

Identity, Image, and  
Issue Interpretation:  
Sensemaking during  
Strategic Change  
in Academia

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This study investigates how top management teams in higher education institutions make sense of important issues that affect strategic change in modern academia. We used a two-phase research approach that progressed from a grounded model anchored in a case study to a quantitative, generalizable study of the issue interpretation process, using 611 executives from 372 colleges and universities in the United States. The findings suggest that under conditions of change, top management team members' perceptions of identity and image, especially desired future image, are key to the sensemaking process and serve as important links between the organization's internal context and the team members' issue interpretations. Rather than using the more common business issue categories of "threats" and "opportunities," team members distinguished their interpretations mainly according to "strategic" or "political" categorizations. •

Higher education is an industry that has experienced significant shifts in recent years. Less than a generation ago academic institutions thrived in an environment of predictable funding and student enrollment with little overt competition among institutions (cf. Cohen and March, 1974; Keller, 1983). Recent economic, demographic, and political changes, however, have cast colleges and universities into an ambiguous arena that looks more and more like a competitive marketplace. Such a dynamic environment calls for institutions to change to meet these new conditions—behavior that is virtually taken for granted in business but is still relatively unfamiliar in academe. There is a growing insistence not only that change occur but that it be accomplished quickly in institutions that historically have been comfortable only with slower, self-paced, incremental change. Given the market character of the environment, with its attendant emphasis on competition, many academic institutions are trying to adopt a more business-like orientation to accomplish intended changes (Milliken, 1990). Administrators are reexamining longstanding notions of egalitarianism in an effort to prioritize departments, colleges, and programs according to new strategic goals. Thus "strategic change" in academia is a phrase that introduces its own ambiguity into institutions not accustomed to thinking and acting strategically.

Parallels with business approaches to strategic change are not exact, however. Most notably, there are few bottom-line measures like profit or return on investment that apply to the generation and dissemination of knowledge. Therefore, assessing an institution's standing and establishing its competitive advantage depends on more subjective factors. For this reason, perceptions of an institution's prestige or ranking come to the fore, often taking precedence over measurable substance (Alvesson, 1990) in an institution's attempt to achieve prominence (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990). Under such conditions, the management of image becomes a critical strategic issue. As Dutton and Dukerich (1991) noted, image (i.e., perceptions of how others perceive the institution) is often tied to identity (i.e., how members perceive their organization). Therefore, it is unlikely that a

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## Issue Interpretation

change in image can be sustained without an associated change in identity. The assumption that image and identity can be altered within the compressed time frame demanded by modern academic environments implies that these concepts must be more fluid than the organizational literature has suggested. Identity, in particular, is typically taken to be that which is central, distinctive, and enduring about an organization (Albert and Whetten, 1985). A key question thus becomes: Can identity be enduring if strategic change is to occur?

Managing change requires a consideration of the effects of change on the interpretive schemes of organization members (Ranson, Hinings, and Greenwood, 1980; Bartunek, 1984). Unfamiliar expressions and actions that are consistent with a new vision for an institution and clearly inconsistent with the taken-for-granted way of seeing tend to destabilize existing identity and image (Gioia et al., 1994). Under conditions of strategic change, then, it is not existing identity or image but, rather, envisioned identity and image—those to be achieved—that imply the standards for interpreting important issues. Our concern with shifting identity and image and their role in issue interpretation derives from a case study that investigated the research question "How do top management teams make sense of issues when managing strategic change in an academic institution?" Because we initially used a grounded approach and then consulted relevant literature to investigate this question, the theoretical framework underlying the paper emerged in large part from the study itself. Our ultimate purpose, however, was to refine the emergent model with a more generalizable, quantitative investigation of a broad range of academic institutions. The overall project thus combines a qualitative case study with a quantitative survey of colleges and universities in the U.S.

## A GROUNDED THEORETICAL OVERVIEW OF STRATEGIC SENSEMAKING

We first foreshadow the elements of the grounded theoretical framework as a means of structuring the findings that emerged. In general we found: (1) that the strategy the top management team was currently pursuing and the information-processing structure they were using most influenced their sensemaking activities; (2) that the top management team's perceptions of institutional identity and image (both present and desired in the future) constituted the major "lenses" through which the team interpreted organization-level issues; and (3) that these issues were not conceived in the usual "threat/opportunity" categories seen in business organizations, but in terms of more general categories of "strategic" and "political" issues.

### The "Internal" Context for Sensemaking

Although changes in the external environment obviously influence the interpretation process, "internal" contextual features also exert considerable influence. Of these, the strategies in use (Daft and Weick, 1984) and the organizational structures in place, especially information-processing structures (Thomas, Shankster, and Mathieu,

1994), play important roles in guiding interpretation. The organization's strategy amounts to a statement of intention that influences top management's perceptions of key issues (Thomas and McDaniel, 1990). The strategy in use thus constitutes a key element in the institution's enacted environment (Weick, 1979) and tightens top management's interpretive focus (Daft and Weick, 1984). Similarly, patterns of informational interaction among team members influence interactions; characteristics such as frequency of interaction and degree of participation by members in decision making affect the identification and interpretation of issues (Thomas and McDaniel, 1990). Both the strategy and the information-processing structure, then, shape interpretive predispositions that focus attention on some information or issues and exclude others (Dutton and Duncan, 1987).

### **Identity and Image as Perceptual Lenses**

Central to the top management team's perceptions of the organization are the notions of identity and image. Both concepts have been explored at various levels of analysis using a number of different perspectives. For example, personal (self) identity and social (collective) identity have long been recognized as critical constructs in the organizational behavior literature (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). At the organizational level, corporate or organizational identity concerns those features of the organization that members perceive as ostensibly central, enduring, and distinctive in character that contribute to how they define the organization and their identification with it (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Sutton and Callahan, 1987; Dutton and Dukerich, 1991). Our focus here is on the organizational identity held by the top management team, i.e., the team members' perceptions of the qualities of the organization that answers the question: "What kind of organization is this?" (Albert and Whetten, 1985).

Image generally has been defined in the organizational literature as how members believe others view their organization (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail, 1994). This descriptive view, labeled as "construed external image," complements a more projective view of the concept in the work of Whetten, Lewis, and Mischel (1992). Whetten, Lewis, and Mischel refer to image as characteristics organizational elites want stakeholders to ascribe to the firm (which can be termed a desired or communicated image). The thread that runs through these definitions is that organizational image is tied to perceptions of how external constituencies view the organization, regardless of whether these views are normative or manipulated. In this study, we focus on the top management team members' perceptions of their organization's image in the context of strategic change. Both identity and image act as perceptual screens or mirrors that affect team members' information processing and, ultimately, their interpretation of key issues.

Although most writers have assumed conditions of relative stability, under conditions of proactive change it is necessary to reconsider the assumed durability and distinctiveness of identity and image. In general, strategic change implies a revision in the interpretive schemes not only of the top

### Issue Interpretation

management team but of the organization's members and constituencies as well. Any major change, perhaps especially a strategic change, must be accompanied by a significant alteration in the overall perception of the organization (Fiol, 1991). Therefore, taking substantive change seriously demands reconsidering existing identity and image. Our focus, therefore, is not only on identity and image per se but also on the management of changing identity and image. What does "enduring" mean when changing environments demand that even not-for-profit institutions behave strategically, thus encouraging the malleability of identity and image? What does "distinctive" mean when institutional processes emphasize mimetic behavior (Scott, 1987) as a path to achieving a desired identity and image? This line of argument suggests that under conditions of change, it is not only existing identity or image that affects interpretation but also those yet to be achieved.

### Issue Interpretation Labels

Research on interpretation in business organizations usually presumes that the labeling of issues influences decisions and actions (Dutton and Jackson, 1987; Thomas, Clark, and Gioia, 1993). This research has identified two issue categories that have come to dominate the literature: whether managers see issues as "opportunities" or as "threats" (Jackson and Dutton, 1988). Given that the study of strategic change in not-for-profit domains is in an early stage, it might be premature to presume that these interpretation categories translate directly to the academic arena. A categorization scheme that distinguishes issues in more general terms might be more useful. Rather than threats and opportunities, for instance, top management team members might initially categorize issues as either "strategic" or not strategic, but nonetheless "important." Similarly, academic traditions encourage participatory, consensus-based decision making, which might foster sensitivity to issues that affect the delicate balancing of factional preferences. The dominance of existing issue categorization schemes might be obscuring such issue categorizations, perhaps inadvertently resulting in a lack of empirical attention, although such categories might be quite germane to this context.

### QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

We conducted the initial stage of the project at a large, public research university that was in the midst of managing a strategic change effort that had been launched earlier. The stated goal of the change effort was to match internal capabilities with external conditions so that the university would be better positioned to deal with the "realities of the '90s." The administration had pointedly noted that "strategic" thinking and planning would be a hallmark of the change effort, to emphasize that the university now needed to see itself as "competing," not only with other universities but also with other organizations vying for public and private funding. The guiding symbolic vision for the change was that of making the institution a "Top 10" public university, which emerged early in the change process. The three members of the top management team, consisting of the president, the

executive vice president/provost, and the vice provost, were the architects of the change effort.

