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The axis of access: a quantitative ethnography of presidential discourse on the construct of college access in the United States

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Pepperdine University
Graduate School of Education and Psychology

THE AXIS OF ACCESS: A QUANTITATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY OF PRESIDENTIAL
DISCOURSE ON THE CONSTRUCT OF COLLEGE ACCESS IN THE UNITED STATES

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Global Leadership and Change

by

Pamela M. Donnelly

April, 2022

Martine Jago, Ph.D. – Dissertation Chairperson

This dissertation, written by

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under the guidance of a Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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VITA

Performance-focused and values-driven executive with 24 years
of leadership in U.S. secondary and higher education systems

Summary of Qualifications

- Motivator known for clearly defining goals, aligning resources, coordinating teams, and consistently delivering results that exceed expectations
- Cultivator of connected communities committed to diversity and inclusion while anchoring academic performance standards
- Implementor of differentiation as experienced marketplace analyst and creative strategist
- Administrator combining theory and practice to support organizational change and amplify team success, with careful attention to budgets, timelines, culture, and methods

Education

- | | | |
|---|--|------|
| I. Pepperdine University | Ph.D., Global Leadership & Change
Malibu CA | 2022 |
| II. George Mason University | Master of Arts, English
Magna cum laude
Fairfax VA | 2004 |
| III. Columbia University in the City of New York | Bachelor of Arts, Literature/Writing
Minor in Secondary Education
Summa cum laude
New York NY | 1997 |

Entrepreneurial Expertise

Pamela M. Donnelly Consulting LLC Founder	2020-present
---	--------------

- Offering academic counseling with consulting services specialization.
 - Result: evolution from one-on-one support for students seeking admission to selective and highly selective colleges to corporate advisory post-PhD supporting aligned for-profit, non-profit, and government institutions.

GATE College System Inc.

2015–2020

Founder, CEO, and Chairman of the Board of Directors

- Created concept and developed curriculum from inception for EdTech platform with mission to increase equitable access to higher education for all students regardless of socioeconomic status.
 - Result: successful pilot programs in 50 high schools in 7 states.
- Raised \$1.5M in investment.
 - Result: structured training project design, including alpha (2015-2016) and beta (2017-2018) phases of platform research and development.
- Led forty co-educators in collaborative implementation of company objectives.
 - Result: academic content curation, video production supporting curriculum, legal assessment, technology specs, nonprofit partnerships, and PR/media campaigns.

Full content completed October 2019. This company was privately acquired under confidentiality agreement November 19, 2020.

Valley Prep Tutoring Services Inc.

2012–2021

Founder

- Identified market need, led all hiring, and distilled marketing materials. Led live events for parents leading to viral growth in public and private school networks throughout Los Angeles.
 - Result: college readiness intellectual property, including customized operational procedures for positive growth, has led to year-over-year growth of 14% per annum. Company is privately held and owned, still operational, and currently runs under office co-director.

Early Career

San Fernando Valley Professional School CA

Stonewall Jackson High School VA

LaGuardia High School for the Performing Arts NY

1997–2010

Teacher

Taught all levels of high school English in diverse high school classrooms including 9th-12th grade regular and honors classes, AP Literature, and AP Language. Co-designed curricula for Public Speaking & Debate, and Drama courses. Grew student arts organizations and built thriving programs. Championed and supported college applications process for undocumented students, students with learning differences, and others from marginalized backgrounds.

Corporate Presentations

Latino-American Superintendents National Conferences Speaker: Supporting ESL Students through the College Admissions Process	Lake Tahoe NV 2019
Common Application Presentation for President regarding modes of increasing access via technology	(Virtual) 2019
ACT Inc. Speaker: Technology Panel for Increasing College Readiness	(Virtual) 2018
The College Board Presentation and interview with senior VP regarding technology and access	New York NY 2018
Lead India International Conference Speaker: Securing Access for International Applicants	Washington DC 2018
Educational Technology Summit, U.S. Department of Education Industry Advocate: Every Student Succeeds Act, Digital Divide	Washington DC 2017
Educational Technology Advocacy, U.S. Congress Industry Advocate: E-rate, Net Neutrality, Title IV	Washington DC 2017
Varsity Brands National Cheerleading Conference Speaker: Academic Strategy for Athletic Aspirants	Orlando FL 2017
Federal Student Aid Office Consultation: Next Gen FAFSA project	Washington DC 2016-2020
Jobs for America's Graduates National Conference Speaker: Piloting Access for JAG.org	New Orleans LA 2017

Academic Conference Presentations

Research Association for Interdisciplinary Studies Conference Princeton University Speaker & Paper: Online Growth Mindset Summer Bridge Programs	2020
University Council for Educational Administration Conference Michigan State University Speaker & Paper: Increasing College and Career Readiness for Disadvantaged Students Leveraging Conley's Four Keys Model	2020
National Science Institute Symposium on Digital Learning Malibu CA Speaker: Incorporating Quantitative Ethnography as a College Access Solution	2019

New Delhi Institute of Management International Conference 2019
 New Delhi, India
 Speaker: Cross-National Interests in Higher Education

Graduate School of Education and Psychology 2018
 Pepperdine University
 Speaker: Higher Education Leadership for Increased Access

Professional Development

South by Southwest Education National Conferences Austin TX 2016-2019
 CEO Breakout Presentations

Consortium for School Networking National Conferences Portland OR 2018
 Policy Workshops: Supporting Underserved Populations

Association of African-American Superintendents Conference Anaheim CA 2018
 Attendee, Diversity & Inclusion Trainings

Alley to the Valley Women's Leadership Conference New York NY 2015 CEO Workshops:
 Budgets, Funding, Strategic Partnerships Los Angeles CA 2016
 Seattle WA 2017
 Palo Alto CA 2018

Publications

SWAT Team Tactics for Getting Your Teen into College 2013
 Self-published
 Reached #1 on Amazon in Educational Testing

4 Keys to College Admissions Success 2015
 Published by Morgan James
 NY, NY

LinkedIn articles

www.linkedin.com/in/pameladonnelly/

Blog

www.pameladonnelly.com/blog

Honors & Awards

Inspiring EdTech Female Founder Award 2021
 SuperCharger Ventures
www.edtechfemalefounders.org

Ph.D. Advisory Committee 2020–2022
Nominated and served as Co-chair under Dr. June Schmieder-Ramirez

ASU-Global Silicon Valley National Conference 2018
CEO finalist for Best Startup

Certifications

Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) Training 2020
Social-Behavioral-Educational Certification

State-Certified Educator California 2008
Credential: English

State-Certified Educator Virginia 1998
Credential: English

State-Certified Educator New York State 1997
Credential: English

Pro Bono Educational Support Services

Bresee Foundation Los Angeles, CA
Latinx High School Student Support 2015–2019

LEAP Foundation Los Angeles, CA
Mentorship for Female Teenagers in Leadership 2016–2018

Project ECHO Los Angeles, CA
Mentorship for High School Entrepreneurs 2017

100 Black Men Los Angeles, CA
African-American Male High School Student Support 2019

Matchlighters Scholarship Program Los Angeles, CA
Essays Coaching for Economically Disadvantaged Students 2020-present

Skills

Effective leadership, quantitative and qualitative research, Epistemic Network Analysis (ENA), public speaking, persuasive writing, marketing analysis, team building, organizational change advisory, conversant Spanish.

ABSTRACT

Federal discourse pertaining to college access requires clarified definition. Use of the college access construct has become commonplace, yet no unified refinement of meaning exists. This study, which covered U.S. presidential communications from January 2009 to October 2021, addressed the abstraction of language as leaders presented ideas, policies, and opinions.

Observable trends impacting social mobility for students from underserved populations were of central interest. The research methodology, Quantitative Ethnography (QE), used the tool of Epistemic Network Analysis (ENA). Eight codes were identified through grounded analysis: Affordability, Pathway Program, Underserved Populations, Class Systems, Upward Mobility, Career Readiness, Trajectory, and Career Technical Education (CTE) and assessed through postmodernism. The Code most commonly appearing in the data set was Upward Mobility. Two codes tied for second-most-common: Affordability and Pathway Programs. In terms of connections among the codes from a broad overview, the most dominant communication patterns among the three presidents included epistemic links from Pathway Programs to both Affordability and Underserved Populations. Overall congruence across administrations was notably lacking. Conclusions drawn included that presidential discourse pertaining to the U.S. college access dilemma may be accurately described as circular, as illustrated by an original figure demonstrating the researcher's "Axis of Access" concept. Due to the churn of new administrations with differing definitions of college access coming into power every 4 to 8 years, a substantial hurdle for stakeholders in the U.S. Department of Education and related divisions was identified; therefore, a recommendation made was to create a new College Access Bridge Division in the U.S. Department of Education, to enable consistency of discourse and policy implementation. The incorporation of kin networks into pathway programs starting in middle

school was recommended at the pathway program level, as was expanding criteria for such programs. Both national and global implications were discussed. Of note: this dissertation marks the first utilization of QE and ENA in the field of higher education in the United States.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter Overview

This inquiry begins with the Background of the Study, Problem Statement, Purpose Statement, Research Questions, and Significance of the Study. These are followed by Definition of Terms, Conceptual Framework, and Theoretical Framework. Finally, the chapter includes Limitations, Delimitations, Assumptions, Positionality, Organization of the Study, and a Chapter Summary. The focus of analysis will be presidential parlance related to college access.

Background of the Study

College access has been defined by higher education researchers McDonough et al. (1997) as “the process whereby educators, policy makers, and administrators attempt to ensure a college education for all who aspire to that goal” (p. 297). U.S. society promotes the attainment of a 4-year college degree as an aim related to financial reward in lucrative careers (Shumar, 1997). Federal communications on college access contribute to this perception of value, yet the construct of college access offers no solid linguistic ground for those inquiring more deeply about its logic, meaning, and implications. Lexical semantics surrounding what is commonly referred to in U.S. higher education circles as the college access space expand into numerous levels of connotation meriting exploration. Conceptual semantics applied to the cognitive structure of contextual meaning within those constructs can illuminate critical thinking and perhaps, as a result, policy (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). Among the several interrelated opaque or misunderstood ideas are those of college access, college eligibility, and college readiness.

Beginning with the earliest colleges in the U.S. circa 1636, when the Massachusetts Bay colonial legislature founded Harvard University, institutions of higher education admitted only

males until 1837. At that time, Mary Lyon founded Mount Holyoke so that females were able to attend college in the U.S. Generally these were privileged daughters of wealthy families.

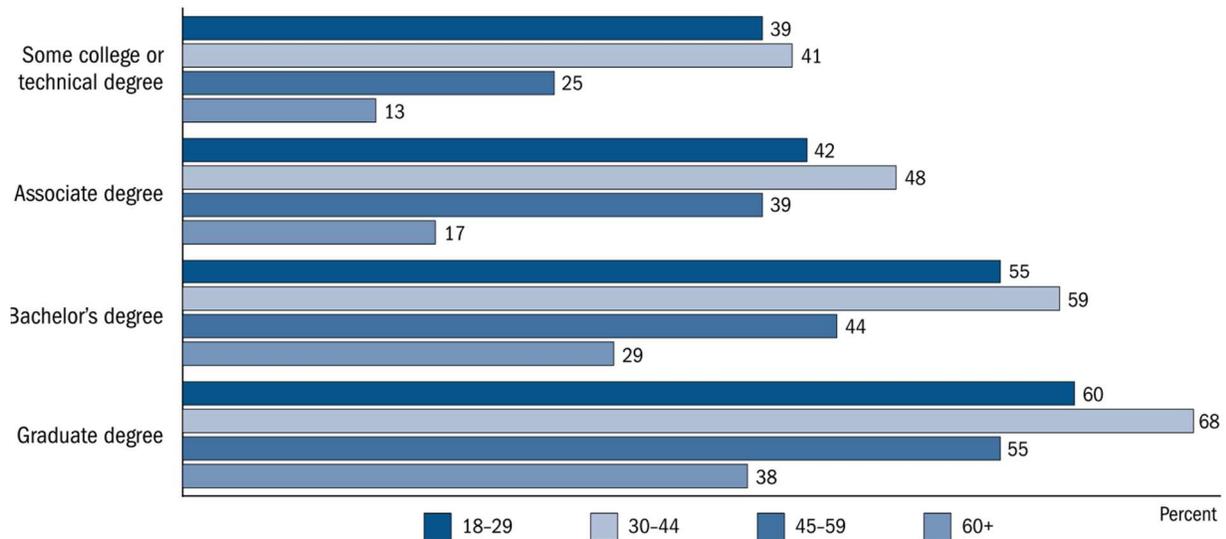
Following the Morrill Land-Grant Colleges Act of 1862 and 1890 the earliest idea of a public promise of higher education access for a broader demographic of Americans came into play. In some of the earliest U.S. rhetoric about access, the Morrill Land-Grant Colleges Act's author, Justin Smith Morrill, stated the Act's purpose was to build a college in every state "upon a sure and perpetual foundation, accessible to all" (Benson & Boyd, 2015).

Economic structures of the U.S. higher education system have nonetheless evolved to call into question whether poor or working-class students are able to access its benefits. Although an educated populace seems to constitute a public good, without individual means to pay for tuition and other fees millions of U.S. students every year are stymied from applying. Whereas states once footed the bill, that previous investment in public institutions designed to promote access has decreased significantly since 2000 (Cochrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2016). Compounding this, the federal role in promoting equitable education is limited by the 10th Amendment, which states that the "powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people" (U.S. Constitution). Most education policy is decided at the state and local levels, but when it comes to the student debt crisis in the U.S., significant strain occurs federally (Tierney & Venegas, 2009).

Regulations do, however, pass down from the U.S. Department of Education to dictate rules such as the ESSA, the Every Student Succeeds Act enacted in 2015. This, along with shifting market factors over the past 20 years, has led to state disinvestment in colleges and universities. As recently as 2008, tuition accounted for only 35.8% of public higher-education revenue across the nation. During 2017, 28 states leaned chiefly on students, not on taxpayers,

for tuition dollars. Vermont's system of public universities and colleges drew 86.6% of its tuition revenue from students, the most extreme example of this trend. At \$72.3 billion nationwide, students now account for an average of 46.4% of overall revenue for public higher education, and those numbers only increase for private colleges and universities (Bauman, 2018). The impact of decreasing incentives in funding for states falls short of ensuring that students of low socioeconomic status (SES) can understand or navigate the realities of successfully becoming eligible, ready, and able to afford higher education.

The burden of covering costs for higher education is now America's second largest debt. Only consumer home mortgages are more costly. The Federal Reserve reports that average monthly student loan payments increased from 2005 to 2016, going from \$227 to \$393. A typical U.S. student earning a 4-year degree owes at least \$20,000 more than they did 13 years ago (Woodworth, 2017). This debt varies by age group, as seen in Figure 1, with students ages 18-44 bearing the largest burden. Debt at any age presents problems; for U.S. students under the age of 30, life goals such as marriage, purchasing a home, or starting a family are impeded by such fiscal liability.

Figure 1*Use of Debt to Finance College, Percentages by Age Group*

Note. From “Report on the Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2020-May 2021,” by the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, 2021, (<https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/2021-economic-well-being-of-us-households-in-2020-student-loans.htm>). Copyright 2021 by the Federal Reserve.

In 2018, the total enrollment of U.S. undergraduates was 16,600,000, each of whom paid at public institutions an average net price of \$13,700; they spent \$22,100 at private for-profit institution, and \$27,000 for private nonprofit institutions. That year, institutions awarded 1,000,000 associate’s degrees, 2,000,000 bachelor’s degrees, 820,000 master’s degrees, and 184,000 (Woodworth, 2021). The financial burden borne by those lacking information to help them successfully pay for a bachelor’s degree constitutes the top-most layer of a multi-faceted problem.

Internationally, each country establishes its own relationship with the construct of higher education and its access, with economic and cultural drivers impacting policy implementation across time. As in the U.S., many acknowledge that college is not the sole pathway to success

(Foust, 2016). Some cultural perspectives, in fact, see the U.S.'s preoccupation with college pathways as patronizing. The notion that disadvantaged populations without higher education access are de facto on a lesser path can run counter to sociocultural values (Marginson & Dang, 2017). Stateside, a defense of alternate pathways, in particular CTE—Career and Technical Education—has found a powerful renaissance funded by \$1.2 billion in federal monies flowing into school districts even as college access remains constrained (Network, 2018). Cross-national corporate implications as jobs move from shore to shore in an increasingly digital economy contribute to the strain of global economics. The college access equation as presented in U.S. federal rhetoric crosses borders with global repercussions.

Problem Statement

Presidential discourse requires a clarified, cross-state understanding of what is meant by the construct of college access and its related narratives. This construct has become commonplace, yet no unified definition or refinement of meaning exists. The study addressed the disconnect in the abstraction of language as leaders present ideas, opinions, and policies in their Discourse related to the rhetorical use of this term.

With over \$1.7 trillion in current U.S. student debt, the relationship between the United States, its higher education system, and the operations underpinning those institutions has become increasingly challenging (Hegji et al., 2018). The U.S. public education system exacerbates inequities across socioeconomic strata and racial/ethnicity divides (Chetty et al., 2017). Rather than pointing to the exception of a disproportionately small number of high-achieving, low-SES students attaining college eligibility, readiness, access, and success, with careful use of language and clear definitions of the constructs being referenced progress may be made toward a more equitable playing field.

Currently, hundreds of nonprofit programs in America support students in a one-on-one mentorship paradigm, perpetuating the opportunity gap at scale since some students get help while many more do not. Networks create opportunities—the grit and growth mindset of qualified students cannot overcome the network gap for those students without such mentorship in place. Wealthier students who never know food insecurity, lack of digital access, or time scarcity are at tremendous advantage. The National Association of College Admissions Counselors recommends a ratio of no more than 250 students to 1 counselor. Budgets in public schools would have to triple or quadruple the amount of on-site support to attain that proportion (NACAC, 2021). The national average of 482-to-1, compounded by the fact that the 20% of lowest income school districts allocate little or no budget to the line item of college counseling, contributes to the problems experienced by students from minority groups in particular (Knight, 2003). Reports in Chicago of a 700-to-1 ratio, and 1000-to-1 in Los Angeles make clear that the time for new approaches has arrived (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008).

Purpose Statement

This Quantitative Ethnography study's purpose was to investigate the communications of U.S. presidents regarding college access. In particular, illuminating impediments experienced by low-SES, disadvantaged, and/or first-generation students to attain college admission within the current rhetorical ecosystem was the study's primary aim. This examination observed, sought patterns, evaluated, and deconstructed discourse. By Chapter 5, this analysis explored the degree to which, if at all, adjustments in federal communication and educational structures can better ensure college aspiration and persistence toward 4-year degrees for students from marginalized backgrounds.

Research Questions

The overarching research question (RQ) asked: How did U.S. presidents from 2009-2021 communicate a national narrative on the construct of college access? This primary RQ broke into one sub-question (SQ): What observable trends appeared across time in such communications may have impacted social mobility for students from underserved populations?

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the field by clarifying terminology, identifying narrative arcs, and assessing trends in U.S. presidential communication. Those who could benefit include higher education stakeholders at the U.S. Department of Education, nonprofit leaders in the college access space, and federal leaders in the executive, judicial, and legislative branches of the U.S. government. International leaders whose work intersects the U.S. higher education system may also benefit. Ways they might benefit include (a) adopting working definitions related to college access that align with those of other stakeholders in order to coalesce policies and procedures, (b) revising presumptions about the access equation in U.S. systems for students from low-SES backgrounds, and (c) developing effective incentives using economic and social mechanisms to bridge the information gap in service of increasing equity.

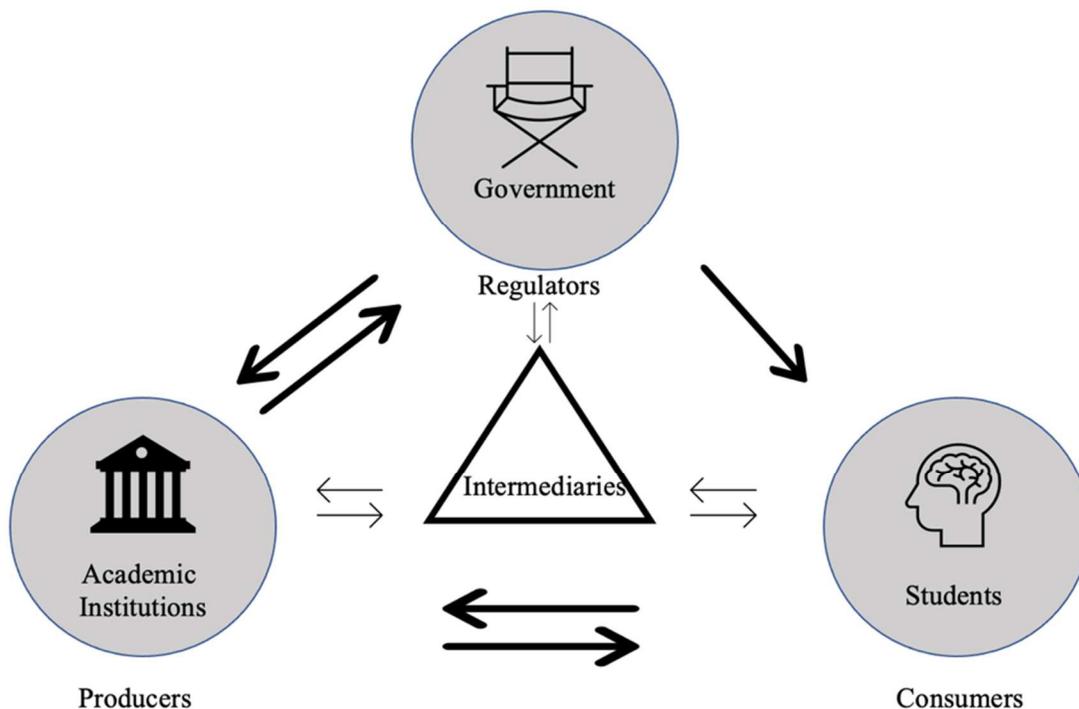
With contributions to the knowledge base among stakeholders, this study may offer incremental awakening to more viable progress toward what is commonly called the American dream of college access. “Is the United States still a land of opportunity?” asks researcher Raj Chetty (Chetty et al., 2014). Related questions asked by researchers across recent decades ponder whether U.S. society fetishizes a 4-year college degree (Shumar, 1997) and whether college should be a public good or a private one (McPherson & Schapiro, 2010). Without infrastructure,

professional development, and federal accountability, capitalism can run amok, as seen in the DeVry University and Trump University debacles (Shireman, 2018).

Presidential rhetoric's role in contributing to higher education's commodification as a good or service in the context of U.S. free-market capitalism is questioned in this study. In Figure 2, these contributions may impact policy makers, practitioners, and students. Each arrow in Figure 2 represents a flow of communication. Intermediaries include for-profit and nonprofit institutions. Two key takeaways: (a) the student is seen here positioned as a consumer, as stated by former U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos among others (FSA, 2018), and (b) there is little to no opportunity for contact from those students to the government whose communications and resultant policies directly impact their access to higher education, or lack thereof.

Figure 2

Economic Model of College Access Posited as Goods and Services



Note. From an original concept created by the researcher.

The history of higher education in the U.S. is rife with sociological barriers, from gender and race to economic disadvantage (Aronson, 2008). America's metanarrative of equitable access calls into question whether the American dream of upward mobility is more hallucinatory than tangible. Since parental education level and zip code are more strongly correlated with college graduation than strong grades and attendance, discourse regarding college access as a construct merits careful parsing (McDonough & Calderone, 2006).

Impact of Financial Need

A dearth of financial aid literacy among potential recipients of Pell Grants and other federal monies obtainable through the FAFSA speaks to what may be seen as the foundational barrier to entry for many first-generation students and other populations. More targeted fiscal support is required to offset the central reason many students under-aspire: money. The three categories of knowledge low-income students need in order to enjoy comparable opportunities as their wealthier peers include information about need-based aid, merit-based institutional aid, and institutional scholarships.

One challenge lies in the fact that direct access to both information and application for these categories of aid above have historically been left to students and their parents. With public school counselors having only an average of 38 minutes per year per student (NACAC, 2021), such support does not typically happen in public high schools. Once students are enrolled in the following year's coursework, time rarely remains to guide them through the complexities of targeting need-based and merit-based aid, or of identifying viable scholarships.

Impact of Standardized Testing

Much has been written in both academia and the media about the negative impact of standardized testing on access. The College Board and Educational Testing Service (ETS), its

test-taking company for the SAT and AP exams, are defended by a team of lawyers in over a million dollars' worth of legal battles annually, and regularly face criticism by stakeholders in the college admissions industry (Phelps, 2018). In these digital times, privacy has become a major concern for the public. Big data lies at the core of the business models of the most influential companies in the world, including Google, Amazon and Facebook. When it comes to harvesting of student data, The College Board has been criticized in the news and on higher education industry sites for selling names and contact data (PCSP, 2020). When students sign up with The College Board through its PSAT exam, the terms of service allow schools to consent for students, putting their name on a list where colleges and the military can market to them.

SAT and ACT exams are discussed as a genuine threat to equitable college access in many heated presentations and conversations in admissions-related conferences, including NACAC, CoSN, and ALAS. Such concerns tether to the racially uneven outcomes of the admissions process, largely attributed to the negative impact of what are seen as biased entrance requirements (Bloom, 2007; Hachey & McCallen, 2018; Knight et al., 2004).

Impact of Coloniality

Legitimizing higher education as accessible to students from all socioeconomic backgrounds requires an eco-system of diversity, equity, and inclusion. In the face of xenophobia-couched-as-nationalism, and resistance to ethnic inclusiveness among some demographics, such legitimization can prove elusive. The control of knowledge, which is impacted by coloniality (Ayala & Ramirez, 2019), has led to an information gap. This contributes to an opportunity gap, which is then further exacerbated by a social network gap. These and other gaps are disproportionately experienced by low-SES teens as they traverse the U.S. public education system. Economically speaking, the gap between funds needed for college

and the need-based or merit-based aid provided by federal or institutional grants and loans looms as a primary part of the problem. This study explored the degree to which, if at all, the rhetoric of access aligns with the lived experiences of students from marginalized backgrounds, with race/ethnicity and SES as primary lenses of interest. This will involve an investigation of modes of making meaning, ways of knowing, epistemological systems, and societal norms of those for whom marginalization has become systemically pervasive. By proposing initiatives in U.S. high schools that permit access to formerly privatized ways of accessing information, the study sought to increase equity and shared privilege, replacing systemic punishment of students lacking financial resources.

The relationship between models of reality and the reality itself has been well explored by semantic scholars, most notably Korzybski (1990). The “map” of language cannot fully denote the real “terrain” of the complex college access construct (1990). In consideration of the notion that “the word is not the thing” (1990, p. xxv), the narrative surrounding higher education was examined with a cautionary eye for the role of abstraction in undermining real-world change.

Any meaning assigned to the college access construct functions at the level of abstraction, and is therefore highly context-dependent. U.S. students may have various reactions to federal communications about college access, but political blame asserting dissatisfaction does little to support actionable improvements. To guard against confusing mental models of reality with the reality itself, this study considered linguistic limitations in capturing the “thing” of college access within the “territory” of the lived experiences of marginalized populations.

Definition of Terms

Appendix A contains a full Glossary of words and acronyms utilized within this study. Prominent definitions are offered here for epistemological clarification.

- *Access*—“Access refers to the ways in which educational institutions and policies ensure—or at least strive to ensure—that students have equal and equitable opportunities to take full advantage of their education” (EdGlossary, 2021, para. 1).
- *Affirmative action*—“A government remedy to the effects of long-standing discrimination against such groups and has consisted of policies, programs, and procedures that give limited preferences to minorities and women in job hiring, admission to institutions of higher education” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2021, para. 1).
- *Disadvantaged*—“Not having the benefits, such as enough money and a healthy social situation, that others have, and therefore having less opportunity to be successful” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021, para. 1).
- *Diversity*—The range of demographic differences that can either positively or negatively impact available college pathways. These include ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, and social class.
- *Equity*—“The term equity refers to the principle of *fairness*. While it is often used interchangeably with the related principle of *equality*, equity encompasses a wide variety of educational models, programs, and strategies that may be considered fair, but not necessarily equal” (EdGlossary, n.d., para. 1).
- *First generation*—Any student for whom neither their natural nor adoptive parents have completed a 4-year college or university degree.

- *Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP)*—A federal grant program intended to increase numbers of economically disadvantaged students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).
- *Inclusion*—The practice or policy of providing equitable access to opportunities and resources for students who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized.
- *Information asymmetry*—An economic principle relating to a transaction in which one party has relevant information that is not known by or available to the other party.
- *Low-SES*—Students and families from low socioeconomic status, as defined by qualifying for free or reduced lunch programs in the local public high school.
- *Marginalized*—Students who have historically been treated as insignificant or peripheral within educational systems. The outcome of social exclusion.
- *The College Board*—A highly profitable nonprofit that manages assessments, for which it charges fees for services to students, parents, colleges and universities in the areas of college planning, recruitment, admissions, and retention.
- *TRIO program*—A federally supported college access program, serving low income, first-generation college students in Upward Bound, Student Support Service, and Talent Search programs.
- *Underrepresented*—Demographic groups inadequately present in populations of successful college applicants and matriculants according to their percentage makeup within the larger populace.

Conceptual Framework

This study adapted the conceptual framework of the Hero's Journey, as defined by mythologist Campbell (1949) in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. This Hero's Journey framework follows an individual moving through a two-section sequence from Ordinary World to Special World and back again, as broken into three phases: Separation, Initiation, and Return. Using this framework, narrative elements of the process disadvantaged students must undergo as they aspire to college will follow an adaptation of Campbell's 3-phase, 17-stage roadmap. The construct of college access with this concept incorporated frequent reference in related research to the rhetoric of the American dream. Literature reviewed employed Campbell's structure as a template, in order to distill present understanding of the barriers faced by students from underserved populations, and to illuminate policy change needed to better contribute to equity.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study employs a postmodern paradigm, with fragmentalism as an interrelated scaffold.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism offers a set of rhetorical practices to guide this study's inquiries. In investigating one set of concepts, postmodernism calls into question and destabilizes another (Browning, 2000). For example, firm ideas prior to applying this theoretical lens to college access as a construct may have included the assumption of consistent meaning for constructs like presence, historical progress, identity, and epistemic certainty (Philosophy, 2021). Meaning was considered unified until the term postmodernism first entered the philosophical lexicon in 1979, with the publication of *The Postmodern Condition* by Jean-François Lyotard (Woodward, 2009). Competing *grand narratives*—i.e., capitalism versus socialism, or in this case access versus

barriers—break down when constituent fragments are carefully assessed based upon beliefs, narratives, and their undergirding value systems.

Although form—that is, the structure of language—and content can be frequently fused in the minds of those giving and receiving communication, the postmodernist view is that these are functions of one another (Latta, 2019). With an anti-essentialist lens, all knowledge can be reduced to a relationship between the known and the knower, and this becomes framed into meaning, mental concepts, ideas, and other linguistic formulations. The observer-observed structure means communicators must question the essence of things summoned by the words they use.

While not all philosophers agree with such analytical breakdowns (Norby, 2014), these analyses offer a way to dissect meaning from often confused or conflated ideas, e.g., college eligibility versus college readiness as delineated by thought leaders in the access space including Conley (2008, 2010, 2018). When a U.S. President or Secretary of Education uses the phrase college access, it conjures one set of meanings for privileged populations and another based on the lived experiences of those from more disadvantaged, marginalized backgrounds.

In the construct of college access in the U.S., a postmodernist approach underscores the tension in how this construct creates divergence between how students experiencing “belonging” or “not belonging.” Foundational to Derrida’s deconstructionist thinking, a central inquiry of the impact of global university systems, particularly those in Europe, questioned the real-life ramifications of distance and proximity to what may be termed orthodox academia (Biesta, 2005). Like numerous U.S.-based philosophers (DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009; McDonnell, 2005; Ogbu & Simons, 1998) Derrida challenged the purpose and function of the university, with contextual analysis in terms of globalization. The advent of so-called late capitalism can be seen

within higher education context as a readjustment of economic market realities, intensified concurrent to the commodification and commercialization of higher learning (Shumar, 1997).

Although Derridean philosophy questions the existence of meaning as derived from words at all (Smith, 2006), other postmodern approaches including the one in this study allow for degrees of meaning when assessing deconstruction of constructs. To that end, postmodernism will be related herein to the theoretical framework of fragmentalism.

Fragmentalism

In the beginning of the 20th century, William James coined the terms fragmentation and disconnection as rhetorical devices. He envisioned a method that systematically focused on each small part of a dilemma in isolation in order to lead to a deeper understanding. He and other fragmentalists, such as Stewart (1997), “carved the universe up...until they reached such a fine level of subdivision that they could no longer observe the pieces directly” (p. 198).

Research in the philosophy of language leveraging fragmentalism centers around psychological implications. As one example of such principles the argument asserts that “if *S* knows that *P*, then *S* knows that *S* knows that *P*” (Greco, 2015, p. 656). Whereas the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 of this study revealed a tendency toward linear determinism as U.S. presidents communicated about college access, alternate ways to conceptualize moving a student from point A (their high school years) to point B (their matriculation to college) are possible with a more nuanced approach. Fragmentalism invites such possibility.

Due to class-constrained perceptions of student challenges, the ability for upper-class leaders to foresee, evaluate, and strategize what is needed by students from less advantaged backgrounds has been marked by limitations (Duncheon & Relles, 2019). This has implications culturally, economically, and racially. A fragmentalist approach in the context of this study

considers that U.S. presidents may have both implicit and explicit beliefs. These, as revealed in their communications, may at times contain ambiguities, opacity, and equivocations. These communications contribute to public perceptions about how students from low-SES backgrounds think about, approach, and experience postsecondary aspiration.

Fragmentalism has been defined as the belief that knowledge results from an accrument of smaller facts or truths. In looking at distinct parts of the U.S. higher education system, a future assessment may seek to define the mechanism by which each component part of the fragmented construct of college access in the U.S. combines to produce current policy. Since fragmentalism purports that the world consists of individual and independent objects, the term implies that only through the assessment of component pieces can any whole be known. Ironically, as popular as the term holistic has become in public discourse about college admissions criteria for students, the construct of college access itself stands in direct opposition to holistic interpretation.

Examples of Recent Stakes. One example of the real-life consequences of this growing gap can be seen in the frustration of students of color in navigating economic limitations and distress erupting throughout the Black Lives Matter zeitgeist. The murder on May 25, 2020 of George Floyd, an African-American man who had attended Texas A&M college but dropped out by the end of sophomore year due to economic factors, sent shockwaves across the globe.

The fact that his death was video recorded and showed him literally under the knee of a white police officer Derek Chauvin, who had earned a bachelor's degree in law enforcement, underscored both racial and socioeconomic tectonic plates shifting below the surface of American society. Floyd's personal road to redemption from being a man formerly convicted of theft to a rehabilitated father of five trying to piece together the economic puzzle of his life was well-documented. Having led his high school football team to championships, and earned a

basketball scholarship, Floyd clearly believed that college mattered, but the terrain he had to journey from his socioeconomic station proved a bridge too far to cross. Dreams like his and those of others have proven to be unattainable, or as Langston Hughes poetically wrote, “deferred” (Hughes, 1951, p. 71).

Another example can be seen in the 2020-21 pandemic. With disproportionate percentages of noncollege graduates unable to keep their residences or buy food during the economic crisis sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic, not only did the dream of attending a higher education institution become harder to achieve, but even the ability to access Wi-Fi on reliable digital devices was disproportionately distributed. Non-college graduates were more exposed to health hazards because they were more likely to live in crowded situations with multiple family members or roommates, more likely to work in job sectors that were closed such as restaurants and retail, and less likely to have adequate health insurance to cover costs for treatment if they did get sick.

Meanwhile, a deep suspicion of higher education as an ivory tower bastion for liberals was underscored in the media narrative surrounding the Capital insurrection in January 2021. Accusations of perceived elitism among college graduates pervaded the sites of several of the contributing groups, from QAnon to the Proud Boys (Bodner et al., 2020). Pragmatically speaking, the etymological and linguistic discussion of this study matters because words have impact. The wrong words can harm, and the right words used wrongly can hurt just as much.

Limitations

Circumstances not under the researcher’s control could impact interpretation of these findings. Unforeseeable changes in U.S. policy, funding, and/or regulations connected to higher education and its stakeholders could impact the relevance of this study. Due to the use of

Quantitative Ethnography and Epistemic Network Analysis, there were methodological limits. Postmodernism and fragmentalism were not the sole theoretical perspectives that could have been applied to the data collected. Because this was a federal-level study, access to some resources were challenging. Although gatekeepers with regulatory limitations as seen in emails included in Appendix B of this study sometimes impeded direct access to relevant documents, every reasonable effort was made to secure an fully exhaustive set of communications for inclusion in the research.

Delimitations

The time frame of this study addressed only communications from January 20, 2009 to October 15, 2021. The number of samples extended to include all oral or written communications, whether conveyed in traditional or digital form, using the phrase “college access” or any of its commonly used related phrases, including but not limited to “higher education access,” “college readiness,” and “post-graduation success.” Only presidential communications from the U.S. were included.

Assumptions

The researcher assumed that the published representations of the communications from 2009-2021 on government websites were accurate. The study took for granted that sufficient funding exists within federal, state, and district budgets to address the U.S. access dilemma within the public education system in a targeted, effective manner. It assumes that the weight of the work should not fall to individuals (parents, students), or to for-profit companies, or to nonprofit institutions. The central assumption is that the system requires repair from the top down, and that by defining and wrangling discourse at the level of presidential communications, policy and procedures may follow to improve the central problem explored in this study.

