality Index</b>	0.11	0.82	0.09	0.82
ACT 75th Percentile	29.89	3.21	28.08	3.38
Endowment per FTE	\$ 145,352.70	\$ 259,063.10	\$ 117,387.10	\$ 149,882.10
Admissions Rate	49.06	23.06	58.04	19.79
Barron's Selectivity	2.18	1.16	2.69	1.16
Peer Nomination Indegree	11.67	8.70	14.92	12.06
USNWR Rank: (1) 4th tier	4%		7%	
(2) 3rd tier	19%		26%	
(3) 51st-120th	34%		33%	
(4) 21st-50th	19%		21%	
(5) 11th-20th	14%		6%	
(6) 1st-10th	10%		7%	
Carnegie Type				
Doctoral/Research ("R3")	39%			
High Research Activity ("R2")	26%			
Very High Research Activity ("R1")	35%			

*n*      82

171

Table 2. Negative binomial estimates of number of peers selected

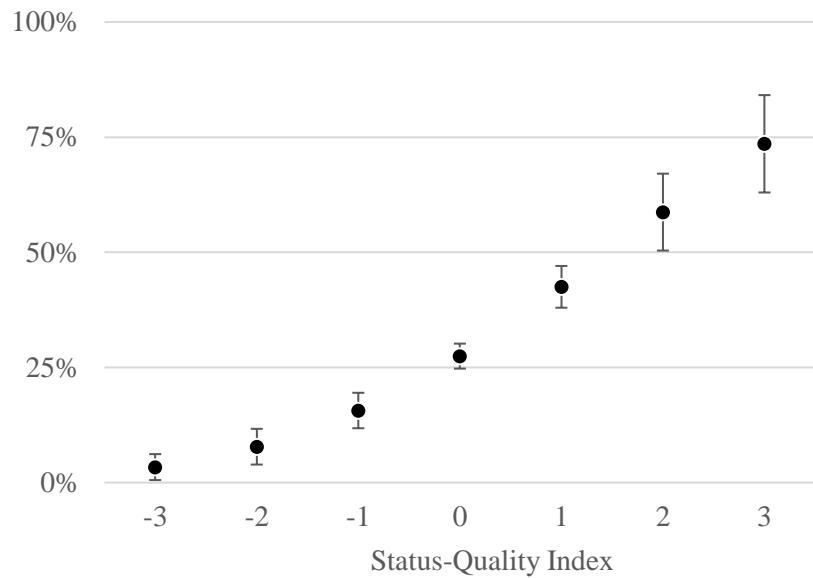
	Doctoral/ Research		BAS	
	Total Peers	Number “Outsiders”	Total Peers	Number “Outsiders”
Status & Quality Index (z-score)	-0.30** (0.09)	-0.45*** (0.13)	0.00 (0.05)	-0.51*** (0.09)
Ln(FTE)	-0.05 (0.10)	-0.18 (0.15)	-0.02 (0.08)	-0.38** (0.14)
Constant	3.50*** (0.92)	2.98* -1.38	3.28*** (0.58)	4.19*** (1.06)
n	82	82	171	171
ln(alpha)	-1.27*** (0.17)	-0.87*** (0.25)	-1.49*** (0.12)	-0.35* (0.15)

Table 3. Fractional probit estimates of fraction reciprocated and aligned

	Doctoral/ Research		BAS	
	Fraction Reciprocated	Fraction Aligned	Fraction Reciprocated	Fraction Aligned
Status & Quality Index (z-score)	0.40** (0.13)	0.52*** (0.11)	0.42*** (0.06)	0.30*** (0.08)
Ln(Total Peers Nominated)	-0.33* (0.13)	0.40** (0.15)	-0.39*** (0.08)	0.44*** (0.11)
Ln(FTE)	0.01 (0.10)	-0.07 (0.15)	0.12 (0.08)	0.22* (0.11)
Constant	0.31 (0.90)	-0.37 (1.53)	-0.32 (0.64)	-3.14*** (0.91)
n	82	82	171	171

Figure 1. Relationship between status-quality and congruent feedback, BAS colleges

1a. Predicted Fraction Reciprocated with 95% CI, by Status-Quality level



1b. Predicted Proportion Aligned with 95% CI, by Status-Quality level