The orientation toward change had already produced several significant alterations in the administrative and academic structure and actions of the university, including the creation of a new school, the elimination of several programs, the combining of two colleges into a new unit, the establishment of a research park, and the pursuit of several large-scale, potentially profit-making projects. In addition, the university had recently become affiliated with a new athletic conference, and lucrative commercial tie-ins with corporations were in place. These changes were all relatively fresh and were still somewhat unsettling to various factions within a university that had historically seen itself as traditional, or normative (Albert and Whetten, 1985), in character. These factions remained politically active in trying to influence change actions toward their preferred agendas. Nonetheless, the top management team viewed the university as "having a momentum for change" and was actively engaged in setting the future direction of the university.

### **Method**

The initial phase of the research was qualitative and fundamentally interpretive in its approach, so as to tap into the interpretation and meaning system of the top management team. Because meaning is essentially a socially constructed phenomenon, we treated the interpretation system as an intersubjectively negotiated framework of understanding. Therefore, we paid particular attention to the ways that the members themselves understood their context and experience and how they communicated that understanding among themselves and to others.

**Informants and research procedures.** All three members of the top management team agreed to participate in the study. We conducted multiple, in-depth interviews with each member over a six-month period, during which the team was actively engaged in the strategic change process. These were ethnographic-style interviews (Spradley, 1979): They were semistructured and allowed open-ended probes, but they also encouraged the informants to use their own terminology and to steer the interview toward issues and concepts that they felt best represented their own experiences. The interviews allowed the informants to engage in a stream of consciousness and to provide "thick," descriptive data.

Both authors took part in each interview, one having primary responsibility for questioning and the other taking notes, seeking clarification, and asking supplementary questions. During data gathering, we observed several rules of interviewing and qualitative data handling (Spradley, 1979; Yin, 1984; Bourgeois and Eisenhardt, 1988). First, we audiotaped all interviews and transcribed them verbatim. Second, we discussed the interviews and notes and did preliminary analyses in accordance with a "24-hour rule" to capitalize on the immediacy of the data. Third, we interviewed each informant multiple times so that we could affirm or revise interpretations, seek clarifications and



## Issue Interpretation

explanations, and ask follow-up questions. Ultimately, the interview transcripts and notes served as the primary data base for the qualitative study.

We also interviewed other members of the upper echelons of the university, former officers (to gain a historical perspective), and members of the top management teams of other universities. In all, there were 25 interviews; for our focal data base we selected 11 of the interviews with the top management team members that focused on key aspects of their interpretation processes. We also used internal documents, including memos and limited-circulation reports, as well as speeches and all publicly available documentation, including newspaper accounts, to build our understanding of the change process.

We analyzed the transcripts according to two related but different analytical systems, one a categorization and theme analysis derived from Miles and Huberman's (1984) qualitative data analysis techniques and the other a domain analysis derived from Spradley's (1979) ethnographic interview techniques. We performed these different analyses as a form of triangulation (Jick, 1979) to provide confidence in the findings. Because both systems generated highly corroborative findings we report only the details of the categorical analysis.

**Categorical analysis.** Figure 1 shows the progression of the categorical analysis. During the initial readings of the transcriptions, we identified numerous first-order (informant) terms and concepts (Van Maanen, 1979). An example is the often-used "top 10 public university" phrase. We devoted subsequent readings to assembling these concepts into categories that defined similar ideas, issues, or relationships that had relevance for the informants (see column 1 of Figure 1). Next, we used a form of constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) to triangulate comparative data from different informants and times to discern the shared concepts and/or processes used in managing the change effort. We developed comprehensive cross-reference lists to keep track of category commonality (e.g., politics and influence), relationships among major concepts (e.g., "top ten" and image), and the emerging themes (e.g., concern with the university's prestige or image).

We next used two different analysts to further explore the data via theoretical sampling (Strauss, 1987); they focused on convergent concepts, quotes, decisions, actions, etc., and their relation to the evolving categories and themes that emerged from the first stage of the analysis. On the basis of this analysis, we merged some overlapping categories. Then we assigned second-order, theoretical labels to the emergent themes (column 2 of Figure 1). We used these second-order themes (Van Maanen, 1979) to capture the informant categories at a higher level of abstraction. We derived these labels either by developing a more general label that subsumed the first-order categories or by reference to the existing literature that described the emergent themes well (e.g., "image" and "identity"). We then conducted a final iteration of constant comparison to decide whether enough evidence existed to support an

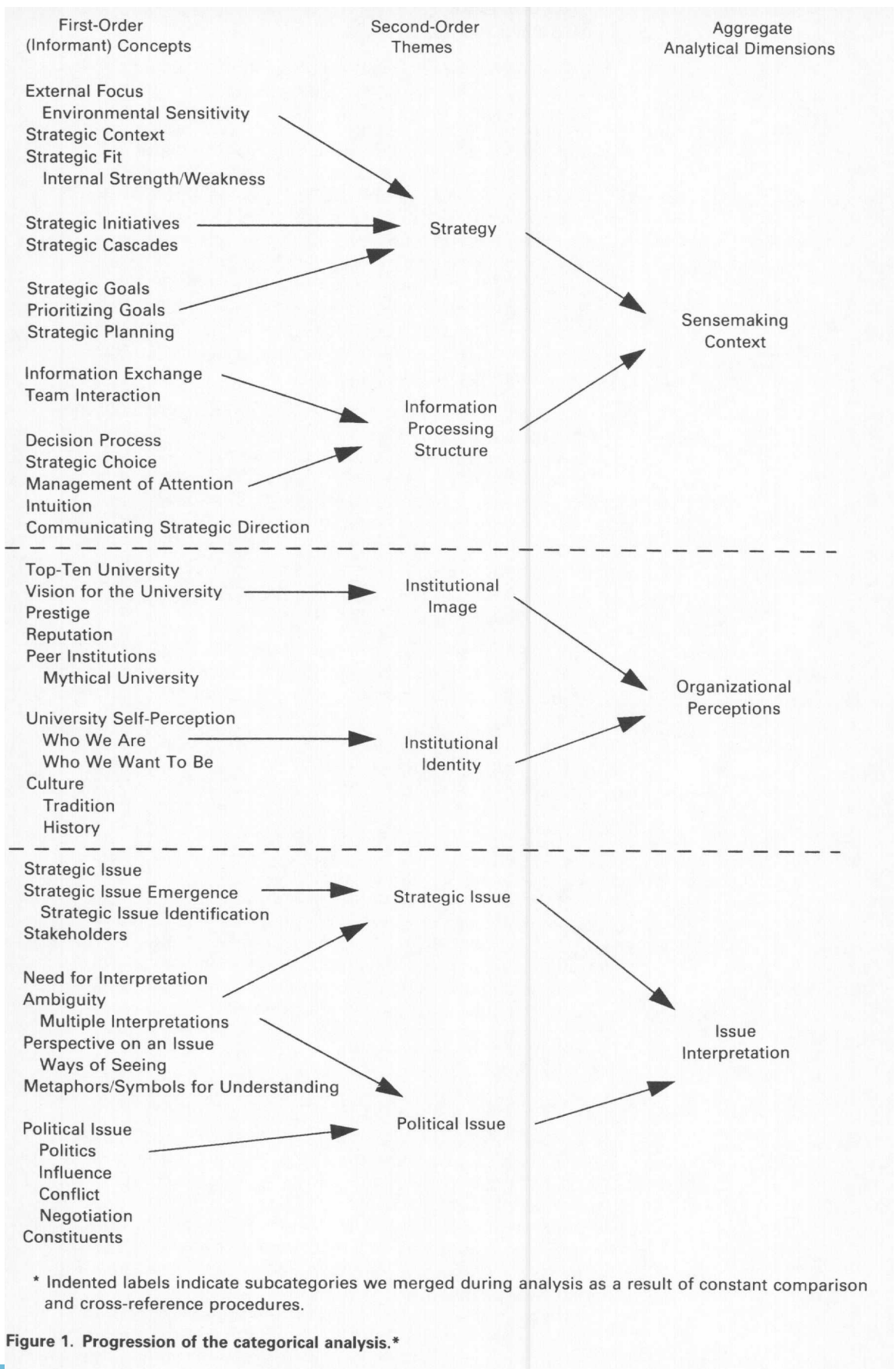


Figure 1. Progression of the categorical analysis.\*

## Issue Interpretation

identified theme as a reportable "finding." Finally, we assembled the second-order themes into aggregate analytical dimensions that provided a superordinate organizing framework for organizing the emerging findings (column 3 of Figure 1).

**Gestalt analyses.** In addition to these qualitatively rigorous analyses, both authors and a different research assistant conducted an impressionistic analysis (Van Maanen, 1988) to try to gain a general sense of patterns in the data. Overall, then, we assessed convergence across the multiple analytical techniques to establish confidence in our findings. We have structured the findings below according to the dominant emergent themes; we present them mainly in second-order terms, because these representations most clearly show the underlying concepts in operation. We have, however, included quotes from informants to demonstrate the character of the emergent themes. The grounded approach used in the case study in some ways is the inverse of the most common mode of interpretation research: Rather than using prior theory to drive the data gathering, the theoretical perspective is grounded in and emerges from the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991).

## Findings

Because the initial focus of the study was on issue interpretation, we first present these findings and work back toward a description of their relationship to the other major informant dimensions (i.e., top management team perceptions and the sensemaking context). After describing the character of the interpretations and perceptions, we formulate several relational propositions between these dimensions and begin to construct the grounded model. Finally, after presenting the findings on the sensemaking context, we formulate propositions relating this dimension to the interpretation and perception dimensions, thus completing the tentative model. This presentational strategy also shows the basis for operationalizing concepts that permit a nomothetic investigation of the model in the second, quantitative study.