Positionality

In order to eliminate as much bias as possible, this section will share why this work matters to the researcher. First person phrasing will be used for clarity purposes. I believe every student, regardless of socioeconomic background, deserves to be confident and competent as they aspire for college admissions, but I have seen firsthand that this is not always the case. I am a first-generation student. I am also White, which denotes a level of privilege I acknowledge is not offset by the following recitations. Neither of my parents, nor any of their parents attained a college degree. My father's family traces its roots back to Appalachia, dirt floors, and deep poverty. I have a personal interest in helping to solve the problem of increasing equitable access, and know that this need is experienced across all racial and ethnic lines.

I have written two books since 2013 on the topic of college admissions (*SWAT Team Tactics for Getting Your Teen Into College* and *4 Keys to College Admissions Success*) to help parents who do not know how to help their sons and daughters. Having accrued over 20 years in the field as a practitioner in college admissions field, starting with my work in 1996 as a high school English teacher, I make my living as an admissions consultant. My awareness of the need for a solution in public schools led me to found a start-up company and raise \$1.5M of funding for a technology platform piloted from 2015 to 2019 in fifty public high schools in seven states. Based upon observations of specific skills and supports lacking for disadvantaged students, my staff and I came to the conclusion that key outcomes needing to be addressed included a four-part curriculum that was named GATE (“G”- Grades, “A” - Applications, “T” – Testing, and “E” - Essays). This interactive, video-driven series of trainings followed the step-by-step process I have used since 2015 to support student outcomes.

As a critical theorist, I am committed to keeping an open mind as I explore both the current paradigm and a new vision for increased equity among all students. I recognize that my academic approach must maintain rigorous standards in order to effectively serve students. For the purposes of this study, I bracketed and suspended my personal perspectives in order to evaluate the facts. That is: I sought to assess access at its axis.

Organization of the Study

This study was organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the topic, conceptual and theoretical frameworks, and RQs. Chapter 2 reviewed relevant literature pertaining to the topic. Chapter 3 introduced the methodology by which the study conducted its discourse analysis. This analysis reviewed all U.S. presidential communications referencing the phrase “college access” or its approved synonyms, and included written and spoken statements starting with the first day of the Obama presidency, January 20, 2009. The qualitative research of those communications was rendered quantitatively using Epistemic Network Analysis (ENA). This analysis tool led to a Quantitative Ethnography that clarified how various words, phrases, and constructs have contributed to the current interpretations of meaning. In Chapter 4 the researcher analyzed data, some of which was in the form of graphs created using ENA, with accompanying explanations for interpretation. In Chapter 5 the researcher analyzed the data collected in Chapter 4, drew inferences, made recommendations, and proposed potential future research.

Chapter Summary

This study examined the linguistic construct of college access, with its focus on U.S. pathways for underserved students. Using original spoken and/or written research documents from U.S. presidents from 2009-2021, the analysis sought to reveal assumptions below the surface of language. The researcher’s objective was to clarify what was said or written, and what

remains unspoken, about notions of upward mobility through the objective of obtaining a 4-year college or university degree for those in the U.S. public education system.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter Overview

This chapter provides a review of literature examining aspects of the experience of disadvantaged high school students in the college admissions process in the U.S. today. It begins with context and a brief history of the evolution of the construct of college access and then assesses students' lived experiences, thematically conceptualized as narrative. Because significant parallels to the construct of the American dream of higher education are noted, the researcher structures this by adapting Campbell's (1949) conceptual framework. Monomyth, also known as the Hero's Journey. Analysis seeks to interweave a metaphoric understanding of the processes disadvantaged students must undertake during college aspiration with practical facts and data.

Context

The purpose of this quantitative ethnographic study was to investigate U.S. presidential communication choices regarding college access. The overarching RQ asked: How did U.S. presidents from 2009-2021 communicate a national narrative on the construct of college access? This primary RQ broke into one SQ: What observable trends appeared across time in such communications may have impacted social mobility for students from underserved populations?

Conceptual Framework

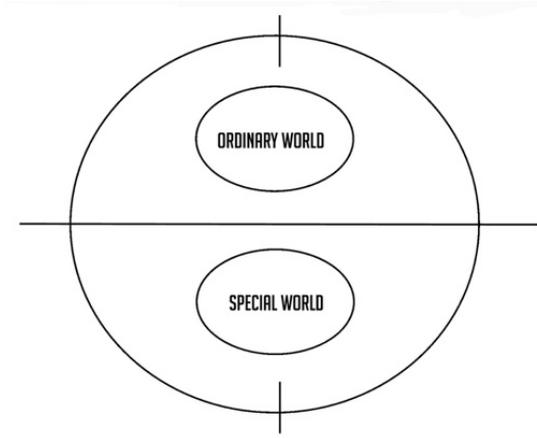
As a conceptual framework, the Hero's Journey, as defined by Campbell (1949) in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, was utilized to organize narrative elements connecting college access with its often-coinciding construct, the American dream. The purpose in connecting these two modes was to present insights into (a) what underserved students presently believed they must do to aspire to higher education immediately after high school, and (b) where policy—and

more particularly funding—may have fallen short of providing necessary support to move all populations along that pathway. An introduction to discourse analysis as pertains to college access as a construct precedes the 17-stage analysis here, in order to frame the study’s research. It will be more deeply investigated in chapters 3, 4, and 5.

This Hero’s Journey conceptual framework introduces a broad overview of an individual moving through a two-section sequence from Ordinary World to Special World and back again, as seen in Figure 3. For the purposes of this study, the Ordinary World is defined as the home and community from which a U.S. high school student hails. Home as a concept in this study incorporates multiple aspects of the origins of the student’s lived experience thus far, including but not limited to their geographical location (Lareau, 2011), socioeconomic level (La Rosa et al., 2006), race (Mickelson, 1990), language (Rendon, 1992), gender (Nieto, 1992), and level of parental education attainment (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008). Each of these demographic aspects contribute to both the likelihood of aspiration and the odds of completing a 4-year degree following high school graduation. As the student begins their trek from home, they embark as seen in Figure 3, beginning at 12 o’clock counter-clockwise from the Ordinary World toward the central line delineating the Special World and eventually—if they succeed—back around again. The stakes, requirements, impediments, and potential benefits of moving from this starting point through all aspects of the college access journey constituted the full circle investigation of this literature review. After a brief introduction to the college access construct, a deeper analysis weaving that within the Campbell (1949) framework follows.

Figure 3

Broad Introduction to the Hero's Journey in Two Stages



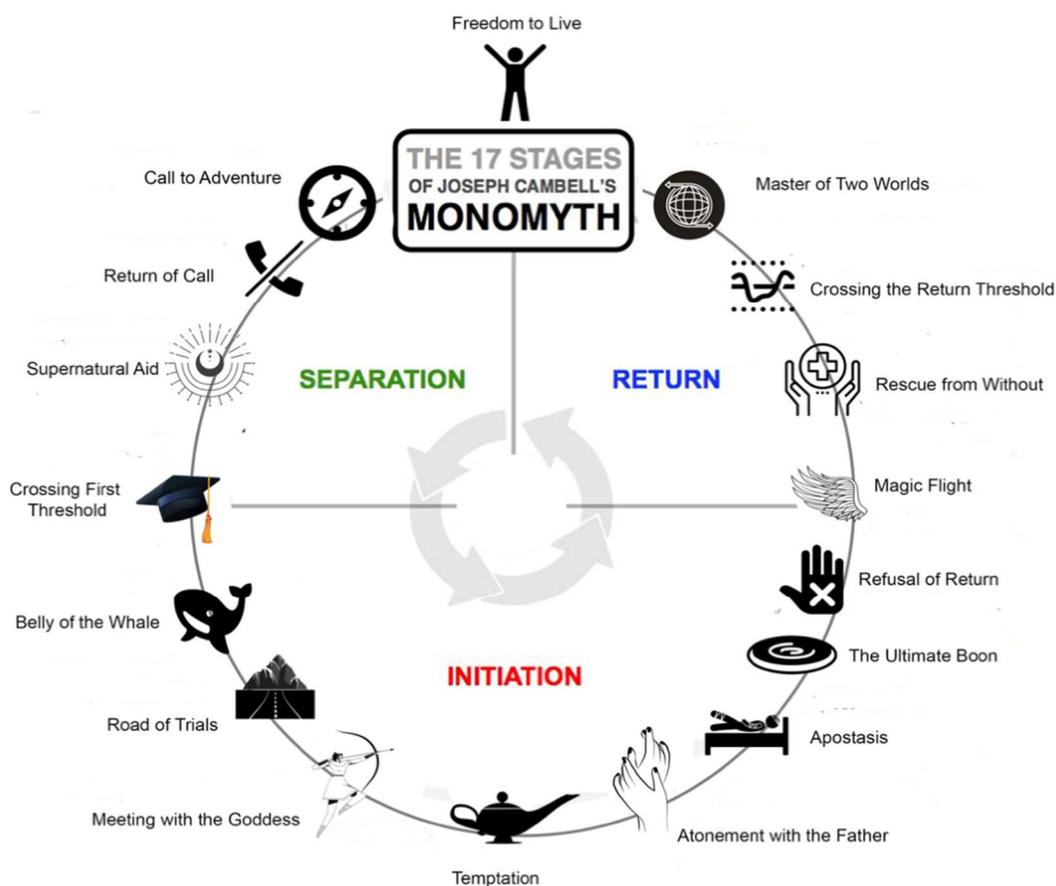
Note. From *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, by J. Campbell & Joseph Campbell Foundation, 1949. Copyright 2018 by R. P. Phelps. Reprinted with permission.

The Monomyth, Adapted

Mythologist, professor, author, and philosopher Campbell identified a 17-stage narrative pattern in 1949 that he termed the Monomyth (Campbell, 2008). In the structure he outlined, the Hero must travel from their ordinary world into an unfamiliar place of challenges and initiation. Supernatural forces and key players along the way are required to support victory. Before the Hero can return from adventure the unknown must be overcome. Campbell's use of the word Monomyth does not imply that only one Hero's journey exists, but rather indicates a way of seeing, with archetypal insights, the experience of what it means to be human.

Figure 4

Detail of The Hero's Journey in 17 Stages



Note. From *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, by J. Campbell & Joseph Campbell Foundation, 1949. Copyright The Joseph Campbell Foundation.

For the purposes of helping to assess communication in presidential communication about the construct of college access, this chapter will analyze related research by breaking components of the student's journey into each of Campbell's 17 stages. Not coincidentally, many of these components connect to what is commonly called the American dream (Hochschild, 1996), with numerous references about them in presidential communications to be shared later in this study.

Each stage comprises a distinct portion of the pattern, in what Lévi-Strauss called mythemes. Mythemes are subset elements of larger narrative structures (Lévi-Strauss, 2008). The mythemes pertaining to this study can be bucketed into three categories: departure, initiation, and return. Of note, international religious and cultural narratives across the globe have followed similar patterns. For example, the Biblical exegesis follows a three-stage story: mankind leaves (Departure from the Ordinary World of innocent ignorance to the tree of knowledge), Initiation (revelment of vulnerability upon eating the apple in what is sometimes termed the fall from grace), and the need to reconcile with God from the banishment of separation (the Return). This Departure-Initiation-Return triad represents a form of structural anthropology, connecting the experiences of the individual Hero to the broader backdrop within which they aspire.

Myths are primarily defined as oral traditions, whereas literary discourse examines the form and function of written text. In beginning this study, which analyzes presidential rhetoric, a pervasive, underpinning myth transcends oral tradition. As will be shown in the literature review that follows, prevailing representations by multiple stakeholders frequently place the role of higher education as inextricably and intrinsically interconnected with what it means to be American.

This myth of the American dream as presently defined has evolved to require no fewer than three disparate but interconnected strategic actions. Each of these three actions must align in order for students from low-SES backgrounds to aspire with confidence and effective actions. These three include (a) securing affordability, (b) bridging the opportunity gap, and (c) navigating the digital and concurrent cultural divides. Each of these elements will be interwoven within the larger analysis that follows of Campbell's 17 stages.

According to the Pew Research Center, most Americans believe the American dream—that is, the ideal that every U.S. citizen should have an equal opportunity to achieve success and prosperity through hard work, determination, and initiative—is within reach. Research shows that only 17% have said the American dream is “out of reach” for their family. While not all Americans believe that higher education is critical to upward mobility, 49% of Americans have agreed with the statement that “a four-year degree is worth the cost because people have a better chance to get a good job and earn more money over their lifetimes” (Dann, 2017). Nevertheless, in recent years increasing numbers of students, in particular those who are first-generation, debate whether they can afford to aspire (Smith, 2017).

An Anthropologic Approach

Lévi-Strauss (2008) made the claim that myth is language. He suggested that myth can be analyzed in similar ways as language—that is, by identical structuralist methods. This is where his work intersects that of Campbell, who stated that dream is personalized myth, and myth a depersonalized dream, emphasizing that both myth and dream are symbolic (Campbell, 2008). For both authors, a structuralist approach as relates to mythology provides a window through which social scientists can view epistemic phenomena and draw conclusions. In the context of this study, these phenomena will be comprised of aspects along the trajectory from ninth to 12th grades for low-SES students, as well as to, through, and after the journey of attaining a college degree. To begin this, an introduction to the construct of college access and the methodology of discourse analysis will situate this literature review.

College as Primary Rite of Passage. College has evolved in U.S. society to stand in place of other rites of passage across world cultures. In Australian aboriginal culture, for example, when a boy is ready to come of age, the men demand overt representations of the

passage into manhood, including circumcision without anesthesia (Campbell, 2003). Related rites of passage like Catholic confirmations with new names taken, Jewish bar/bat mitzvahs, and Hispanic quinceañera celebrations may assist some students across the perceived societal divide between adolescence and adulthood. In the U.S. today, the transition from the parent's home to living and studying at an institution of higher education has come to be most U.S. students' de facto rite (Lareau, 2011; Manzoni & Streib, 2019). These years that matter most, according to some thought leaders in the college access space (Tough, 2019), are nonetheless lacking in clearly marked milestones for students without the foundational social capital at home to navigate the process. This study investigated those among its central concerns.

The following 17 stages assess relevant literature through the lens of how this research impacts the Hero's Journey a U.S. public high school student must navigate. Some sections will be longer, and others shorter due to the particular emphasis of this study. Three overarching Phases (Departure, Initiation, and Return) will comprise the three larger categories of the journey.

Exploring the Construct of College Access in the U.S. Distribution of information regarding stakes and requirements of exactly how to transport oneself into the Special World of college matriculation are unevenly distributed (Carnavale & Rose, 2011; Carnevale & Rose, 2013). The sections that follow will incorporate global elements, including insights from Greek Mythology and other narrative constructs, which interweave in this literary analysis. Both micro-narratives and anti-narratives on the subject will be examined. The chapter will conclude by considering both omission and commission in terms of the communications of U.S. presidents. In commission, it will ask what messages and narratives students have received from them. In

omission, it will also make an inquiry into elements of the college access narrative that were omitted, withheld, or overlooked.

The size of the U.S. population in need of significant support to approach the college access challenge is quantified in Figure 5. Given the overall U.S. population, a disproportionate representation of students of color (e.g., Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska Native) is apparent. Spiraling student debt presents a central impediment. According to the Chief Program Officer at College Possible,

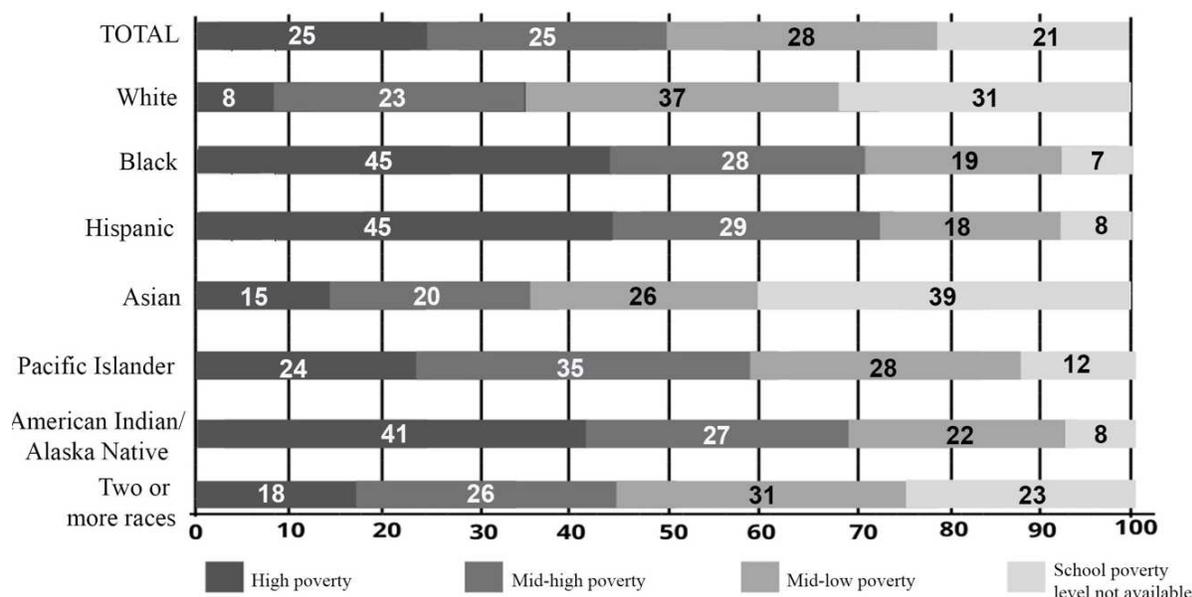
In the mid-2000s, I often said with confidence that if we did our job right, and our students followed our guidance, they could find a college pathway where finances did not have to be a barrier to success. A decade later, I can no longer say the same thing.

(DeBaun, 2018, p. 2)

With current cumulative student debt in the United States above the \$1.7 trillion-dollar mark, fiscal feasibility constitutes a major barrier often blocking the aspirational willingness required to apply to college.

Figure 5

Percentage of Public School Students Qualifying for Free or Reduced Lunch, by Racial and Ethnic Group



Note. From *The Condition of Education*, by J. L. Woodworth, 2017. Copyright: National Center for Education Statistics.

Completion Rates Without Adequate Mentorship. A National College Attainment Network (NCAN) report described the outcomes of students served by college access programs that leverage human specialists supporting student comprehension and action (Brown et al., 2016). Data from 24 college access programs were calculated, assessing enrollment and graduation rates for the high school classes of 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2013. Not surprisingly, students served by college success programs were found to “outperform expectations for college enrollment and completion, demonstrating that current national lower levels of postsecondary attainment for poor and minority students are not destiny” (Brown et al., 2016, p. 28). NCAN students showed a six-year college completion rate for the high school class of 2007 at 54.8%,

which approached the national rate for all high school graduates in that year, at 59.7%. These NCAN outcomes, while still acknowledging differentials in aspiration between low-SES and a broad spectrum of students across the national average, support the conclusion that college access and success programs can help to close the opportunity gap, paralleling Bandura's findings about how to foster self-efficacy.

Bandura's four principles by which students gain information to influence self-efficacy include: creating enactive mastery experiences, ensuring vicarious experiences, leveraging verbal persuasion, and creating physiological states by which learners can judge their ability to engage in the task at hand (Driscoll, 1994). In the case of live-counselor supports, however, the crux of the matter goes beyond mere effectiveness of support; the question becomes how to scale that to help over 15,000,000 public high students in the U.S. annually. Learning technologies have begun to offer a heightened sense of learner engagement through gamified teaching strategies. Badging and other digital rewards may be able help to generate what Bandura calls physiological responses when deployed. Post-COVID-19 pandemic, online solutions will no doubt continue to change the ways students engage and aspire, but further research is needed to quantify best practices.

Digital Solutions. As new college and career readiness solutions have begun to arise, district superintendents bear the ultimate responsibility to effectively provide what students require in order to be inspired to aspire; however, funding and efficacy supports from the states and federal government are needed. These professionals cannot operate autonomously. An average of at least half a dozen individuals at any district must sign off on digital solutions being put into place (Morrison et al., 2019). From CTOs and CIOs to heads of departments and even teachers' unions, it is challenging for innovation to reach the students it has been designed to

support. A determination must be made concerning whether this support will occur live, sometimes called between-the-bells. Finding that coveted time often proves problematic. After-school programs may seem to be a viable alternative, but that structure disqualifies the millions of students with economic disadvantages, who rely on making the bus to make it home, or have to rush to jobs and sibling care to help their families function.

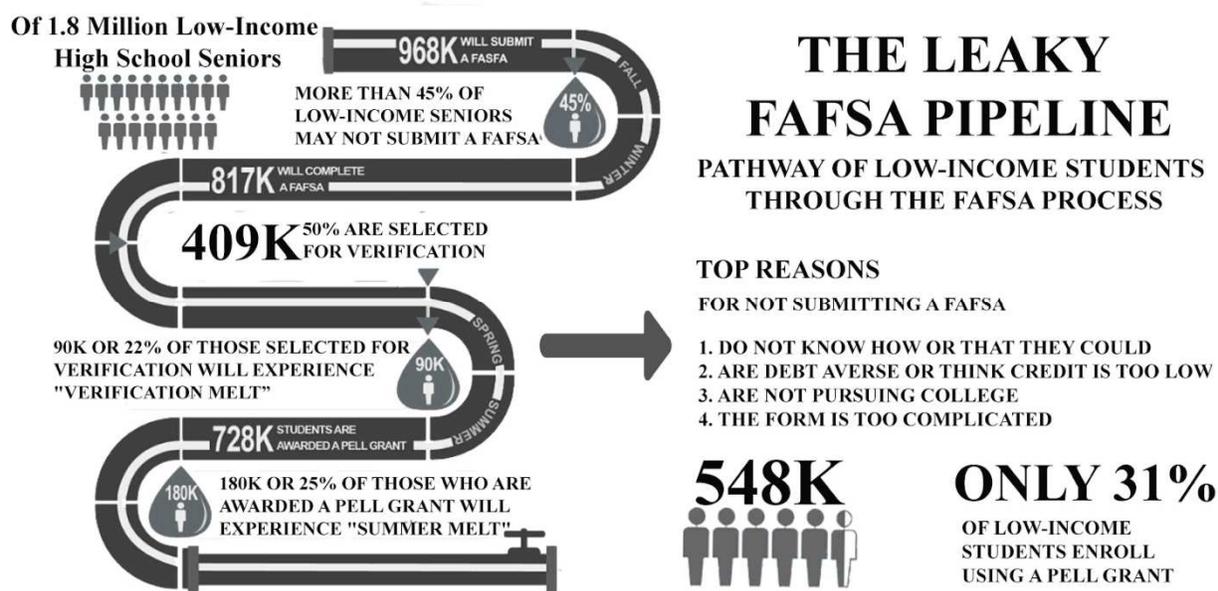
There is also a resistance to change and inherent territoriality of some stakeholders (Morrison et al., 2019). Counselors themselves, used to traditional ways of offering necessary but often piecemeal support in their busy days working for public districts, may rightly be concerned about educational technology attempting to augment or even replace their services. A hybrid model of in-person mentorship with a digital solution for scale may present a viable way forward, as has been adopted with online solutions like Naviance and Scior. In a “both/and” approach, disadvantaged students with time-constrained counselors can use those precious 38 minutes annually they average with their counselors (NACAC, 2018) to target desired outcomes with digital support as a central part of that equation. Whether those particular platforms or others sufficiently address college access objectives—meriting federal, state, or district funding—has yet to be fully established. The fact that such solutions are for-profit entities raises further questions about the role of money-making impacting students’ Hero’s Journeys, with uneven supports available to them based on their particular districts and schools.

The Role of Federal Student Aid. The FAFSA acts as a primary way millions of students each academic year access grants and loans for higher education. However, the FAFSA’s complexities have resulted in significant underutilization of federal aid. As seen in Figure 6, only 61 % of high school seniors complete the application, and many procrastinate timely submissions. This leaves \$24 billion in unclaimed federal aid. Many other students

initially file the application, but then do not persist to enroll at a institutions of higher education. With just 31 % of low-income students using the assistance of a Pell Grant to afford college, this issue disproportionately affects disadvantaged students.

Figure 6

The Leaky FAFSA Pipeline



Note. From *Infographic: The Leaky FAFSA Pipeline*, by B. DeBaun, 2017,

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Despite moderate improvements of FAFSA access due to the mobile app project launched in October 2018 by the Federal Student Aid Office at the U.S. Department of Education, more remains to be done by federal policy makers to increase access. These economic concerns, while central, do not begin to capture the broad array of challenges students from low-SES backgrounds must face as they approach the decision of whether to apply to college. Those myriad factors will be itemized in the research conveyed within this chapter. First, the

researcher's adaptation of Campbell's model within the context of college access is offered as an orientation to the literature in this section.

Examining the Concept of College Access

This study will analyze words and phrases in order to assess their euphemistic connections, metaphorical associations, and ideological implications. Etymology, context, structural usage, grammatical utilization, and historical context will comprise five categories guiding this study's analysis.

- A. Etymology: To approach literature in this arena, the etymology of the construct college access will first be addressed.
 - i. Etymology of the word college: The word college dates back to the late 14th century, with the Latin word collegium as its antecedent. Collegium came from the prefix *col-* meaning "together with" and the root word legare, meaning "to depute," "to send as an emissary," or "to choose" (Hoad, 1993, p. 100). This word described an organized association of men endowed with certain powers as a result of the proscribed pursuit of specific tract of education. Implicit in this definition was the establishment of two camps: those within the collegium, and those outside of it. The us versus them nature of the haves and the have-nots has been argued to lie at the root of much of the civil unrest related to higher education access by numerous researchers (Knight, 2003; Ogbu, 1990).
 - ii. Etymology of the word access: The origins of the word access date at the earliest to circa the early 17th century, several hundred years after the

constructs of university and then college appeared. Derived from the Latin *accessus*, the verb *accedere* denotes “to approach” (Hoad, 1993, p. 19).

- B. Context: Semantic considerations related to the combined construct of college access abound. Accessing college has become a key indicator of having reached a certain threshold of accomplishment—a sign of moving from blue- or grey-collar to white-collar readiness in the job market. The word college itself offers a germane starting point. In late Middle English circa the 14th century, the word college came into contextual usage meaning “partnership,” “community,” “society,” or “guild” (Hoad, 1993, p. 100).
- i. College as partnership: The unwritten social contract between students and the institutions of higher education they attend can be framed as partnerships, in that a synergistic relationship is created upon enrollment. The interdependence of college-needing-students and students-needing-college writ large, as well as more personal partnerships among mentors and professors with those enrollees speaks to this aspect of the meaning of the word. However, this meaning does not contain the full scope or implication of what individuals mean when using the word college.
 - ii. College as community: Any gathering of individual people can be said to create a community, whether at a gala or in a prison. Since entire towns and cities build their economic systems of interdependence with campuses—such as the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and other college towns accounting for the vast majority of local revenue—the word community is apt. With mascots and other commonalities like school colors breeding a sense of

togetherness, college-as-community is a truism, nonetheless one insufficient to capture the depth, breadth, and scope of what people mean by the word college.

- iii. College as society: Coming from mid-16th century, as seen in the French *société*, derived from the Latin *societas*, society implies companionship. Defining society as a group of people sharing social territory, this interpretation of the word college expands from the literal geography of community to an understanding that college incorporates cultural expectations. These expectancies comprise one of many hurdles for the uninitiated into upper levels of socioeconomic status. Economic and intellectual demands aside, this definition of college-as-society underscores the unwritten rules of engagement that stratify the haves and the have-nots in collegium today. Many of those hurdles will be outlined in the literature following these preliminary recitations.
- iv. College as guild: The construct of a guild is derived from late Old English as seen in Middle Low German and Middle Dutch. The word *gilde*, of Germanic origin, is related to the word *yield*, meaning to pay tribute, as connected to the German word *gelt*, which means money. College-as-guild captures part of the economic aspect seen today in higher education, in that dues are always paid by guild members, and those who do not or cannot pay are not able to participate. A guild, like college itself, is a private club with limited membership. Only invitees, especially those practitioners of particular trades or activities, need apply.

- C. **Structural Usage:** One way to assess structural usage of a word or phrase is to note synonyms employed for the same meaning. Synonyms for the word college that appear in research include association, institute, lyceum, organization, academy, seminary, and most commonly university. While each of these may denote a roughly equivalent construct, the connotations are as vast as the array of the schools themselves. A frequent lack of semantic clarity in written and oral communication muddles the matter. In order to approach increasing college access or other such rhetoric to be explored, these linguistic constructs require deconstruction and inquiry.
- D. **Grammatical Utilization:** In discourse analysis, the construction of sentences—for example active or passive construction, verb tenses, and the use of imperatives or questions—can reveal aspects of intended meaning.
- i. **Parts of speech:** Grammatical constructs to be measured in this study will include imperatives, questions, active versus passive construction, and a compare/contrast analysis of the use of “access” as noun versus “access” as a verb.
 - ii. **Structure:** Textual structure can be analyzed for how it creates emphasis or evolves toward a narrative. Structural constructs to be measured in this study will include use of emphases, framing of narratives, and a comparison of the use of a sociocultural stance versus a purely academic or literary stance in building rhetoric related to college access.
- E. **Historical usage:** The word university predates the word college in usage by over 100 years, tracing its origins back to circa 1250. Derived from the Latin word universus, university literally means “turned into one.” Related collegiate words like “varsity”

spring from the same root, connoting someone or something connected to the institution. Over time, in both the U.K. and the U.S. institutions known as colleges and universities have come to be seen as interchangeable and equivalent. A single university can contain more than a dozen schools, colleges, and seminaries, such as Columbia University, which is organized into twenty sub-entities—including four undergraduate and fifteen graduate schools. It would, however, be incorrect to assume that universities are always larger and more prestigious, so the semantics lack logic. There can be tremendous prestige for colleges (e.g. Dartmouth College, a member of the Ivy League) and overt scorn for particular categories of university, e.g. DeVry (Federal Trade Commission, 2014).

College Access and the Hero's Journey

Campbell's Hero's Journey provides a helpful framework with which to assess narrative. It can be seen in many of the most seminal novels taught in U.S. high schools. One such example, *The Great Gatsby* by American author F. Scott Fitzgerald, explores the potentially catastrophic outcomes when someone from low economic status aspires, like Icarus, upward. Ironically, millions of students encounter both Greek mythology about the melted wings of the ambitious Icarus and the death of the equally striving Jay Gatsby in 11th grade English classes, just as they are being encouraged to prepare for SAT or ACT exams to purportedly elevate their economic potential through higher education.

Dystopic Example. In what has been called the Great Gatsby Curve, a counter-American dream dynamic can be attributed in part to compounding intergenerational economic barriers as experienced among the poor (Sakamoto et al., 2014). In U.S. society, the rates of relative poverty in Title I high schools speaks to the pervasive level of income inequality when contrasted with

students attending private schools. The low intergenerational mobility can incapacitate low-income students who might otherwise become upwardly mobile. Through this psychological lens, poverty correlates with diminished psychological resources. These can impede the competitiveness of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, interrupting their achievement levels in an educational system built to sort, sift, and separate students into categories from special education and trade school tracks to all-AP and IB programs for those aspiring toward 4-year colleges. More on The Great Gatsby Curve appears later in this literature review.

Systemic Barriers to Entry. It is the system itself, not the lack of capacity of individual students, that requires addressing. Economic deprivation, starting in utero with compromised nutrition in many cases, accompanies the lived experience of disadvantaged students, and can skew future trajectories in a cycle of intergenerational poverty. The decrease of intergenerational social mobility has been correlated with an increase in income inequality since the 1990s (Chetty et al., 2014).

Metanarrative. America's metanarrative of the American dream, where anyone can work hard and successfully aspire upward in socioeconomic station, is as problematic as it is enduring. Similar to the complex construct of patriotism, it becomes challenging to describe American society without conceding to the anything-is-possible belief despite all evidence to the contrary for millions of disadvantaged students. Human beings are wired for narrative—these stories are a way to make sense of the world, to dispute temporality, and to understand the social context of language in a way that offers a satisfying evaluative conclusion (Campbell, 2008). From the happily ever after of fairytales to the low-SES student gets into all eight Ivy League schools stories that appear in national media every spring, the U.S. media and its readers love to tell and hear a coherent story. These narratives can provide a window into the process of identity

construction (Riessman, 1993). The cognitive dissonance between the U.S. as alleged and the U.S. as it actually exists comprises the center of the narrative problem. This is where epistemic akrasia can skew perceptions and under-serve those in need of more effective, sustainable communication and policy.

Epistemic Akrasia

According to the theory of fragmentation analysis, internal disconnects within an individual, between what is perceived and what is believed, often arise. This friction has a name: epistemic akrasia. This phenomenon has been described as a “state of conflict between beliefs formed by the linguistic and non-linguistic belief-formation systems” (Kearl, 2020, p. 2501). Epistemically akratic viewpoints lead to externalized questions about what is rational to believe given data existing outside of the rhetoric about a subject. In the case of college access, both sociocultural (Elliott, 2005) and literary (Clandinin, 2006) modes of discourse impact and impede equity. These two types of narrative stances will be further explored.

Sociocultural Stance. Broad cultural narratives such as college-for-all and higher-education-as-panacea influence individual experience. The stories people tell—whether akratic or not—impact both policy and practice, from high schools and universities to nonprofits and the federal government. The ways these cultural narratives function as either directive, resource, or reproach informs a shared commonality that individuals leverage to try to improve their lives.

Literary Stance. This approach, when integrated into the sociocultural approach above, focuses the discourse in the ways that individuals describe experiences. As an example, former First Lady Michelle Obama tells of her Chicago public high school guidance counselor discouraging her aspirations. “‘I’m not sure,’ she said, giving me a perfunctory, patronizing smile, ‘that you’re Princeton material’” (Obama, 2021, p. 66) she reports in her autobiography.

When Michelle Obama later not only attended the Ivy League school but flourished, she was able to look back and reflect in her autobiography that she had shown her counselor but concedes that perhaps she had really only needed to show herself. While this narrative offers a satisfying jolt of what is possible for students being racially profiled or otherwise underestimated, the prevailing experiences of millions of other students of color from urban neighborhoods are less encouraging (Bloom, 2007; Knight et al., 2004; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000).

The images and metaphors that appear in college-related narratives in the U.S. can hold powerful sway in perceptions driving policy. The notion of underserved students as archetypal underdogs battling an unfair system thereby takes on mythical proportion. Campbell's Hero's Journey describes it like this: the Hero, a protagonist in his or her own story, must leave the Ordinary World (low socioeconomic status, possibly coupled with being from a racial/ethnic minority and/or being first-generation) to encounter obstacles, obtain a mentor, find an elixir, and return changed forevermore (Campbell, 2003). Character arcs may vary, as may the settings, but the plotline remains the same. Allegorically speaking, either David slays Goliath and gets a lucrative degree, or he does not. The system itself looms as the antagonist of the college access story.

Phase 1: Departure

Call to Adventure

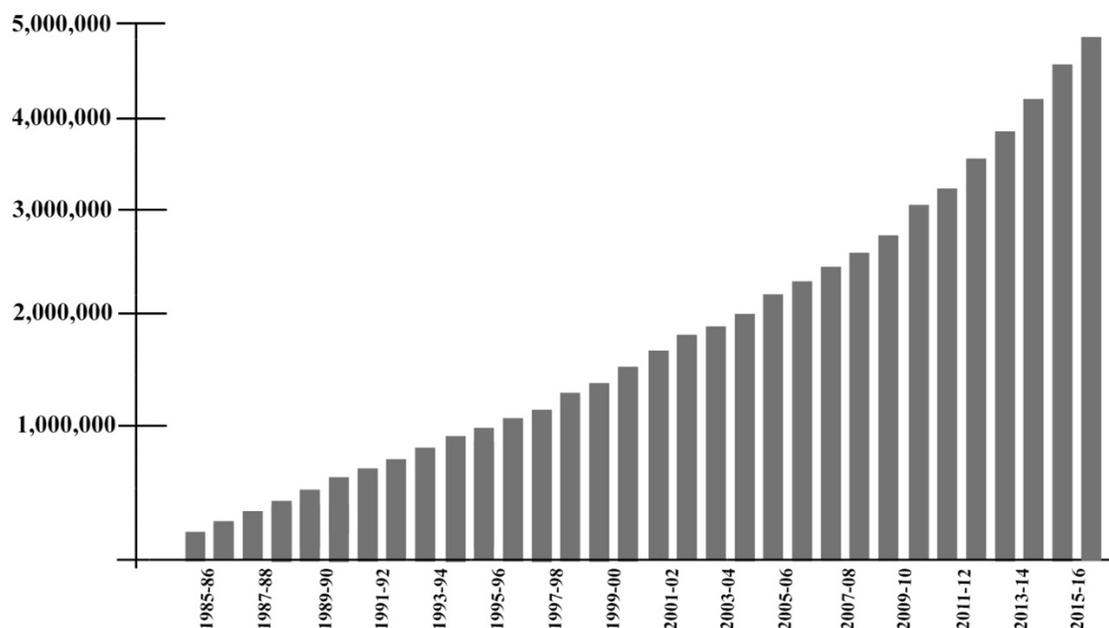
According to Campbell (1949) the first stage is where the individual is “drawn into a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood” (p. 42). In the context of the college admissions journey, the herald of this summoning to adventure is often a guidance counselor, introducing the high school student to not only the admissions process for higher education but also its intrinsic value. As represented in mystic literature, the Call to Adventure stage has been

described as an invitation to die to the old self in order to awaken anew. This call raises the curtain on a mysterious transitional time, where the psyche becomes ripe for a new way of seeing the world.

As a new stage in the lived experience of the teen, this biographical shift can be accompanied by both curiosity and resistance. Sacrificing the familiar in order to embrace the unknown requires a leap of faith. Complicating matters, although many students do not realize it, the starting gun in the race to higher education starts much earlier than the typical 11th grade conversations where college as a pathway are discussed in public high school counseling offices (Conley, 2010). Course rigor and selection of the right classes in the optimal sequence begins the separating into tiers of students. For those who are well-advised, starting both Algebra 1 (or 1a) and their first year of foreign language no later than 7th grade positions them to complete a series of college preparatory classes culminating in AP Calculus BC and AP Spanish, AP French, AP Latin, AP German, AP Chinese, AP Italian, or AP Japanese. Of course not all high schools offer such a broad array of class options, and even fewer public middle schools have foundational courses like these (McDonough, 2004). In this way, the private school student, whose parents can often afford to annually pay tens of thousands of dollars for the privilege, lunges out ahead of the public school student who does not even realize the race has begun (Kretchmar & Farmer, 2013). Figure 7 demonstrates the trend of increasing awareness of course rigor.