**Issue interpretations.** Early in the research it became clear that the top management team distinguished issues as either "strategic" or "political." Although both types of issues were important, the informants saw strategic issues as "most important" because they affected the long-term well-being of the university. As the vice provost described it: "I carry around in my head distinctions between content and process, in terms of what is a strategic issue and what is a political issue. I spend a lot of time smoothing feathers, but I concentrate on what will get the job done."

*Strategic issues.* The interpretation of an issue as strategic had to do with identifying or pursuing initiatives that would create or convey the image of a top-10 academic institution. As the president said, "When you are looking at strategic issues, you ask yourself: What would a top-10 place look like? That's how you consider issues that you are going to deal with." He defined them as "issues that relate to how the university serves the state economy and society more



generally." The vice president was even more pointed: "What makes an issue strategic? It's whether it relates to [our] drive for prestige in becoming a top-10 place." Seen in these terms, enrollment, faculty recruiting, the creation of high-visibility schools and programs, and, perhaps especially, funding issues were defined as strategic because they "relate to the quality of the enterprise and the image of the institution" (executive vice president). Defining an issue as strategic implied "hard-nosed prioritizing" in a culture that was not receptive to such blatantly business-like processes. Nonetheless, the team emphatically dismissed the idea that all colleges, departments, and programs should somehow be treated "equally," although they were keenly aware that those units not favored would argue that such a "slash and burn approach" was not in the traditions of academia. The president put it in stark terms:

You can't treat all these departments and programs equally. You begin to make some judgments about those areas that are strong and ought to continue to be strong, those areas that are weak and need to be strengthened, those areas that are weak and should be left with benign neglect, and those areas that are actually going to disappear.

Within the team, the frequently invoked metaphor of a "three-legged stool" captured the idea of being strategic. The legs of the metaphorical stool were (1) increased state funding, (2) increased private funding, and (3) strategic planning. Trying to identify strategic issues and prioritize according to a nebulous top-10 vision, however, was not a clear-cut process, especially in a university in which consensus and egalitarianism were historically valued. Therefore, another prominent type of issue also captured interpretive attention: political issues.

*Political issues.* The informants defined political issues as those that involved the management of competing interests and preferences, especially if the issue could compromise the attempt to achieve top-10 status. Those issues labeled (and treated) as political included pressures for administrative structural changes and concerns with diversity, as well as student involvement in the governance of the university. As the president explained about student involvement, "Nobody is going to rise or fall based on that issue, unless you say you don't believe it's important." These issues obviously were important and delicate in trying to manage the change process, but they led to a different way of thinking about issue interpretation: "How do you make the judgment call on navigating this thicket? Information is seldom on the substance of the issue; it is on the personalities involved, people's attitudes, and the politics of getting from here to there" (executive vice president).

The idea of change itself became a political issue simply because it challenged many people's preference for *not* changing—and because it involved powerful parties: "We want to change the place, but it is a question of what you can get away with. Historically, we have a very conservative board. We have to pay serious attention to that. Prepare them for thinking of the place as top 10 and understanding what that means we have to do" (president). The notion of prioritization as a strategic planning process, as well as the

## Issue Interpretation

intention to designate certain colleges and programs to receive extra funding to try to become a top-10 institution, plunged the team directly into dealing with political issues because some powerful factions demanded that their programs be treated as strategically important, even if they were not:

You cannot ignore [that college] in this university, even if they have little to do with achieving top 10 status. . . . It is not insignificant that a number of our very influential trustees are graduates of that program and have a proprietary attitude about its health. That is a big political issue and a political fact of life. Now the real issue is whether it will help us get strategic excellence nationally. It won't, so you can't make it a strategic priority. But you better pay attention to it. You will get kicked out of here very fast if you are not sensitive to them. (Vice president)

In general, political issues were almost exclusively internally focused, but an issue that appears prototypically political—dealing with the governor and state legislature—top management team members instead construed as a strategic issue. They wanted to garner more state funding (one of the legs of the three-legged stool), which would enable more strategic initiatives. To do so, they wanted to affect the governor's perceptions of the university; they wanted to co-opt him by having him see himself "as a stakeholder in this university, instead of as a member of the audience" (president), and interpret the top-10 vision as his own and see such status as a goal of the state. If successful, the university might avoid the draining, yearly budget battles that consistently resulted in lower appropriations than needed. Overall, the top management team recognized that the change effort would not be sustained unless both internal and external stakeholders and constituencies could be convinced to accept the top-10 vision and the top management team's issue interpretations. As the vice president explained, "We want to try to get people to think the way we would like them to think. We want to try to raise their aspirations." They chose language so that their issue interpretations would be influential.

In addition to these findings, there also was a corollary finding that we termed a "strategic cascade": As team members labeled certain issues as strategic, they then came to see other issues as strategic as a consequence. Designating one program as a strategic priority, for instance, sometimes meant that they then designated other programs as strategic, in turn. Similarly, they sometimes classified current "political" issues as having the likelihood of evolving or cascading into future strategic issues. Minority enrollment, for example, which they classified as a political issue, they also saw as a strategic-issue-in-waiting, simply because future demographic projections show dramatic escalations in minority enrollment, and enrollment was predictably a strategic issue. Likewise, although they also interpreted diversity as a political issue, its future status was likely to be strategic, especially as it concerned faculty recruiting. Lastly, the president noted that it was also possible for sticky political issues to turn into strategic issues if they created such a furor that they prevented strategic action or subverted the processes or goodwill

necessary to accomplish strategic action. All these types of cascades were important in revealing future issues to be dealt with, either because they identified untenable political states or because they suggested previously overlooked strategic possibilities.

Overall, our findings concerning issue interpretation showed that in this organization, which was inexperienced in the strategic change process, the informants dichotomized issues into "strategic" and "political" categories, rather than the threat and opportunity categories common in business organizations. Of some note, late in the research when we asked one of the informants if he conceived issues in terms of threats or opportunities, his response was, "If you ask me to think in those terms, I can, but that isn't the way I normally do it. Those terms don't necessarily relate to what I am doing in this job." What became clear to us is that the way team members interpreted issues related to the way they saw the organization's identity and image.

**Top management team perceptions.** The top-10 vision that served as the symbol for launching the strategic change effort some years earlier had become pervasive at the time of this study. The concept of "top 10" had an aura of apparent specificity, but the top management team and many other members of the university community acknowledge that it was a much more ill-defined notion than it first appeared: "The top-10 vision is inspirational and is plausible. It doesn't have to be realistic, but it is plausible" (executive vice president). This vision communicated not only aspirations for the future but also the message that the university was not yet in the elite circle, although by implication it could be and would be if the change effort were successful: "Top-10 status is a way of articulating our intent to be, and be seen, as a major player" (executive vice president). It was clear, too, that the team wanted to maintain the ambiguity of the top-10 idea to allow a variety of interpretations, while minimizing the likelihood of in-fighting over exact standards of assessment: "The top-10 idea? Kind of a vague concept, eh? Yeah. It has to be. It needs to allow room to mean different things to different people and different factions" (president). In fact, the informants slyly noted that by various accounts the top-10 probably contained 15 or 20 universities. Many in the university were aware of the varied make-up of top-10 lists but conveniently overlooked the discrepancies because it permitted them to argue for status according to face-saving or self-serving choices of rating lists used. The team viewed the inconsistency as useful, however, because it allowed political sensitivities to be managed.

The overriding concern with the top-10 vision led to a studied consideration of the prototypical characteristics of top universities as an approach to defining what a top-10 school looked like: "There is a profile in an experienced administrator's mind of what a great university looks like, and we are attempting to match that profile. We're not there yet" (vice president). The "we're not there yet" notion appeared in all informants' accounts and emphasized their desire for a different future "look" for the university. They originally cast this desired image in terms of a "mythical

## Issue Interpretation

university," a phrase meant to convey idealism and high standards. In practice, the idea of a mythical university came to focus on the features of "peer institutions" perceived as already holding the elusive top-10 status. Those features included not only academic strength but also a utilitarian orientation with a demonstrated ability to raise funds and pursue enterprises that could "make a few bucks to support all the things we do." As the president phrased it:

I look at the best places I can find that have certain traits that we don't have now, but are capable of having, and should have in the future. . . . I'm a great believer in peer comparisons. You look at the people who have the reputation and the clout for doing the best job and you say to yourself: "Why aren't we doing those things?"

Overall, in this process of comparing perceived top-10 universities with their own espoused top-10 vision, the team used two related but different consensual concepts to express their perceptions of the university: identity and image. At the first-order level of meaning, identity concerned "how you see yourself" as an institution; image focused implicitly on "how we think others see us [now]," but more overtly on "how we want others to see us in the future."

*Identity.* The adoption of the top-10 vision had led initially to a look inward at the team's sense of the institutional identity, as manifested in references to its history, traditions, symbols, practices, and "philosophy," as well as an assessment of the strength with which beliefs were held. Conclusions about identity and the strength of entrenched values and beliefs were not positive, especially given the desire for the university to change in some substantial ways. The president described the university as having had "a little hardening of the arteries," a description meant to suggest a recalcitrance toward change and a dysfunctional focus on political jockeying for resources. The team had therefore voiced a strong concern with changing the existing identity: "We just need to get [the university] to think better of itself. It's not easy; there is a lot of tradition around here that can get in the way of changing the way people think about themselves" (vice president). Such observations suggested that not only was the character of identity (e.g., emphasizing academic and/or economic values) an important consideration in anticipating critical issues, but that strength-of-identity perceptions also would affect current or emerging understandings of key issues. Talk among the top management team focused on the need for instilling a change orientation in members' perception of the university: "Top-10 is shorthand for saying that we are moving, that we are changing. It gives us a notion of who we will be in the future" (executive vice president).

At the time of this study, it was clear that the top management team had left its prior conception of the institution's identity behind in favor of a conception transformed in terms of a "top-10 public research institution." It also was clear that members of the team saw identity as necessarily malleable, but perhaps not easily so. They also indicated that they probably could not accomplish an identity change by focusing mainly on identity, because they were aware that people do not easily alter such belief structures. Therefore, instead of appealing directly to identity

issues, they concentrated overtly on the related notion of image: “. . . if we start with trying to change identity, we might not get anywhere. But, if we start by laying out an image that people want to achieve, that will make it easier to move them off the current way of seeing themselves. That’s what top-10 is all about” (vice president).

*Image.* The image dimension took the foreground in our data, appearing in a number of forms in the language of the informants, who often interchangeably used such terms as “prestige,” “status,” “impression,” “stature,” “visibility,” and, somewhat loosely, “reputation.” Of these first-order terms, the notions of prestige (“prestige is the goal”) and our chosen representative label, “image,” occurred most often: “Image is important! If you have the image, then people say: ‘Oh yeah, he’s from a good place.’ They start by saying he must be pretty good. Then they look at what he’s actually done” (executive vice president).

It soon became apparent that the issues the team interpreted as “strategic” were those they associated with achieving the desired future image for the university; those designated as “political” they associated with the status quo. Also, they did not construe image as “hand-waving” at the expense of substance; rather, they assumed that acceptance of the future image would lead to subsequent substantive improvements. The working logic was that the desired image would motivate a change in identity that would produce a desire for quality improvements, thus facilitating changes and strategic adaptation to the changing environment:

Image has to be backed up by reality. It can’t be fraudulent or it won’t work. But if you tell people that your vision is that in five, ten, or fifteen years down the road they will be seen as graduates of a great university, they will buy into it. As you go along from here, you deliver, and you deliver by images, by people’s impressions of who they will have become. (Executive vice president)

This belief was captured in the recurring story of a now-famous, high-quality institution that ostensibly had “bought” an image by convincing alumni to make major financial contributions to their then-mediocre university, so that the current administration could use the money to acquire resources and highly reputed faculty. The administrators argued that after using the donations to improve the university, the contributors would later be seen as having graduated from an elite school, even though the one they actually graduated from was not. In this fashion, later revisionist history would help to alter identity. Thus, the team saw image and identity as interdependent processes affecting each other over time. Although identity was an important concern, the current concentration was on projecting a desired future image: “We are trying to create an opportunity to articulate a vision of what the place ought to look like when it grows up. . . . What I am trying to do is manage the meaning of stature. A lot of us in the education business are trying to increase the future stature of the university” (vice president).

Identity and image took on a qualitatively different form within the strategic-change context of this study. Image, in



## Issue Interpretation

particular, had a pronounced future-oriented tense to its expression. The characterization of both notions also implied that each was essentially changeable, but members clearly saw the desired, top-10 future image as the "key to change." Although they cast both perceptions against a backdrop of the existing tradition and culture of the university ("This was a stodgy institution . . ."), instead of the usual expression of "this is who we are and how we are seen," team members usually couched their expressions in terms of "this is who we want to be and how we want to be seen after the strategic change is accomplished." Overall, then, not only were image and identity important and vivid in the team members' perceptual processes, they also influenced the interpretation of issues. In particular, present and desired future image differed in their associations with strategic and political interpretations. These findings suggest several related propositions that capture key elements of an emerging model and provide grounds for further empirical investigation:

**Proposition 1:** Perceptions of identity and image will be differentially related to issue interpretation.

**Proposition 1a:** Present image will be related to political interpretation.

**Proposition 1b:** Desired future image will be related to strategic interpretation.

The remaining questions concern possible relationships between organizational perceptions and issue interpretations and the internal context within which sensemaking occurred.

**Sensemaking context.** We found two dominating contextual influences on how the top management team made sense of issues important to the change effort: strategy and information processing structure. Both are internal to the organization rather than external, as "the environment" is usually assumed to be. These internal "devices" (the informants' term) facilitated the understanding of the external environment.

*Strategy.* The strategy originally adopted under the aegis of this team several years earlier was based on the now-ubiquitous top-10 vision, and it guided administrative goals, plans, budgets, etc. Most notable, the mundane notion of "planning" had been recast as strategic planning and was framed as "a set of devices for making sense of things, motivating people, eliciting information, and justifying decisions" in pursuit of the top-10 vision:

The vision is a clear, almost deceptively simple generalization. . . . The vision is decoupled from the strategy and is not easily monkeyed with. And maybe it has another important characteristic—it is not very easy to give up. Strategy is the operationalization of the vision. . . . It is the strategy that gets elaborated and explained and tinkered with and all that. Not the vision. Strategy is what makes it possible to achieve the vision. (Executive vice president)

The existing strategy constituted a means for identifying and focusing attention on issues relevant to managing the change process and in fact was influential in deciding which issues were actually strategic. As is evident in Figure 1, above, the strategy implied increased sensitivity to the

external environment, assessments of the university's fit with environmental demands, an orientation toward strategic goals and planning, and an entrepreneurial stance. Proposed changes, impending changes, and actual changes (e.g., new schools, colleges, and programs that modeled top-10 universities) all provided symbolic evidence of the vision coming to realization. The team now pointedly interpreted all budgeting and funding issues in light of the strategy and selectively prioritized goals and initiatives accordingly—a change that engendered resistance and political activity among powerful factions in the university (e.g., the deans).

*Information processing structure.* In keeping with the aims of the revised strategy, the top management team developed an information processing structure and supporting infrastructures that oriented information toward issues important to the whole institution, rather than the former concern with "provincial" decision making: "The administrative structure now facilitates the gathering and processing of information that we need to make strategic decisions. It never did before" (president). Meetings, information exchanges, and scanning activities assigned to specific roles or positions focused attention on important issues. In particular, interactions among the team members were frequent and typically open and informal; there were, however, several standing meetings designed to structure information and obtain input from outside sources, such as deans, other university officers, and ad hoc committees. Similarly, all team members participated in all major issue decisions: "We now have a much bigger sieve, and we have a much more matrix-like arrangement in terms of communication and decision making inside and a much more permeable membrane between the inside and the outside" (executive vice president).

The president had implemented this revised information processing structure because he felt that the "total organization" was not attuned to strategic issues but more to local, political issues that affected individual units: "The farther down you get, the harder you have to work to get issues recognized." The executive vice president noted differences by college: "Some deans didn't know what was going on and didn't have their own ears to the ground, except to protect their own territory, but we don't have many of them left." This suggested that the information processing structure also had a political use. Overall, the top management team set up an information processing structure characterized by interaction, informality, and participation so as to stay attuned to both strategic and political issues.

The internal sensemaking context thus had two main components: the strategy (put in place during the strategic change initiation process), which served as both an attention-directing device and a symbol of a university "on the move," and the top management team's information processing structure, which they used to deal with information on important issues. These findings, in juxtaposition with those concerning top management team perceptions and issue interpretations allow us to formulate a set of relational propositions that complete the emergent

## Issue Interpretation

model and also lay the groundwork for testing and refining that model in the second phase of the study, a quantitative analysis of survey data.

**Proposition 2:** Strategy and information processing structure will be related to issue interpretation.

**Proposition 2a:** Strategy will be related to strategic issue interpretation.

**Proposition 2b:** Information processing structure will be related to both strategic and political issue interpretation.

Similar evidence and reasoning lead to parallel propositions concerning the relationships among strategy, information processing structure, identity, and image:

**Proposition 3:** Strategy and information processing structure will be related to organizational identity and image.

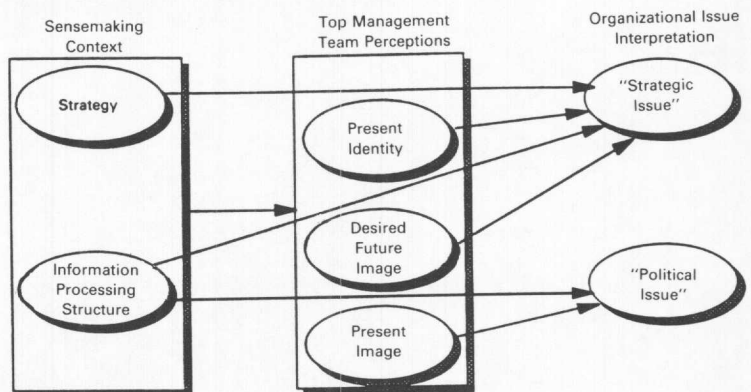
Because we do not have compelling empirical evidence suggesting specific differential relationships, we specify only the general relational proposition. Taken together, however, these findings and propositions suggest an emergent, grounded model, as shown in Figure 2.