Figure 7

Number of AP Exams Taken Annually 1985–2016



Note. From “Does College Board Deserve Public Subsidies?” by R. P. Phelps, 2018,

Nonpartisan Education Review 14(7), 1–45

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Students from all socioeconomic levels who apply typically submit applications to more colleges than ever, thanks to ease of the Common App and other online modes of communication, but low-SES students do not aspire in proportionate numbers as their wealthier peers (Paulsen & John, 2002). One increasingly popular strategy for financially privileged students to increase their chances of admission involves Early Decision (“ED”)—with higher admit rates than Regular Decision (“RD”) applications. The fact that financial aid becomes less likely in binding ED Agreements means less to these students than their lower-SES peers, who are more reliant on educators to guide them. Even as these counselors do so, the tight kinship

within disadvantaged families has been shown by research to sometimes counter-indicate compliance with what is recommended—with a notable fundamental resistance to submissiveness displayed by low-SES parents toward educators (Lareau, 2011).

Whether a student from an underserved population will pursue college aspiration involves an amalgamation of numerous factors; academic performance is only one component. Researchers in the college access space have worked to identify key transitional skills required to undertake the secondary-to-postsecondary transition. This complex, multidimensional process requires layers of organization according to one framework called the Four Keys to College Readiness (Conley, 2018). The scope of issues students must navigate include five primary potential barriers: contextual, procedural, financial, cultural, and personal.

Contextual Barriers. Contextual matters involve students' perceptions of their motivations to apply to college and what they think are realistic options. Applying to college is more than a one-and-done process. It requires building a list of multiple schools to which students will apply. How can a teen with low social capital at home know about such options? How are overworked public school counselors with 482 students on their rosters supposed to help each one? Even software and artificial intelligence solutions have their limitations, although in recent years educational technology has begun offering solutions to support without a random web search approach using free computers in public libraries being the last resort for those with limited means (King & South, 2017).

Procedural Barriers. Procedural barriers relate to the how-to of the applications process. Because this involves complex, often opaque procedures, those with privilege often avail themselves of private consultants known as IECs (Independent Educational Consultants). These professionals sometimes charge anywhere from a few hundred to 1,000 U.S. dollars per hour to

guide students through the labyrinthine sequence of steps, ensuring their clients require less personal grit and persistence than what is required from those with low-SES backgrounds (Paulsen & John, 2002). Disadvantaged students cannot fund private support. Once they identify where they may want to attend, they still need to traverse the information gap currently contributing to the wide divide between the haves and the have-nots in U.S. society (Chetty et al., 2020). Gaining admission to a right-fit institution requires multiple steps. Without a guide holding both compass and map, completing all necessities in a timely manner becomes extremely challenging. In the context of the Hero's Journey, without Supernatural Aid, this challenge often proves too much, even for highly intelligent and otherwise viable college candidates. The consequent loss of human capital each year brings negative economic and societal impacts for the U.S. at large (Mickelson, 1990; Richardson Jr & Skinner, 1992).

Financial Barriers. The Call to Adventure is frequently interrupted by economic limiters. Students sometimes do not want to even try to determine whether they can afford their desired postsecondary option—they may simply assume they are not able to attend (Oakes, 2022; Walpole, 2003). Detailed understanding of costs can elude parents and students for whom layered and nuanced fiscal planning is unfamiliar (Mumper, 1996). This can include not only tuition, but understanding the complex rules for grants, loans, interest rates, student fees, housing, and food plans on campus. While public high schools might offer a one-off financial aid event with FAFSA training, that is only one of many steps actually needed to confidently answer the call to the adventure of college. For families already dealing with food insecurity, housing insecurity, parents working multiple jobs, and numerous siblings all also needing basic necessities, financial concerns often comprise an insurmountable hurdle that first-generation and other low-SES students cannot surmount (Duncheon & Relles, 2019).

Student Debt Barriers. As districts struggle to navigate financial trials, U.S. student debt has reached over \$1.7 trillion and grows each day. One explanation for the tendency of students to over-borrow connects to the question of when a teen becomes an adult (Lareau, 2011). For example, the voting age is 18, but renting a car or hotel room often requires individuals to be older. Because the Expected Family Contribution (EFC) is determined by the federal government after parents and students together fill out the FAFSA, and because the parents' tax records are used as the reference, the federal government effectively communicates that those applying to college are not independent adults. Yet, most students have reached 18 years of age by the time they begin financing their first year of college, and the debt they carry is largely their own to bear, especially for those from low-income communities, schools, and families (La Rosa et al., 2006). Still, every year millions of college-bound aspirants assume debt that cannot be expunged even in bankruptcy. Many or most of those have no idea how the financial aid maze really works (Knight et al., 2004). The U.S. government's own student aid office has even codified, as seen in Figure 8, five areas of confusion leading to nine types of barriers disproportionately impacting students of color and others from underserved populations.

Figure 8*Top Nine Pain Points for Federal Student Loan Borrowers*

Area	Top borrower pain points
Repayment planning and application	1. I don't have the information I need to select the right repayment option 2. I have difficulty navigating the repayment application and recertification process
Making payments	3. I don't understand or agree with what I owe 4. I have difficulty with the payment process
Delinquency and default	5. I don't know how to avoid or get out of delinquency / default
Issue resolution	6. I found an issue with my account and it was difficult to fix 7. I always have trouble accessing my account
Cross-cutting	8. Many of the communications I receive are unclear and hard to understand 9. I received inaccurate or inconsistent information from my servicer

Note. From “Top Nine Pain Points for Federal Student Loan Borrowers,” Federal Student Aid Office, a Division of the U.S. Department of Education, 2018, (http://www.webcastregister.live/2018fsatc_records/viewv2/1813/).

Colleges are not required to treat incoming freshman as adults, and they often do not, except when it comes to getting paid (Perna, 2000). Work-study and other repayment methods often prove insufficient. This need gap frightens away many would-be applicants entirely. While over 90% of high school students say at some point that they want to go to college (Adelman, 2002; Rosenbaum, 2001) it is more rare for them to actually enroll or persist to graduation. Interconnecting realities for college-bound students constitute key barriers, especially their limited perspective regarding how to attain and sustain college financial aid (McDonough, 2005; Roderick et al., 2008).

Disadvantaged students lack systematized opportunities to receive requisite guidance (Knight et al., 2004; McDonough, 2004). The increasingly complex admissions process exacerbates multiple hurdles encountered along the way (Selingo, 2013). Whereas teens from

wealthier families often enjoy significant support from parents or private counselors, the parents of first-generation college-bound students do not know what they do not know. Although they may encourage college application, they often lack what's needed to help make that a reality—including time, information, and resources needed to guide them through many particulars of the process (Bloom, 2007; Kirst & Venezia, 2004).

Cultural Barriers. The admissions process requires a labyrinthine series of steps to complete. The time it takes is significant, often a year or more. Confusion frequently results when underserved students feel alienated by words they do not know and assumptions on forms that do not match their lived experience, such as when they've been raised by grandparents or are in foster care. These disconnects can make them feel that college is not designed for them (Bloom, 2007). Furthermore, forms like the FAFSA and CSS Profile include questions about things like mortgages, employment, investments, and highest parental education achieved. Since the cultural transition can be just as challenging as academic challenges, adapting to new behavioral norms is often necessary. Some students become self-consciousness and may even opt-out of aspiring toward higher education at all (Avery & Kane, 2004; La Rosa et al., 2006). College culture, and fear of not fitting in, constitutes an emotional and psychological hurdle for many. This can include not only social communications but basic elements surrounding the college experience (Walpole, 2003). Examples include not having clothing to allow disadvantaged students to blend in with peers, but also lacking understanding of simple matters more privileged students take for granted, such as going out for expensive, unfamiliar cuisine, or being able to afford tickets to pricey athletic, musical, or theatrical events.

Personal Barriers. The fifth and final potential barrier examined here, personal issues, focuses upon whether students have had the opportunity to develop the skillset of self-advocacy

within an institutional environment. The complexities of colleges and universities as ecosystems can make it easy for students, in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to become overwhelmed and disoriented (Bloom, 2008; Henry, 1995). Speaking up for oneself with a broad range of adults can intimidate these young adults. Assertiveness with financial aid staff, professors, academic advisors, and others can stand in sharp contrast to norms of their lived experience, where people in positions of authority are deferred to and obeyed no matter what (McDonough, 1998).

Taken as a group, these five potential barriers to college access can certainly impede student willingness to aspire. Any one of them, financial concerns most particularly, can offer sufficient friction to decline answering the Call to Adventure. Whether or not they lack sufficient support, many students from underserved populations face these challenges in such a way that propels them to progress to the second phase of Campbell's Hero's Journey: the Refusal of the Call.

Refusal of the Call

According to Campbell (1949), this stage is where the individual turns their ear to other interests, "converting the adventure into its negative" (p. 49) where the subject becomes walled in, lacking "significant affirmative action" (p. 49) to serve their own best interest by doing what they perceive to be best. The maintenance of fealty to values previously considered sacred are held firm, with resistance to the evolution that might otherwise call them to an adventure with the potential to make them more secure emotionally, psychologically, physically, and financially. What Campbell (1949) calls the "machinery of the miracle" (p. 56) needed to move the Hero from stasis to momentum constitutes the central problem of this phase.

In the context of the college access dilemma, government data show that millions of underserved students get to stage two of the Hero's Journey and stop. They hear about college, consider it, and then disregard it as a viable pathway for them (Corwin et al., 2020; Engle & Lynch, 2009). The barriers are perceived to be too high to navigate. This has been expressed in the arts throughout the last century in film, theatre, and literature. Langston Hughes, an impactful poet of the Harlem Renaissance, wrote the following poem in 1951. Ironically, it is studied in public high school classrooms by students across all socioeconomic strata during American Literature coursework.

Harlem

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

(Hughes, 1951, p. 71)

Although this poem was not specifically addressing college access, its relevance to students of color offers a particularly germane perspective. The sequence of five similes about a dream placed on hold crescendos in an overarching metaphor comparing the cumulative tension of an unattainable vision to a bomb. The poet's italics underscore the intended meaning.

In the U.S., reaching for the American dream comes with a heavy price tag for those unable to attain it (Oakes, 2005). In recent years, the explosion of the Black Lives Matter movement, the anti-Asian racism movement, and the pro-Dreamers Act contingency for

undocumented Latino/a students all speak to the explosive nature of minority frustration with impeded pathways (Chetty et al., 2020; Duncheon & Relles, 2019). These include all types of racist barriers to full participation within U.S. society, within which the desire for college access and other aspirations play a role. Myriad ways forward have been implemented by numerous nonprofits supporting college readiness for specific sub-demographics (Bloom, 2007; Bloom, 2008). School districts have also incorporated locally sourced support for career and technical education (CTE) as an alternative pathway so marginalized students are not left entirely behind (Lafer, 2002). Research reports that military pathways have also long attracted low-SES students according to high school counselors. One counselor stated, “They listen to the military recruiters. They hear them saying ‘We have money for college’ and so they’ll jump on it” (McDonough & Calderone, 2006, p. 1710). These and other methods have arisen in the context of an often-necessary refusal of the call, or alongside an answering of the call with caveats and supports in place to offset what is not readily made available within public secondary education. Namely, this means a transparent and timely college access support between the bells of the school day for 100% of students so that they can become confident in knowing they can afford to aspire.

Two central factors impacting the college access ecosystem of center on the roles of community colleges and the SAT and ACT entrance exams.

The Role of Community Colleges. The U.S.’s highest volume pathway offered to address the U.S. college access dilemma has evolved to center on its network of community colleges, which comprise the largest sector of postsecondary education. More than 40 % of all undergraduates have enrolled in community colleges (Horn et al., 2006), but just 19% of community college students typically transfer from their initial institution within 3 years of enrolling. While this number is conservative, it becomes even lower when considering that only

11% transfer to a 4-year college or university. The other 8% move to another 2-year institution (Horn, 2009). For millions of disadvantaged students every year, community colleges have offered both help and hinderance. On one hand, without barriers to entry like requiring SAT/ACT scores and strong GPAs, they cast a wider net of inclusivity. On the other hand, research has found that baccalaureate aspirants are not as apt to succeed if they attend community college.

As more and more stakeholders question the value of a 4-year college degree (MacLeod, 2018), trade schools and community college pathways have overtaken focus in many public school districts, as seen in the Promise Program in 300 American cities. This national, nonpartisan initiative seeks to build broad public support for funding the first 2 years of higher education for low-SES students starting in America's community colleges. The wrong assumption that community colleges are a gateway to 4-year programs can impede pathways. Some researchers assert that this baccalaureate gap in part arises from different institutional characteristics of community colleges that produce "lower rates of persistence" (Dougherty, 2002, p. 22). For students from lower-SES households, any assumption that community college will lead to a bachelor's degree—which is correlated with desirable financial and career outcomes—is not supported by the data.

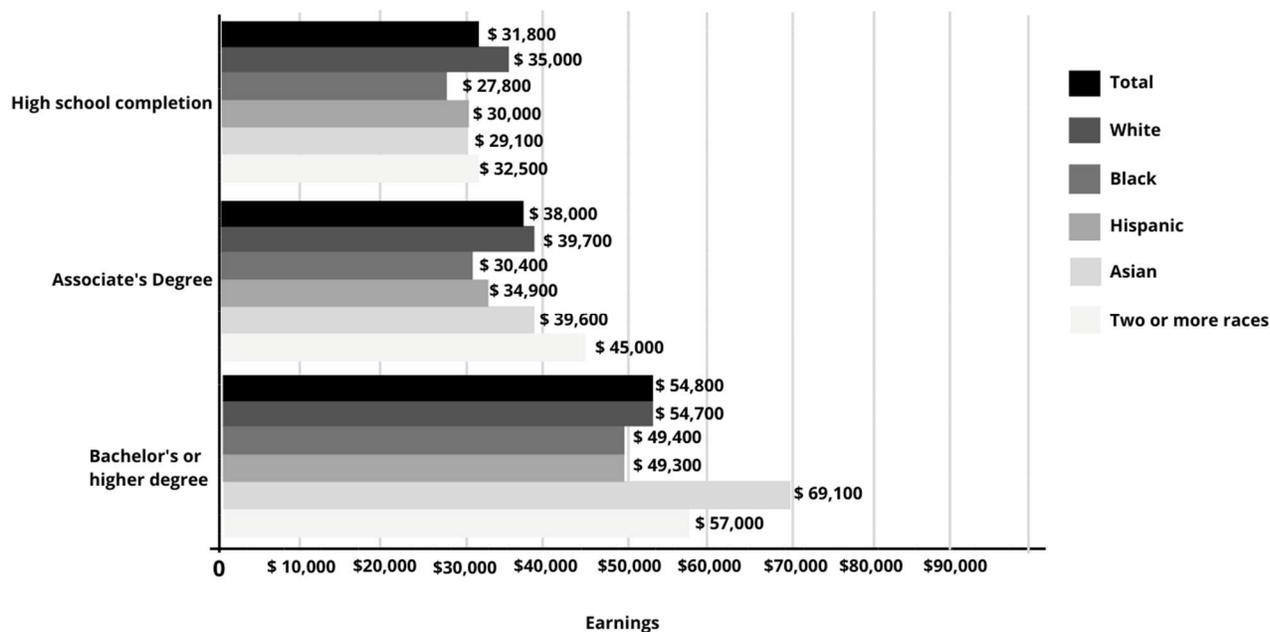
According to First Lady Dr. Jill Biden's dissertation, most students attending community college have either full-time or part-time jobs, while taking classes (Jacobs-Biden, 2007). Additionally, many are raising children, have to provide care for older parents, or both. The duties of juggling mixed priorities can be taxing. Community college students from low-SES backgrounds often seek a degree in order to gain financial advantages in employment. The aims of many of these students center around the ability to earn money. A 2-year degree can lead to a

wage increase or a promotion at their current jobs. Disadvantaged students' American dream of a 4-year degree may seem to ensure career stability and elevated social status. Biden noted that high schools graduate students are not always well prepared for college courses' level of rigor, stating that "developmental education is a major component of the community college curriculum" (Jacobs-Biden, 2007, p. 16). This connects to earlier researchers (Hardin, 1988), one of whom noted that "When developmental students are admitted to institutions of higher education with little hope of success, then the open door policy of many institutions becomes a revolving door policy" (p. 3).

A central problem is that many public high schools fail to enroll sufficient percentages of low-SES students in college preparatory programs. Regular (that is, not honors, AP, or IB) coursework does not prepare them for a collegiate level of rigor (Kretchmar & Farmer, 2013). Student retention specialists cited by researchers (Jacobs-Biden, 2007) have identified the need for all college students to be paired with mentors who can help them with "academic, social, and emotional hurdles throughout their college years" (p. 37), but this type of support—which in Campbell's model can be seen as a form of Supernatural Aid—requires that students understand how to find and use those services to their advantage. To wit, economic boosts related to bachelor's degree attainment outpace those related to associate's degrees by a significant margin, as seen in Figure 9.

Figure 9

Median Annual Earnings of Full-Time Year-Round Workers 25 to 34 years old, by Educational Attainment and Race/Ethnicity



Note. From Digest of Education Statistics 2021, National Center for Education Statistics, by U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), Table 502.530 (https://doi.org/https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator_RFD.asp).

While attendance at a community college can in some cases provide a necessary bridge to the 4-year degrees that can solidify future opportunities and income, data reveal that in terms of community-college students earning a bachelor's degree, only 15% do so within 6 years. Whether this is due to lack of financial aid literacy, under-developed skill levels, or “the cultural gulf between community-college students and the colleges and universities that do little to welcome them” (Strikwerda, 2018), a current trend in large urban districts to direct large numbers of students into community college pathways comes with a caveat. In Texas for example, the Dallas County Promise program has ushered in a 40% growth in enrollment at the

Dallas County Community College District (DCCCD) from thirty-one high schools by having students sign pledges and assuring every graduating senior they could attend community college for free, due to a partnership between the DCCCD and education nonprofit Commit. This alliance, as emblematic of others in the public and private sectors across America, states as its goal an intention to boost postsecondary attainment across the board. However, national statistics do not support the tactic of sending a majority of disadvantaged students into community colleges if the assumption is that this will result in 4-year degrees. Due to the churn of K-12 systems, students constantly graduate onward, pulling districts' focus toward an evergreen renewable crop of incoming ninth graders looking for guidance. Longitudinal studies to determine both qualitative and quantitative impacts on students' lives would be helpful in determining best policy and practice moving forward. Although community colleges provide a valuable stopgap, they offer no panacea in terms of the larger economic aims of equitable access to 4-year institutions.

A central question raised by programs of this sort is whether U.S. policy should send a message to already marginalized students that what they should hope and aim for is attendance at 2-year colleges. If all students could be effectively and economically coached in attaining sufficient state investment to offset tuition costs for 4-year options, the economic and societal boon is well-established. Empowering young men and women to move directly into bachelors' programs regardless of their socioeconomic background would prove a worthier goal. Relatedly, although the Biden presidency announced its plan to focus on promoting free community college as the center of its higher education plan, that was struck down by Congress (Leonhardt, 2021).

Taking the SAT/ACT. Whereas community college students are not required to submit entrance exam scores from the SAT or ACT, those considering 4-year college application

sometimes face these exams. Long established by multiple researchers to constitute one of the most intimidating parts of the admissions labyrinth (Evans, 2015; González Canché, 2019; Schudson, 1972), the time and financial costs of preparation for these tests constitute a hurdle many students from disadvantaged backgrounds struggle to overcome. In fact, many may not even be aware of what they are, why they matter, or how to approach them as a serious aspect of the junior year of high school (Atkinson & Geiser, 2009).

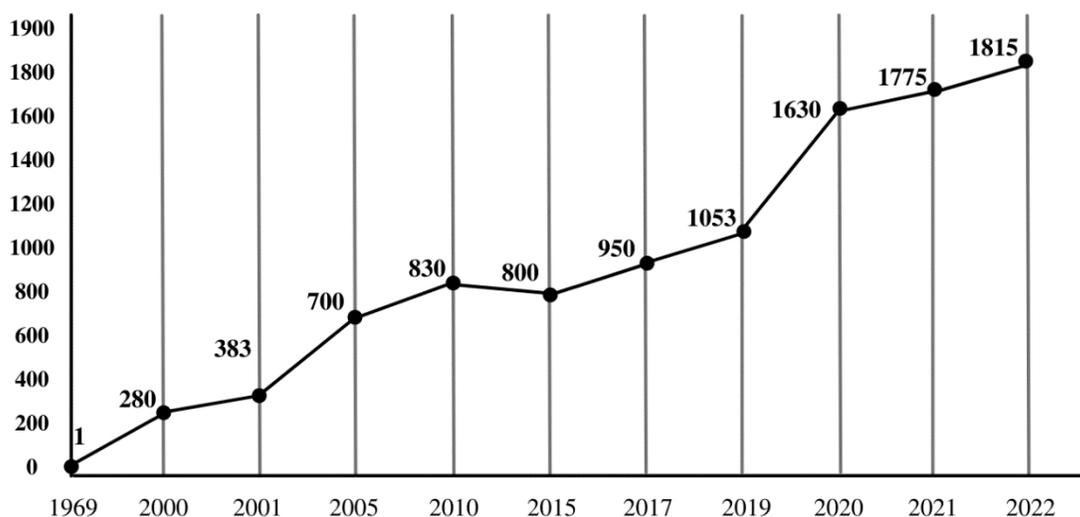
Racial Bias in Exams. An increasing concern negatively impacting college access, according to Harvard Educational Review, has been that the SAT has been shown as both statistically and culturally biased against Hispanic Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans (Freedle, 2003). Meanwhile, although until recently twenty-five states mandated that students sit for either the SAT exam or for the ACT exam in order to graduate from high school (Gewertz, 2017), nonprofit FairTest “works to end the misuses and flaws of standardized testing” (FairTest, 2007, para. 1). One important distinction to be made lies between the construct of merit and that of achievement. Although used interchangeably within admissions circles, they denote different things. Research has shown that investment in students precedes achievement (Engle & Lynch, 2009; Mathews, 2015). Those who benefit from the current college access system in the U.S. are frequently seen as meritorious, when in fact they are high achievers whose accomplishments in many ways connect to parent SES or another form of societal investment (Bloom, 2007). The so-called merit aid given to students therefore often isn’t helping those who need it most, further privileging those from higher SES backgrounds. Admissions office practices related to economic indicators have been called into question as they in some cases impact or impede educational equity (Carnevale & Rose, 2013). Merit aid has historically been connected to standardized exam scores, but since there is no standardized U.S. high school

curriculum, many students from underperforming districts and overcrowded schools have not had sufficient exposure to the content on the SAT or ACT, and there is nothing they could have done to improve that. These exams have increasingly come under scrutiny, and are seen by many working toward improving college access as a way to promote the wealthy while blocking those without the social, financial, or cultural capital to navigate the unfair playing field (Freedle, 2003; Kempf, 2016; Koretz, 2017).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, concerns abounded and led to a growing trend toward test optional, test flexible, or test blind admissions. Weak predictive validity has been purported in findings by multiple researchers, who have shown that SAT and ACT exams predict neither freshman grade point averages in college nor college completion (Allensworth & Clark, 2020; Koretz et al., 2016). Compounding these concerns, economic and gender bias, test form reuse, and cheating have all been cited as major impediments for disadvantaged populations (Bello, 2020).

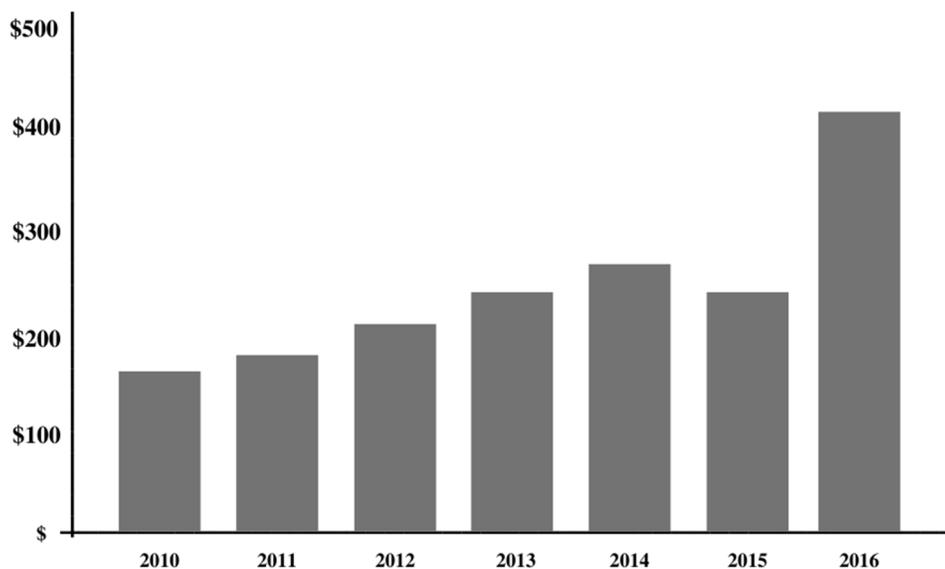
Figure 10

Number of Test Blind, Test Flexible, or Test Optional Institutions



Note. From Number of Test Blind, Test Flexible, or Test Optional Institutions 1969-2022, A. Bello, 2022. Copyright 2002 by Akil Bello. Reprinted with permission.

Adversity Scores. In 2019, a short-lived attempt to offset such concerns led to the college board’s now defunct adversity score, which was discontinued after much negative feedback (Hartocollis, 2019). Posited as a tool to boost admission outlooks for students dealing with multi-layered challenges, this initiative was accused of perpetuating inequalities. Furthermore, many question whether the college board deserves public subsidies, and question whether it is appropriate for a private institution, albeit “nonprofit” to be so, in fact, profitable. See Figure 11 for financial details of earnings largely based upon selling AP curriculum, SAT and PSAT exams, and selling student data for marketing purposes to colleges, universities, and the military (Phelps, 2018).

Figure 11*Profitability of The College Board*

Note. From “Assets in Off-Shore Partnerships and Non-Publicly Traded Securities, in Millions” 2018, *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 14 ([doi:10.2139/ssrn.3331692](https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3331692)). Copyright 2018 by R. Phelps. Reprinted with permission.

The Great Gatsby Curve. While community colleges, entrance exams, alternate pathways in military or career education, and other realities populate the roads traveled by U.S. high school students, for those without generational wealth to underwrite their aspirations, the ability to launch toward and through higher education can feel like the stuff of novels. In fact, narratives in many of the most canonized works of literature taught in U.S. high schools parallel the Hero’s Journey students face. Langston Hughes’ seminal poem Harlem, already cited, offers a vantage point from the perspective of an African American male. As he wrote in another poem studied in America’s high school English classroom, his life “ain’t been no crystal stair” and yet “all the time/I’ve been a-climbin’ on,/And reachin’ landin’s,/And turnin’ corners,/And sometimes goin’ in the dark/Where there ain’t been no light” (Hughes, 1926, p. 107).

Without adequate information and mentorship across the higher education journey, millions of students experience a similar sense of struggle. The arc of moral universe may bend toward justice, but as Martin Luther King Junior famously stated, it is also long. Hughes was writing exactly 100 years ago in the Harlem Renaissance, 1922, but his words ring true today.

Another such story, this time from the lens of a low-SES White male, is the previously mentioned *The Great Gatsby*. Authored by F. Scott Fitzgerald, this narrative explores the potentially catastrophic outcomes when an individual from low economic status aims upward, from the no-name background of being merely James Gatz to the green light of East Egg, NY, with new money and a new name to accompany the new life to which the re-invented Jay Gatsby aspired.

In U.S. society, the rate of relative poverty in Title I high schools speaks to the pervasive income inequality impeding the competitiveness of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This often interrupts their achievement levels in an educational system built to sort, sift, and separate students into categories. Some land in special education, others on trade school tracks, and the fortunate few into all-AP and IB programs for those deemed to qualify as appropriate candidates for 4-year college applications. However, research has shown that such tracking can range from arbitrary to deliberately biased on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, and other demographic factors (Kirst & Venezia, 2004; Kretchmar & Farmer, 2013; McDonough, 2004). The lack of increasing intergenerational mobility has been proven to correlate with a decrease in income equality since at least the early 1990s (Chetty et al., 2014).

Supernatural Aid

According to Campbell (1949), this stage is where, for those who have not refused the call, “a protective figure...provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is

about to pass” (p. 57). Although the college access adventure lacks literal dragons, numerous challenges populate the precarious transitional period from the latter 2 years of high school through the first day of college (McDonough, 2004). Counselors play a pivotal role here as both mentors and gatekeepers, but an underabundance of qualified support stymies access for millions of high school students each year.

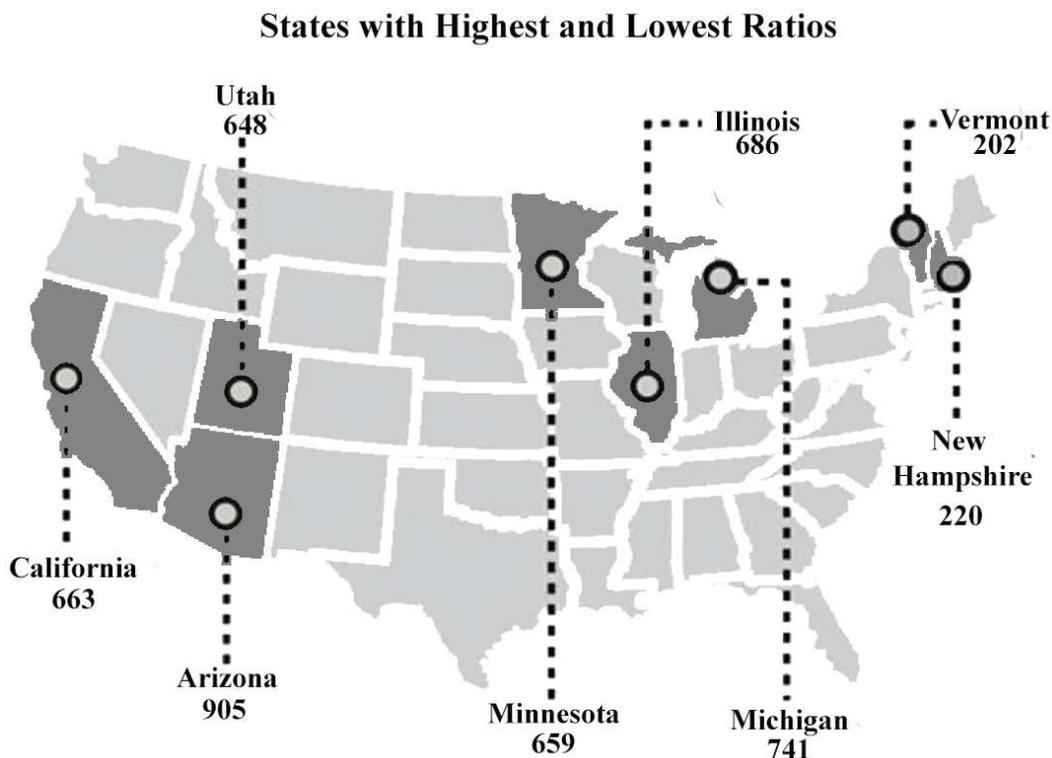
The National Association of College Admissions Counselors recommends ratios of a maximum of 250 students for each individual counselor in U.S. high schools (NACAC, 2018). Budgets in most public institutions would have to double or even triple the amount of on-site support to attain that proportion. Costs for such additional staffing, with a median salary over \$67,000 per hire, are prohibitive within the currently strained budgets in most districts. Students from underserved populations needing to be provided with amulets of information and guidance to be protected within the dragon forces of the admissions process obtain only 38 minutes per year with their counselors (NACAC, 2018). This time is generally utilized for registration for the following year’s classes, with little time for the complex steps of preparing for admissions.

The national average of 482-to-1, compounded by the fact that the 20% of lowest income school districts allocate little or no budget to this line item, results in an alarmingly un-level playing field (NACAC, 2018). Reports in Chicago of a 700-to-1 ratio, and 1000-to-1 in Los Angeles highlight the need to intervene in order to interrupt cyclical, generational poverty. As seen in Figure 12, the more rural areas in states like Illinois and California offset the extreme under-hiring within major districts like Los Angeles Unified School District and Chicago Public Schools. The wide array of number of students assigned to a single counselor ranges from Vermont at the low end with 202 students to Arizona at the high end with 905 students. Figure 12 elucidates the wide spectrum of counselor caseloads, from Vermont as the most favorable to

Arizona as the least equitable. Present and future American generations will be impacted by how policy makers distribute and incentivize funding for counseling as a key need in the quest for equity in higher education (Cahalan et al., 2020).

Figure 12

Counselor Caseloads in Public High Schools by State



Note. From “Counselor Caseloads in Public High Schools by State,” by National Association of College Admissions Counselors, 2021, (<https://public.tableau.com/profile/nacac.research#!/>). Copyright 2021 by NACAC. Reprinted with permission.

A strong correlation has been established by researchers investigating the relationship between access to school counselors and access to college admissions success (Woods & Domina, 2014). Their research design utilized the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002. They establish that the central metric to track is the counselor caseload for students, measured by how

many 10th graders are assigned per counselor at each high school. Outcome variables focus upon students' college expectations and experiences with counseling advice received. Logistic and multinomial logistic regression analyses were employed, quantifying the relationships between the variables. Not surprisingly, the researchers found that students in schools with small counselor caseloads benefitted from greater achievement in transitioning from the high school to college.

Students receiving strong social supports such as one-on-one counseling and a space to complete applications-related activities have been shown to be better equipped to excel than their less-supported peers (Bloom, 2008; Labaree, 2012). Six practices were identified as highly desirable: "lifestyle discussion, academic support programming, college tours, one-on-one counseling, financial aid assistance, and social supports" (p. 220). Survey results indicated a need for expanded college access programming and effective ways to disseminate information, for both students and teachers. Echoing Piagetian theory, the research concluded that only with effective support could low-income and first-generation students increase the likelihood of successful college admission and matriculation.

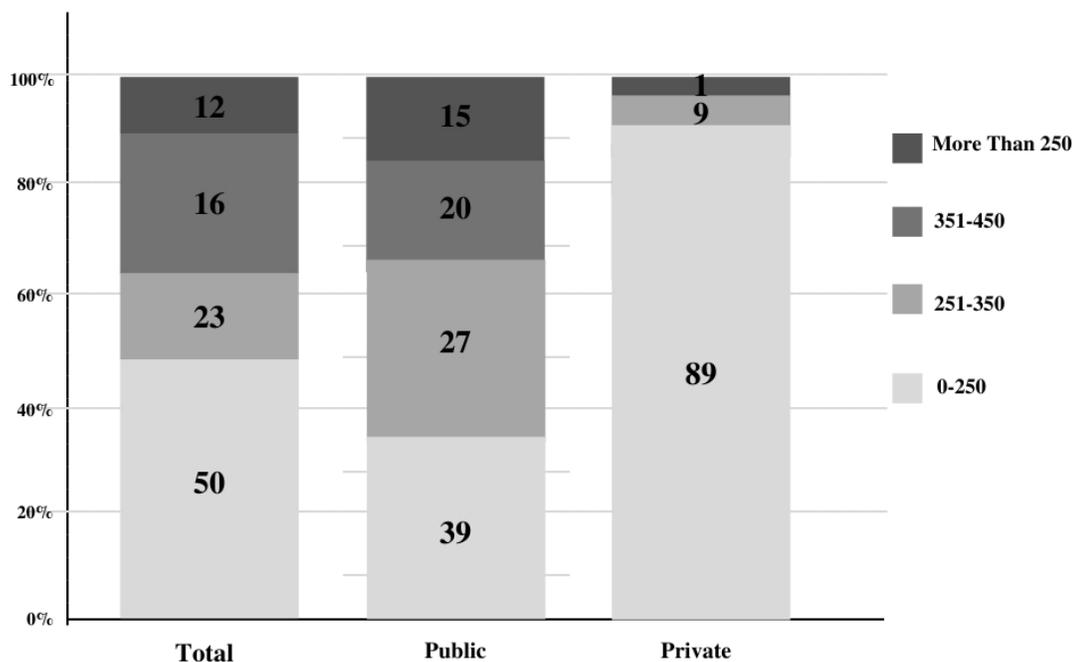
A 2021 Stanford University study, which acknowledged the already-established evidence of class bias in how standardized tests are used to evaluate college applicants, created a comparable inquiry of admissions essays for selective U.S. colleges and universities (Alvero, 2021). The study measured relationships between application essays and reported household income, and between reported household income and SAT scores. Results showed that the correlation between a family's money and how student essays were scored was stronger than any linkage between those essays and SAT scores. The study concluded, "Efforts to realize more

equitable college admissions protocols can be informed by attending to how social class is encoded in non-numerical components of applications” (Alvero, 2021, p. 1).

Explorations of college access abound, for example focusing exclusively on low-income, first-generation urban African American students (Benson & Boyd, 2015). Researchers focused on college access frequently seek to attain a “clearer understanding of how social contexts constrain and add cognition” (Driscoll, 1994, p. 164). Inherent in all cognitive theory is the belief that knowledge is an “internal representation of an external reality” (Driscoll, 1994, p. 170). To that end, the federal government’s Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 spawned TRIO programs to increase representation for disadvantaged populations in postsecondary education.

Figure 13

Median Caseload Per School Counselor, by High School Type



Note. From U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, (<https://nces.ed.gov>).

In fall 2016, the percentage of students enrolling in higher education immediately after high school graduation was 69.8%, but only 46% were heading to 4-year institutions. Others attended 2-year community colleges, in many cases due to financial concerns (NCES, 2018).

Federal Supernatural Aid. Most recently, in April 2021 President Biden endorsed expansion of free public higher education, stating:

Twelve years is no longer enough today to compete with the rest of the world in the 21st century. That's why my American Families Plan guarantees four additional years of public education for every person in America, starting as early as we can. (White House, 2021, para. 9)

Since the economics of this presented costly and unclear mandates from the perspective of Congress, such changes have not yet materialized. The president also openly acknowledged that the First Lady's career as a community college professor has influenced his perspectives in this regard, "She's long said—if I heard it once, I've heard it a thousand times. 'Joe, any country that out-educates U.S. is going to outcompete U.S.' She'll be deeply involved in leading this effort" (Biden, 2021a). Since the difference between 4 free years of public education and 2 constitutes a large gap, both in terms of financial implications for federal and state budgets and expected outcomes for students (Dougherty, 2002), it will be important for this president and future administrations to carefully and clearly communicate its intentions based on the data, with an eye on likely long-term outcomes.

Supernatural Aid via Intervention. In the Hero's Journey of low-SES students, limitations in cultural capital at home constitutes a major blockade. Cultural capital has been defined in the college access context as, "institutionalized or widely shared high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, possessions, and credentials) used

for cultural and social exclusion from jobs and resources and the latter to exclusion from high status groups” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 158). Such exclusion concerns many college access programs, which have arisen over the past several decades to stand in the gap. Each expends resources aiming to contribute the cultural capital needed for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to attain college enrollment through various means (Damico, 2016).

In these programs, college advisers seek to compensate in numerous ways, in some ways standing in as surrogate parents by providing the students with information and experiences they would have not experienced otherwise. Parallel to cultural capital, social capital also impacts whether students form a desire to attend college. Research has shown that teens in limited contact with strong social networks attain lesser postsecondary outcomes compared to peers who are exposed to a variety of college going options (McDonough, 2005). These programs fall into two primary categories: initiatives that are federally funded, and those of nonprofit organizations.

Federally Funded Programs. Numerous federally funded programs exist. Three are listed here for reference.

TRIO. TRIO arose out of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. Comprised of Upward Bound, Student Support Services, and Talent Search, the three programs were combined and funded under Title IV as connected to the Higher Education Act. Today, TRIO’s expanded reach includes Upward Bound Math Science, The Ronald McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program and the Educational Opportunity Centers program. The vast majority of participants come from low-SES homes with a family income of \$24,000 or less, and are first-generation college students. TRIO grants go to institutions such as Historically Black Colleges (HBCs). Middle school students are sometimes served at the lower end of the age scale, but most funds

are focused at the high school to college pathway. TRIO grant programs are overseen by the Office of Postsecondary Education at the U.S. Department of Education (Fields, 2001).

GEAR UP. GEAR UP is an acronym standing for Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs. It was launched after TRIO was well established, in 1998. President Bill Clinton wrote GEAR UP into law, with the first grants awarded in 1999 to advance the college readiness of low-SES students. As with TRIO, middle school students as young as the 7th grade enter into the program and are supported to and through the admissions process, but the primary focus is high schoolers. The structure of the program splits into two parts. First, a public/private partnership grant program allows for-profits and nonprofits to benefit while offering localized support. Second, a state grant program sends hundreds of millions of dollars annually to ensure local public school districts have funding for focused on-site supports (Fields, 2001). As with TRIO, administration is handled by The Office of Postsecondary Education at the U.S. Department of Education.

A Non-Federal, Nonprofit Alternate Example. AVID is an acronym standing for Advancement Via Individual Determination. The nonprofit has grown to be the largest organization supporting college readiness in the U.S., serving over 2,000,000 students to date (Mathews, 2015). Founded in 1980 by Mary Catherine Swanson, an English teacher, its early purpose was to help generate parental support, motivation, and study habits for low-SES students in San Diego bused from disadvantaged neighborhoods into more affluent schools. AVID's structure to this day involves what the organization calls inquiry-based tutoring, which is conducted between the bells of the school day during an AVID elective period. Student participants must be enrolled in honors, AP or IB coursework to qualify, which can leave behind many otherwise viable candidates for college readiness counseling. Students must also be

recommended by previous year's teacher to qualify, which can create a barrier for students who may be seen by their teachers as not college-bound for nonacademic reasons (Kelly, 2008; Knight et al., 2004). Despite naysayers who decry outside consultants from AVID infiltrating public schools (Spring, 2021), The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, and the federal government have designated \$10,000 in funding per classroom of 30 students per year for this program (U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

Although TRIO, GEAR UP, AVID, and other nonprofit programs have served millions of disadvantaged students since inception, closing the U.S. college access opportunity gap is far from a reality. While lessons learned include research supporting that intervening by middle school has the potential to promote more positive outcomes, a sustainable model to reach every school in every district remains elusive. What is known is that waiting until a student is well into high school to start the college conversation preparing students for college is far too tardy (Conley, 2008; Poynton & Lapan, 2017). Students must understand that only by taking college preparatory courses early will they position themselves. Options that may seem far off or even irrelevant at age 11 become extremely important by the time they are 17. Only with Supernatural Aid in place can students from under-served populations have hope for a future that includes higher education.

Crossing the First Threshold

The word threshold represents a point of entering. According to Campbell (1949), this stage is where “with the personifications of his destiny to guide and aid” (p. 64) the Hero goes forward in adventure until reaching a no-threshold guardian. This occurs at the entrance to the zone of new experiences just ahead. In the context of the college access expedition for disadvantaged students, this marks the moment where the decision to apply becomes firm.

Technology can play a role in leveling the playing field for students. Economic and social drivers impacting student decisions of whether and where to apply underscore the necessity of persistence. An analysis of the ecosystem surrounding the pathways high school students must tread in order to attain college admissions shows that self-efficacy and support of a guardian are both required.

According to Bandura's et al. (1999) perspective, "Perceived self-efficacy refers to beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (p. 3). College access advocates tend to promote programs that take into consideration not only these internal senses of efficacy, but also the building of a community around the teens to help sustain effort, to perseverance, and resilience. The internal ability for those students to believe that they can outperform low expectations based on performance and efforts is a prerequisite for positive outcomes.

As previously established, interventions to prepare students to cross the threshold in a few short years have to begin long before 11th grade. More than 50% of ninth graders from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds have been shown to lack even a basic understanding of the college admissions process (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). The root cause of this is information asymmetry is comprised of economic circumstances allowing access to crucial intelligence for wealthier students much more so than for those whose family lives lack social and economic capital (McDonough, 1998; Perna, 2000). The fact is that ninth graders consistently have the lowest GPAs, the most missed classes, and the majority of low or failing grades. This grade level has increasingly become a bottleneck in America's high schools: in 1970, there were 3% fewer 10th graders than ninth graders; by 2000, that had increased to 11% (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010).

One issue in solving this problem is the uneven distribution of programs and resources across U.S. high schools. Funded by local property taxes, schools with the poorest students often receive the least help, even though they need the most help. Here an opportunity arises to clarify the purposes of the curriculum of U.S. high schools writ large in order to ensure that upward mobility for all students comes within reach. These principles of instruction, according to learning experts (Tyler, 2013), need to begin with the end in mind. As Tyler (2013) asserted, “Many educational programs do not have clearly defined purposes...it is very necessary to have some conception of the goals that are being aimed at” (p. 3). A wide range of theoretical lenses exist, from which an instructional designer might re-imagine the role of public education or draw inspiration. Gagne’s stipulation applies, which suggested that any “class of human performances” needs to be anchored in “verbs denoting observable action” (Knowles et al., 2013, p. 125). Mager et al., as reported in Knowles et al. (2013), also contribute to this envisioning—recommending that such instructional redesign explicitly focus on the “desired accomplishments of the learner” (p. 127). Inculcating those desires through effective interventions at an early enough age to matter constitutes one of the central challenges of college access.

The Digital Divide. When addressing economic barriers, the importance of specificity contributes to potential solutions more than mere rhetoric. The digital divide offers one such example—this is an equity gap, including lack of access to computer hardware, software, and broadband Internet access. In the college application process, students must sort large numbers of online resources and judge the quality of the information, a particularly challenging task for disadvantaged students. Students determine their aspirations and plans for college during what some have called a “predisposition phase” (Warick & DeBaun, 2018). In order to help them find their way to higher education, the support must start much earlier—the predisposition phase

spans 7th through 10th grades. As an example of what happens without such support, in one Boston program researchers found that such students waited too long to strategize, misjudged the cost of college, and overestimated the economic benefits of degree attainment (Avery & Kane, 2004). Low-SES students face unique challenges in today's computer-centric environment of college education, which has more and more inextricably moved online.

The federal government has begun earmarking funds to increase access to high-speed internet in urban and rural communities as part of its infrastructure spending in the new administration (Biden, 2021a). While this logistic necessity is needed, the instructional design needed to motivate a generation of students at risk of non-aspiration must accompany it in order to bridge the opportunity gap. Ultimately, what is needed is a change in school systems that can lead to changes in student behavior. Behaviorists Watson and Skinner established longstanding principles of behavior management, centered around behavior modification leading to performance improvement. They asserted that learning must be understood in terms of observable events. Skinner believed that "behavior could be understood in terms of environmental cues and results" with one being antecedent to the other (Driscoll, 1994), and any intermediary mental activity requiring less focus (p. 33). Stimulus and response in this theory can be manipulated to provoke desired outcomes. Recommended are both positive reinforcement (i.e.; badging in gamification for proposed digital solutions) as one strategy to be used, and negative reinforcement (i.e.; exemption from an undesirable requirement). Gold stars, points or certifications are examples of conditioned reinforcers in the Skinner model. Cueing learning behaviors in students in order to promote their academic outcomes has been proven to be more effective than punishment, which Driscoll goes on to assert has the "unfortunate side effect" of having effectiveness that "tends to be short-lived" (p. 41), so those realities need to be taken into

consideration with any programs moving forward. In extreme cases, the learned helplessness sometimes seen in students stuck in cycles of poverty leads to “passive acceptance of events seemingly beyond one’s control” (p. 41).

With the predisposition intentionally nurtured, and the threshold of deciding to apply to college in place, the Hero becomes ready to face the next phase of the Hero’s Journey.

Belly of the Whale

According to Campbell (1949), this stage is where the Hero experiences being “swallowed by the unknown” into a “sphere of rebirth” (p. 74). The actual applications process, which often creates a sense of overwhelm and engulfment for even the most privileged students as they transition into their senior year of high school (Oakes, 2022), requires a multi-month process more akin to a long-term project than a one-time event. Whereas low-SES students sometimes wait until as late as November, December, or January of 12th grade to begin looking at what they need to do to apply, their wealthier peers will have begun years earlier in many cases, working with paid consultants and/or family friends to build carefully researched lists of schools they perceive as being the right fit. These advantaged students often complete multiple drafts of their admissions essays for application—a 15-30 hour process in many cases, with 8-12 schools as an average number being applied to—in the summer before senior year even begins. Students from underserved populations do not intentionally procrastinate (Aronson, 2008); they do, however, lack a road map and calendar explaining optimal timing for the requirements they need to check off a very long list: FAFSA completion they do not always understand, demonstrated interest no one has told them to complete, live tours they cannot afford to take, college fairs they have not heard about, and essays no one is coaching them how to write.

Campbell's (1949) notion of a sphere of rebirth in the college access context implies a death to what came before. For low-SES students, the fear of ostracization within existing support systems, or of venturing too far from the tried-and-true paths of their parents and ancestors, can constitute yet another hurdle. Notions of loyalty can surpass a willingness for the student to take action in their own best interest (Bloom, 2007). The fear of homesickness can constitute a gravitational pull, especially for those from first-generation backgrounds where the construct of leaving one geographic region to pursue opportunity in another is not part of the cultural norm (La Rosa et al., 2006). The willingness to die to the old self, be swallowed by a new way of thinking and behaving, and become a new creation in the context of academic pursuit is the price of admission for successful completion of this phase. As with those stages preceding it, not every student chooses to make that change. Stasis as an option can eclipse the desire for upward intellectual and economic mobility. Only those who successfully traverse stages one through five can be said to have navigated the Departure phase, part one of three in Campbell's framework. What lies ahead are six more stages, comprising what is called the Initiation.

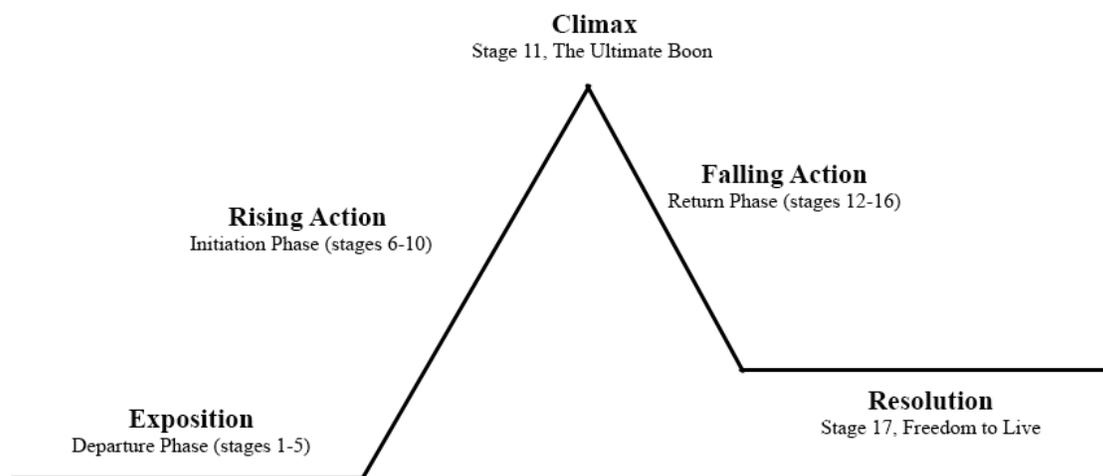
Phase 2: Initiation

The initiation section marks the second of Campbell's three larger phases of the Hero's Journey. Everything preceding this phase can be seen as Exposition in the narrative structure, that is: exposing the ordinary world where the student began the Hero's Journey. Once they have reached Phase 2, a new series of challenges must be overcome in what traditional narrative structure has called the Rising Action. Figure 14 offers an overview of that framework, and how it tracks with the Campbell model. Of interest, in classrooms across the U.S., state curricular

requirements in the English curriculum for ninth grade include instruction on the elements of this chart as part of the literary analysis strand.

Figure 14

The Plot Chart, Adapted to Show Phases of Campbell's Hero's Journey



Note. Adapted from *Enjoying Literature: Analysis Skills in the High School Grades*, 2014.

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The rising action of Campbell's Initiation Phase begins with the Road of Trials.

Road of Trials

In this first part of the second of three sections of the Hero's Journey according to Campbell (1949), the Hero "moves in a dream landscape" (p. 81) in order to survive a succession of ordeals. The Hero requires the "amulets and advice" (Campbell, 1949, p. 81) covertly received during the previous phase of Supernatural Aid. In the context of college access, the Road of Trials consists of the time from May 1 of senior year through high school graduation. Students, in less than 2 short months, complete all 12th grade coursework, take final exams that often require AP-, IB- or honors-level preparation, attend proms, purchase caps and gowns, sign their friends' yearbooks, and exchange stories about what happens now for each of their peers. This

can constitute a time of reflection, comparing one's options to those of classmates, and fielding comments from family and community members who may express any number of opinions about the student's chosen pathway.

Students across the U.S. commit to their college of choice on or before May 1 of the senior year. For those from underserved populations, this moment of truth often eclipses all preceding stages in magnitude, because it comes with financial and sometimes legal commitments including contracts and signed agreements for the first time in their lives.

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development offers insights into the college access Road of Trials. As students have now not only applied, but place their hard-earned monetary deposits and commit to particular colleges or universities, a gap between what Driscoll (1994) calls a teen's "actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving" and a higher level of "potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or with more capable peers" frequently appears (p. 86). As in earlier stages such as Supernatural Aid, the ongoing support of knowledgeable adults is key, but in most cases public high school counselors have moved onto the next upcoming class of seniors and spend little time with last year's lot.

Since many theories of learning originate with questions, these students must now go through a process of proving or disproving their hypotheses that applying and committing to the college pathway has indeed been the correct choice, frequently on their own. Any process of maturation and intellectual skills assessment like this can move students, according to Vygotsky, from mere learning to personal actuation outcomes beyond what would otherwise be likely or even possible—but one of the trials to be overcome is the ability to think or see an outcome before it is apparent.

Cognitive theorists assert that thought processes inside the learner mediate learning, which includes a journey from sensory input to visual and auditory memory, followed by short-term memory (rehearsal, chunking) and encoding to long-term memory. Situated Cognition Theory evolves from Vygotsky's sociocultural theory as described by Driscoll (1994), and is often "closely linked to constructivism" (p. 156) in education. At the center of such inquiries is how the construction of the student's identity occurs. Vygotsky's emphasis on teaching critical thinking, as opposed to mere content-specific skills, has been posited as one differentiator in academic standards that could improve college access-related outcomes. Being able to consider multiple angles of a single question may arguably be seen as a pre-requisite for effective college matriculation, and can be conceptualized as evidence of college readiness (Conley, 2010).

What Vygotsky called scaffolding can help low-SES students in this stage both construct knowledge and accomplish tasks. Co-construction in intersubjectivity allows for deeper levels of buy-in, as students are able to view their terrain from alternate, adult perspectives. Social interaction is emphasized in this theory. This stage requires students to not just ask questions, but to take continuous action over a sustained period of time, demonstrating comprehension of the commitment they've made and the ability to implement what is needed to proceed on the journey. This solidification of self-perception and burgeoning identification as college-bound is propelled by both internal and external forces. The Hero-student must now strive to do what had previously been seen as impossible.

Meeting With the Goddess

Rituals take many forms, and the rituals of academia are not unlike those of marriage and other religious sacraments referenced by Campbell (1949). In *The Hero's Journey*, the Meeting with the Goddess is comprised of a "mystical marriage of the triumphant soul" (p. 91) that has

overcome all the barriers of the earlier phases. The high school Alma Mater, or mother of the soul in Latin, holds this place in the journey of the student. The meeting with the goddess in this sense occurs at the graduation ceremony.

High school graduation marks a seminal moment in the lives of students making the trek from the ordinary world of life at home to the special world of higher education. As they symbolically cross a stage, move a tassel from right to left, and toss a mortarboard cap into the air, students are reforming the ways they see themselves—from being a high schooler to becoming a pre-college student.

Piaget in his theory of theory of constructivism asserted that knowledge can be formed and reformed based on the world surrounding a student. In the context of college access, this means even low-SES students can mold new ideas and identities as new information comes within reach. Relatedly, Piaget's concept of hierarchization asserts that previous stages of each student's development have been founded on learnings of what has gone before. Situated between the definitions of Driscoll (1994) of nativism ("knowledge is inborn") and empiricism ("knowledge is an accumulation of experience"), a constructivist perspective emphasizes the potential for expanding horizons just beyond graduation (p.190).

An interactionist viewpoint builds upon the constructivist view, emphasizing the connection between environment and heredity. This is the intersection at which students from underserved populations find themselves on high school graduation day. The ritual of high school graduation exists within a broader ecosystem of the student's family, peers, and community. One theorist whose findings speak to perspectives on these impacts is Wenger. His focus on social networks, called Communities of Practice, emphasizes learning from sociocultural influences (Wenger, 1999). Notably, communities of practice as a theory posits that

learning occurs in more than one community, and that identity is achieved through—as Driscoll (1994) describes it— “not only what we do but also who we are and how we interpret what we do” (p. 160). This is social in nature, but nonetheless described as a form of situated cognition. This means that the knowledge is mediated in signs and understood through socio-cultural interactions. Which perspective arises as primary in any student’s thinking depends on internal integrations of the various fragments of knowledge they’ve accrued.

Entrenched perspectives can create complexity as low-SES students navigate this Meeting with the Goddess moment, where they prepare to transition to a new alma mater, that is: a mother of the soul at their new college. In synthesizing a broad spectrum of carefully integrated messages from across all aspects of their lives, students may successfully move forward on their journeys, with high school graduation as a ritual marking the starting gun for a new race to be run.

Temptation

According to Campbell (1949), the temptation stage is where the Hero has to “discover his own position...and let it then assist him past his restricting walls” (p. 121). In the context of the college aspiration journey for students from disadvantaged populations, one way temptation takes form is in terms of “summer melt”, where distractions or impediments occur in the summer between high school graduation and the start of college classes several months later in the fall. These can take many forms, including economic, social, and personal hindrances. As the paperwork and bills for fall arrive, unexpected costs, such as required health insurance or student fees, can tilt Pell Grant eligible students, whose parents are at the lowest end of the economic spectrum, away from a previously intended pathway (Castleman et al., 2014).

Districts experience pressure to increase rates of graduation for disadvantaged students, but the question of whose job it is to ensure students make it across the divide from high school to college remains. Researchers who focus on what happens immediately after graduation for those who have applied and gained admittance to colleges or universities have shown that summer presents a serious attrition risk for college-intending seniors—in particular those from low-SES families (Castleman & Page, 2014).

Studies show that 10% - 40% of students who have indicated they intend to attend college in the fall fail to matriculate at that time. The temptation to stay with the familiar rather than risk such significant change has been attributed to limitations of school counseling support, students feeling overwhelmed by confusing paperwork, parents not knowing how to help, and the teenage propensity to procrastinate. In order to help such students make the transition to college, various methods have been researched to increase likelihood of making it past this final hurdle before day one of college classes. These include text nudging programs, live one-on-one counseling, and groups. Randomized trials to mitigate summer melt offering college-intending high school graduates 2 – 3 hours of summer counseling were shown to increase overall enrollment by 3%, but among low-income students, the impact was greater, at 8% – 12%. The challenge for financially strapped districts is that these types of support typically cost \$100 - \$200 per student (Castleman et al., 2014). Despite the fact that summer support has been shown to offer a lasting influence on not only attendance but also persistence, economic barriers to low-SES students receiving such supports remain. Thus, the temptation stage of the Hero's Journey constitutes a genuine hurdle that must be traversed.

Atonement With the Father

Campbell (1949) defined atonement as “at-one-ment” (p. 130), positing that the hero in this stage comes to understand a more realistic view of the father. This ordeal ups the ante to require an “ego-shattering initiation” (p. 130) requiring letting go of previously held beliefs and perspectives. In the context of the collegiate journey, students arrive on campus and begin to assimilate into an entirely new and unfamiliar culture, with a need to expand and sometimes adapt their perspectives in terms of what they knew before. Many, in particular those from low-SES backgrounds, begin to see a much wider world than was previously available to them, and now start the process of weaving together past messaging from their parents with a future that will be influenced by the viewpoints of their peers and professors (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008). The ability to become at-one with the family of origin requires many aspects of inspection of previously held assumptions and introspection regarding how to move forward in the student’s own uniquely held manner. Emerging into maturity involves developmental changes that can include religious views, interpersonal relations, and evolution in expressions of gender or sexual identity (Lefkowitz, 2005). Integrating individual students’ perceptions of changes in these areas requires them to synthesize the old and the new.

Apostasis

Apostasis is defined as a literal act of refusing to continue recognizing, following, or obeying a religious faith (Merriam-Webster, 2021a). The word comes from the Greek prefix apo-, which means away from, and the suffix -ptosis, which means falling. In the context of the college aspirational Hero’s Journey, this word metaphorically implies the necessity of demise for certain individual aspects of the self as a natural, necessary progression in evolving through the higher education journey.

According to Campbell (1949), this stage reveals a previously unimagined reality for the Hero, namely that the world is not neatly constrained into their-or-that, black-or-white binaries, but rather a highly complex network of realities that will require surrendering the facility of simplistic labels in order to make meaning in the wider world. Notions of eternity and time as constructs begin to take form, and the integration of many polarities such as logical/interpretive, science/art, physical/spiritual, and intellectual/emotional begin to arise. Campbell (1949) asserts that Apostasis symbolizes human reckoning with the mysteries of creation, such as the splitting of eternity into time, and the splitting of one individual into two or more component parts that then combine to serve a larger group. This is “the moment when the wall of Paradise is dissolved, the divine form found and recollected, and wisdom regained” (p. 154). Ultimately, this stage of Initiation is all about integration.

Numerous researchers have addressed the moments of realization and even epiphanies as students work through their college coursework while assimilating into college culture and integrating what they learn into their sense of self (Adelman, 2002; Knight et al., 2004; Walpole, 2003). Culturally relevant practices include what have been called counterstories. These modes of narrating and understanding the lived experience of disadvantaged students as they matriculate have reconceptualized college access, stressing how family and community structures combine to enable overcoming what Knight et al. (2004) call “inequitable structures that hinder access to college-going resources” (p. 116).

As Campbell (1949) asserts, “Once we have broken free of the prejudices of our own provincially limited ecclesiastical, tribal, or national rendition of the world archetypes” (p. 158) the aperture of awareness opens to allow for a “supreme initiation” into a much broader understanding of the world writ large (p. 158). The process of Apostasis can last 4 years or many

more. For those unwilling or unable to successfully assimilate previously held assumptions within the college experience, this stage can stall or even permanently derail the intention of attaining a college degree (La Rosa et al., 2006; Tierney, 1999).

The Ultimate Boon—College Graduation

The Ultimate Boon of the Hero's Journey in the context of this study is the attainment of a 4-year college degree by a student from an underserved background. According to Campbell (1949), this stage is where a great battle ensues for something invaluable. As the nadir of the elixir quest, this pinnacle of the Hero's search leads to something so magical that it can, metaphorically speaking, sustain life beyond mere mortality. Referencing the tale of King Midas, who wished for everything he touched to turn to gold and then regretted it, Campbell (1949) here cautions the limitations of the boon. While a college education can provide students from disadvantaged backgrounds with a foundational knowledge of the arts, literature, philosophy, and other disciplines, research confirms that such studies provide no cure-all (McDonough, 1998; McDonough et al., 1998).

Campbell (1949) stated, "The agony of breaking through personal limitations is the agony of spiritual growth" (p. 190). In fact, the attainment of the boon of a Bachelor's degree occurs six stages before the end of the Hero's Journey, constituting less an ending than a passage into what Campbell (1949) called the innermost cave. In this context, that means connecting within communities' higher forms of knowledge. The cost of crossing the threshold that the stage of the Ultimate Boon cannot offset the realities of the earlier stages of the adventure. Having moved from stage to stage, with the Hero overcoming hurdle after hurdle, "the stature of divinity that he summons to his highest wish increases" (Campbell, 1949, p. 189) and demands nothing less than that the mind "break the bounding sphere of the cosmos" (p. 189). This cosmos, now

more fully understood as a result of the college education, leads the Hero to a realization “transcending all experiences of forms” (Campbell, 1949, p. 190). How each student faces their own “realization of the ineluctable void” (p. 190) in large part determines their willingness to continue along the trajectory.

Just as many Shakespearean romantic narratives end with weddings, and tragedies end in funerals, the narrative of modern higher education may seem to inevitably end with the college graduation. However, perhaps the most significant challenge still awaits those students who have aspired from first-generation and other disadvantaged backgrounds, as they now must determine how to reapproach their families and communities of origin with their newfound knowledge and social status.

Phase 3: Return

Returns can prove just as problematic as beginnings for students on the college access journey. The purpose of having attained the boon of a college degree for some, especially those from underserved backgrounds, is often to benefit their home communities (Adelman, 2002; Knight et al., 2004). For others, a broader intention may be the motivation. As Campbell (1949) stated, bringing back the runes of wisdom may help renew the community, the nation, or the world. Still, at this stage, a resistance or even refusal to return to the ordinary world can occur.

Refusal of Return

According to Campbell (1949), “When the Hero-quest has been accomplished...the adventurer still must return with his life-transmuting trophy” (p. 193). A retreat from the challenges that preceded the Heroic journey can in some cases even lead to full isolation, where students struggle to make life choices post-college graduation (Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005).

For Native American students, for example, having been raised on a reservation—typically with deep cultural bonding—the experiences of returning after university graduation can create significant emotional and psychological duress (Jackson et al., 2003). The friction between homesickness in the early college experience and the evolving assimilation into the predominantly White culture on most campuses can lead to a paradoxical reversal of cultural pressure. Students experience conflicting demands to be successful in college, but also to maintain their cultural and community-assigned identities. Students from tightknit communities without significant college-going culture, as is common among Native American populations, “report feeling somewhat uncertain about their families’ and communities’ acceptance of them as a college graduate or as a student or professional in a particular discipline” (Jackson et al., 2003, p. 558).

The refusal of return can take many forms, from a literal rejection of the notion of going back to the home community at all to a more moderate refusal. Through evolving internalized norms and new understandings, the space created between the student and their Ordinary World can lead to a form of cognitive dissonance. One reason for this is that parents who are college graduates have informed their children about the realities of the work world with clarity that noncollege-graduate parents are unable to impart. Researchers argue that this knowledge gap adds friction to the already difficult journey from disadvantaged background to and through the college completion experience (Manzoni & Streib, 2019).

Magic Flight

According to Campbell (1949), in this stage one of two things can happen. Either the Hero is commissioned by the gods and returns with a blessing to bring an elixir from the hard-fought journey, or they experience “resentment of the original gatekeepers of the elixir, and a

struggle complicated by obstruction and evasion” (Campbell, 1949, p. 170). Emerging anew following matriculation, students must not only reassess belief systems, they must integrate entirely new identities.

SES-linked cultural norms and expectations impact the ways in which students participate in social life on campus, and lead cumulatively to the burgeoning identities they subsequently carve for themselves. The choices students from disadvantaged backgrounds make following college graduation have been interpreted by researchers as subjective markers for everything from levels of maturity and self-actualization to autonomy. For Black male students, for example, some theorists this as complicated by having to choose between the options to “draw on scripts about middle-class adult masculinity” or “conform to scripts associated with adolescence and the black lower class” (Wilkins, 2014, p. 185). The identity transition necessary to migrate back to home environs following higher education attainment requires contextual intersections to be navigated, including race, class, gender, sexual identity, and more.

Identity as a post-collegiate construct may therefore be understood not only as an intrinsic aspect of the self of graduates, but also as performance. This ties to research on stereotype threat, a social–psychological dynamic wherein students find themselves in situations where negative assumptions about their demographic group applies whether related to race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual-orientation (Steel, 2020). This situational threat causes a fear being reduced to particular stereotypes that do not encompass the full breadth of the individual. Such concerns can incumber achievement.

Only after 4 or more years of the adventure of completing a college degree does the time of Magic Flight reveal information to students that they may have not considered previously. One such fact is that earnings related to college degrees are not only stratified in the U.S. system

along perceived prestige lines of institutions based on levels of selectivity. They are also internally stratified by major (Manzoni & Streib, 2019). In fact, majors have been found to have a greater impact on subsequent earnings than a college's selectivity (Kim et al., 2015). As a rule, it is the science, technology, engineering, math majors and those related to business that lead to the higher income levels. When a student from an underserved background has risked their Hero's Journey on a degree in fine arts, education, or humanities, they are more likely to under-earn and carry greater student debt for longer periods of time as a result (Carnevale et al., 2015).

Rescue From Without

According to Campbell (1949), this stage is where the Hero may have to be brought back to the ordinary world with external assistance, "that is to say, the world may have to come and get him" (p. 207). Sociologists have long acknowledged the correlation between the family expectations of low-SES students and their eventual socioeconomic attainment. The same gravitational pull that in some cases impedes matriculation altogether now resurrects, demanding a return to some version of home as their time in the academy concludes in college graduation. This ties to the concept of family capital.

Family capital has been posited as consisting of the cumulative advantages and/or disadvantages in "material, human, social, linguistic, psychological, and cultural capital acquired in families through childhood and adolescence" (Aronson, 2008, p. 15), and these have been shown to contribute to what adults achieve following college, sometimes still culminating in what has been conceptualized as the reproduction of social class. Family capital can further be understood as summative resources that can be utilized to advance an individual's aspirations. This construct in the context of the U.S. system of capitalism, where commodification of higher education impedes millions of candidates from endeavoring toward post-high school education

(Shumar, 1997), underscores the role of economics in shaping U.S. lives—and by extension, the qualifications of its work force and citizenry. According to sociological research, it is theorized that “Even when individuals rise above (or fall beneath) the class positions of their families of origin, it is quite likely that some aspects of family capital are at work in the ascent or descent” (Swartz, 2008, p. 15). While the origin story of students from particular social classes does not overtly control subsequent generations’ socioeconomic achievement, students are still most likely to live their lives at the same socioeconomic class-level as their parents, or one that is closely adjacent.

Kin Networks. Kin networks provide a lens through which inequities across sociocultural strata may be viewed. These networks are defined as systems consisting of extended family, including people connected through marriage, blood, or “self-ascribed association” (Miller-Cribbs & Farber, 2008, p. 43). For students from disadvantaged backgrounds, these affiliations center around belief systems that may not champion notions of upward mobility through higher education (Bowen & Bok, 2016). Without structural re-envisioning and policy modifications to support aspirations, even the college graduate from an underserved background who makes it through the first 14 stages of Campbell’s (1949) 17-stage Hero’s Journey still faces disadvantages after college graduation (Hussar et al., 2020). While most current pathway programs related to college access begin in high school, personal perceptions about the value of school based on kin networks begin much earlier. The belief that one has the ability or inability to aspire to postsecondary education is well established by middle school age.

In the context of Campbell’s Return phase, challenges arise around many types of differences resulting from the collegiate experience. One example can be seen in changing

speech patterns, which for students from working class families may become more elaborate than those of their families. As these students have adapted to the dominant cultural standards experienced in their colleges, the higher levels of cultural and linguistic capital legitimated and affirmed in those schools can come at a cost of friction as they return home (Mullen, 2011).

Cultural capital in advantaged kin networks includes access to linguistic capabilities, logistic awareness, and information about how, precisely, to aspire within the higher education system. Economic factors inform these sociocultural norms. In kin networks much depends upon parental expectations, and families vary in education levels they presume their children will attain. Over 80% of families with an annual household income exceeding \$75,000 expect their children to earn a bachelor's degree. Conversely, when that annual income drops below \$25,000, less than 50% expect the same goal (Mullen, 2011). As one demographic example, historical and contemporary research on the structure and function of African American communities has established that any a priori assumptions that their kin networks provide a reliable source of support toward applying to college, especially for those living in poverty, must be reexamined (Miller-Cribbs & Farber, 2008). Competing narratives on the meaning and purpose of education similarly impact Latino and other marginalized communities, where "counter-stories" through programs like AVID or other intermediaries often have had to offset the messaging students receive in their home environs (Knight et al., 2004). As those students with enough individual determination to apply, gain acceptance, study, and graduate from 4-year programs return to their home communities, the external support they require to do so generally centers around sociocultural barriers to re-entry.

Sociocultural Factors. Whereas socioeconomic factors often take the focus of policymakers, the sociocultural context within which a student has been raised merits equal

consideration. Although some research has shown that “families benefit from the social pressure for academic success conveyed through the academic ethos of their friends,” it is also true that “social networks influence both educational expectations and choices” (Mullen, 2011, p. 34). Lareau’s class-based philosophies have illustrated that middle-class families tend to cultivate the abilities of their students, while families with lower household income levels tend to intervene less often. Parenting habits such as talking more frequently with their children to ask for their perspectives can lead more affluent students to attain greater verbal dexterity with more substantial diction (Lareau, 2011). For students seeking to navigate the return home, losses may have occurred alongside what was gained, with varying levels of alienation sometimes being experienced within home communities upon return (Aronowitz, 2003). Presumptions that warm welcomes of pride and celebration may not materialize. Alternate lived experiences can include having to withstand accusations of snobbery, experiences of envy, or even resentment of those who did not endeavor to take a parallel journey (Perna & Titus, 2005). The connotation of a commencement ceremony upon graduating college is when the student ironically commences by ending one arduous journey to begin again, circling backward to a new beginning where they must find a way to live in the new world of socioeconomic advancement—without being of or entirely from that world.

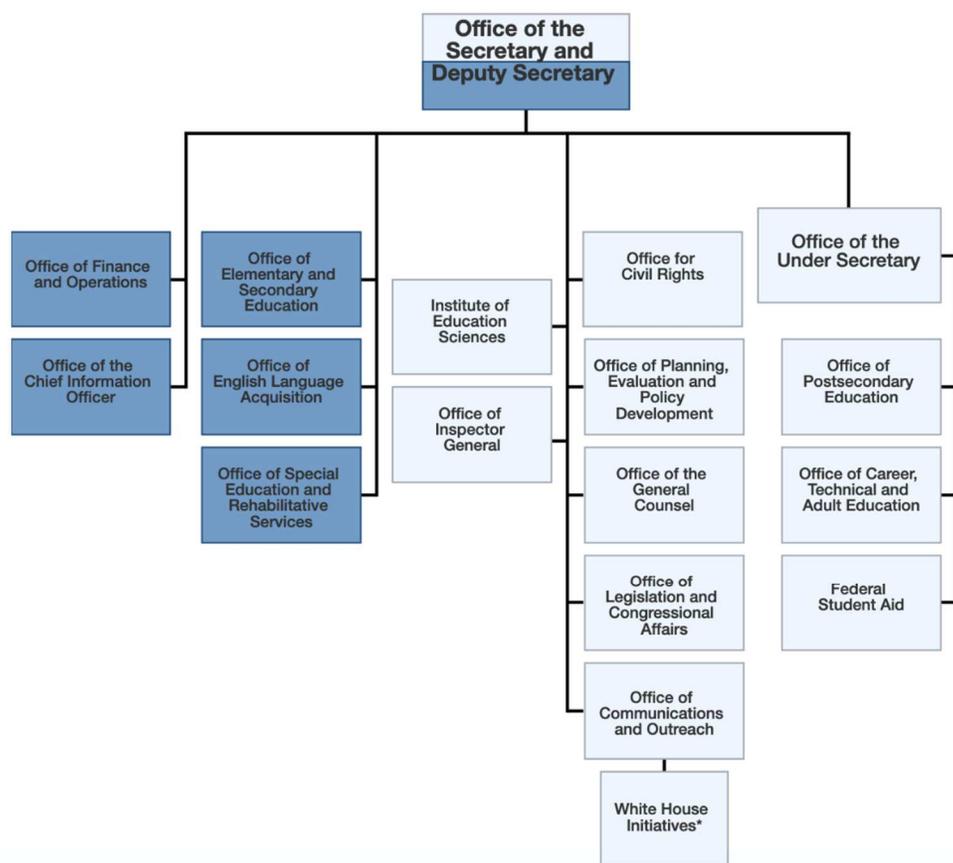
Crossing the Return Threshold

According to Campbell (1949), this stage is where the Hero may finally come to understand that, on a mystical level “the two kingdoms are actually one” (p. 217) even as the journey circles back to its origin. There must always remain, however, the integration of the consciousness and learnings of the Special World into what was once considered the Ordinary World. In the context of this study, this stage and the final two stages following it invite a closer

inspection as to the larger ecosystem—or, as Campbell (1949) might posit it, a metaphoric kingdom—within which disadvantaged students struggle to aspire. Here, this literature review begins to expand its aperture to encompass not only the Hero’s Journey from the perspective of the aspiring student, but also assessing the environmental realities of that endeavor.