The emergent model in this graphic form also allows the clearest specification of a final mediational proposition:

**Proposition 4:** Perceptions of image and identity will partially mediate the relationship between the sensemaking context and issue interpretation.

We refined the emergent model from this qualitative, ideographic case study by investigating these propositions in a quantitative, nomothetic survey study. The main research question remained: How do top management teams make sense of issues when managing strategic change in academia? Two corollary questions also guided the quantitative study, however: (1) Does the emergent theoretical model apply to other academic institutions of different size, type, ownership, and location? If so, (2) What are the relationships between the key emergent concepts (strategy, information processing structure, identity, and image) and the interpretation of issues?

Figure 2. Emergent model of sensemaking in academic administration.



## QUANTITATIVE SURVEY STUDY

### Sample

We chose a stratified sample of 439 higher-education institutions representing two different ownership

385/ASQ, September 1996

classifications (public and private) and three different degree-granting types (four-year baccalaureate, master's, and doctorate). There were approximately 75 institutions in each of the resulting six cells. We based our selection process on the regional distribution of the population of higher-education institutions to insure that all regions of the U.S. (Northeast, South, Midwest, West) were well represented. We selected no more than 33 percent of the institutions in each cell from any one region. We sent questionnaires to three top-level administrators at each of the 439 institutions. The positions included the following: the president or chancellor; executive vice president, provost, or vice president of academic affairs; and vice president or dean of admissions. If there was no vice president or dean of admissions, we sent a questionnaire to the chief financial officer or controller. We pretested the questionnaire via structured interviews lasting approximately one to two hours with five higher-education executives and professionals.

Of 1,317 questionnaires sent out, we received 611 usable questionnaires, representing 372 universities and colleges (individual response rate = 46 percent; institutional rate = 85 percent). Chi-square analysis revealed that in terms of size (number of full-time students), ownership, and type, there was no significant difference between the respondents and nonrespondents. There was a significant difference by region ( $\chi^2 = 22.1, p < .0001$ ), for which we controlled in subsequent analyses. The number of respondents from each institution ranged from one to three, with an average of 1.64. An analysis of the response rate by title showed the following distribution: presidents (33 percent), executive vice presidents (40 percent), and other top administrators (27 percent). Further analyses showed that neither title nor the number of respondents from an institution had a significant effect on the findings. Size, type, ownership, and region, however, did have a significant effect on some of the interpretation responses. Therefore, we also controlled for these demographic variables in all analyses. Of the 372 institutions responding to the questionnaire, 178 had more than one respondent. Interrater reliabilities across these institutions were greater than .80 for all perceptual variables, suggesting an acceptable level of agreement.

### Variables

We conducted a literature search to help us operationalize the main concepts that emerged in the case study. We were especially interested in identifying research on higher education and in which the constructs of interest were operationalized. From the results of this search we constructed a questionnaire that included multi-item scales with 7-point Likert response formats for all variables. We averaged the items in each scale to calculate a score. The Appendix provides the complete scales for all variables. Cronbach alphas were greater than .70 for all scales.

**Perceived contextual variables.** The relevant variables associated with the sensemaking context were strategy and the information processing structure of the top management team. The eight items measuring the institution's strategy derived from Miles' (1982) conceptual framework and

### Issue Interpretation

adaptation of specific items that Hambrick (1981) used to measure the strategies of higher-education institutions. Two main types of strategies anchored the primary scale: domain offensive (institutions engaging in new programs, curricula, and market developments) and domain defensive (institutions maintaining positions, engaging in little program development, concerned with efficiency). Items were coded so that higher scores meant more offensive-oriented behavior.

For information processing structure, we were interested in the degree of interaction, participation, and process formality among the top managers involved in decision processes (Duncan, 1973). To measure this, we used a 9-item scale derived from the work of Thomas and McDaniel (1990). We scaled the items so that higher scores represented higher interaction, higher participation, and lower formality, indicating an information processing structure with higher processing capacity (Galbraith, 1973). Although we collected responses for these variables from individual administrators, these scales referred to processes or actions occurring at the institution level. Thus, the survey instructions emphasized that items referred to institutional/team characteristics, where appropriate, and that top management team members were acting as informants on the team. We then calculated aggregate values for these variables from item averages across multiple respondents within each university.

**Top management team perceptions.** The main top management team perceptions of interest were identity and image. Identity refers to "how the institution sees itself" (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991). Following Albert and Whetten (1985), who drew heavily from university settings in their theory development, we assessed the type of organizational identity as perceived by the top management team respondents through items that measured whether they saw the institution as more "utilitarian" or more "normative." When members perceive the organization's character to be oriented mainly toward economic factors, identity is more utilitarian; when they perceive the organization's character to be oriented mainly toward ideological and value-based concerns, identity is more normative. We reverse-coded the 9-item scale so that low scores indicated a more utilitarian identity.

Because the data from the qualitative study suggested that top management team members were concerned not only with identity per se, but also with the extent to which members held the values and identity of the institution, we included a strength-of-identity measure in addition to the type-of-identity measure. This strength-of-identity variable refers to administrators' beliefs about various facets of the organization's cultural values (Martin et al., 1983; Milliken, 1990) irrespective of the type of identity (normative or utilitarian) they perceive. We adapted Milliken's six-item scale, which had been used in a higher-education research setting, for use in this research. Higher scores indicated a stronger sense of identity by top management team members.



Table 1

**Means, Standard Deviations, Alphas, Interrater Reliabilities and Zero-order Correlations**

Variable	Mean	S.D.	Alpha*	IRR†	1	2	3
1. Size‡	3.65	.47	NA	NA			
2. Type	1.99	.78	NA	NA	.61**		
3. Ownership	1.47	.50	NA	NA	-.37**	-.06	
4. Region	2.87	.61	NA	NA	.06	.01	-.20**
5. Identity type	3.85	.68	.71	.92	.13*	-.02	-.16**
6. Identity strength	5.60	.78	.82	.90	-.13*	-.07	.20**
7. Present image	5.07	.71	.88	.92	-.05	.07*	.25**
8. Desired future image	5.27	.65	.86	.91	.02	-.03	.07
9. Strategy	3.86	.92	.76	.86	.14**	.13*	-.01
10. Information processing structure	4.81	.74	.88	.91	-.02	-.07	-.04
11. Strategic interpretation	5.44	.61	.88	.91	.04	.07	.05
12. Political interpretation	3.63	.89	.92	.81	.15**	.12**	-.14**

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ .\* Cronbach alphas calculated across all informants ( $N = 611$ ).† Interrater reliability for those institutions with more than one informant ( $N = 178$ ).

‡ Raw size range was 188 to 66,909 students.

Image refers to how members think others see the institution (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991) or how top management would like others to see the institution (Whetten, Lewis, and Mischel, 1992). Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail (1994) also referred to this notion as "construed external image." We identified two variations of the image concept from the case study—present and desired future image—and measured both using 10-item Likert (1–7) scales. We assessed present image by asking respondents how they perceived other peer institutions would currently rate their institution along ten dimensions (e.g., quality of students, academic climate; see Appendix for details). Because the findings from the case study indicated that the emulation of "peer" institutions with desired attributes was the basis for a desired future image, we assessed desired future image by first asking respondents what peer institutions (up to three) they would want their own institution to emulate. Next, we asked them to indicate (using the same ten items) the extent to which they desired to emulate the institutions they identified earlier (i.e., how respondents wanted their institution to be seen in the future).

**Issue interpretation.** Through our case study interviews and a subsequent literature search we identified 26 issues that top administrators typically face at modern institutions of higher education. We asked a panel of five experts (three higher-education professors and two high-level administrators) to rank the issues in terms of how important they felt higher-education administrators would perceive them to be. Five issues appeared in the top rankings of all five raters: faculty satisfaction, minority issues, external funding, student educational satisfaction, and changes in academic programs. For each of these issues, we used two, 4-item scales to assess the extent to which respondents felt each was a strategic and/or political issue. Issues are strategic if they can alter the institution's position in the market, can significantly affect the whole institution, and can have an effect on the institution's goals and missions

## Issue Interpretation

Table 1 (continued)

	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
-.04								
-.03		-.20**						
-.06		-.19**	.53**					
-.02		-.10	.16**	.22**				
.06		-.35**	.05	.08*	.04			
.03		-.08	.39**	.26**	-.10*	-.07		
-.01		-.20**	-.19**	.15**	.15**	.10*	.18**	
.09		-.01	-.24**	-.10*	.07	.08*	.19**	.22**

(Ginsberg, 1988). Issues are political if they involve conflict, negotiation, or influence attempts by individuals or groups to gain their preferences (Pfeffer, 1981).

**Data analysis.** We tested propositions 1–3 using path analysis. We used two path models, each utilizing one of the image variables (present vs. future) to test the differential relationships of image to interpretation. The path analytical technique allowed us to identify the relative magnitudes of the direct and indirect effects of the sensemaking context and image/identity variables on the interpretation of key institutional issues. We tested proposition 4 by using the three-regression-equations procedure suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986). We used multivariate regression to test the overall relationships between sets of variables.

**Control variables.** We controlled for the effects of size, type, ownership, and region for each of the regression equations in the path analyses, as well as the test for mediation, after initial ANOVA analyses revealed links to the study's variables. Size was the number of full-time students enrolled, which we calculated by using the nine size groups used in the U.S. Department of Education's *Digest of Educational Statistics* (1 = less than 200 students; 9 = more than 30,000). Because the distribution was skewed (Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z-Test = 4.80,  $p < .001$ ), we applied a logarithmic transformation. We coded type in terms of highest degree offered, with bachelor's degree equal to 1; master's degree, 2; and Ph.D. and beyond, 3. We coded ownership as either public (1) or private (2). We coded region as Northeast (1), Midwest (2), South (3), or West (4). We based this coding scheme and the states representing these regions on the *Digest* categories.

### Results

Because neither extant theory nor the findings from the case study permitted issue-specific propositions or hypotheses, we averaged the scores for the five issues in terms of their perceived strategic and political content to form higher strata strategic interpretation and political interpretation measures, respectively. The overall Cronbach alpha for the strategic interpretation scale was .88; for the political interpretation scale it was .92 (reliability alphas for the individual issues were all above .72). Second-order factor analyses revealed

that the issue loaded significantly on the single higher-order latent (strategic/political) variable (all parameter estimates  $> .50$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for the combined interpretation scales and the other scales and variables.

Multivariate analysis indicated that, across all respondents, the set of independent variables (strategy, information processing structure, present/future image, identity type, and identity strength) was significantly related to the set of dependent variables (strategic and political interpretation). Multivariate results were Wilks' lambda = .69,  $F_{18,720} = 12.56$ ,  $p < .0001$ .

**Proposition testing.** Results of testing the proposed differential relationship between the perceptual measures (i.e., image and identity) and interpretation (proposition 1) indicated that identity type was related to the interpretation of organizational issues as strategic. This means that top management teams perceiving their institutions as more utilitarian tended to interpret issues as more strategic; those teams perceiving their institutions as more normative tended to interpret issues as less strategic. The strength-of-identity measure was positively related to the interpretation of issues as strategic and negatively related to the interpretation of issues as political. Further, although present image was significantly related to political interpretation, desired future image was not, supporting proposition 1a. Desired future image was related only to strategic interpretation and to political interpretation, as predicted by proposition 1b. Overall, the pattern of relationships among the variables indicated that identity type, identity strength, and desired future image were related to strategic interpretation, while only strength of identity and present image were related to political interpretation. Table 2 presents all the results from the path analyses.

In testing proposition 2 (that context would relate directly to issue interpretation), we found a direct link between information processing structure and the interpretation of issues as political, as well as the interpretation of issues as strategic. This negative relationship between information processing structure and political interpretation indicates that higher degrees of information processing structure are associated with top management teams perceiving organizational issues as less political. There was no significant direct relationship, however, between strategy and interpretation. Thus, the data support proposition 2b (that the information processing structure related to both strategic and political interpretation), but not proposition 2a (that strategy will be related to strategic issue interpretation).

We had formulated a general proposition that strategy and information processing structure would be related to identity and image, respectively (proposition 3). After controlling for

Table 2

## Path Analysis and Regression Results\*

Variable	B	t	R <sup>2</sup>	F
<i>Strategic Interpretation</i>				
Region	-.02	-.56	.15	6.93**
Type	.00	.05		
Ownership	.04	.71		
Size	.12	1.77		
Information processing structure	.15	2.89**		
Strategy	.04	.76		
Image—present (future)	.05 (.11)	.03 (1.97*)		
Identity (type)	-.20	-3.67**		
Identity (strength)	.12	1.96*		
<i>Political Interpretation</i>				
Region	.07	1.46	.17	8.33***
Type	.05	.77		
Ownership	-.10	-.18		
Size	.08	1.11		
Information processing structure	-.19	-3.63***		
Strategy	.08	1.55		
Image—present (future)	.11 (.08)	1.89* (1.01)		
Identity (type)	-.07	-1.23		
Identity (strength)	-.26	-4.24***		
<i>Identity (Type)</i>				
Region	-.02	-.48	.17	12.78***
Type	-.14	-2.29*		
Ownership	-.09	-1.73		
Size	.24	3.68***		
Information processing structure	-.05	-1.21		
Strategy	-.35	-7.27***		
<i>Identity (Strength)</i>				
Region	-.01	-.31	.22	17.23***
Type	.01	.04		
Ownership	.18	3.40***		
Size	-.08	-1.27		
Information processing structure	.40	8.67***		
Strategy	.08	2.19*		
<i>Image (Present/Future)</i>				
Region	-.24	-.49	.13	9.34***
Type	.14	2.28*		
Ownership	.21	3.76		
Size	-.07	-1.16		
Information processing structure	.26	5.35***		
Strategy	.03	.63		

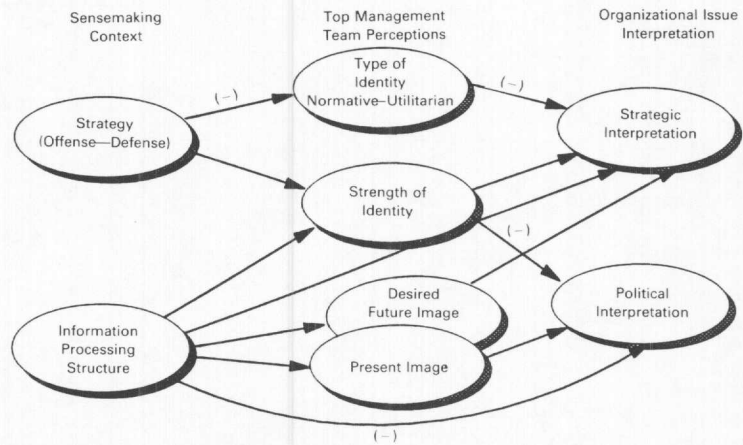
\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

\* Standardized betas and t-values in parentheses are for future image when significance level changed as a result of substitution for present image.

size, type, ownership, and region, we found that strategy was a significant predictor of both identity measures, as shown in Table 2. The negative relationship between strategy and identity type means that offense-oriented strategies were associated with more utilitarian (less normative) identities. Although information processing structure was linked to strength of identity, present image, and desired future image, it was not significantly related to the type of identity. Thus, proposition 3 was broadly supported in that there was a general pattern of significant relationships between the sensemaking context and organizational perceptions. This can be seen clearly in Figure 3, which summarizes the findings graphically.

To test for mediation (proposition 4), we estimated the following three regression equations for each path in Figure

Figure 3. Revised model based on results of path analyses.\*



3: first, regressing the mediator (top management team perceptions) on the independent variable (sensemaking context); second, regressing the dependent variable (issue interpretations) on the independent variable; and third, regressing the dependent variable on both the independent variable and the mediator. If the independent variable has no effect when controlling the mediator, there is full mediation; if the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable is less in the third regression equation than in the second, then there is partial mediation (Baron and Kenny, 1986). This procedure revealed only one path (Strategy → Identity Type → Strategic Interpretation) that was fully mediational (i.e., the regression coefficient for strategy went from a .01 significance level to nonsignificance when controlling identity type). A second path (Information Processing Structure → Present Image → Political Interpretation) showed no mediation effects. All other paths were partially mediated by the top management team's perceptions of image and identity. Thus, these results provide only partial support for proposition 4.

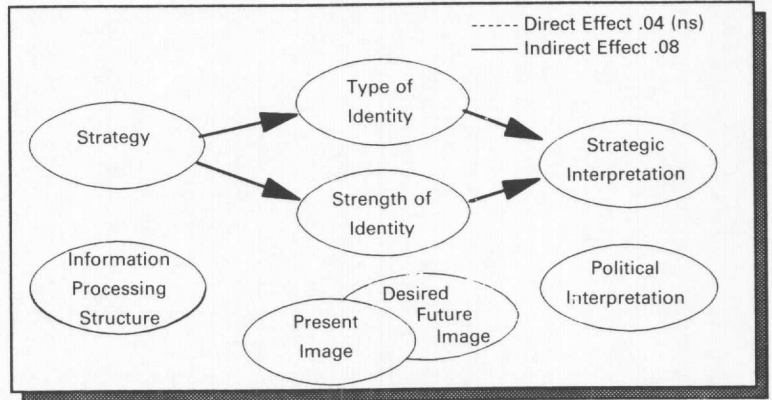
When coupled with the case study findings, the path and mediation analyses indicate three primary paths, as shown in Figure 4. The first suggests that strategy's relationship to strategic interpretations is through the type and strength of the top management team's perceptions of organizational identity. Paths 2 and 3 of Figure 4 deal with the direct and indirect effects of information processing structure on interpretation. In path 2, we found that information processing structure affects the political interpretation of organizational issues both directly and indirectly through the strength of identity. There is no significant indirect path through the type of identity, present image, or desired future image. In path 3, the effect of information processing structure on strategic interpretation is also both direct and indirect. The partially mediated effect is through strength of identity and desired future image (but not present image). Again, there is no path through identity type.