The friction between capitalism and democratic access lies at the crux of the matter (Shumar, 1997). Two kingdoms, with divergent values, collide. When colleges and universities leverage a supply-and-demand mindset in their interactions with the public, the ever-expanding emphasis on selectivity leads to viewing students not as future citizens endeavoring to support the mutually beneficial goal of lifting the U.S. economy. Students are reduced to being seen as consumers. With the organizational change in the U.S. Department of Education recommended in Chapter 5 of this study, efforts between the Offices of Elementary and Secondary Education and Postsecondary Education—as well as the Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development—can be better coordinated to increase equitable college access.

Currently, U.S. educators from federal to local levels apply much time and effort into understanding often-disjointed college equity policies and initiatives (Cahalan et al., 2020; McDonough et al., 1997). As previously mentioned, the 10th amendment of the U.S. Constitution leaves education as a states’ rights issue, despite the fact that federal taxes have been allocated to the conception and maintenance of the U.S. Department of Education since 1867, when President Andrew Johnson initiated it. As the structure has evolved over time, departmental priorities and functionality become apparent, as revealed in Figure 15.

Figure 15*U.S. Department of Education Organizational Chart*

Note. From “Operating Structure,” by U.S. Department of Education, 2022, (<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/or/index.html>).

A significant takeaway from Figure 15 in the context of this literature review is that current leadership to promote U.S. college access splits into various divisions reporting to different administrators within the U.S. Department of Education. Offices may report to either the Office of the Secretary or the Office of the Deputy Secretary, and from there the organizational structures further diverge. As research shared in this study has shown, a connective thread between the secondary education experiences of U.S. students and the ecosystems within which they must assess their potential for aspiring to higher education is

needed. Increasing equity requires a cohesive and connected organizational structure. The Implications section of Chapter 5 of this study offers a detailed proposal for such modifications.

The Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, where access-related considerations impacting disadvantaged high school students are addressed, reports to the Deputy Secretary. On the far opposite side of the organizational chart, the Office of Postsecondary Education functions as a subdivision beneath the Office of the Under Secretary. This division operates within an entirely separate ecosystem with different leadership. Further, as established elsewhere in this study, the changing of administrations in the White House can disrupt efforts throughout the Department. Adding a deliberate bridge between these two offices, preferably one with a nonpartisan mission statement held inviolable beyond political machinations or agendas, will be recommended in Chapter 5 of this study.

In terms of Campbell's Crossing the Return Threshold, students' integration of the consciousness and learnings of the Special World into what was once considered ordinary can only be optimized when the systemic processes surrounding them are aligned to support the full process accordingly. This means that waning in-school supports and non-scalable nonprofit interventions are not the only areas needing to be addressed. Addressing kin networks and family capital, among other recommendations seen in Chapter 5, can empower more students to not only reach the Special World but to attain the actual boon and economic benefit they've worked so hard to attain.

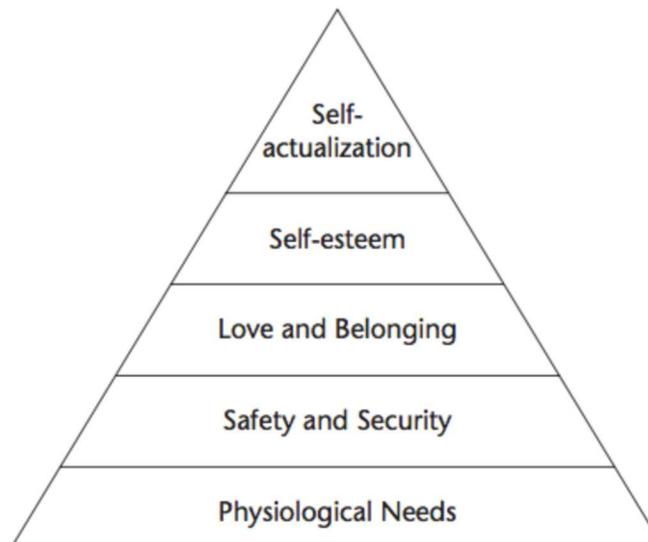
Master of Two Worlds

According to Campbell (1949), this stage is where the Hero has gained the ability to "lightly turn and leap from one position to another" (p. 229) as they transmute, transfigure, and assimilate as a "cosmic dancer" (p. 229) well equipped to live in both the Ordinary World and

the Special World while being tethered to neither. This portion of the Hero's Journey invites a deeper consideration of the two aspects of the sphere into which they now must integrate: the world of the U.S. job market and the world of the international job market directly impacting it. Although many college degrees offer intrinsic value in terms of the knowledge, critical thinking, and psychological advantages they provide, the extrinsic realities of economics drive the end game. This can be seen in the Hierarchy of Needs, Figure 16. Maslow framed his theory of human motivation around five collections of objectives, which are examined in his writing as basic needs. These relate to one other in a hierarchy of predominance. Only when the most inherent and pressing goal is realized does the next higher need arise. This view of humankind as "a perpetually wanting animal" (Maslow, 1943, p. 370) helps to explain why graduates seek a justifiable return-on-investment for any college degree for the time, effort, and financial costs undertaken. The hope for safety, love, self-esteem and self-actualization offer attractive outcomes, but without a clear and reliable way forward to secure the physiological need for food, shelter, and basic necessities, such higher-level needs in the hierarchy can fall to the wayside in favor of more readily accessible pathways, such as working for minimum wage in a family business (Bloom, 2007).

Figure 16

A Theory of Human Motivation: The Hierarchy of Needs



Note. From “A Theory of Human Motivation,” by A. H. Maslow, 1943, *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370. Public domain through Cambridge University Press.

Low-SES students passing through America’s public high schools are often stymied long before applications season begins in 12th grade. In fact, a deeper inquiry into international comparatives reveals that by the age of fifteen most already struggle at a disadvantage to position themselves. The lack of adequate mentorship and early encouragement to connect-the-dots from matriculation to economic security (McDonough & Calderone, 2006) may be a primary factor in such underperformance, along with family capital detriments and other dynamics already outlined in this literature review.

Freedom to Live

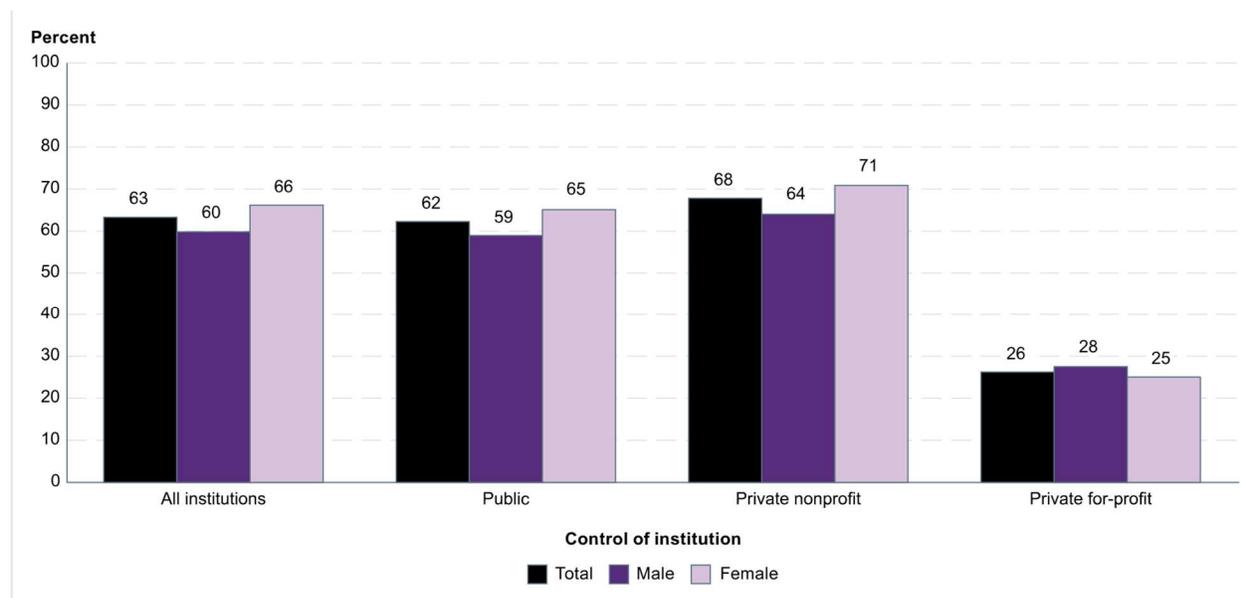
According to Campbell (1949) this final stage of the Hero’s Journey is the result of the “miraculous passage and return” (p. 238), where the goal of the journey is attained, dispelling life’s ignorance as one might cast off old clothing to wear something new. Because life exists not in isolation but in a state of interconnection, this concluding stage of the crossing from high

school into post-undergraduate status offers liberty to experience the benefits of the boon of matriculation. That freedom, however, is circumscribed by the governmental mechanisms that either support or impede the ability to fully integrate the knowledge from college into a new life of economic security and personal fulfillment, or as Maslow called it, self-actualization (Maslow, 1943).

To that point, not all students who risk and aspire make it through their undergraduate experiences to the fruition of a diploma. Only approximately 63% of students in 2019 beginning bachelor's degree programs at 4-year institutions in fall 2013 had accomplished degree attainment at the same institution within 6 years, as seen in Figure 17.

Figure 17

Graduation Rate Within 6 Years for Degree Completion by First-Time, Full-Time Students at 4-Year Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions

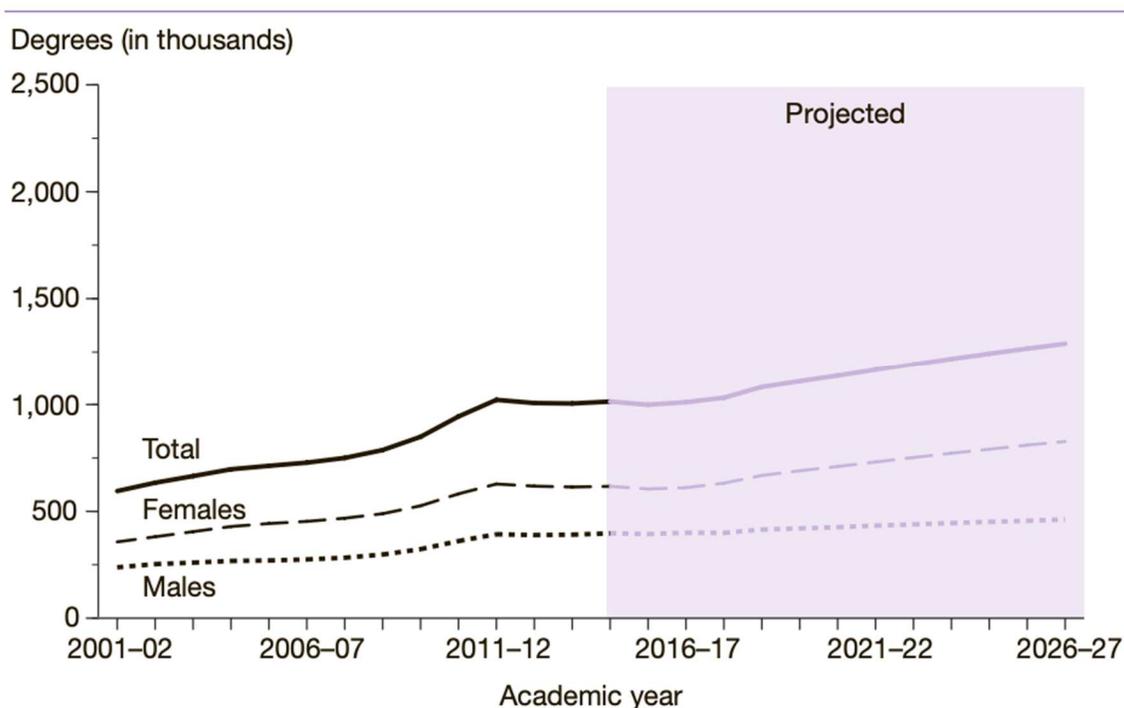


Note. From “The Condition of Education 2020,” by B. Hussar J. Zhang, S. Hein, K. Wang, A. Roberts, J. Cui, M. Smith, F. B. Mann, A. Barmer, & R. Dilig, 2020, The National Center for Education Statistics.

Notably, in the last century it has become common for both men and women to attend, with female attendance in the U.S. currently outpacing that of male counterparts. As seen in Figure 18, this trend is expected to continue.

Figure 18

Projected College Degrees by Gender



Note. From “Projections of Education Statistics to 2026,” by U.S. Department of Education, 2018, (<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED582074.pdf>).

Sociological factors predicate such projected trends, and beg questions about how higher education in the public consciousness has come to be positioned. Perceptions of the value of going to college in moving students upward across quintiles in economic circumstances occur across gender lines, economic factors, and racial demographics. According to recent research, for example, Black Americans and American Indians have markedly lower chances of upward

mobility and increased rates of downward mobility as compared to Whites, leading to persistent disparities across generations (Chetty et al., 2020).

Global Implications. The National Center for Education Statistics reports data that underscore the global implications of continuing on the U.S.'s current trajectory away from equitable access and attainment. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development administers the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which measures 15-year-old students' performance in mathematics, reading, and science literacy. These exams are administered once every 3 years. In 2018, PISA tests were taken in 79 countries. There were 30 nations with higher mathematics literacy scores than the U.S., 11 with higher science literacy scores, and eight with higher average reading literacy scores (Hussar et al., 2020). Concerns related to access matter not solely on the basis of fairness to individuals or social justice across the nation, but they bear significant implications in the U.S.'s position on the world stage in terms of academics, business, and economics.

With jobs having increasingly moved off-shore, U.S. industries have been sourcing qualified employees at reduced wages from non-U.S. countries to solve labor shortages in highly skilled areas. In general, this enables them to competitively strengthen their positions against foreign rivals. This occurs at the expense of supporting the U.S. economy with payroll dollars (Arndt, 1997). Economic philosophers have argued the perspective that global value chains are establishing a new frontier of human capital distribution. International economic shifts are increasingly requiring policy in individual nations to manage the influx and outflow of employment dollars within international organizations. With the imposition of tariffs and other regulatory mechanisms, countries seek to protect national competitiveness within a global system of innovation (Gereffi, 2019). Across myriad digital and traditional job sectors, the evolution of

the U.S. economy within its larger global context will most certainly be impacted by the levels of educational attainment of its workers.

Gaps and Inconsistencies in the Literature

The fiscal vulnerability of millions of U.S. high school students proves the need for change, but gaps in the literature remain. Since financial matters comprise a major impediment to college access for millions of economically disadvantaged students, the friction between capitalistic commodification of the postsecondary experience, and the societal need for equitable access to higher education needs to be further addressed. These gaps to be filled may include any or all of the following, each of which constitutes an area for further research: organizational change in the Department of Education; a deeper investigation of the potential for digital innovation—including Artificial Intelligence and virtual reality—to bolster counselor effectiveness; identification of sustainable economic modes for reduction of college tuition, including revised incentives for state investment in public institutions of higher education; restructuring of the Federal Student Aid office’s practices of levying unforgivable loans with interest; and identifying related policy levers for each of the preceding items in order to mitigate obstacles to student success.

Inconsistencies in the literature also exist. Whereas some researchers—generally those connected to the exam companies The College Board and ACT, Inc.—promote the importance and even necessity of higher education institutions continuing to require students to take the SAT or ACT, other educators like those at FairTest.org and others nonprofit organizations adamantly oppose such exams, calling them biased and unfair. Concerns about grade inflation on high school transcripts are unevenly distributed among those proposing criteria by which students should be evaluated. The role of demonstrated interest, which has largely become an algorithmic

mechanism by which colleges and universities track likelihood of student enrollment, is also inconsistently represented in the literature.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this quantitative ethnographic study was to investigate U.S. presidential communication choices regarding college access. This literature review has provided a broad exploration of existing literature related to the construct of college access in the U.S. as seen through the framework of Campbell's Hero's Journey. Discourse analysis has been identified as the means by which a deeper analysis may be pursued. With a goal to quantify presidential rhetoric, this study's mode of assessment will seek to reveal present assumptions informing policy, and inquire how policy flowing from that rhetoric might best operate from a clarified definition of the college access construct. With organizational change at various levels, from the U.S. Department of Education to state boards of education, local districts, schools, and classrooms, helping underserved students will require asking the right questions, and all of that must begin with linguistic lucidity. How, where, and when to deploy effective change can be assessed through practical application of theoretically-sound, data-driven initiatives. These may then strengthen what has been called the fragile road to access (Ahlman, 2019). The researcher will address this study's proposed way forward in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Chapter Overview

This chapter begins with context, and is organized using a theoretical structure called Jago's Six-Step Process for research studies. U.S. presidential references to the construct of college access is described using a postmodern paradigm. Quantitative Ethnography (QE) is established as the methodology by which the tool of ENA is deployed. The overarching investigation focused on narrative metaframes in presidential communication. This study's research methodology identifies rhetorical patterns in order to contribute to an increase in equitable postsecondary access.

Context

The purpose of this quantitative ethnographic study was to investigate U.S. presidents' communication choices regarding the construct of college access. By better understanding the semantics of the phrase as used in federal messaging, the researcher sought to clarify meaning to positively inform policy toward a more equitable future in terms of public high school students accessing the U.S. higher education system. In particular, published written communications and speeches communicated from U.S. presidents between 2009 and 2021 were included.

The RQ that guided this study was: How did U.S. presidents from 2009-2021 communicate a national narrative on the construct of college access? This primary RQ broke into one SQ: What observable trends appeared across time in such communications may have impacted social mobility for students from underserved populations?

Research Design

Ontologically, the researcher came to this work with the identity of a career educator seeking to describe phenomena in the field of college admissions. The inequitable experiences of

students considering whether to aspire toward higher education based on SES was the focus. The researcher sought to promote transformational leadership, believing that by U.S. presidents establishing common college access definitions within communications, the resulting Discourse could inform more effective actions at the U.S. Department of Education. With a working vocabulary of clarified constructs, the possibility of increased alignment toward equity was connected to what might informally be thought of as a college access play book. By determining the degree to which, if at all, such common definitions were lacking, a more socially just road ahead was targeted. The researcher's aim was to elucidate rhetoric in order to impact policy.

The principles for the organization of this chapter were structured according to Jago's Six-Step Process for determining theoretical goals within a research study (Jago, 2021). These steps included (a) the goal (b) the approach (c) the worldview (d) the methodology (e) the method and (f) the tools.

Figure 19

Jago's Six-Step Process



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Each step comprises a subsection of this section of the chapter.

Step 1: Goal

The goal of this study was to increase stakeholder understanding of the semantics of the construct of college access as used in U.S. presidential communications. The ways in which this phrase and its synonyms have come to be interpreted in higher education discourse centers around the friction between two polarities: archetypally heroic achievement due to individual determination despite an unlevel playing field, and a more meritocratic kind of achievement that arises within equitable circumstances. The first interpretation of college access invokes assumptions of individual responsibility, where the individual can attain anything with enough persistence (Mathews, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 1998). The second interpretation of college access focuses more on notions related to a societal commitment to meritocracy—that is, a “society in which people are chosen and moved into positions of success, power, and influence on the basis of their demonstrated abilities and merit” (Merriam-Webster, 2021b). The friction between these two interpretations lies in the fact that in order to demonstrate abilities and merit, students from low-SES backgrounds require supports within public education that have been proven insufficient for the task at hand (MacLeod, 2018; Manzoni & Streib, 2019; Soares, 2020).

Central to this conflict is that within U.S. capitalism, college itself has become a commodity. The commodification of higher education skews the access equation toward those able to, as Bello of Fairtest.org stated, “apply money to the problem” (Karmen, 2021). The applications of funds can include private tutoring, private schools, test preparation, independent educational consultants, and more. Politically, this raises the question of how federal stakeholders need to re-position priorities and policies in order to address inequities. Still, presidential rhetoric, behavior, and impact are, of course, only part of the equation. At the state level, disinvestment has become rampant, creating diminishing returns as students migrate out of

state to other regions for their college experiences, sometimes remaining elsewhere as they begin professional lives, sewing their social and economic capital into those locales. Regional implications flow from the state, just as state implications flow from the federal level. All trickle down and impact students at the grass root level.

A related question to the goal of this study was whether those employing the rhetoric of college access and its related construct of the American dream sufficiently acknowledge the reality that higher education has evolved to be a product. Status seeking drives students and their parents to pursue prestigious acceptances in what has evolved to connect acceptance to highly selective schools as a form of legitimization (Park et al., 2014; Schneider, 2009). These symbolic increases to reputation and respect drive countless economic realities along the K-12 to college corridor. Charter schools provide one example of the trend toward privatization. At the collegiate level, because both public and private institutions compete for student dollars within a marketplace buoyed by both federal and private student loans, a downward spiral has led to both societal and economic crises (McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Mortenson, 1990). As in all such predicaments, scarcity and surplus play roles in the evolution of the commodification.

The goal of this research addressed the challenge that education with the democratic system in the U.S. must straddle two needs: first for democratic fairness, and second for nurturing excellence in its academies. As requirements become more selective the process becomes less democratic, narrowing and skewing the field too often based not on intellect or potential, but on the economic status of the parents of the student (Kelly, 2008). Examples of this include costly SAT and ACT exams, with scores benefitting from pricey tutoring, and the ability of only some of the populace afford paid exams like those of the AP and IB programs.

On the other hand, opening the gates of universities to anyone who wants to be accepted risks what some are concerned could be a dumbing down of higher education (Carnevale & Rose, 2013; Chua, 2019; Henry, 1995). The contrast between academic standards and democratic expectations inextricably centers on economic principles. When learning is made so challenging as to exclude those from low-SES backgrounds, the human capital lost to the U.S. economy and society is difficult to quantify (Rosenbaum, 2001), sometimes resulting in career and trade as the sole pathway for what some call the “forgotten”. Other theorists (Lucas, 1998) note an “inverse relationship between democracy and distinction”, where “quantity and quality, forever mutually exclusive and irreconcilable, seem to be at war with one another” (p. 91).

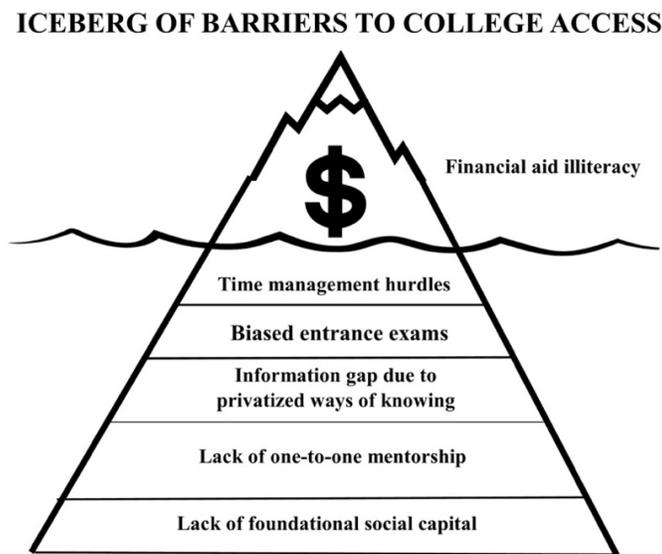
Whether colleges treat students as consumers directly impacts perceptions of the value of those academic experiences (Kane, 2010). While some consider America’s public education system a pipeline to nowhere, critics at the other end of the spectrum lament the fetishization of a college diploma as panacea for a world of problems across U.S. society. These advocates often point to career readiness through trade schools and alternate pathways as a solution (Burd, 2002). While avoiding reification of high academic performers, the assumption that low-SES students need not aspire to 4-year pathways falls far afield of the American dream construct, which asserts that there should be a level playing field for all (Hochschild, 1996).

Step 2: Approach

The study was viewed through a postmodern lens. Although form—that is, the structure of language—and content can be frequently fused in the minds of those giving and receiving communication, the postmodernist view is that these are functions of one another (Latta, 2019). The U.S. has for many years struggled to keep consistent constructivist mores in place within its sprawling higher education industry. With an anti-essentialist lens, all knowledge can be reduced

to a relationship between the known and the knower, and this becomes framed into meaning, mental concepts, ideas, and other linguistic articulations. The observer-observed structure means communicators must question the essence of things summoned by the words they use. While not all philosophers agree with such analytical breakdowns (Norby, 2014), these assessments offer a way to dissect meaning from often confused or conflated ideas, e.g., college eligibility versus college readiness, as delineated by thought leaders in the college access space (Conley, 2008, 2010, 2018). When a U.S. president references the construct of college access, it conjures one set of meanings for privileged populations and quite another based on the lived experiences of those from marginalized backgrounds.

Whereas Derridean philosophy questions the existence of meaning as derived from words at all, other postmodernists allow for nuance when assessing deconstructive approaches to problems. In the case of the construct of college access in the U.S., a more general tension is underscored in how this creates divergence between some students experiencing belonging and others experiencing not belonging (Biesta, 2005). Foundational to Derrida's deconstructionist thinking, a central inquiry of the impact of global university systems, particularly those in Europe, questioned the real-life ramifications of distance and proximity to what may be termed orthodox academia. Like numerous U.S.-based philosophers (DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009; McDonnell, 2005; Ogbu & Simons, 1998) Derrida rethought the purpose and function of the university, with an analysis of its context in terms of globalization. The advent of so-called late capitalism can be seen within higher education context as a readjustment of economic market realities, intensified concurrent to the commodification and commercialization of higher learning. See Figure 20, where the researcher offers a diagram describing both the conspicuous and hidden barriers to access.

Figure 20*Iceberg Model of Barriers to College Access*

Note. From an original concept created by the researcher.

Just as holding a map without a knowledgeable captain holding a reliable compass can be meaningless, so too is merely addressing the tip of the iceberg seen in Figure 20 insufficient to prevent titanic disaster. The financial barrier to access results from at least five tiers of contributing subfactors. Each requires addressing, which in part explain the complexities of the college access dilemma.

Step 3: Worldview

This worldview of this study centered on social justice, a subset of a category called transformative worldviews (Creswell, 2017), each of which presents a belief that “research inquiry needs to be intertwined with politics and a political agenda to confront social oppression at whatever levels it occurs” (p. 9). With transformative leadership and research, the intention of the study was to provoke change at a systemic level. The asymmetry of power relationships

leading to asymmetry of knowledge was seen as addressable. As the domination of a western, male, White ethos has increasingly been called into question in the ivory tower of higher education, the strategy of inquiry in this study questioned assumptions and resultant narratives, including, as mentioned earlier, factors impacted by coloniality.

Step 4: Methodology

This study undertook discourse analysis of data drawn from presidential communications occurring between 2009 and 2021. The rationale was to tether a postmodern assessment of such communications to real-world implications. Words were segmented, and a subsequent review of how they were used in context was assessed to clarify implications. This discourse analysis asked questions about how particular constructs were being defined, and why. The substance of communication can be missed when analysis is based on isolated words, phrases, or sentences alone. Comprehending how information is packaged requires a nuanced, complete understanding of the structures of discourse, and is dependent upon recognizing the grammatical devices that comprise it.

Some theorists (Georgakopoulou & Goutsos, 1997) assert that all discourse constitutes more than “a string of undifferentiated sentences”, and is rather “a whole with interrelated parts” (p. 190). As all knowledge builds upon previous understanding, it is interesting to note that within public school systems, the name given to disparate objectives in various classes is “strands”. There is an intrinsic understanding within school systems that a weaving together of numerous threads of information is necessary to move the student from, for instance, basic mathematics to calculus and statistics. Communications of U.S. presidents impacting the experiences of students and teachers on the front lines of the battle for college access were assessed in two ways. These included both the words deployed and the connections among them.

Although words without action denote little, with deeds combined they can lead to effective change.

Narrative Performance. Through discourse analysis, the presidents' words in this study were assessed as narrative performances within their socio-cultural context. That is, written and spoken communications were segmented. Empirical evidence was used to observe patterns of rhetoric. Often these narratives connected to grand tropes, most commonly related to upward social mobility and constructs related to the American dream.

As one example of such contextual performance of rhetoric, the trend for U.S. presidents as they expressed perspectives on the purpose of education has evolved to move from framing it as a civic responsibility to emphasizing education in terms of economic efficiency (Carpenter, 2005). Such a market-based approach is not without its disadvantages, not the least of which is skewing the playing field in many of the ways expressed in Chapter 2 of this study.

Methodologically, this study intended to leverage discourse analysis to point the way telling to a better, more attainable story, and then to propose equipping policy with effective economic levers for solving the barriers impeding progress. But: it was understood that equitable college access starts with telling the right story. And: that story could no longer fall back on worn-out rhetoric of the American dream and pulling oneself up by the bootstraps. The time for a new, better story had arrived.

Social Linguistics. Discourse analysis exists as a subset within the larger study of linguistics. The complicated relationships between language and discourse within the educational setting can veer toward the ideological when not kept in check. Within analyses of those communicating in the public arena, whether in written or spoken form, exists an ethical responsibility to uncover and investigate any ideologies implicated. As has been noted, imbedded

rhetorical manipulations can lead to preferential outcomes for certain demographic groups while disadvantaging others (Gee, 1996).

Dominant Culture. The story of education as a remedy to create individual social and economic mobility must be viewed as both result and promoter of the beliefs of the dominant culture. Narratives frequently emerge in society through authoritative means (Isseks, 2017). In context of this study, dominant culture can be broadly understood to incorporate gatekeepers at colleges and universities as well as stakeholders across the U.S. education system whose words, actions, and policies trickle down to individual students, with real-life implications.

Fragmented Ideologies. Research has shown what Isseks (2017) calls “incoherence and fragmentation in the courses of action of those trying to do the work of effecting change” (p. 50). The intersections of these fragmented ideologies and social norms are then broadcast across the mainstream in media, film, TV, and classroom interactions, leading in some cases to extreme behaviors on the part of even the most savvy parents as they attempt to help their teenagers navigate the labyrinth (Karmen, 2021). The challenge of such fragments, just as plot points on a map, is that they fail to envelop the broad scope of factors necessary to move the needle toward more equitable terrain. As this study approached its RQs related to the U.S.’s college access dilemma, it explored how language was functioning. To that end, this study assessed both micro and macro elements of the RQs presented. Several myths contribute to these limitations, including the Great Equalizer Myth and the Selectivity Myth.

The Great Equalizer Myth. Breaking down challenges in the Hero’s Journey of disadvantaged students moving toward higher education attainment, from the perspective of fragmentalism the ideals of a fair and democratic society are implicated (Isseks, 2017). Over the past several decades, dominant U.S. discourse “has coalesced around a *Great Equalizer* narrative

of education; that is, it has identified schools as the primary means through which individuals can achieve social mobility” (Isseks, 2017, p. 49). The myth that any school across the U.S. can equalize the plethora of socioeconomic disparities leads to a false perception, and impedes progress on a collective theory of change. Isseks (2017) indicts this as “a fragmented common sense amongst teachers, politicians, scholars and activists” (p. 49).

Until a recent career readiness trend displaced college-for-all rhetoric as already discussed in Chapter 2 of this study, few questioned higher education as a primary mechanism for upward socioeconomic mobility (Lefkowitz, 2005), with Rosenbaum as an early exception (Rosenbaum, 2001). And while it is true that any person of the required minimum age with a high school diploma or General Education Development can apply to colleges or universities, students must be informed, motivated, and able to pay the costs of attendance, or lofty rhetoric about the value of college is meaningless and a nonstarter. For millions, taking on student debt has been seen as their only option (Duncheon & Relles, 2019; Manzoni & Streib, 2019). Significant barriers to entry, in particular financial hurdles, exist entirely apart from a student’s intellect, school performance, or potential. The narrative of education as a great equalizer falls short of acknowledging and addressing the complex ecosystems within which disadvantaged students navigate. Through the lens of fragmentalism, the individual factors impacting and impeding equity can be assessed and then placed within their larger context in order to promote efficacious policies and procedures moving forward.

The Selectivity Myth. A national preoccupation with selectivity is evidenced by the fact that although more than 50% of colleges accept more than half of all applicants, a small slice of the over 3,000 4-year colleges and universities gathers both headlines and applicants (NCES, 2017). An old chestnut attributed to Groucho Marx states he did not want to be a member of any

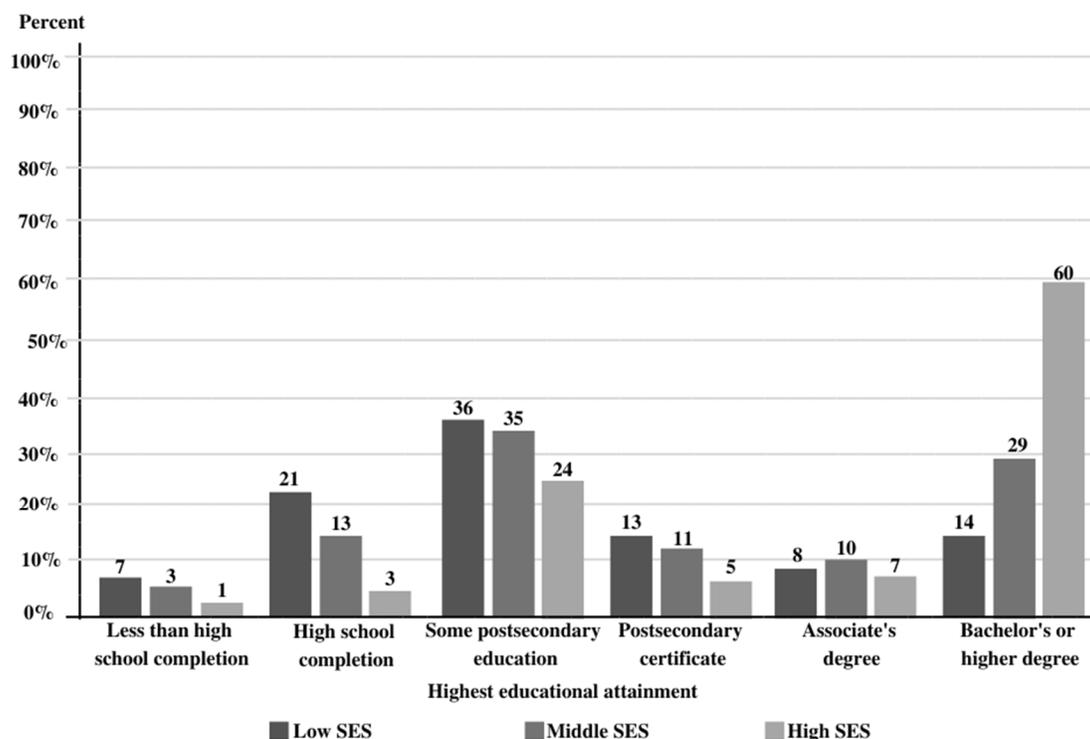
club that would have him, and this sentiment applies within elite circles of higher education. Through the fragmentalism lens, the narrative of prestige in selective college admissions reaffirms the U.S. obsession with status (Tough, 2019). Terminology used to describe such institutions of higher education includes elite, exclusive, selective, and highly selective (Selingo, 2013), and emphasizes a hyper-awareness of education as competition: a race to be won, battle to be fought, or hill to be climbed.

Financial implications largely drive such perceptions. In general, the more brand recognition a school has, the more likely its yield will be high. Yield, a very important economic indicator in the collegiate business model, is an equation defined as the percentage of students accepting and attending a particular school compared to the number admitted (Tough, 2019). Many social justice advocates express concerns about this trend, which has led to nonprofit initiatives committed to raising awareness (McDonough, 1998; Roderick et al., 2009). One example, Colleges That Change Lives, introduces students through its website and events to small liberal arts colleges that they might otherwise never have had on their radar (Colleges That Change Lives, 2021). Meanwhile, students whose parents have enough economic privilege to place them in private schools with GPA support and test prep tutors while underwriting full tuition anywhere they may want to attend tend to occupy most of the seats at Ivy League and the top 20% of institutions on the U.S. News and World Report's annual Best Colleges edition (NCES, 1995).

Despite the great equalizer and selectivity myths, gaining admission and sustaining perseverance through degree attainment significantly correlates with economic advantage, and the likelihood of completing college degree attainment strongly favors those from higher SES levels. See Figure 21.

Figure 21

Longitudinal Study of Likelihood of Degree Attainment Based on Socioeconomic Status



Note. From “Postsecondary Attainment: Differences by Socioeconomic Status,” by National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015, (https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_tva.pdf).