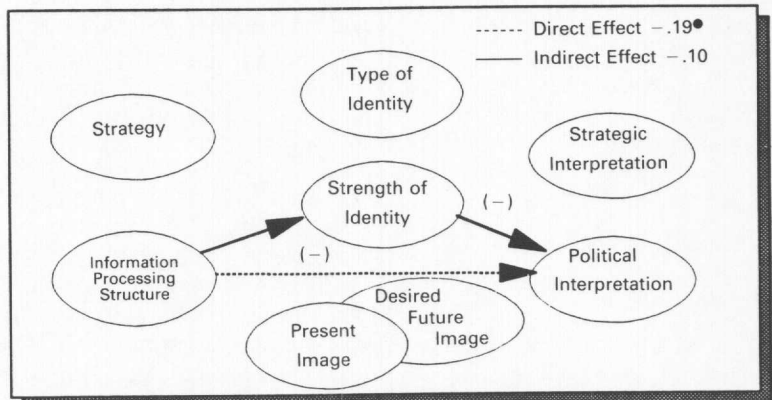
## Issue Interpretation

Figure 4. Primary mediated paths and direct effects compared.

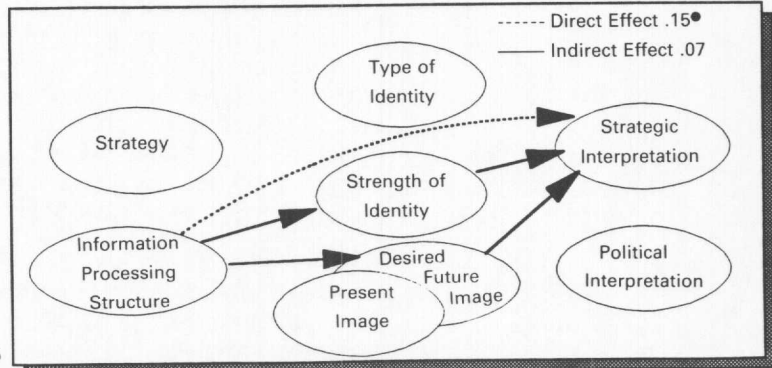
Path 1: Strategy to Strategic Interpretation



Path 2: Information Processing Structure to Political Interpretation



Path 3: Information Processing Structure to Strategic Interpretation



●  $p < .05$

## DISCUSSION

### A Grounded View of Identity, Image, and Issue Interpretation in Academia

Of the findings from the case study, those concerning top management team perceptions (identity and image) and issue interpretations (strategic and political) have the greatest implications for theory. An underlying assumption of the informants was that their institution would not change

markedly without somehow altering aspects of the central qualities of their institution—their identity. One of the most pronounced findings was the intense focus on the projection of a desired *future* image as a means of changing the currently held identity. There are several implications here. The first is that these team members assumed (or needed) identity to be somewhat fluid; actually, they viewed it as already in a state of flux as they tried to manage the strategic change effort that was currently underway. The top management teams' orientation is of some significance for theory, in that they construed organizational identity as changeable over relatively short periods of time, which is at odds with a key element of the currently accepted definition of identity as that which is central, distinctive, and *enduring* (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Whetten, Lewis, and Mischel, 1992). The definition of identity as enduring obscures an important aspect of identity within the context of organizational change: for substantive change to occur, some basic features of identity also must change. What does "enduring" mean if organizational actors presume identity to be (and treat it as) malleable as a matter of practical necessity? In light of our findings, it seems appropriate to soften the stricture on the conception of identity as more or less fixed to include a dimension of fluidity.

Another theoretically important issue concerns the relationship of identity and image. Do changes in identity lead to changes in image or vice versa? And what implications might an answer to this question have for accomplishing organizational changes in identity and image? One line of thought would be that top management could first try to foster a change in identity that would produce a change in image (identity as the progenitor of image). Another line of thought would be that management could project a desired future image that would serve as a catalyst for changing identity (image as the shaper of identity). In the case study, the top management team believed that altering image was the path to altering identity, that the projection of a compelling future image would destabilize identity and "pull" it into alignment with the desired image. Presumably, the changing identity would further motivate progress toward the desired future image, which would further strengthen the new identity, etc.

A stream of theory and research that merges with this future-oriented sense of image as an impetus for change is the literature on organizational vision. Vision connotes the idea of a mythical organization that, as Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) suggested, creates both chaos and order: chaos because it challenges members to think differently about the organization, and order because it offers direction. Collins and Porras (1991) argued that vision must be rooted in a guiding philosophy—the core beliefs and values of the organization—before it can be coupled with a tangible image of the future. It is in this articulation of a vision for change that past, present, and future come together. Against the backdrop of the organization's current and historical identity, top managers begin to mold new images of how they would like the organization to be perceived by external (and

## Issue Interpretation

internal) stakeholders. As our informants suggested, new or redefined "sensible" identities that depart from past- and present-oriented views of the organization's self-concept then need to be generated to fit this desired future image. The range and level of abstraction of that departure are critical considerations during strategic change. In particular, members must determine which ostensibly enduring elements of the organization's identity should change and how much they should change to affect and ultimately reflect a desired future image of the organization. These proposed changes must at once capture members' imagination as well as their commitment (Hart, 1992). Thus, strategic change requires navigating between the maintenance of continuity and the management of disruption.

Dutton and Dukerich (1991) argued that deterioration of image is an important trigger for action. The findings of our case study suggested that the top management team was trying to think ahead, to do a kind of prospective sensemaking in constructing a desired image based on emulating other successful universities. The emphasis on emulation raised another caution about using a definition of identity as that which is "distinctive." Given our finding that the university administrators were seeking a new image by trying to mimic others already in the "top-10," they arguably were trying to achieve prominence by becoming *non*-distinctive from this elite referent group. Perhaps they intended to distinguish themselves along some fine-grained lines of difference within the elite group, but that point is not obvious from our data. With emulation as the chosen path to a desired future image, mimetic processes (Scott, 1987; DiMaggio and Powell, 1991) operated to diminish, not foster, distinctiveness as a component of some projective identity. Our findings also stand in contrast to Martin et al.'s (1983) and Kunda's (1992) assertions that organizations often claim uniqueness when they are in fact not unique. The lack of uniqueness that emerged here was, for all practical purposes, intentional.

The most obvious difference between the findings of the case study and the existing literature was in the use of strategic/political categories, rather than the expected opportunity/threat categories. Our data, and our experiences in gathering it, lead us to believe that these categories pertain to a more general or coarse-grained level of categorization and labeling (Rosch, 1978) more appropriate to the context studied here. Cognitive categories emerge at a fairly general level and through experience develop finer gradations of distinction (Rosch and Mervis, 1975). Furthermore, such coarse-grained interpretations might be precursors to the development of more refined categories with commonly recognized issue labels like threats and opportunities (Dutton, Stumpf, and Wagner, 1990). We studied a context that featured an industry, an organization, and an executive team who were relatively unfamiliar with competition and with the strategic change stance that is so common in the business arena. For this domain, the team did not use the threat/opportunity labels. One might therefore see this finding as an artifact of the domain

studied, and indeed it might be, but if so, it is an informative artifact because it suggests that taken-for-granted categories from the business literature do not necessarily translate well to other domains in which top managers are now engaging in strategic processes.

### Discussion of the Quantitative Results

The broad-based survey results offer general support, clarification, and refinement of the grounded findings of the case study. These results demonstrate that image and identity have strong and systematic relationships with top management team interpretations of the key issues confronting higher-education institutions. Furthermore, image and identity not only directly affected issue interpretation, but they also served as influential linkages between the organizational sensemaking context and issue interpretation. The refined model also indicates firm support for the grounded model's focus on the existing strategy in use and the information processing structure in place. Although changes in the external environment are clearly influential, strategy and information processing structure create an internal context for interpreting those changes. Thomas and McDaniel (1990), using an information processing perspective, found a linkage between these internal contextual features and interpretation, but they did not identify or explore the means by which this linkage occurred. This study locates the conceptual and empirical connection in the top management team's perceptions of the organization (i.e., identity and image).

With respect to the specific path relationships, we would like to highlight several key results evident in Figures 3 and 4. First, we found that strategy was linked only to the identity measures. When top management teams perceived their institutions as utilitarian and domain offensive, they tended to see the issues they faced as being strategic, whereas those who perceived their institutions as normative and domain-defensive saw the same issues as less strategic. Why might this pattern hold? On one hand, perhaps a declared domain-offensive strategy influences an orientation or reorientation toward a utilitarian identity. Such an identity implies that institutional decisions and actions are aimed at dealing with a competitive environment. On the other hand, domain defensive strategies are associated with more traditional, normative identities that de-emphasize an external, market orientation and thus do not facilitate perceptions of key issues from the environment in strategic terms.

There also was a positive relationship between strength of identity and the interpretation of issues as strategic. This result modifies the findings of Milliken (1990) by suggesting that strong, not weak, identities are linked to interpretations of issues as strategic. Rather than a strong identity providing confidence that the institution can weather, or even ignore, environmental changes, our findings suggest the possibility that a strong identity (especially when linked to a domain-offensive strategy) might instead provide the confidence to be proactive. This difference might be because of the number of issues examined (one in Milliken's

## Issue Interpretation

study versus five in this study) or to the type(s) of higher-education institutions studied (four-year, privately owned versus all types and ownership). This suggests that defense-oriented strategies in modern academia, although usually linked to an identity that stresses the traditional norms of higher education, seem to be weak platforms for building strategic interpretations of critical issues. Rather, it appears that more offense-oriented strategies are associated with identities that promote strategic thinking. The quantitative results also indicate that the strength-of-identity measure is negatively related to interpretations of organizational issues as political. That is, when top management team members perceived their institutions as having stronger (i.e., more embedded and firmly understood) identities, they tended to interpret issues as less political. Stronger perceptions of institutional identity by the top management team perhaps foster the commitment and social control (Ouchi and Price, 1978) that minimizes the need for political speculation around the key issues facing the team.