Class and Access. Assertions of class-based preferences being allotted to wealthy, mostly White students are not uncommon (Damico, 2016; Lareau, 2011). The argument that certain institutions of higher education should be only attended by those with privileged backgrounds rather than opening opportunity to others constitutes an elitist view still seen in some wealthy communities (Tough, 2019). While the beliefs being presented to students in public high schools emphasize academic merit and dedication to scholastic endeavor, the happenstance of SES status can play as great a role in outcomes as anything the student does or does not do (Chetty et al., 2017; Chetty et al., 2020). One such opinion (Lucas, 1998) was expressed this way: “In an

egalitarian environment, the influx of mediocrities relentlessly lowers the general standards at colleges to levels the weak ones can meet” (p. 161). Such perspectives persist, favoring notions of keeping higher education from becoming lower by not allowing standards of admission to become “fatally compromised”; the concurrent lament being that “there seems to be an inverse relationship between democracy and distinction” (p. 91). Parallel philosophers who support that type of contention date all the way back to Ancient Greece. Aristotle is said to have estimated that only a small percentage of young men was capable of critical thinking and learning, and believed that higher learning should be held exclusive to the elite with ancient lineage (Lear, 1988). In a manner of speaking, expressions of societal elitism surrounding higher education is far from a modern phenomenon. Its roots extend back into classical antiquity.

Step 5: Method

This study utilized a Quantitative Ethnographic process. The researcher began with document analysis, moved on to coding, and then made meaning from patterns discovered through use of ENA. It was anticipated that these discoveries may support refinement in future communications, and a greater likelihood of policy change at the governmental level.

Location and Types of Data. The years of data assessed were mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive, to include all federal communications, both written and oral, from U.S. presidents from January 20, 2009 to October 15, 2022. Included were all statements that included the literal phrase “college access” or synonymous constructs as evidenced by their usage in context. These were accessed through federal websites, including www.ed.gov, www.govinfo.gov/, and www.federalregister.gov/. A list of approved synonyms is available.

Tools. In order to assess usage of the construct of college access at the federal level, after IRB approval the researcher mathematized ethnographic structures. The methodology used, QE,

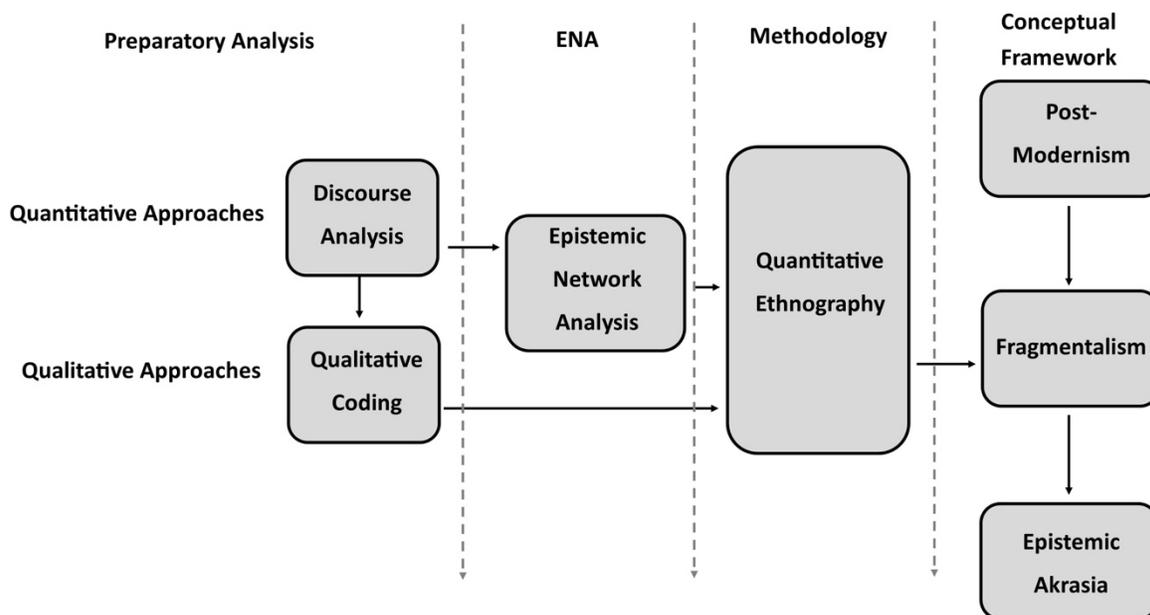
laid the foundation to code using ENA. That is, ENA as a software tool enabled operationalization of QE. Although this process involved both qualitative and quantitative elements, this process was dissimilar from mixed methods. In mixed method studies, the qualitative and quantitative elements can be separated and are divisible. While chemical mixtures can separate, compounds cannot—thus it is with QE: the qualitative coding and analysis will be intrinsically and indivisibly connected to the quantitative discoveries connected to such investigation.

This QE resembled a compound in that extricating one element from the other could not occur. The essence of the ethnography and the mathematical analysis was that they relied upon one another and could not exist independently. In thinking through how to describe the federal expression of college access using QE methodology, this study parsed syntactical use of phrases and ideas in sentences, and then expanded to encompass an analysis of the narrative meta-frames accompanying them. For example, the construct of the American dream as metanarrative was addressed. Of interest, related phrases sometimes drew from sporting and war analogy, connoting both the values and assumptions underlying how U.S. presidents frame the form and function of higher education for its citizens: as a competition.

Figure 22 outlines how the ENA tool was utilized within the QE study, with its related conceptual frameworks.

Figure 22

Process by Which ENA Was Used in This Study



Methodological Approach Using the ENA Tool. Discourse analysis enables the study of language as related to the social context within which it appears. Language concribes meaning in real life situations. Whereas one word related to higher education often has numerous meanings, less often does one meaning have only one word. The purposes and effects of words, phrases, and the concepts to which they refer requires examination in order to lay the foundation for effective analysis.

Cultural conventions of communication can convey more than literal information—they can also reveal the ways values, beliefs, and assumptions are communicated (Sosa, 2009). In terms of the postsecondary access landscape, language has historically incorporated social, political, and economic elements to express the intended context. It is this context more than the words themselves that confers trust, creates skepticism, elicits emotions, manages disagreements, or promotes change.

This methodological approach seeks to enable a connection between words spoken or written and ensuing federal stances or official policy. In the past, a central barrier to the usefulness of qualitative methods was the strong preference of industry stakeholders and policymakers for quantitative methodologies (Hoy & Adams, 2015). Prior to QE, a study like this would have been problematic, but with ENA the mathematization of language can lead to innovative research that promotes discourse analysis in concrete ways.

Discourse analysis both addresses and intervenes in societal issues on the basis that language is the mode by which people make meaning of their world (Gee, 2014). Using the concept of Discourse with a capital D, language can be seen as an instrument able to bring power to both perceptions and policy. According to Foucault, this capital D Discourse integrates ways of saying (informing), doing (action), and being (identity; Foucault, 1973). Whereas discourse—small d—refers to language at its most basic levels of usefulness, this study theorized how presidential utterances and writings have been and can be viewed in larger context, as they relate to broader institutional Discourses.

Setting and Sample

The setting for this study was entirely virtual, with no in-person research to be conducted. The sample for this analysis was accessed online, to include all presidential communication referencing the phrase “college access” or its approved synonyms. Inclusion criteria required communications start between the first day of the Obama presidency: January 20, 2009, and ended no later than October 15, 2021, the last day of this study, which was approximately nine months into the Biden administration. The researcher thoroughly reviewed 120 relevant articles and speeches, each of which was one to twenty pages in length. Websites used in data collection included the White House website, the Federal Register website, and govinfo.gov.

Human Subject Considerations

This study qualified as exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and (b)(3). Because it focused only on publicly accessible, published communications from U.S. presidents, human subject considerations were not relevant. Each speaker or author was fully and accurately credited in the study, including the date and context of all communications. No physical, psychological, social or legal risks occurred. According to IRB protocols, research on behavior in research may employ spoken or written history, including assessing language, cognition, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, motivation, identity, perception, and social behavior. This study covered these elements, but solely within the context of discourse analysis.

Instrumentation

The methodology for this study, QE, utilized the tool of ENA. The researcher first encountered both the QE methodology and the ENA tool through Professor Eric Hamilton, who invited her to attend and present at an event sponsored by the National Science Institute in April 2019 on the campus of Pepperdine University in Malibu, California. ENA as a software tool enabled operationalization of QE.

History of ENA

ENA is a tool of QE, a term coined by Dr. David Shaffer at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. It is featured in his 2017 book by the same name (Shaffer, 2017). QE as a research method leverages statistical models with mathematical techniques for data visualization to provide what Shaffer terms “thick description” in qualitative analyses that quantifies the development of epistemic frames (ICQE, 2019). The original purpose of these frames was to understand complexities in communities of practice (Wenger, 1999). ENA today is used to

quantify structural connections, constitute complex thinking, and elucidate discourse in numerous fields, including history, healthcare, and systems engineering.

Validity

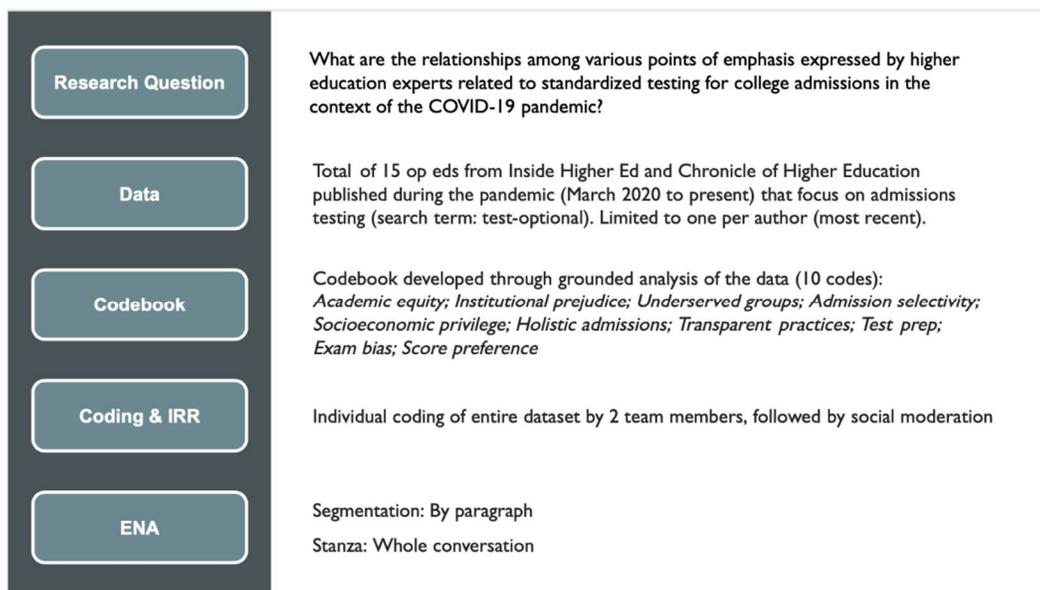
Validity describes the extent to which a study's method measures what it purports. Instruments with demonstrated evidence of validity are preferable to those lacking such evidence. There are numerous types of validity, including both internal and external. Internal validity establishes a causal relationship between variables being studied, and external validity establishes the ability to generalize conclusions to other people, time, and/or contexts. The objective of this study's research was to identify rhetorical patterns in presidential communications that could be both internally and externally validated. Whether causality could be plausibly argued or not, direct connections between what was said or written and real-life implications were considered. Externally, an assessment across time frames for different speakers and writers sought to discover patterns in outcomes to establish whether a level of generalizability existed.

The validity of the ENA tool connects to its way of representing outcomes. The graphs resulting from ENA reveal proportionate emphasis of codes and the relationships between them. That is: the various constructs identified in the discourse analysis are investigated not just for their appearance or existence, but also for their inter-relatedness with other codes. Each construct is known as a node. Nodes are able to be assessed in ENA with weighted density, which is computed through a series of linkages this software was developed to represent. These densities are constituted by the relative thickness of the lines as well as the distance between the nodes, as will be seen in the figures populating Chapter 4.

Mathematically, the weighted density is calculated through ENA as the square root of the summation of the squares of the relationships between individual elements in a particular inquiry. In this way, ENA provides a measure of the overall significance of association of the network, identifying a dense core within the graph, and then representing the epistemic frame from that point (Shaffer, 2017). Figure 24 to Figure 26 show a series of four slides from one of the researcher's recent ENA studies, to offer an example of how the instrument may inform investigation and assessment. Dr. Seung Lee partnered in collaboration on this research, which was presented live in the QE Data Challenge to international colleagues as hosted by the University of Wisconsin, Madison on Zoom on April 25, 2021. The topic of this presentation was "The Pandemic's Impact on College Admissions Criteria in the United States."

Figure 23

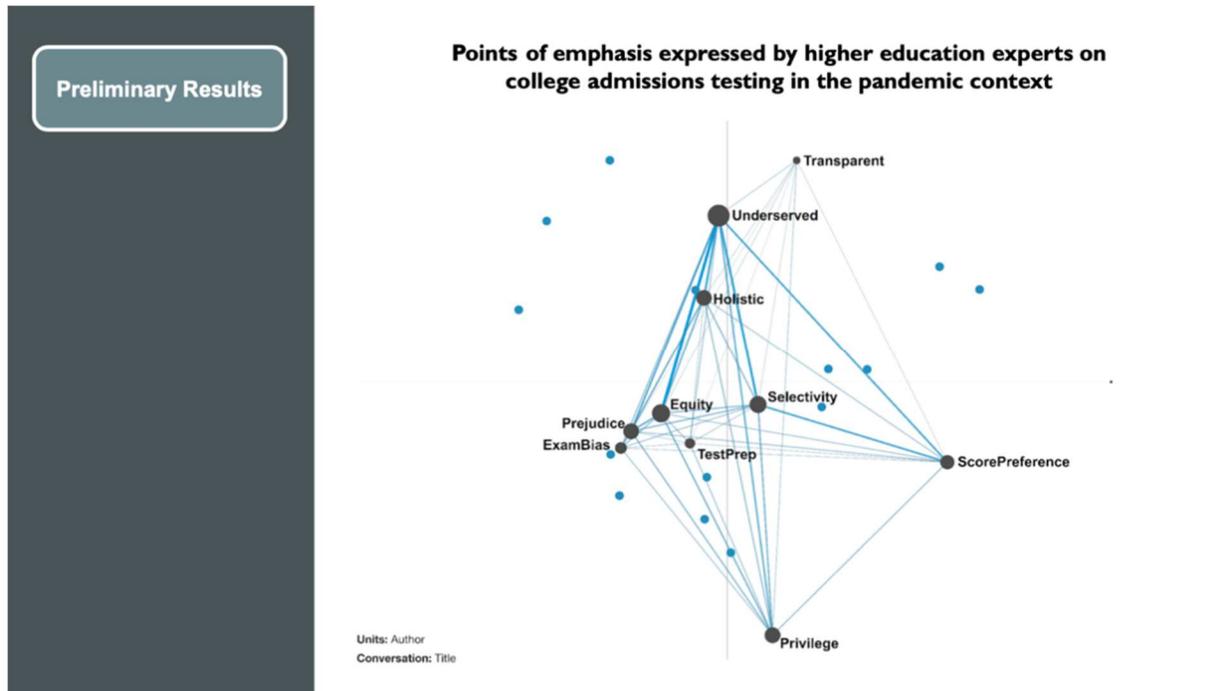
Sample Overview of an ENA Study



Note. From "The Pandemic's Impact on College Admissions Criteria in the United States," by S. Lee and the researcher, 2021. Copyright QE Data Challenge, University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Figure 24

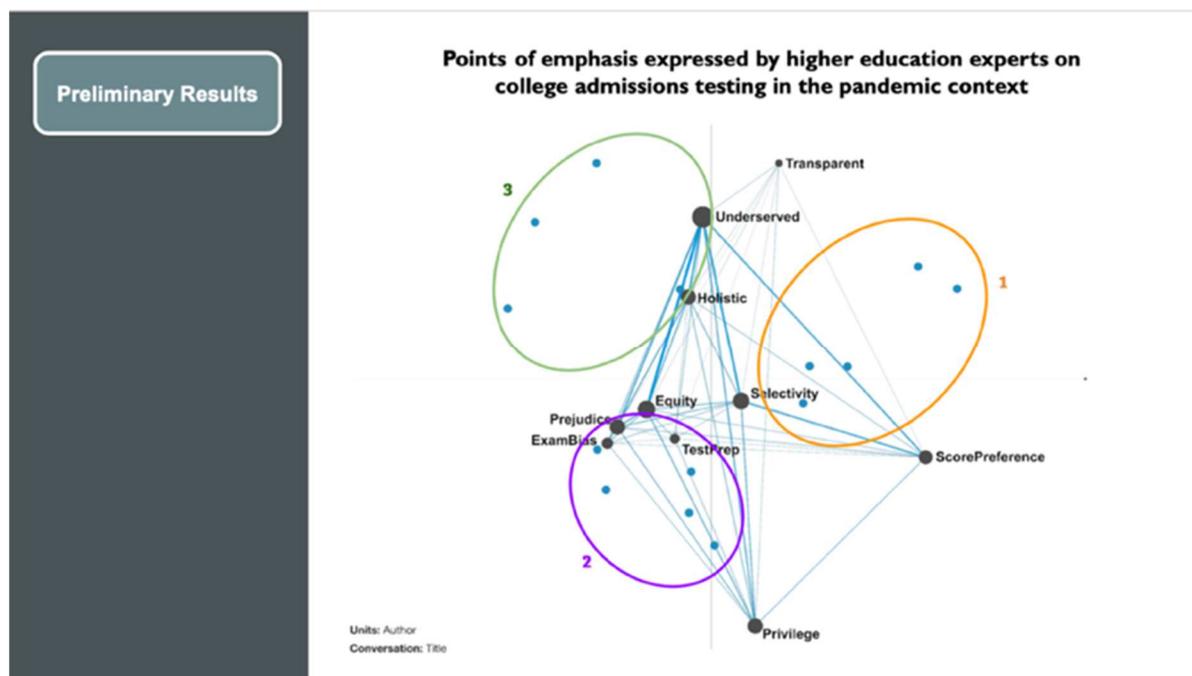
Nodes and Weighted Density in an ENA Study



Note. From “The Pandemic’s Impact on College Admissions Criteria in the United States,” by S. Lee and the researcher, 2021. Copyright QE Data Challenge, University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Figure 25

Clustered Observations

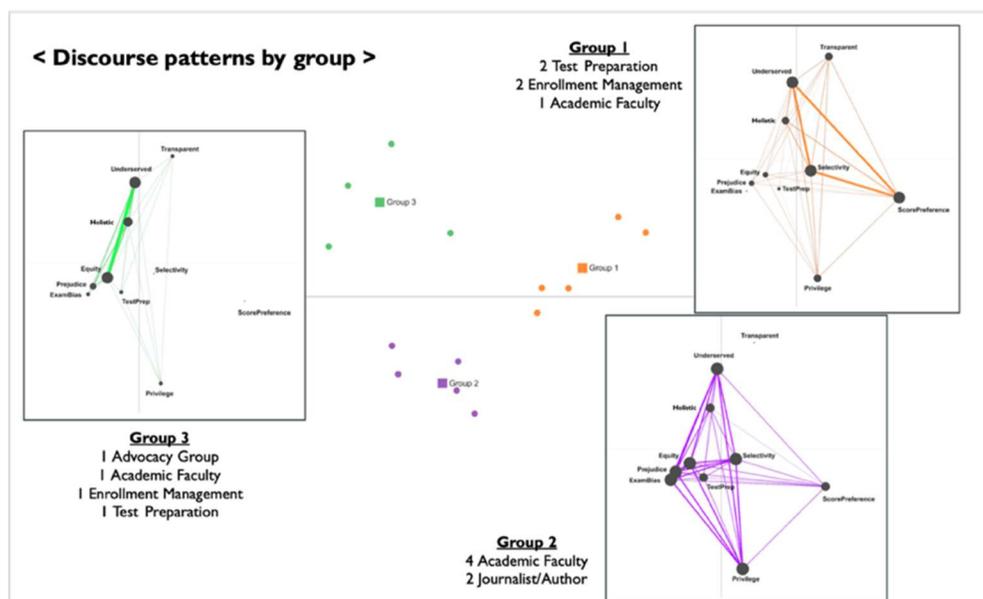


Note. From “The Pandemic’s Impact on College Admissions Criteria in the United States,” by S. Lee and the researcher, 2021. Copyright QE Data Challenge, University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Figure 25 demonstrates three categories of higher education experts, as seen in colored circles. Each dot represents a different author.

Figure 26

Patterns of Discourse as Seen in an ENA Study



Note. From “The Pandemic’s Impact on College Admissions Criteria in the United States,” by S. Lee and the researcher, 2021. Copyright QE Data Challenge, University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Figure 26 demonstrates a visual representation of discourse patterns, with an ability to draw inferences based upon which type of stakeholders populated each clustered group of communications. The researcher approached this dissertation anticipating the ability to compare and contrast discourse patterns for communications from U.S. presidents in a similar fashion.

Reliability

Reliability is the degree to which a study consistently measures what it seeks to measure without measurement error. Instruments with demonstrated evidence of reliability are preferable to those lacking such evidence. There are two types of reliability: stability and equivalence. Stability reliability occurs when a test followed by a retest results in the same outcome. Equivalence reliability occurs when there is internal consistency. Cronbach’s alpha as a statistic is used to measure inter-item reliability, indicating results intended to remain stable over time.

The reliability of the ENA tool leverages equivalence reliability in that interrater reliability is a necessary part of the coding process. Two separate researchers code the same data set, and then meet to agree, disagree, or modify each Code in order to establish a unified result. The results from an interrater reliability check are based on two raters who examined all coded expressions. The agreement between the two raters determines the level of reliability.

Two research assistants participated, JR and JH. Comparisons made during this study revealed disagreement between JR and the lead researcher in 6.27% of codes for one set of speeches and documents. Between JH and the lead researcher, the disagreement level was comparable, at 6.35% of codes requiring a second review. The starting point, prior to inter-rater reliability confirmation, showed an overall average of 93.69% agreement between the lead researcher and the two research assistants. At the time of inter-rater reliability confirmation, social moderation was then utilized. Before a final spreadsheet was prepared to upload to the Epistemic Network Analysis software, all variations in coding were reviewed, ending with either defense or concession by both parties.

Data Collection

Informed consent must be obtained from all persons prior to their participation in research, according to federal regulations, unless the IRB grants exemption. Because this study solely focused on publicly communicated and/or published statements, no human subject considerations were necessary. The step-by-step process by which this study collected data was as follows. For ten weeks, the researcher retrieved 120 documents, including both written communications and transcripts of speeches that were delivered, from federal resources. Published communications included public papers of the Presidents of the United States at gov.info, The White House at whitehouse.gov, and National Archives at archives.gov.

Documents researched included remarks, briefings, public speeches, executive orders, proclamations, State of the Union addresses, inaugural addresses, and weekly addresses from January 2009 through October 2021. The Federal Register and Govinfo.gov were consulted to ensure no relevant communications were missed.

Appendix B of this manuscript describes the process of identifying which data were and were not available. Email communications between the researcher and the National Archives and Records Administration, the U.S. Department of Education, and the Library of Congress are included.

Data Management

No physical artifacts were anticipated. Any such items that could arise would have been stored in a password protected zip file in order to protect them. Secure coding standards of implementation would have been utilized to minimize risk and protect data input, including the destruction of all original data collected, including Excel spreadsheets and CSV files, after 3 years poststudy.

Password access was used on all computers being utilized for this study—that of the lead researcher and those of the two colleagues helping with the interrater duties. The code book was kept as a master list on a secure network through digital means only, with no hard copies created. The researcher's thoughts, assessments, and resulting intellectual property are legally secured by copyright with the publication of this manuscript.

Data Analysis

The ENA Process

The researcher defined codes to be used in a code book. This code book was structured using an Excel spreadsheet. Rows were comprised of individual portions of particular

communications, broken into subsets for both written documents spoken-word statements. All rows had to meet inclusion criteria: that the excerpt occurred within 150 words, before or after, a reference to the construct college access as defined elsewhere in this study. Columns were comprised of individual codes, which arose from the study. These were words or phrases that most commonly occurred as related to the central RQ. A series of 1's and 0's populated the Excel spreadsheet, with 1 identifying when a construct did appear in a given piece of communication, and 0 identifying its absence.

The researcher and two research associates collaborated to socially moderate these codes, removing any irrelevant columns and seeking agreement on the structure of the code book in terms of its rows, columns, and definitions. They sought and identified unified definitions in written form in a separate section of their collaboration. When infrequent disagreements arose about the existence or absence of a particular construct, they referred back to the mutually agreed-upon definitions of each in the code book. When complete, the Excel spreadsheet was converted to a CSV (comma separated values) file, and uploaded to the ENA website at www.epistemicnetwork.org in order to process graph generation.

ENA

In this study, the researcher applied Epistemic Network Analysis (Shaffer, 2017; Shaffer, 2016) to data using the ENA1.7.0 (Swiecki, 2019) Web Tool (version 1.7.0). A total of 109 communications from U.S. presidents between 2009-2021 met the inclusion criteria. These comprised the corpus for the study. The researcher used ENA to create visualization models from the coded elements.

Epistemic Frame Theory states that epistemic frames are important to understanding the discourse of a culture, and that connections are important, not just the core components. In the

context of discourse analysis, beyond individual occurrences of particular words and phrases, the ability to see and analyze the structures of connections between them becomes central.

ENA offers a method using quantitative ethnography in a way that demonstrates data's structural connections. ENA asserts that: (a) sets of meaningful features in data can be systematically identified as codes; (b) this data has a local structure that can be conceived as conversations; and (c) the ways in which codes connect to one another within conversations important provides an opportunity to make meaning (Shaffer, 2017; Shaffer et al., 2016). ENA represents connections by calculating codes' co-occurrence within conversations, and creates visualizations for each unit of analysis by quantifying a weighted network of cooccurrences. This results in a set of comparable networks, with visual and statistical contrasts.

At the time of ENA's development, it was deployed to model theories of cognition, discourse, and culture. Seemingly isolated aspects of experiential knowledge are able to be linked through theoretical frameworks that helped to develop systematic understanding. Similar to a knowledge web, ENA's visualizations represent a range of ideas and the connections among them. In fact, learning itself can be characterized as the developing of an epistemic frame—a pattern connecting mental habits, knowledge, other cognitive features (Shaffer, 2017).

In the context of this study, presidential communications were examined in order to assess similar and dissimilar modes of framing, assessing, and solving the complex problem of improving college access. Although ENA was originally designed as a tool supporting learning analytics, it has subsequently been implemented to analyze (a) operative performances of surgery trainees during a simulated procedure (Swiecki, 2019); (b) the coordination of human gazes during collaborative work (Ruis, 2018); and (c) health care teams' communications (Wooldridge, 2018), among numerous other applications.

ENA has been shown in numerous peer-reviewed works across various sectors to be a suitable technique for any study within which meaning can be found in the structure of connections. The central assumption of the method posits that data's structure of connections offers relevant information in analysis. This study considered it an advantageous method for modeling presidential rhetoric because it could show relationships among commonly referenced constructs in both written and oral communications as they have occurred across time and administrations.

Qualitative Coding

Up to the point of the coding process, this was a qualitative study. Quantitative Ethnography offered a methodological approach wherein formatting the data enables turning the qualitative information into information that is quantifiable. The ability to codify, label, and annotate the data with codes in this study permitted not only exploration of rhetorical patterns but also an ability to interpret actual data resulting from that discovery process.

Unit of Analysis

A determination was made to read full documents of all communications meeting the inclusion criteria, although the unit of analysis would need to be much smaller. Full documents were compiled, highlighted, annotated, and organized. Thereafter, the unit of analysis for coding consisted of excerpts as described below, rather than full documents. This decision enabled contextual analysis, where ENA helped to reveal rhetorical proximity between related constructs in order for patterns to emerge. Specificity was required in order to not dilute the outcomes. For example, "upward mobility" may have appeared in a 5-page document, but the study concerned itself with how that connected to other codes. In ENA's nodes, using 150-word units of data, those connections were able to be surmised.

Research Criteria

Presidents speak and write each and every day, and most but not all of what they communicate is captured and made available. For example, although official communications are conveyed, less formal presentations—say, a speech at a local children’s event—may not be recorded and disseminated either online or elsewhere. Because it was logistically impossible to review 100% of spoken or written communication by the presidents under consideration, this study determined to focus upon the angle of official communications only. “Official” in this context was defined as only those communications conveyed on .gov websites as pertaining to the formal activities of the presidents. The reason for this focus centered on the intended outcome: an ability to assess the connection—or possible disconnect—between saying and doing, or between talking politics and promoting policy.

The study included research of all presidential remarks and speeches, actions, executive orders, memoranda, and proclamations during a given time frame. Online government resources were visited and searched. Published communications included public papers of the Presidents of the United States at gov.info and The White House at whitehouse.gov. Documents researched included remarks, briefings, public speeches, State of the Union addresses, inaugural addresses, executive orders, proclamations, and weekly addresses from January 2009 through October 2021. The Federal Register and Govinfo.gov were consulted to ensure no relevant communications were missed.

The researcher created metatags for the study in order to facilitate analysis of particular categories of comparative factors attached to the excerpt. The full list of metatags for the study included: Date, Year, Document ID, Written or Spoken Communication, which Administration, and Before or After Inclusion Criteria Phrase. These permitted the ability to compare, for

example, points of emphasis in oral speeches as compared to written communication or differences as viewed across time.

Inclusion Criteria

Only written or spoken communications from U.S. presidents between January 20, 2009 and October 15, 2021 were included in the data set, and the phrase “college access” or its approved synonyms had to appear in order for the speech or written communication to become part of the study.

Approved Synonyms

In order to corral the numerous phrases and variety of expressions related to presidential rhetoric pertaining to college access, a grounded approach was utilized wherein a list of approved synonyms was curated and collaboratively collated among the three members of the research team. Approved synonyms were discovered through assessing the variation in the ways rhetoric fluctuated while conveying related constructs. The following list shows all approved synonyms that appeared in the study’s corpus. For the purposes of this study, the words “college” or “university” were considered equated to and synonymous with “postsecondary education” or “higher education,” except where technical or vocational tracks were explicitly referenced. Furthermore, where verbs preceded those phrases, all conjugations of approved synonyms were included. For example, “graduate from college” was included, as were “graduating from college” and “graduated from college.” Plural versions of the similar phrases were considered as valid synonyms in terms of the study’s inclusion criteria. For example, both “postsecondary opportunity” and “postsecondary opportunities” were included.

- College opportunity
- College readiness

- College attendance
- Earn/earning/earned college degree
- Attend/attending/attended college
- Gain/gaining/gained acceptance to college
- Matriculate/matriculating/matriculated to college
- Access/accessing/accessed college
- Qualify/qualifying/qualified to attend college
- Qualify/qualifying/qualified to get accepted to college
- Qualify/qualifying/qualified to gain acceptance to college
- Ability/able to attend college
- Ability/able to go to college
- Ability/able to get a college education
- Ability/able to afford college
- Ability/able to access resources to pay for college
- Ability/able to make college more affordable
- Complete/completing/completed college
- Graduate/graduating/graduated from college
- Finish/finishing/finished college
- College graduate/graduation

Delimitations

In order to ensure that coding and definitions were reasonable, boundary parameters were considered and discussed at length. For example, code 2, Pathway Programs, was kept separate from code 9, CTE because even though the government may fund programs related to CTE, the

coding definitions were distinct between the two. The determination of what to include and exclude were set in the study's criteria based on its interest in determining trajectories across time of patterns—or lack thereof—in presidential communications.

Computational Approach

With “college access” and its synonyms as search terms, the researchers employed a computational approach. A total of 150 words on either side of “college access” or one of its synonyms was excerpted and copied into the data set in an Excel spreadsheet. Each of the research assistants completed their own spreadsheet, as did the lead researcher. Several months of reading and research were conducted independently. Comparisons revealed disagreement between JR and the lead researcher in 6.27% of the codes, and between JH and the lead researcher in 6.35% of the codes. At the time of inter-rater reliability confirmation, social moderation was utilized to review. Before a final spreadsheet was prepared to upload to the ENA software, all variations in coding were reviewed, ending with either defense or concession by both parties. Dual or multiple coding for an individual line of communication was permitted where those constructs appeared.

Data Set Construction

Two versions of the code book were created: a preliminary exploration and the final version, which included nuanced definitions and sample text to guide replicability levels in inter-rater reliability via social moderation. Preliminary codes included Affordability, Pathway Programs, the American Dream, Underserved Populations, Wealth Gaps, Career Readiness, Trajectory, Institution Types (4-year versus 2-year), and Career & Technical Education. Ultimately, the study dropped 4-year versus 2-year inquiry as part of its focus, due to complexity of the matter and its meriting future research in its own study. Table 1 shows the final code book.

Creation of the code book involved conducting preliminary grounded analysis of over 1,000 pages of communication. codes were not pre-determined, but arose from this preliminary research. Those most commonly appearing are identified in Table 1. Column 1 shows the codes, which are then defined in column 2 (“Description”), and further clarified by actual examples from the study in column 3 (“Sample Text”).

An important note: one additional code—the American dream—was removed for reasons to be explained later in this study.

Table 1*Final Code Book*

Code	Description	Sample Text
1. Affordability	Text references one or more of the following: 1. Student debt 2. Financial capability 3. Savings 4. College as free and/or universal.	"So I challenge state college and university leaders to put affordability front and career as they chart a path forward."
2. Pathway Programs	Text reference one or more of the following: 1. Affirmative action 2. Federal programs (i.e. GEARUP, TRIO) 3. Localized public school initiative 4. Opportunity.	"...encourage agencies to incorporate best practices into appropriate discretionary programs where permitted by law."
3. Undeserved Populations	Text references one or more of the following: 1. Equal Opportunity 2. Giving back to marginalized or disadvantaged minority groups i. African American ii. Hispanic iii. Native American iv. Asian American Pacific Islander.	"... providing advice and recommendations, take into consideration the particular needs of traditionally undeserved populations including women and minorities."
4. Class Systems	Text refers to lower class, middle class, or upper/higher class American.	" When it comes to the cost of college, there's a frustration in a middle class that feels like folks at the top can afford it, folks at the bottom get help; there's nobody who's looking out for folks in the middle."
5. Career Readiness	Text references one or more of the following: 1. Employment/employability 2. Workplace advancement 3. Support/mentorship. Career training opportunities	"...whether students have strong career potential when they graduate."
6. Trajectory	Text references one or more of the following: 1. Timeline-related experiences of students as pertains to eventual college readiness 2. Early pre-K (i.e.; Head Start programs) through quality college education 3. Evolving systems within the higher education system.	"The system's current trajectory is not sustainable. And what that means is state legislatures are going to have to step up. They can't just keep cutting support for the public colleges and universities."
7. Upward Mobility	Text refers to the capacity or facility for a person to rise to a higher social or economic position within US society.	"And one of the most important things we can do to restore that senses of upward mobility—the ability to achieve the American Dream, the idea that you can make it if you try..."
8. Career Technical Education	Text refers to educational programs that provide students with technical skills, training to instill knowledge necessary to succeed in future careers.	"So whether we're talking about a two-year program, a four-year program, or a technical certificate, the bottom line is that higher education cannot be a luxury. It's an economic imperative."

Final Data Set

A total of 196 rows of coded data comprised the final data set. Each row alternated between excerpted communications identified as either before or after in the metadata. Before excerpts included 150 words preceding the college access phrase or approved synonym, and after excerpts included 150 words following the “college access” phrase or approved synonym. The qualifying word or phrase was always included in the after data, and truncation was permitted in either before or after excerpts.

Models Generated

The following analyses were conducted. Models included: (a) overall 2009–2021, all administrations combined; (b) by administration Obama 2009-2016; (c) by administration Trump 2017-2020; (d) by administration Biden 2021; (e) spoken versus written, by administration; (f) Obama First Term 2009-2011; (g) Obama Second Term 2012-2016.

Research Team

Two research assistants, JR and JH, contributed to this study to ensure accuracy and inter-rater reliability. Each research assistant was assigned the time period within which they would conduct research. JR focused exclusively on Barack Obama’s communications from his inauguration on Jan. 20, 2009 through June 30, 2014, which was determined to be the approximate mid-point of the full twelve-year span of the study. JH focused exclusively on all presidential communications meeting the study’s criteria from July 1, 2014 to November 1, 2021. These dates included the last several years of the Barack Obama administration, 4 years of the administration of Donald Trump, and approximately the first nine months of the administration of Joseph Biden.

Chapter Summary

The principles for the organization of this chapter were structured according to Jago's Six-Step Process for determining theoretical goals within a research study. These steps included the goal, the approach, the worldview, the methodology, the method, and the tools for the study. The goal was to better understand use of the construct of college access in U.S. presidential communications in a postmodern approach. Using Quantitative Ethnography, the making of meaning from patterns was described through use of ENA, the tool for the study.

Chapter 4: Presentation of Findings

Chapter Overview

This chapter begins with context, an explanation of how ENA was utilized, and a presentation of the findings in a series of ENA-generated figures. Each features a brief descriptor. The chapter ends with a Chapter Summary.

The findings of the study will be presented according to the RQ and SQ in the following sequence: (a) overall view of all administrations with all codes combined, (b) mean and confidence intervals assessing overall view of all administrations (c) individual view of the three administrations with all codes combined, (d) frequency tally assessing the first nine months each president was in office, (e) frequency tallies assessing totals as well as written and spoken communication as individual categories, and (f) Obama's first term versus his second term, showing changes over time in two comparable models.

Context

The purpose of this Quantitative Ethnography was to investigate presidential communications from January 2009 to October 2021 wherever the construct of college access in the United States was referenced. In particular, the study sought to examine how rhetorical patterns in communications may have had an impact on underserved populations. These populations were defined as students from low-SES backgrounds, including but not limited to first-generation students and others from marginalized populations.

The examination observed, identified patterns, evaluated, and deconstructed discourse. Its overarching RQ asked: How did U.S. presidents from 2009-2021 communicate a national narrative on the construct of college access? This primary RQ broke into one SQ: What

observable trends appeared across time in such communications may have impacted social mobility for students from underserved populations?

Related Referents

Codes were identified through grounded research by reading all relevant documents within the scope of the study. The researcher identified that U.S. presidents focused on eight primary referents related to the construct of college access in their communications. The final list included nuanced definitions and sample text to guide replicability levels in inter-rater reliability via social moderation. The related referents appearing most consistently were coded as (a) Affordability, (b) Pathway Programs, (c) Underserved Populations, (d) Class Systems, (e) Career Readiness, (f) Trajectory, (g) Upward Mobility, and (h) Career & Technical Education. Definitions and examples have been provided in Chapter 3 of this dissertation. The following figures were drawn from data retrieved as described in that chapter.

Explanation of How ENA Was Utilized

This study utilized Epistemic Network Analysis (Shaffer, 2017; Shaffer et al., 2016) applying it to data using the ENA1.7.0 (Swiecki, 2019) Web Tool (version 1.7.0). Units of analysis were individual lines of data associated with a single value of Administration subset by RowID. For example, one unit consisted of all the lines associated with RowID 1. The algorithm constructed a network model for each line in the data using a moving window, showing how codes in the current line were connected to codes that occurred recently (Siebert-Evenstone, 2017). Recency here was defined as 4 lines (each line plus the 3 previous lines) within a given conversation. All lines for each unit of analysis in the model were aggregated, and networks were grouped using a binary summary in which the networks for each line reflected the presence or absence of coexistence among each pair of codes.

Codes

The ENA models shown in this chapter included the following codes: Affordability, Pathway Programs, Class Systems, Underserved Populations, Career Readiness, Upward Mobility, Trajectory, and CTE. The researcher defined conversations as all lines of data associated with a single value of DocID, subsetted by RowID. For example, one conversation consisted of all the lines associated with DocID 1 and RowID 1.

Normalization

ENA normalizes the networks for all units before they undergo a dimensional reduction. This makes necessary adjustments since different units sometimes have different numbers of coded lines in the data. Dimensional reduction uses a singular value decomposition. This maximizes the variance explained by each dimension, and produces the orthogonal dimensions seen in the Chapter 4. Shaffer offers in-depth explanation of ENA mathematics (Shaffer, 2016); and examples from other ENA researchers are available as well (Swiecki, 2019).

Categories of Assessment

Two categories of assessment were used—frequency and connections. Frequency was broken into two categories: frequency of college access communication, and frequency of particular codes within those communications.

Frequency of College Access Communication

The frequency of communication using the construct of college access or its approved synonyms was assessed using the standard qualitative research process of coding and counting. In total the researcher and research assistant JR individually confirmed 45 pieces of communication meeting the inclusion criteria, while the researcher and research assistant JH individually confirmed 66 pieces of communication meeting the inclusion criteria. Together,

these 109 communications from U.S. presidents from 2009-2021 comprised the corpus for the study. Each was a row on the Excel spreadsheet imported into the ENA software generating the figures seen in this chapter. Because some of these communications appeared in the same speech or written document with more than 150 words between them, the number of communications and the actual number of individual documents were different. The total number of separate documents meeting all inclusion criteria—including speeches and writings—was 52, inclusive of all three administrations.

Among the data collected for this study, Obama spoke of college access in forty-three separate speeches and written documents during his 8 years in office. He spoke of the construct multiple times—that is, more than 150 words apart—in many of those communications, totaling 88 separate communications that were analyzed. When averaged annually, Obama spoke of college access 11.0625 times per year. His data consisted of 69 speeches and 19 written communications.

In contrast, during his 4 years in office, Trump spoke of college access in two communications among the data collected for this study. When averaged per year, Trump's utterances tallied to 0.5 times per year. He had no written references, and 2 speeches.

During his first 9 months in office, Biden communicated about college access among the data collected for this study 7 times in 7 documents. Averaged annually, the projected yearly references would be 5.25 times per year if no further communications were made.

Code Frequency

The overall corpus of the dataset contained: 62 references to Code 1, Affordability; 62 references to Code 2, Pathway Programs; 49 references to Code 3, Underserved Populations; 37 references to Code 4, Class Systems; 59 references to Code 5, Career Readiness; 40 references to

Code 6, Trajectory; 63 references to Code 7, Upward Mobility; and 19 references to Code 8, Career and Technical Education. The particular breakdown for each president can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2

Number of References to Each Code, by President

Codes	1 Affordability	2 Pathway Programs	3 Underserved Populations	4 Class Systems	5 Career Readiness	6 Trajectory	7 Upward Mobility	8 CTE	Totals
Obama	57	59	44	36	53	36	59	18	364
Trump	0	0	1	0	2	0	1	0	4
Biden	5	3	4	1	4	4	3	1	25
Totals	62	62	49	37	59	40	63	19	393

First 9 Months. Because contrasting 8 years to 4 years to 9 months offered no plausible comparatives, the first 9 months of communications of the three administrations were assessed. The result can be viewed in Table 3.

Table 3

Presidential Communications Pertaining to College Access Within the First 9 Months (2009–2021)

	Number of References	Number of Written Communications	Number of Speeches
OBAMA	2	1	1
TRUMP	0	0	0
BIDEN	7	2	5

Connections

The insights offered by ENA allowed for descriptive results beyond a list of numbers describing how each president talked and wrote about college access. With ENA, the researcher identified connections within the question, “When they spoke or wrote about college access, what else did they say or write?” This was achieved by having recent temporal context define co-occurrence within the modeling. A section of the ENA software called Conversation drove the software’s ability to define how those connections were modeled based on researcher input. Categories explored for this study included by administration, by year, by document, and by type—whether written or spoken.

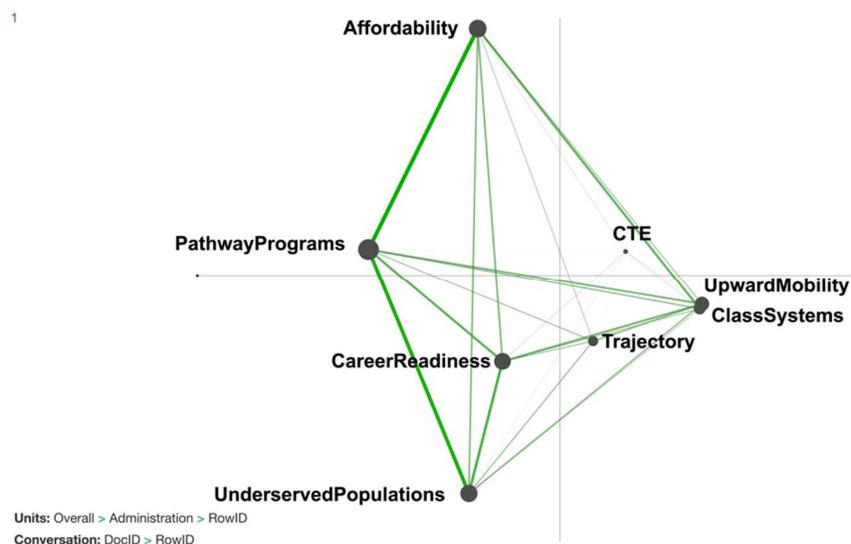
Overall Findings of All Administrations

The researcher identified each administration with a color coding in order to facilitate comparative graph analysis, Figure 27 shows overall findings of all administrations with all

codes combined. As a reminder, the nodes and thickness of the lines here do not denote frequency of appearance. Instead, they show strength of connections across the epistemic frame.

Figure 27

Overview of All Administrations



Findings from the epistemic network analysis show strong connections are made between Pathway Programs and Affordability as well as between Pathway Programs and Underserved Populations. Moderate connections appear between Career Readiness and Upward Mobility, between Career Readiness and Underserved Populations, between Career Readiness and Pathway Programs, and between Career Readiness and Affordability. Distribution of rhetorical emphasis all it is quite even, other than Trajectory, which is sparsely connected, and CTE, which is largely absent until 2017. The Trump administration, which was notably silent on college access initiatives and rhetoric, focused instead on helping usher in \$1.263 billion in CTE funding. Approved by Congress and signed into law, from 2017 to 2018 a significantly increase in federal investment in CTE pulled focus (CTE Policy Watch, 2018). Nonetheless, when averaged across all administrations, among Pathways Programs, Affordability, and Underserved

Populations, the most connections were noted. Although this first image can seem evenly distributed, each administration in fact had its own different points of emphasis. For this reason, a series of subset analyses were conducted, in order to draw interpretations and make meaning.

Individual View of Administrations

Obama, Trump, and Biden

The orange chart in Figure 28 shows an individual view of both terms of the Obama administration with all codes combined. The red chart in Figure 29 below shows an individual view of the single term of the Trump administration with all codes combined. The blue chart in Figure 30 below shows an individual view of the first nine months of the Biden administration with all codes combined.

Figure 28

Obama Administration. Single Model, all Codes

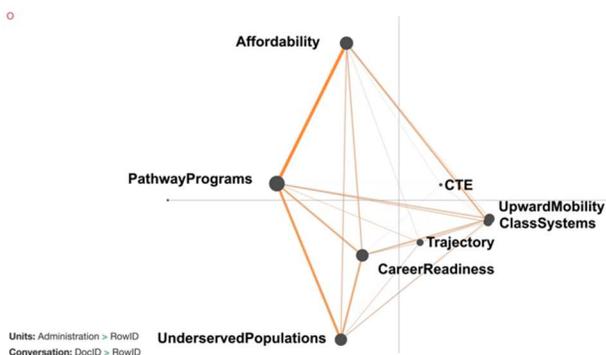
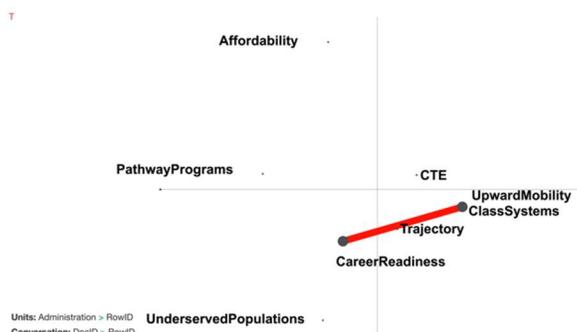
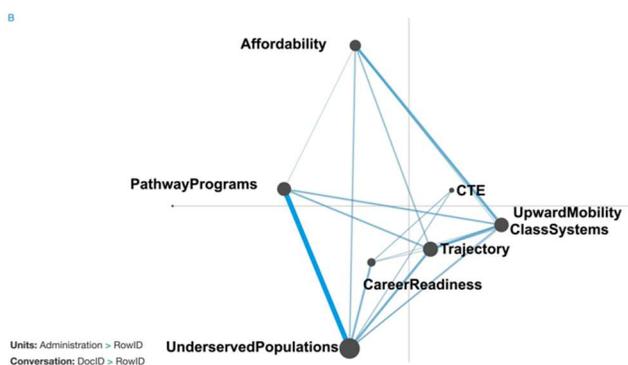


Figure 29

Trump Administration. Single Model, all Codes

**Figure 30**

Biden Administration. Single Model, all Codes



Findings from the epistemic network analysis show the relative emphasis of linkages being made. Node placements are identical in these figures, because they were drawn from the same model, but the resulting impressions are distinct from one another. These individual models show *relative* points of rhetorical emphasis; that is, in showing strength of connections across epistemic frames across time, the thickest and thinnest lines provide insights.

Obama. This figure covers 8 years, with two terms combined. The strongest association is seen between Pathway Programs and Affordability. The second-strongest connection is between Pathway Programs and Underserved Populations. Although CTE is not present in the rhetoric, Career Readiness appears. With lesser emphasis than

Pathway Programs, Career Readiness connects with significant emphasis to Affordability, Class Systems, Underserved Populations, and Upward Mobility. Class Systems and Upward Mobility also show moderate connections to Affordability. Both CTE and Trajectory codes are notably absent. As an example of rhetoric in his most prominent connections, in his State of the Union Address on 1/28/14, Obama stated:

Five years ago, we set out to change the odds for all our kids. We worked with lenders to reform student loans [Code 1: Affordability], and today, more young people are earning college degrees than ever before. Race to the Top...has helped states raise expectations and performance [Code 2: Pathway Programs].

Interestingly, Obama acknowledged the role of kin networks in the same speech, where he mentioned, “Some of this change is hard. It requires...more demanding parents (Obama, 2014).

Trump. This figure covers 4 years. The nodes and thickness of the lines here do not denote frequency of appearance, since Trump’s single connection is included. That connection is seen between Career Readiness and Upward Mobility. Although in comparing this figure to those of other administrations the thickness of this line seems dominant, it actually represents only two spoken statements, both of which connected the same codes. That is because ENA is measuring the relevant emphasis within the single Trump model only. As an example of rhetoric in his connections, Trump stated in a State of the Union Address, “Through our Pledge to American Workers, over 400 companies will also provide new jobs and education opportunities to almost 15,000,000 Americans” (Career Readiness) and epistemically associated this with “permanent funding for our nation’s historically black colleges and universities” (Code 3: Underserved Populations; Trump, 2020).

Biden. This figure covers the first 9 months of Biden’s administration. In this figure, the strongest association is seen between Pathway Programs and Underserved Populations. The second-strongest connection is between Affordability and Upward Mobility and Affordability and Class Systems. With lesser emphasis, Trajectory makes its first appearance in this figure, linking with significant emphasis to Upward Mobility and Class Systems. Trajectory also shows moderate connection to Affordability, and CTE connects to Career Readiness as well as Underserved Populations. As an example of the increasing emphasis on Trajectory impacting Pathway Programs, in Biden’s 2021 address to Congress he stated, “my American Families Plan guarantees four additional years of public education starting as early as we can” (Biden, 2021a, para. 97) going on to promote “universal, high-quality preschool for every three and four-year-old” (para. 98) in order to exponentially increase their prospects of graduating and going on beyond graduation.

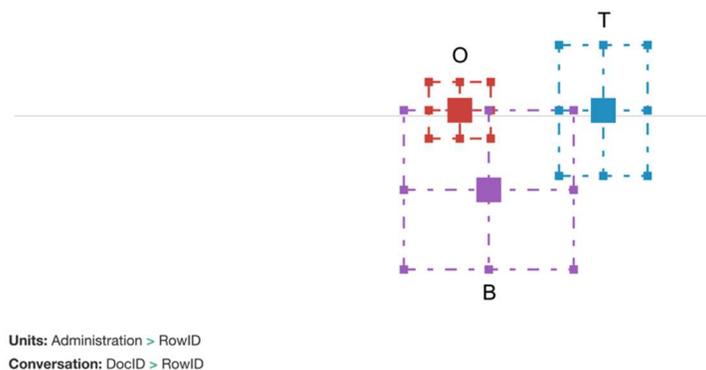
The quotes above have been shared to support what Shaffer calls closing the interpretive loop (Shaffer, 2018), where coded quantitative elements in ENA and the qualitative evidence of those assertions can be affirmed.

Mean and Confidence Intervals for All Administrations

Using the ENA software, the researcher sought to identify and compare the mean and confidence intervals of each administration’s discourse. The 95% confidence interval is represented on Figure 31 by dotted lines, and the mean is represented by the squares.

Figure 31

Mean and Confidence Intervals for All Administrations



These units placed on the ENA graph show the average location of the different points of emphasis among administrations. Means are represented by the small squares, and confidence intervals are shown by the dotted lines surrounding the means. The network created by each unit when presidents spoke or wrote of college access shows varying levels of consistency.

Underlying mean points indicate how close to one another the points of nodes are located. As seen here, the means are in different locations, and the 95% confidence interval tells us if there is a difference. On the X-axis, Obama and Trump seem similar. On the Y-axis there is no statistical similarity at all. The nodes are what help interpret these placements along the X and Y axes. In ENA, weighted centroids effectively “pull” the mean left or right, and up or down. A high correlation exists between weighted centroids and those mean points. Because the first three overall views of the three administrations used the identical model, higher on the Y-axis in Figure 31 indicates emphasis on Affordability, which appears at the top of the epistemic frames seen in Figures 28–30. Other nodes can pull the mean down, and the same is true moving laterally between Pathway Programs on the far left and both Class Systems and Upward Mobility on the far right.

Spoken and Written Discourse Differences

To better understand how the RQ and SQ were being addressed within presidential rhetoric, spoken and written communications were separated into individual graphs. The two overall figures below combine all administrations and include spoken communications followed by written communications only. Figure 32 shows spoken communications only among all administrations. Figure 33 shows written communications only among all administrations. Note that the epistemic frame, as seen in the placement of the nodes, is different than the model for the overall administration assessments in Figures 28–30, but identical between Figures 32 and 33, which use a single model to make meaning.

Figure 32

Spoken Communications Only. All Administrations

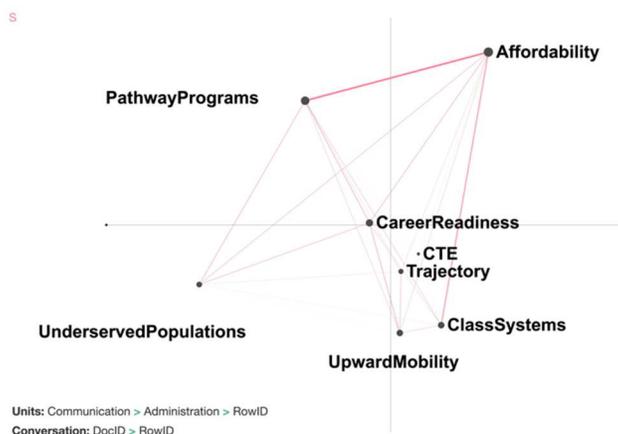
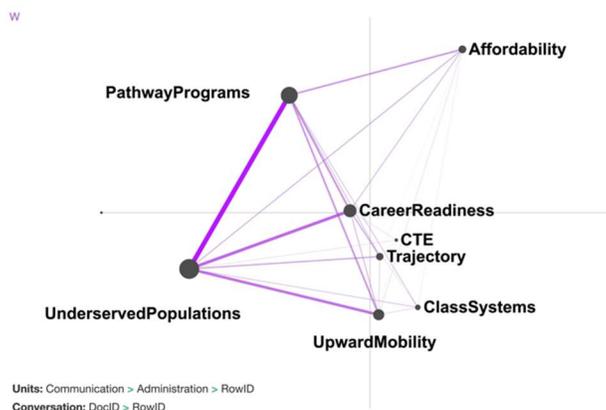


Figure 33

Written Communications Only. All Administrations



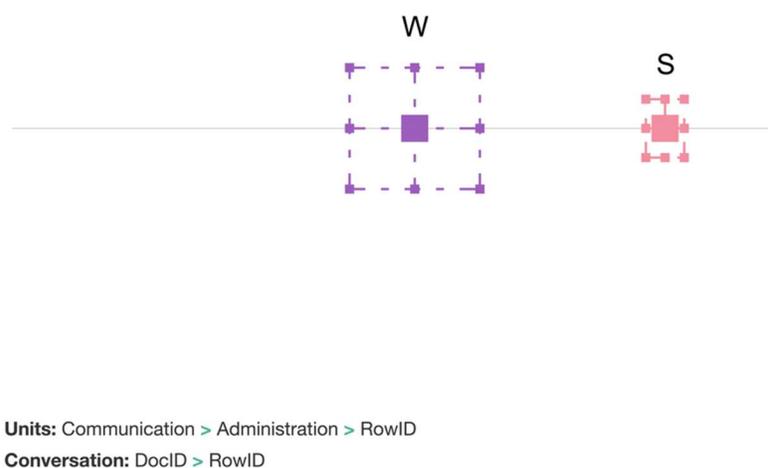
Findings from the epistemic network analysis here show that spoken discourse was fairly evenly dispersed, with moderate emphasis between Pathway Programs and Affordability and between Affordability and Class Systems. By contrast, written communications had an overall trend toward stronger connection, especially between Pathway Programs and Underserved Populations. Moderate linkage in presidential writings also appears between Underserved Populations and Career Readiness, between Underserved Populations and Upward Mobility, and between Career Readiness and Pathway Programs. Speaking with a wider variety of rhetorical constructs as compared to what is written seems to indicate a sharpened focus on four primary codes: Underserved Populations, Career Readiness, Upward Mobility, and Pathway Programs. The fact that Affordability and Class Systems are de-emphasized in written rhetoric is noteworthy.

Mean and Confidence Intervals: Spoken Versus Written Communication, All Administrations

Mean and confidence intervals were assessed for all administrations, comparing written to spoken communications. As seen, the speech interval holds a significantly higher confidence interval, as demonstrated by the tighter grouping.

Figure 34

Mean and Confidence Intervals, Written Versus Speech. All Administrations



As in Figure 31, the units in Figure 34 show the average location of the different points of emphasis among administrations. Small squares represent the means, and the dotted lines surrounding the means show confidence intervals. The network created by each unit when presidents spoke or wrote of college access shows varying levels of consistency. The written rhetoric is pulled by Underserved Populations in the epistemic frame, and speech is primarily pulled by Affordability. There is no overlap in confidence intervals.

Speech Versus Written: Individual Administrations

The next phase of the study compared individual administrations in the patterns of their speech versus written communications. Note that epistemic frames, as seen in the placement of the nodes, remain identical within grouped figures to illustrate that a single model was used to make meaning. Only the weight of the connections change.

Obama. Figures 35 and 36 show the graph of Obama's spoken and written analysis.

Figure 35

Obama, Speech Only

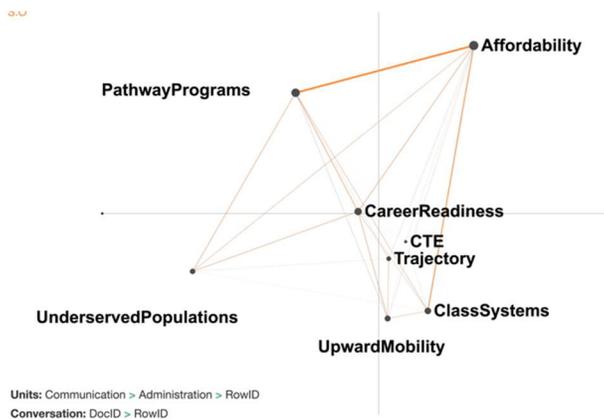
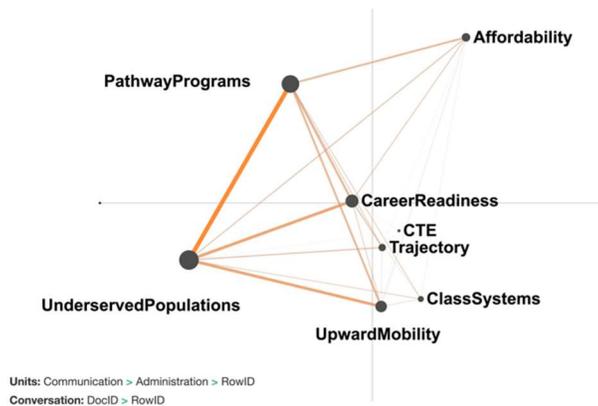


Figure 36

Obama, Written Only



Findings from the epistemic network analysis show that when speaking Obama tended to link Pathway Programs and Affordability, and to associate Affordability and Class Systems. However when writing, the Rhetoric shifted to a strong emphasis on Pathway Programs and Underserved Populations. Career Readiness was connected in his writings to Underserved Populations and Pathway Programs, and Upward Mobility similarly connected to Pathway Programs. As an example of the difference between his spoken and written rhetoric, Obama

stated in a live speech on 4/29/09: “In a paradox of American life, at the very moment it’s never been more important to have a quality higher education, the cost of that kind of that kind of education has never been higher” (Code 1: Affordability; Obama, 2009), going on to link that idea with this: “We have taken and proposed a number of sweeping steps over our first few months in office—steps that amount to the most significant efforts to open the doors of college to middle-class Americans since the GI Bill” (Code 2: Pathway Programs; Obama, 2009, para. 3). By contrast, in a written document later that same year, he emphasized that: “The purpose of this order is to establish a President’s Advisory Commission...and work to improve the quality of life and opportunities for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (Code 3: Underserved Populations) through increased access to, and participation in, Federal programs (Code 2: Pathway Programs) in which they may be underserved” (Obama, 2009).

Trump. Figure 37 shows the graph of Trump’s spoken analysis only.

Figure 37

Trump, Speech Only



Note. No Trump written references identified met the study’s inclusion criteria.

Findings from the epistemic network analysis show Trump's exclusive focus connecting Career Readiness and Upward Mobility. The fact that he did not write about college access during his administration speaks to Trump's priority of business-related (career) focus, both in terms of the epistemic frames of how he viewed the purpose of college access, and in terms of related business-centered concerns, including promoting private, for-profit charter high schools.

Biden. Figures 38 and 39 show figures of Biden's spoken analysis only and written analysis only.

Figure 38

Biden, Speech Only

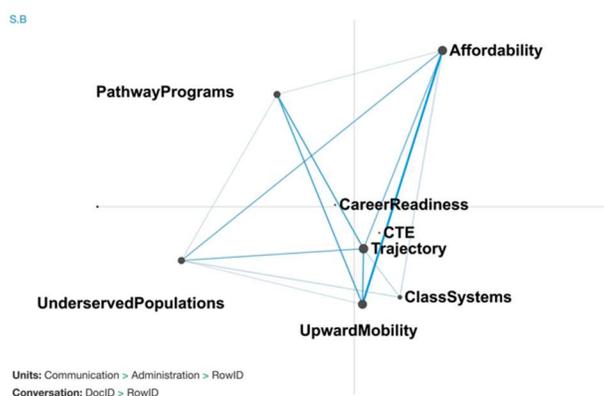
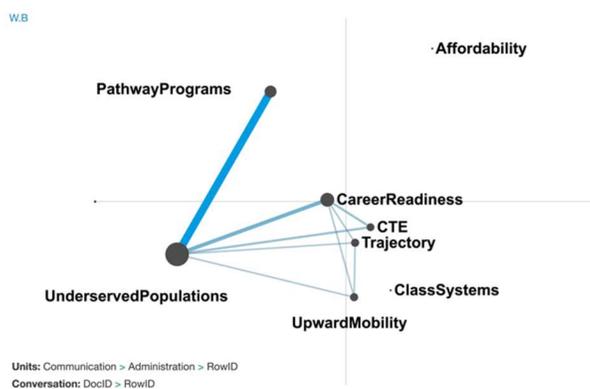


Figure 39

Biden, Written Only

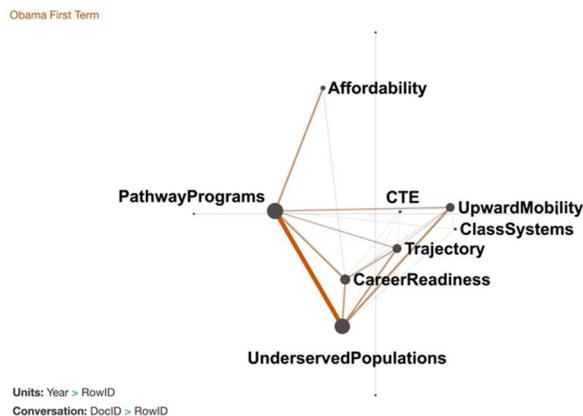
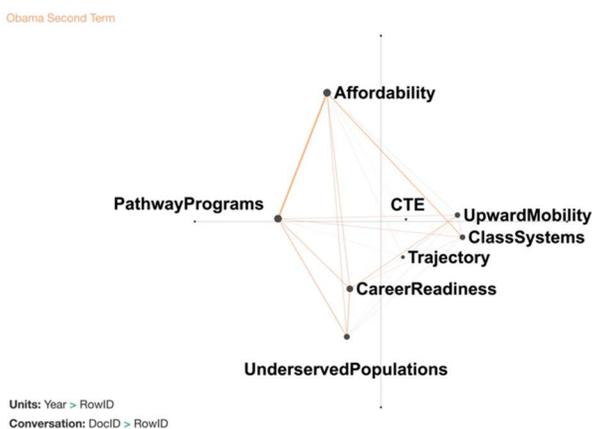


Findings from the epistemic network analysis show that Biden's spoken discourse was somewhat consistently distributed, with moderate emphasis linking Affordability and Upward Mobility, and secondary connections associating Upward Mobility and Trajectory and Pathway Programs. By contrast, Biden's written Discourse consistently linked Underserved Populations with Pathway Programs, with a less emphatic connection between Underserved Populations and Career Readiness. This sharp focus in written rhetoric has shown up in numerous released communications. When writing of his American Families Plan, he has described his vision for college access, asserting among other factors that, "When you add two years of free community college on top of that (Code 2: Pathway Programs), you begin to change the dynamic. We can do that. We will increase Pell grants and invest in historically black colleges and universities" (Code 3: Underserved Populations; Internet Archive, 2021, para. 1).

Obama's Rhetorical Patterns: First Versus Second Term

The next phase of the study considered the change over time in the rhetoric of the two-term presidency of Barack Obama in order to assess any evolution in epistemic frames or rhetorical points of emphasis. Note that epistemic frames, as seen in the placement of the nodes, remain identical within grouped figures; this shows that a single model was used. Only the weight of the connections change.

Figure 40 shows the graph of Obama's first term only, and Figure 41 shows the graph of Obama's second term only.

Figure 40*Obama, First Term***Figure 41***Obama, Second Term*

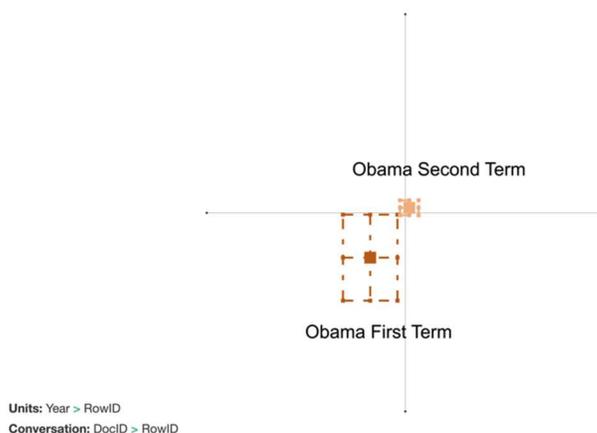
Findings from the epistemic network analysis show a decreasing emphasis over time for Obama between Pathway Programs and Underserved Populations, which was a prominent link in his first term rhetoric. Taking its place as primary association by his second term was Affordability linked to Pathway Programs; however, the comparable emphasis was markedly reduced. This change can be interpreted as attributable to the longer-term learning curve as the administration navigated not only its own ideas, values, and priorities, but those of Congress and other stakeholders necessary to implement initiatives and sustain momentum.

Mean and Confidence Intervals: Obama First and Second Terms

Using the ENA software, the researcher sought to identify and compare the mean and confidence intervals of Obama's first term and second term discourse. The 95% confidence interval is represented on Figure 42 by dotted lines, and the mean is represented by the squares.

Figure 42

Means and Confidence Intervals: Obama First and Second Terms



This ENA graph shows the average location of points of emphasis between Obama's first and second terms. Means, the small squares, and confidence intervals, the dotted lines, show that when the president either spoke or wrote of college access the rhetoric was inconsistent. As seen here, the means are in different locations, and both the X-axis and the Y-axis show statistically significant differences. In the first term, the placement within the epistemic frame of Underserved Populations pulled the mean to its position to the right of the figure, and the second term's more evenly distributed rhetoric pulled that mean up and right. The first term's overall confidence interval was more widely distributed, indicating increasing consistency in the rhetoric across the years from the first 4 years of the administration to the second.

Initial Interpretations

Initial interpretations compared both the frequency with which each president referenced college access, and allowed for thick description of connections (Shaffer, 2018). These denoted strength in terms of co-occurrence. Visualizations of networks graphed where nodes corresponded to the codes, and the lines connecting those “dots” represented the relative frequency of connection between the two. The result was two coordinated representations for each unit of analysis: (a) a plotted point, or dot, which represented the location of that unit’s network in the figure’s projected space, and (b) a weighted network graph, seen in the thin and thick lines. Network graph node positions were fixed, as determined by optimizing a minimal difference between the plotted points and their corresponding network centroids. Because of this co-registration of network graphs and projected space, the positions of the network graph nodes—and the connections they defined—were able to inform implications, recommendations, and conclusions to be presented in Chapter 5.

Chapter Summary

This chapter began by offering context, moved on to explanation of how ENA was utilized, described categories of assessment, presented findings in a series of ENA-generated figures with descriptors, gave initial interpretations, and emerging themes in codes. It ends with this Chapter Summary.

The following four findings were selected to be discussed in Chapter 5.

- Finding 1: Presidential rhetoric pertaining to the U.S. college access dilemma can be most accurately described as circular.
- Finding 2: Akrotic implications are apparent in U.S. presidential discourse about college access.

- Finding 3: Upward Mobility and Class Systems were correlated.
- Finding 4: Rhetorical congruence across administrations is lacking.

Additional findings of interest were also identified, but they not included due to their loose or lacking connection to the RQ and SQ. Although they were interesting, they were not sufficiently compelling to contributing to an understanding of the impact of presidential discourse.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

Chapter Overview

This chapter begins with Context, then offers six findings, three conclusions, implications, recommendations and an evaluation of the researcher's work in this study. In seeking to understand how U.S. presidents contextualize the construct of college access and its related narratives, this study utilized Quantitative Ethnography to assess communications of U.S. Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden from January 2009 to October 2021. In particular, the study examined rhetorical patterns in order to determine how epistemic frames of making meaning did or did not track alongside policy shifts promoting action to mobilize language. With an overarching RQ that asked how U.S. presidents have communicated a national narrative on the construct of college access, this study concerned itself with observable trends as they appeared across administrations. Whether such rhetoric aligned with proposed or enacted policy constituted an underlying area of interest. Did the talk parallel the walk? Was the result of the rhetoric helpful in terms of mobilizing an increase in equitable college access?

Context

The problem identified was that federal discourse requires a clarified, cross-state understanding of what is meant by "college access" and its related constructs. The researcher proposed a unified definition or refinement of meaning in order to offset abstraction in language. The theoretical framework for this study employed a postmodern worldview, with interrelating fragmentalism as a scaffold. The researcher challenged, through an anti-essentialist lens, whether the observer-observed structure within these communications means leaders should more intentionally communicate what they mean by the construct "college access" in the words they choose. The study posited that the advent of so-called late capitalism in the U.S. has ushered its

higher education system the brink of requiring a readjustment of economic market realities, and decried the intensifying commodification and commercialization of postsecondary education. The study's postmodern paradigm incorporated fragmentalism to promote presidential consideration for how students from low-SES backgrounds think about, approach, and experience access to the so-called American dream of access to higher education based upon their rhetoric and resulting policies.

Findings

The conceptual framework of Campbell's Hero's Journey explored the hurdles of low-SES students hearing a call to action that feels viable enough for them to pursue. As the conceptual framework underscored, the current paradigm in America divides the pool of potential college applicants into those who are supported in one-on-one mentorship programs and those who are not. This opportunity gap at scale connects to sociological barriers like lack of access to social emotional learning within kin networks. In Campbell's Monomyth structure, supernatural forces along the way are required to support success, but in the highly commodified U.S. higher education system, archetypal insights from mentors are largely for sale to the highest bidders. The researcher broke down component hurdles, assessing them in content with each of Campbell's 17 stages. Using a Quantitative Ethnographic methodology, the researcher began with document analysis, moved on to coding, and then made meaning from patterns discovered through use of ENA. Investigation of narrative metaframes in U.S. presidential communications from 2009–2021 revealed eight prevailing tropes—for example, affordability, upward mobility, and class systems. Barriers to equity were placed into eight categories mirroring the codes that emerged in the data, which were placed as the inner hub of a conceptual framework the

researcher dubbed the Wheel of Access. These were founded in the codes that emerged within the discourse reviewed in this study as well as the peer-reviewed literature assessed.

Overall RQ and SQ Analysis

These findings in this section relate to the literature included in chapter 2, with an emphasis on intersecting factors that impact the college admissions decision for students, in particular those from marginalized populations.

RQ. The RQ for this study asked how U.S. presidents have communicated a national narrative on the construct of college access. The research identified what was conceptualized as a pervasive undercurrent that is foregrounded here in order to make sense of the data.

Of note, in its earliest stage, the study originally contained one additional code. This additional code, the American dream, was removed from the data set at the time of sharpening definitions of the code book. Among members of the research team, it was determined that the meaning of the construct of the “American dream” was too undefined to carry statistical significance in the context of this study unless it was used verbatim.

The phrase “American dream” appeared only once in what would have been its fully defined, verbatim form. Obama used those exact words in reference to college access. Dozens of references that could arguably be seen as related to the American dream were seen throughout the rhetoric assessed for two of the three presidents, Obama and Biden. The following speech by then-President Barack Obama neatly offers an overview of commonly connected ideas and definitions of that construct. Parentheses have been added for emphasis by the researcher to clearly identify those connections. Of note, the words “American Dream” were capitalized, as if to represent an understanding of the construct as a proper noun in White House records of the speech. This contrasts major dictionaries, including Merriam-Webster, which disagree and keep

the lower case “d” for dream. The phrase American Dream is bolded below to help identify proximity and usage, and codes that emerged in this study have been added parenthetically, following passages the researcher underlined to connect to that construct.

We’ve got to build on the cornerstones of what it means to be middle class (code 4, Class System) in America: A good job with good wages (code 5, Career Readiness); a good education; a home of your own; affordable health care; secure retirements even if you’re not rich; more ladders of opportunity (code 7, Upward Mobility) for everybody who’s willing to work for. That’s what we should be fighting for. And one of the most important things we can do to restore that sense of upward mobility (code 7, Upward Mobility)—the ability to achieve the American Dream, the idea that you can make it if you try—one of the most important things we can do is make sure every child is getting a good education (code 6, Trajectory). And the students who are studying here, they understand that. That’s why they’ve made sacrifices. That’s why their family are making sacrifices. You understand that in the face of global competition—when the Germans and the Chinese and the Indians are all putting more money into education and putting more money into research—that we can’t just stand pat. We can’t stand by and do nothing. You understand that a great education is more important than ever. And you don’t have to take my word for it. Look, the data is clear: If you get some kind of higher education—whether it’s a two-year degree, a four-year degree, a technical college (code 8, CTE)—you’re more likely to have a job. You’re more likely to see your income going up (code 7, Upward Mobility). More than ever before, some form of higher education is the surest path into the middle class, and the surest path that you stay there. (Applause.) Now, here’s the challenge: The soaring cost of higher education (code 1, Affordability) has

become an increasing burden and barrier for too many young people. College has never been more necessary, but it's never been more expensive (code 1, Affordability).