We also found that richer information processing structures (i.e., those with more participation and interaction and less formality) were related to stronger identities and to the two image measures. Information processing structure clearly is an influential mechanism for institutionalizing the extent to which identity is held by organization members. Moreover, it affects both present and desired future image. If the emphasis is on "who we are," information processing structure provides the means for justifying and reinforcing the status quo; if the emphasis is on "who we want to be," information processing structure becomes a driver for legitimizing an altered image, whereas strategy might be the driver for altering or retaining identity.

As Figure 3 shows, present image relates only to political interpretations. This suggests that an emphasis on present image (especially in dynamic environments) leads to issue interpretations that are more focused on the status quo, thus steering the top management team away from interpretations that might facilitate strategic change. The conspicuously absent linkage between present image and strategic interpretation is counterintuitive, given the external focus of the concept of image. We found that desired future image, however, relates only to strategic interpretation, suggesting that future image fosters a more strategic focus. The mythical organization that is embodied in desired future image appears to guide interpretation toward those aspects of an issue that, when acted upon, can help accomplish strategic reorientation in a changing environment. Desired future image thus contributes an interpretive template for strategic change.

## CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Taken together, the findings and emergent model of the grounded qualitative case study and the results and broader scope of the quantitative survey study provide some revealing insights. Several notable outcomes suggest implications for our theoretical views of changing organizations, perhaps especially those in an industry like



higher education, which is just becoming familiar with the elements of strategic change.

Perhaps because change in the external environment is now virtually a given, it is useful conceptually to observe that top management teams in academia construe the proximal context for sensemaking mainly in internal terms. This finding is consistent with Thomas and McDaniel (1990) and Thomas, Clark, Gioia (1993) and Weick's (1995) recent theorizing. Also, strategy is construed here more as an input to the sensemaking process than as an output or product of sensemaking, as it is usually treated. The combined qualitative findings and quantitative results, in conjunction with prior work, suggest that both strategy and information processing structure might better be viewed as recursive phenomena that over time are both medium and outcome of the sensemaking process.

The findings on identity and image as they relate to strategic change were among the most revealing. If the concern is to make intentional, substantive change, then some fundamental organizational attributes must change. This apparently simple observation implies that even that which we usually presume to be essentially immutable (i.e., identity) might instead be fluid and malleable. Although existing organizational theories have viewed identity as somewhat changeable, typically over a long term (Albert and Whetten, 1985) or as an incremental adaptation to deteriorating image over time (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991), the kind of change now demanded of academic institutions calls for altering aspects of identity and image within dramatically shorter time horizons. Consequently, the conceptualization of identity should include dimensions that account for the ability of organizations to learn and adapt quickly.

This study also suggests that changes to identity can be encouraged by design and, further, that an influential avenue to a changed identity is a changed image. Thus, a prime role for leaders of strategic change is to frame that change in aspirational terms. As Thayer (1988: 250, cited in Weick, 1995) noted, "a leader does not tell it 'as it is'; [she or] he tells it 'as it might be' . . ." A plausible, attractive, even idealistic future image would seem to help organization members envision and prepare for the dynamic environment implied by strategic change. When strategic change is articulated in desired states, we get a picture of people thinking and talking in the future tense. This picture not only portrays identity and image as fluid, it also portrays organizations as more capable of change than is typically assumed. Practically speaking, it suggests that formulating a compelling future image that people can associate with and commit to eases the launching and eventual institutionalizing of strategic change.

Given our findings about image, should we conclude that higher-education institutions that engage in strategic change are likely to move from a focus on substance to a focus on image (Alvesson, 1990), such that the image becomes an overriding goal in itself? Perhaps, but it is important to note that because many of their products and services are

## Issue Interpretation

intangible, institutions of higher education must rely (and historically have relied) on image to some extent, albeit not as an impetus for strategic change. It also is apparent that there is a link between substance and image. Achieving an improved image fosters substantive improvement. The progression, therefore, might not be simply from substance to image but, rather, from substance to image to substance, as organization members seek congruence between the two. Or course, there are limits to the degree to which an organization can change its identity and image. Gagliardi (1986) even argued that the primary strategy of an organization is to maintain its identity and that organizations change so that they can preserve the essence of their identities. There is a resolution to this seeming paradox if one assumes that organizational change is natural, so that organizational identity is naturally presumed to evolve. Gagliardi's apparent paradox also assumes that organizational change and identity are independent. They are not. This study suggests that substantive strategic change implies a shift in the lenses used not only to reflect but also to guide the changing organization. Barring drastic contradictions or unmanageable discontinuities between present and projected identity, top managers can induce identity changes by working toward the desired future image.

The original premises and research questions for these integrated studies sought to explore how top management team members make sense of their shifting environments in modern academia. We found that under conditions of change, team members' perceptions of identity and image, and especially desired future image, were key to their interpretations of issues, which they categorized as either strategic or political in character. We believe that our grounded, emergent model in its refined form can serve as a basis for further research concerning some of the distinctive features of strategic change in academia. We also hope it will encourage research in other organizational settings in which strategic change is a less familiar process than in the business domain.

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## Issue Interpretation

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## APPENDIX: Questionnaire

Questionnaire items were all measured on 7-point Likert scales.

**Identity Type** (U = Utilitarian, N = Normative)

To what extent . . .

- do top administrators feel that your institution should *not* be "competing" for students as if they were clients or customers? (N)
- are symbols and ceremonies important to the functioning of your institution? (N)
- have budget cuts or increases usually been made across-the-board? (N)
- are financial returns (e.g., from athletics, economic development, etc.) a measure of success for your institution? (U)
- is your institution's mission focused on academic quality? (N)
- is there a feeling that the university should be (or continue to be) actively engaged in marketing campaigns to attract students? (U)
- are budget cuts or increases made selectively across departments or colleges at your institution? (U)
- is cost-effectiveness the major criterion that guides programmatic or administrative change? (U)
- is economic performance considered to be important to fulfilling your institution's missions or goals? (U)

**Identity Strength**

To what extent . . .

- do the top management team members of your institution have a strong sense of the institution's history?
- do your institution's administrators have a sense of pride in the institution's goals and missions?

- c. do top administrators feel that your institution has carved out a significant place in the higher education community?
- d. do the top management team members *not* have a well-defined set of goals or objectives for the institution?
- e. does your institution have administrators who are knowledgeable about the institution's history and traditions?
- f. does your institution have administrators, faculty, and students who identify strongly with the institution?

#### Present Image

In general, how do you think *peer institutions* would rate your institution in terms of:

- a. the quality of program offerings?
- b. the quality of faculty?
- c. the quality of students?
- d. the quality of the administrators?
- e. overall academic climate?
- f. academic innovativeness?
- g. overall reputation and prestige?
- h. financial/economic status?
- i. your goals?
- j. your administrative structure?

#### Future Image

After identifying up to three institutions that the respondent institution would like to emulate, respondents were asked: "To what extent is the reason for wanting to emulate these institutions based on . . ." The survey then presented the same characteristics provided for present image.

**Strategy** (O = Offense, D = Defense)

To what extent does your institution . . .

- a. tend to ignore external changes that have little immediate, direct impact on current operations? (D)
- b. try to be in the forefront of new programs or market developments in higher education? (O)
- c. offer a more limited range of programs, but emphasize higher program quality, superior student services, etc.? (D)
- d. respond rapidly to early signals concerning areas of opportunity? (O)
- e. maintain relatively stable curricula and programs? (D)
- f. try to maintain superior strength in all of the areas it enters? (D)
- g. operate within a broad program/curriculum domain that undergoes periodic reshaping? (O)
- h. value being "first in" with new programs or market activities? (O)

#### Information Processing Structure of the Top Management Team

To what extent . . .

- a. are views other than those of top administrators included in executive decision processes?
- b. can planning concerning important issues be characterized as participative?
- c. are written rules and procedures followed during executive decision processes?
- d. are committees such as ad hoc task groups formed to deal with important issues?
- e. can decision processes around important issues be characterized as interactive?
- f. do one or two people dominate the handling of important issues?
- g. is there a free and open exchange of ideas between those affected by a given issue?
- h. do people affected by an issue typically feel that the definition of the issue and the manner in which it was resolved were imposed upon them?
- i. can decision making be characterized as a formal process involving rules and policies?

**Interpretation** (S = Strategic, P = Political)

Informants were presented with five issues for which they were asked to respond to eight items. Four items measured the extent to which the informant *saw* the issue as strategic, four items the extent to which they perceived the issue as political.



## Issue Interpretation

### Example

To what extent is *faculty satisfaction* considered by your institution to be . . .

- a. a strategic issue? (S)
- b. an issue that has consequences for the institution's position in the marketplace? (S)
- c. an issue that involves attempts among individuals or groups in the institution to influence preferences? (P)
- d. a political issue? (P)
- e. something that affects the whole institution? (S)
- f. an area in which there is conflict within the institution over control of the issue? (P)
- g. an issue that could impact the institution's mission and goals? (S)
- h. a topic that is associated with bargaining, compromise, and negotiation among top administrators? (P)