(Obama, 2013)

Interestingly, this speech tied the American dream not only to upward mobility and career readiness, but also the global competitiveness—or lack thereof—of American students. More on those connections and others will be analyzed in Chapter 5's conclusion section.

As described in Chapter 2 of this study, pathway programs promoting college access abound, especially those that focus exclusively on low-income students. Researchers promoting college access therefore need to attain an understanding of how these particular social contexts constrain advantages. The federal government's TRIO programs aim to increase representation for disadvantaged populations in postsecondary education, for example, and offer useful supports. However, to date they have not incorporated family capital and kin network supports at an early enough age to promote student matriculation. The code trajectory in this study, which appeared less frequently than numerous other constructs mentioned, alludes to such a need, but many programs focus exclusively on the students as if they exist outside of family and community systems, which they do not. As one example, Upward Bound provides tutoring in literature, composition, mathematics, laboratory sciences, and foreign languages. However, what is termed cultural enrichment focuses exclusively on the students. Activities especially designed for students with limited English proficiency, for instance, assume that students from groups that are traditionally underrepresented in higher education will be making the trek solo. As Chetty et al. (2017) have noted, the U.S. public education system exacerbates inequities across socioeconomic strata and racial/ethnicity divides. When presidential rhetoric about the American

dream ignores those stark realities, administrations miss an opportunity to promote tethering policy to practical realities.

SQ. The SQ for this study asked what observable trends appeared across time in U.S. presidential communications that may have impacted social mobility for students from underserved populations.

Wide fluctuations between the rhetoric—or lack of rhetoric—across administrations plays a role in impeding momentum of programs supporting social mobility for students from underserved populations. One administration can dismantle the progress made by its predecessors, thereby impacting policy and those tasked with deploying it. The Trump administration so significantly de-emphasized college access as compared to Obama (see Figures 30 and 29, respectively) that it resulted in a 4-year void, bereft of attention to either existing or potential college access initiatives. The contrast between the following two statements of focus 5 years apart in two different administrations bears noting. Obama stated on 3/10/2015:

We've got more to do, all of us—universities, students, parents, financial institutions, and yes, the Government—to make sure that you're not saddled with debt before you even get started in life. That's something that's in all of our interests (Obama, 2015, para. 28).

Five years later, Trump's statement on 2/4/20 showed a rare interest in educational policy, one which had almost nothing to do with higher education at all. He stated, "Pass the Education Freedom Scholarships and Opportunities Act—because no parent should be forced to send their child to a failing government school" (Trump, 2020, para. 76).

Trump's Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, was noted for approaching public education as a business, in which she spoke of students as consumers, and Trump's focus on charter schools—and open disdain for public education—showed parallel emphasis on education

as business, not a necessary societal good for millions of students whose parents cannot afford private options. Post-Trump, Biden has re-invigorated rhetoric about the importance of postsecondary education, but the dearth of congruent communication across administrations as pertains to college access marks one of the primary problems in terms of the SQ of this study. When viewing the figures in Chapter 4, there can be little surprise that students from underserved populations have continued to face impeded social mobility. The goal posts of federal leadership in how that is supported keep changing.

Emerging Themes in Codes

Two categories of themes emerged from the codes in the study organized according to two primary themes. These were defined by the researcher as perceived problem factors and proposed solution factors.

- Perceived problem factors
 - Code 1: Affordability
 - Code 3: Underserved Populations
 - Code 4: Class Systems
 - Code 7: Upward Mobility
- Proposed solution factors
 - Code 2: Pathway Programs
 - Code 5: Career Readiness
 - Code 6: Trajectory
 - Code 8: CTE

The researcher's decision-making about the how to organize and conceptualize this data arose from the literature review in Chapter 2 of this study, and builds upon the foundation of the many college access researchers whose works are cited there.

Analysis of Individual Findings

The following concise list summarizes the four primary findings of this study. Each finding will be described in detail directly below its overall label.

Finding 1: Presidential Rhetoric Pertaining to the U.S. College Access Dilemma Can Be Accurately Described as Circular

Although presidents frequently spoke of a desire to increase, advance, strengthen, or improve access, they often denoted a linear approach. The codes themselves connected within the epistemic frames to indicate more nuanced realities. For example, in Obama's Executive Order 13532 of February 26, 2010, he stated this order was, "In order to *advance* the development of the Nation's full human potential and to *advance* equal opportunity in higher education, *strengthen* the capacity of historically black colleges and universities to provide the highest quality education, [and] *increase* opportunities" (para. 1). Nonetheless, the realities within the rhetoric showed that an awareness of the circular logic surrounding the desire for such improvements complexities could have better supported the desired such increase. Figures 43 and 44 show two contrasting ways of conceptualizing the access dilemma—the linear approach and the study's circular description.

Figure 43*Linear Model of Access*

Note. From an original concept created by the researcher.

Because both equity and access lack clarified definition by U.S. presidents in the context of college access, a deeper investigation into sub-demographic groups and their representation is indicated. The National Center for Education Statistics already tracks such numbers in terms of percentage of students accessing higher education. Setting a target for approximately proportionate demographic representation would meet the dictionary definition of equity in seeking to achieve “fairness or justice in the way people are treated” (Merriam-Webster, 2022, para. 1).

In terms of frequency, the code most commonly appearing in the data set was Upward Mobility, and the two codes following Upward Mobility in terms of frequency were Affordability and Pathway Programs. This means that when talking or writing about college access, these three categories appear most often in the epistemic frames. It is perhaps unsurprising that U.S. presidents position the double-edged sword of upward mobility as the most commonly referenced code in the study, with 63 instances. As a fulcrum point of their discourse, this construct can be seen to straddle the problem/solution categories.

On one hand, the fact that millions of underserved students hope to improve their SES and financial security through obtaining postsecondary education is laudable. On the other hand, implicit in this hope is the problem of affordability. In fact, affordability tied for second-most-

common code in the study at 62 instances. Pathway programs was the other code tying in this instance, which seems to indicate a proportionate awareness of the need for initiatives to enable upward mobility to occur.

To date, economic drivers motivating the U.S. higher education system writ large have yet to align with equitable access at scale. The researcher has created a series of circular images to elucidate current rhetoric. See Figures 44, 45, and 46 for the Wheel of College Access, Cycle of Systemically Inequitable College Access, and Axis of Access that were conceptualized.

Problems and Solutions. The codes that emerged from the data shown as the first category, problem-related constructs, were where barriers to college access were emphasized. The codes that emerged from the second category, solution-related constructs, were where proposed resolutions were emphasized. By level of decreasing frequency, those codes may be categorized as follows.

Table 4

Frequency of Codes, Categorized

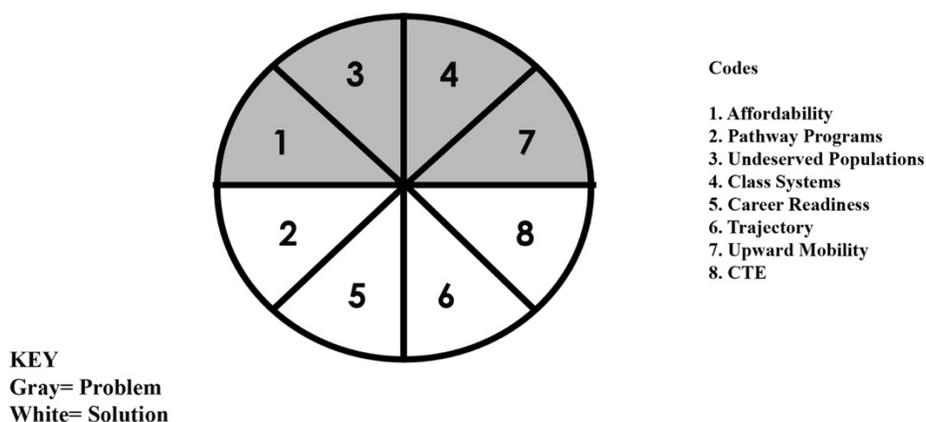
Frequency of Codes, Categorized

Code7: Upward Mobility	63 references	Problem
Code1: Affordability	62 references	Problem
Code 2: Pathway Programs	62 references	Solution
Code 5: Career Readiness	59 references	Solution
Code 3: Underserved Populations	49 references	Problem
Code 6: Trajectory	40 references	Solution
Code 4: Class Systems	37 references	Problem
Code 8: Career and Technical Education	21 references	Solution

In reviewing the figures appearing in Chapter 4, the rhetoric of U.S. presidents since 2009 has largely broken into what the researcher has conceptualized as two categories, problems and solutions. These are identified in Figure 44, *The Wheel of College Access Rhetoric by U.S. Presidents*.

Figure 44

The Wheel of College Access Rhetoric by U.S. Presidents



Note. From an original concept created by the researcher.

Figure 44 demonstrates the researcher’s conceptualization of how the four problem-related codes emerged from this study. Presidential discourse patterns observed showed epistemic connections revealing a problem-solution mindset. In particular, pairings of problem-solution were observed in pairings of codes 1 and 2, 3 and 5, 4 and 6, and 7 and 8. That is, code 1—Affordability—was frequently referenced vis a vie Pathway Programs. Code 3—Underserved Populations—was often referenced as related to either Career Readiness or Pathway Programs or both. Class Systems, Code 4, when mentioned often connected to notions of Trajectory solutions, where the construct of “readiness” dates back to as early as pre-school in the discourse. Finally, the need for Upward Mobility—code 7—was commonly tethered to rhetoric about Affordability, another code from the problem subset.

While some might see clearly delineated cause and effect statements with propositions in this discourse as desirable, the reality is less measured. Problems like the four gray codes seen in the Wheel of College Access Rhetoric figure appear and recede within the presidential discourse analyzed in this study, and are not collated into a single, strategic, over-arching initiative. For example, on 9/9/21 Biden wrote of promoting career readiness for Hispanic and Latino students, “advancing racial equity and economic opportunity by connecting education to labor market needs” (Biden, 2021b) and on the other he cited the need to place “policies that lead to racial and socioeconomic segregation among and within schools” (Biden, 2021b) ensuring equitable access to educational resources, professionals, and technology, including by addressing racial disparities in school funding and expenditures (Biden, 2021b).

In conceptualizing this finding, the researcher noted a phenomenon among the literature reviewed as well as within the data itself. While talk of proposed education reform policy tends to focus on levels of college access—that is, how much or how little equitable access there is—the truth of the epistemic frames imparted from U.S. presidents shows that college access discourse tends to be communicated in nonlinear ways.

Finding 2: Akrotic Implications Are Apparent in U.S. Presidential Discourse About College Access.

In terms of connections among the codes, the most dominant communication patterns among all presidents combined connected Pathway Programs to (a) Affordability and (b) Underserved Populations. However, these connections did not result in successful mitigation of the college access dilemma. Akrotasia has been defined as a moral failure in which an agent decides that a certain course of action would be best, but then acts against that judgement (Horowitz, 2014). The ability to know and act according to that knowledge has been

philosophized as a four-step process: (a) evidence and belief; (b) level-splitting; (c) rational agency, and (d) non-akratic constraints.

In reviewing the discourse patterns of the presidents included in this study, varying levels of the phenomenon of akrasia can be seen. In such cases, the speaker makes a choice he may doubt even while choosing it, knowing that what they are saying and what may be logistically feasible are two different things. A recent example can be seen in Biden's Build Back Better initiative, which proposed \$109 billion aimed to help students from lower-income families attend community college. "I don't know that I can get it done," Biden admitted last October (Leonhardt, 2021). He was correct; he could not. Nonetheless the political challenges of college access were, for a time, addressed.

As established in Chapter 2, the average cost of a college education falls far outside the ability of lower class and even middle class students to afford without significant debt. Although filling out the FAFSA can lead to Pell Grants for students at the extreme low end of household income, many more students are offered loans. Over \$24 billion in unclaimed federal aid (see Figure 6) proves that lower income students face significant barriers beyond monetary concerns. These economic issues, while central, do not capture the broad array of challenges students from low-SES backgrounds must face as they approach the decision of whether to apply to college.

In the context of this study, underserved populations was defined as demographic groups inadequately present in populations of successful college applicants and matriculants according to their percentage makeup within the larger populace. Therefore, when addressing college access as communicated by U.S. presidents using this Code, the concern is with proportionality. If the American dream were fully functional, and a level playing field secured, the percentage of students from each demographic group—whether according to

race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or other aspect—would be represented proportionately among the population of 4-year college graduates. As established throughout this study, that is not the case. So, although U.S. presidents sometimes connect the construct of college access to productive rhetorical constructs such as programs to help various populations, and affordability tends to be a central component of such programs, the means by which students from nonprivileged backgrounds navigate from their public high schools remains insufficient.

Epistemic Akrasia, Defined. The word *akrasia*, derived from 19th century Greek philosophy, has been described as denoting the state of acting against one's better judgment. Individuals lacking command over themselves can therefore be said to display akratic behavior. Deriving its etymology from *a-*, meaning without, plus *kratos*, meaning power, the word *akrasia* has predominantly been used in reference to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. When combined with the word *epistemic*--coming also from Greek, where *epistēmē* means knowledge—the investigation into epistemic *akrasia* as used in this study has extrapolated the concept of knowledge-without-power as directly pertains to the college access dilemma. Presidential discourse is misaligned, affecting more than 15 million public high school students across the U.S. annually.

Of interest, Biden also proposed \$85 billion to increase the maximum Pell Grant and \$46 billion to invest in historically Black, tribal, Hispanic, Asian-American, Native-American, and Pacific Islander-serving colleges and universities. His rhetoric revealed both his commitment to revisiting an Obama-era respect for higher education and a deviation from those programs in his prioritization of 2-year community college pathways. The Obama momentum lost during the 4-year Trump administration is in the process of being reconceptualized and recaptured, as of this writing, and certain programs from that administration and previous ones continue to exist.

As discussed in Chapter 2 of this study, the economic divide between the benefits of attending community college and matriculating to 4-year institutions can be substantial. The built-in limitations of each branch of the U.S. government aside, the obligation of leadership to clearly articulate how it will define and address college access lies at the crux of this study. In Biden's case, this has been thus far significantly connected to 2-year, not 4-year, aspiration.

If akrasia is in fact conceptualized as some have theorized as a struggle between conflicting desires (Moss, 2009) then presidents' ongoing challenges to balance the economics of political expediency with the needs of America's students can be better understood. The grounded theoretical approach of this study's revealed friction in the data. codes emerged in ways that communicated disconnect and instability.

Finding 3: Upward Mobility and Class Systems Were Correlated

Upward mobility and class systems were correlated, nearly overlapping in terms of their epistemic frames within overall presidential rhetoric. This shows consistency across administrations in linking the two constructs. Although the U.S. is not technically a caste system, as seen in countries like India and Japan, being placed within an economic stratification is inescapable for millions of people elsewhere. Despite the anathema of this idea to American mores and values, in this study presidential rhetoric pertaining to college access nonetheless showed a distinct awareness that class systems (code 4) play a role in the college access dilemma. With ENA's placement of both constructs nearly overlapping in the epistemic frames of this study, the 37 presidential references to class systems denoted a somewhat consistent pattern of connecting Affordability to an acknowledgement that those in lower- and middle-class homes are at a disadvantage within the system as it currently exists. Biden in particular has tended to reference class more than his two predecessors, with a propensity to tie his thinking

about solutions to trajectory (code 6). In the context of this study, that means he referenced timeline-related experiences of students, from early pre-K (i.e.; Head Start programs) through higher education, most often as pertaining to his promotion of community college programs.

Upward mobility and class systems may broadly be considered as interdependent factors impacting college access today. If there were no lower-SES students, and no lower middle-class students whose households struggled to make economic ends meet, there would be no need to become mobile in an upward manner. Many theorists cited in the literature reviewed in this study have noted that aspirational messaging about attending college within U.S. culture, including within presidential discourse, creates a great divide between those who have (colleges degrees) and those who have not. The odds of students catapulting themselves into the upper echelons of SES are not encouraging. Chetty's mobility report card study showed that students attending Ivy league institutions had a 1 in 5 chance to be in top 1% of income earners (Chetty et al., 2017). That number slipped to 1 in 11 for other highly selective colleges, and collapsed to a 1 in 300 likelihood for students who only attended community college. Individual implications are apparent, but when the national interest enters the calculus, the economic risks of poverty, crime, drug-addiction, and other societal ills—which have been shown to connect to lack of access to educational resources (Aronowitz, 2003)—further underscore the importance of addressing hierarchical class systems and supporting upward mobility.

Finding 4: Rhetorical Congruence Across Administrations Is Lacking

Consistent messaging in this study was lacking across administrations in terms of college access discourse. In comparing the individual overall figures in Chapter 4 of this study, wide variations in what was being emphasized, and how, are apparent. Since no president begins with a tabula rasa upon which to write new policies to promote college access, the continuum across

time merits consideration. Any long-view assessment of why the U.S. system fails to promote policies leading to more equitable access must consider legacy programs passed down before each incoming administration. Therefore, a brief review of Obama's predecessor has been included here in order to identify connecting threads—and, ultimately, inform the Recommendations of this study.

Obama's 8-year administration, on the heels of George W. Bush's two terms in office, had to wrestle with the legacy of a massive expansion of standardized testing in America's public high schools. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) had been the most recent update at the time to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, and was presented at the time as a potential harbinger for improved postsecondary educational access. Concerns that the American education system was falling behind in international rankings led to a significant increase of the role of the federal government, which Obama inherited. In that Bush's NCLB targeted its focus on select groups of disadvantaged students, there was some alignment, but in other ways—that are not the focus of this study—discordance existed between the newly inaugurated Democratic Obama and his Republican predecessor.

As he entered office, Obama's primary concerns related to college access, as expressed in his Discourse, centered upon Affordability, Pathway Programs, and Underserved Populations (see Figure 37). But he experienced pushback from teachers, with 3,000,000 members of the NEA pushing back on the idea that testing could somehow close the gap between wealthy and poor schools. The fact that those schools were and are paid for by local taxes further exacerbated the issue. Leveraging the threat of schools losing federal Title I money if students in those categories failed to make adequate Annual Yearly Progress was seen as a threat to local educators. Many were already toiling in difficult schools and districts filled mostly with

socioeconomically disadvantaged students; a large percentage of them qualified for free or reduced lunch. The rhetoric that began with Bush reached its crescendo with Obama, whose legacy of promoting 4-year education carries on today. This occurs largely through the work of former First Lady Michelle Obama, whose Reach Higher nonprofit continues the work of increasing equitable access for disadvantaged teens.

It is also worth noting that the longer Obama was in office, the more his rhetoric and policy aligned. As seen in the figures offering a comparative, Obama's first term showed his strongest connections between Underserved Populations and Pathway Programs. By his second term a more measured approach was evident, as he spoke and wrote almost exclusively about solving affordability through various pathway programs. The means and confidence intervals of Figure 43 further establish a tighter consistency within second-term Discourse. From a proposed solutions perspective, this underscores the importance of consistency. Therefore, this study will recommend the establishment of a division within the U.S. Department of Education committed to college access as its sole imperative (see Implications).

Moving from Obama to Trump, the college access momentum accruing came to an abrupt halt. With little discourse in higher education (see Figure 30) and a clear priority for business and economic considerations in its infrequent references to education, the incoming Republican administration placed a highly controversial U.S. Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, and all but ignored the college access dilemma entirely. The history of what has been called the "scam" of Trump University years earlier, where capitalism ran amok, made this less than surprising for many who worked in the educational sector (Shireman, 2018). Without infrastructure and ongoing federal accountability, one might say the scourge of inequitable

access metastasized during these 4 years, with college access as a presidential priority falling to the wayside.

Four years later, as Biden came into office on the heels of the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the U.S. Capital, he was faced with the necessity to balance multiple concerns. These included the global Covid-19 pandemic and resultant threats of economic and social collapse. Nonetheless, as seen in Figure 32, he set to work picking up the mantle of college access where Obama had ended at the time his 8 years in office came to an end. Perhaps because he had served as Obama's Vice-President, there were notable parallels in the Discourse, with one primary difference. Biden squarely centered his college access rhetoric and proposed plans on promoting the idea of free community college for all.

Whereas Obama's programs and policies focused on 4-year pathways, the new administration tilted toward what some might see as a smaller, more attainable but less economically optimal goal (see Figure 9). By October 2021, the Biden administration announced that its program to make community college tuition-free was being dropped. Biden was quoted by National Public Radio as stating:

I don't know of any major change in American public policy that's occurred by a single piece of legislation. I doubt whether we'll get the entire funding for community colleges, but I'm not going to give up on community colleges as long as I'm president. (Nadworny, 2021, para. 1).

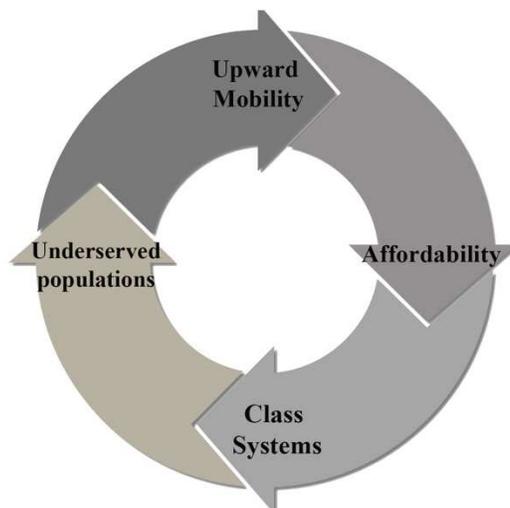
This raises the question of whether Biden will stay in office long enough to complete that objective, or whether another administration will take over and continue to kick the can of inequitable college access further down the road.

Conclusions

Rhetoric and reality must align in order for U.S. presidents to effectively lead change as pertains to higher education access within the currently stymied capitalistic model. Although this has typically been framed in the years of this study as largely an economic problem, the blind spots of family capital and cultural divides need to be more effectively addressed. The misaligned correlation between noncollegiate family expectations of low-SES students and what could be possible as their eventual attainment of higher education will benefit from being addressed. Through increased sensitivity to logistic, psychological, and linguistically sensitive cultural capital as is acquired by teens in their home communities through adolescence, this aim can become more attainable.

To date, pathway programs have focused almost exclusively on the student without sufficient consideration for the home environment within which they've been raised. To interrupt cycles of generational poverty and reproduction of social class, a less commodified structure of higher education will be necessary. Research has shown that even when students rise above or fall below the class positions of their families of origin, aspects of family capital are at play; therefore, those families will need to be invited into the process of helping their students transition toward a future that they themselves often do not understand.

The problem with pathway programs not involving parents, in particular, stems from what the researcher has conceptualized as a cycle of the problem codes that emerged from this study. Figure 45 shows how those four codes emerge from and collapse into one another.

Figure 45*Cycle of Systemically Inequitable College Access***Cycle of Systemically Inequitable College Access**

Note. From an original concept created by the researcher.

As presidential rhetoric has focused more on Affordability than any other code, the following analysis begins there.

Affordability

Parents who did not graduate from college, and whose household income often falls below the national average, know that if they encourage their teenagers to aspire to college they will be opening a difficult conversation about their own limited means to contribute to the tens of thousands of dollars on the price tag of even the most affordable institutions across 4 years. Many will have heard the word scholarship, but have no idea how to help their loved one secure them. Most have little way of knowing that the process of readiness often needs to begin by or before ninth grade. As an example of this rhetoric, Obama stated:

A college education is the single most important investment that Americans can make in their futures. College remains a good investment, resulting in higher earnings and a lower

risk of unemployment. Unfortunately, for many low- and middle-income families, college is slipping out of reach. Over the past three decades, the average tuition at a public four-year college has more than tripled, while a typical family's income has increased only modestly. More students than ever are relying on loans to pay for college. Today, 71% of those earning a bachelor's degree graduate with debt. (Obama, 2014, para. 1)

As seen in this quote, the affordability dilemma both connects and gives rise to class systems.

Class Systems

Because of the information gap, where families lack the socioeconomic capital necessary to catapult up and out of poverty, an opportunity gap arises. America's class systems are largely stratified by level of educational attainment, with the wealthiest being the most likely to apply to and graduate from 4-year institutions. Furthermore, those with such advantages are much more likely to navigate the admissions process understanding rankings, prestige, and the comparative value of one institution over another. Those mired in the lower or lower-middle class make up significant percentages of the overall U.S. population, and public education to date has fallen short of addressing their needs in an equitable manner. Therefore, myriad nonprofits and pathway programs have emerged. As an example of this rhetoric, Biden stated on 5/27/21 that:

I'm insisting that we have universal pre-kindergarten, 2 years of free community college. All the studies show: No matter what background a kid comes from—whether they're a single mom, a single dad who is on what we used to call welfare, are in trouble, or come from a middle-class household—the kid who comes from the background that's deprived is going to hear, by the time they get to first grade, a million fewer words spoken. A

million fewer spoken. What that means is they're behind the eight ball from the start.
(House, 2021)

The class systems dilemma references in this quote, with its acknowledgment of students being deprived, both connects and gives rise to underserved populations.

Underserved Populations

Parents without socioeconomic advantages know they cannot afford to pay or in many cases even contribute to postsecondary education for their teens. This creates the connection to the next problem that emerged from this study. In context here, underserved populations has been defined by the researcher as including demographic groups who are inadequately present in populations of successful college applicants and matriculants according to their percentage makeup within the larger populace. While numerous pathway programs identified in this study are earmarked for Latino, African-American, Asian-Pacific Islander, and Native-American populations, there are no such earmarked funds for the 7.3% of non-Hispanic White students living at or below the poverty line in the U.S. (Creamer, 2020). As an example of this rhetoric, Biden stated on 4/28/21:

We will increase Pell Grants and invest in historically Black colleges and universities, minority institutions. The reason is they don't have the endowments, but the students are just as capable of learning about cybersecurity, just as capable of learning about metallurgy, all of the things going on to provide jobs in the future. (Internet Archive, 2021, para. 100)

The underserved populations dilemma references in this quote both connects and gives rise to a desire for upward mobility.

Upward Mobility

While upward mobility itself does not construe a problem, the dearth of it among U.S. students, who most often stay stuck in their parental level of economic status as seen in Chapter 2 of this study, does. Although only 17% of respondents in the Pew report cited said the American dream is out of reach for their family, the frustration of trying to bring that optimism to the fruition of a 4-year college degree remains. Despite the fact that not all Americans believe that higher education is critical to upward mobility, 49% have agreed that a 4-year degree is worth it because it is perceived to increase career opportunities and money over their lifetimes. Presidential rhetoric contributes to these perceptions. Nevertheless, social commentary widely disseminated by America's media questions whether college is worth the cost, given student debt realities. As an example of this rhetoric, Obama stated on 10/28/15:

We pulled the United States and the world out of an economic crisis, stabilized the financial system, have grown jobs for over five years—more than 13,000,000 jobs created; 17,000,000 people without health insurance before now have it. High school graduations are up, college enrollment is up. (Obama, 2015, para. 1)

While it was true that those metrics were up, skyrocketing student debt was and is catapulting millions of Americans into circumstances that perpetuate, not ameliorate, the affordability dilemma that initiated the entire cycle.

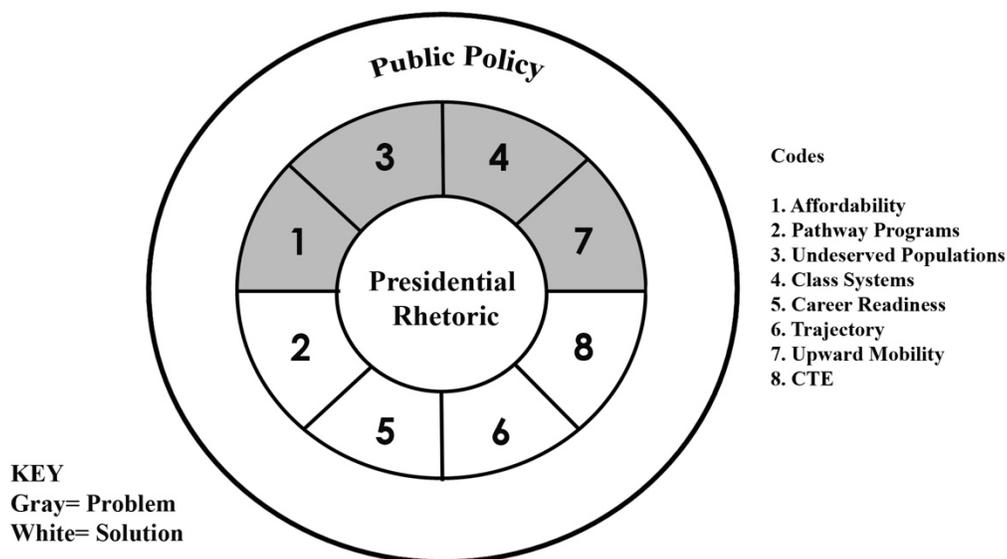
This finding, within the larger context of the study, underscores the importance of what is commonly called walking the walk, not just talking the talk. Rhetoric, discourse, speeches, and written communications are meaningless unless they are directly connected to actionable policies and programs to address those comments. Related to this is the fact that recent presidents have tended to speak more than write about college access. While writing can be seen as a form of

doing, the distance from talk to written statements to the implementation of policy actually reaching students is a long one.

The study revealed a total of 78 excerpts from speeches and 31 excerpts from written communications that met the inclusion criteria. The fact that U.S. presidents spoke 2 1/2 times more often than they wrote in discourse related to college access was a first data point of interest. When presidents did speak, their emphasis consistently addressed affordability, with pathway programs and class systems as the most common connections to that code. However, when looking at written trends, underserved populations was the topic covered most consistently. There was also a much stronger emphasis on pathway programs in written form, with upward mobility and career readiness also prominently featured. These findings reveal that U.S. presidents utilize shifting epistemic frames in how they conceptualize college access, which seem to be dependent upon whether they are being heard by an audience or read by a reader.

Rhetoric and Reality

Rhetoric needs to directly connect to public policy. What leaders say needs to impact real-life actions. Initiatives and policies can support and substantiate what is said with more than mere language. Figure 46 expands on the earlier concept set forth in terms of viewing the rhetoric as a wheel, and demonstrates that the wheel of college access turns around an axis of presidential rhetoric. Furthermore, it metaphorically underscores that the proverbial rubber hits the road when this rhetoric, as expressed in epistemic frames leading to codes 1 through 8 in this study, does—or does not—result in public policy.

Figure 46*Donnelly's Axis of Access Concept***The Wheel of College Access Rhetoric by US Presidents**

U.S. Presidents would benefit from remembering that, as structuralist interpretations would argue, human behavior is conditioned externally by systems impacting individuals. Because public education in the U.S. functions as a catalyst or impediment to student aspiration, policy must effectively intertwine consideration for stakeholders from the grass roots level—for example, parents, children, and local businesses—all the way to the White House. Constitutional authority, as has been mentioned in this study, trickles down from the federal to state levels, after which Boards of Education implement policies that directly affect students.

Of interest, the number of school districts have become more and more centralized since inception in 1939 with 117,108 public districts decreasing across the subsequent seven decades to just 13,588 (NCES, 2021). U.S. Presidents must wrangle the tension between twin desires, for both control and independence all along the continuum, and economics cannot be the sole factor driving determinations. From the days of Horace Mann in the 19th century, the U.S. has

increasingly established and bureaucratized public education. Now with the charter movement of the last decade, disrupted systems and presumptions of control are ushering in an opportunity to modify stances and reconsider prudent discourse.

As far back as the early 1970s, political scientists like Thomas Dye have been expressing the increasing concern about the sprawling scope of pressure on America's high schools. Today these are pressured to handle everything from resolving racial conflict to dealing with shootings while trying to help build an integrated society. These are no small tasks, and organizational change may require formal endeavors such as legislation, regulations, policy directives, and court decisions to improve the college access equation. Although educational governance in the current structures of the U.S. educational system is too loosely coupled to effectively navigate spheres of such authority and responsibility, change can be made. Ideally, this will begin in the Oval Office.

Implications

This study has contributed to the field by offered rhetorical insights and clarifications. Its ENA graphs have helped to identify narrative arcs, and assessed trends in U.S. presidential communication. The researcher intends to share the study to benefit federal leaders in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the U.S. government, in particular higher education stakeholders at the U.S. Department of Education. Nonprofit leaders in the college access space will also be potentially impacted, as well as international educational leaders whose objectives intersect the U.S. higher education system. The role of presidential rhetoric in contributing to the commodification of higher education as questioned in this study may illuminate new ways of making meaning and shifting both perspectives and behavior.

To the researcher's knowledge, this dissertation is the first foray with QE and ENA in the field of college access or higher education. Since in epistemic frame theory, thinking is best understood as a way people make decisions and justify actions, the implications of this study are vast.

Practice and Scholarship

Specific ways in which various categories of stakeholders might benefit from this study include (a) adopting a working definition related to college access that aligns with those of other stakeholders in order to coalesce policies and procedure accordingly, (b) revising presumptions about the access equation in U.S. systems for students from low-SES backgrounds, and (c) developing effective incentives using economic and social mechanisms to bridge the information gap in service of increasing equity.

Abstraction of Language. Resulting data show a disconnect due to the abstraction of language as used by these national leaders as they presented their communications. Ideas, policies, and opinions in their discourse related to the rhetorical use of this term, for example Obama stated in March 2015 that, "all of us—elected officials, universities, business leaders—everybody needs to do more to bring down college costs" (Obama, 2015). To his credit, this president promoted ideas to enable change like the Student Aid Bill of Rights, but initiatives such as this one were given the form of a memorandum directed to the Department of Education and largely focused on adding website communications, not offsetting the bottom line burden borne by America's students. While that so-called bill went forth, his budget called for loan forgiveness programs and income-based cuts on repayments. Those cuts would prove to drive up student loan volumes and exacerbate the central affordability problem outlined in this study. Nonetheless, Obama has been hailed by many as a higher education president whose work with

the creation of the College Scorecard and other initiatives would carry forward the foundational work of Johnson, who created the financial student aid system, and others (Rinfret, 2019).

In the end, U.S. voters will decide whether they elect presidents who back up what they say with effective action. Yes, there is a complex system of other stakeholders alongside those Commanders in Chief, including the legislative and judicial branches of government. But in the war on inequitable college access, the center that must hold begins at the top. With a cogent and consistent communication of the definition combined with accountability, future leaders can ensure that students who rely on public education in the United States will be able to contribute their human capital to the U.S. economy, culture, and way of life.

Need for Tethering Discourse to Policy. Accurately identifying affordability, class-based, and other economic barriers to equitable access needs to be tethered to specific policy in communications by U.S. Presidents. Going beyond use of common phrases and constructs that emerged in this research may also help shift from stasis to positive momentum, supporting upward mobility and sharpening specific subobjectives within future pathway programs.

College eligibility is far easier to attain than college access, and true college readiness is harder still. The ongoing commodification of higher education, with state disinvestment, increased student debt, and steeply rising tuition must be addressed with realistic policy in order to prevent further generations of public high school students from under-aspiring. The lost potential human capital of millions of disadvantaged students unable to enter lucrative fields of interest can only be described as catastrophic. This is particularly true within science, technology, engineering, and math fields, where so much of the future economy is moving in the digital age.

International Implications

Both national and global implications abound as pertains to this theory, for example in international education scores such as the PISA—which measures 15-year-olds across the globe in their ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge to meet real-life challenges. In 2018, the United States ranked 15th in reading, 19th in science, and 38th in math.

Table 5

PISA Scores (2018)

Mathematics		Science		Reading	
1	China (B-S-J-Z)[a] 591	1	China (B-S-J-Z)[a] 590	1	China (B-S-J-Z)[a] 555
2	Singapore 569	2	Singapore 551	2	Singapore 549
3	Macau (China) 558	3	Macau (China) 544	3	Macau (China) 525
4	Hong Kong (China) 551	4	Vietnam 543	4	Hong Kong (China) 524
5	Taiwan 531	5	Estonia 530	5	Estonia 523
6	Japan 527	6	Japan 529	6	Canada 520
7	South Korea 526	7	Finland 522	6	Finland 520
8	Estonia 523	8	South Korea 519	8	Ireland 518
9	Netherlands 519	9	Canada 518	9	South Korea 514
10	Poland 516	10	Hong Kong (China) 517	10	Poland 512
11	Switzerland 515	11	Taiwan 516	11	New Zealand 506
12	Canada 512	12	Poland 511	11	Sweden 506
13	Denmark 509	13	New Zealand 508	13	United States 505
13	Slovenia 509	14	Slovenia 507	13	Vietnam 505
15	Belgium 508	15	United Kingdom 505	15	Japan 504
16	Finland 507	16	Australia 503	15	United Kingdom 504
17	Sweden 502	16	Germany 503	17	Australia 503
17	United Kingdom 502	16	Netherlands 503	17	Taiwan 503
19	Norway 501	19	United States 502	19	Denmark 501
20	Germany 500	20	Belgium 499	20	Norway 499
20	Ireland 500	20	Sweden 499	21	Germany 498
22	Czech Republic 499	22	Czech Republic 497	22	Slovenia 495
22	Austria 499	23	Ireland 496	23	Belgium 493
24	Latvia 496	24	Switzerland 495	23	France 493
24	Vietnam 496	25	Denmark 493	25	Portugal 492
26	France 495	25	France 493	26	Czech Republic 490
26	Iceland 495	27	Portugal 492	27	Netherlands 485
28	New Zealand 494	28	Austria 490	28	Austria 484
29	Portugal 492	28	Norway 490	28	Switzerland 484
30	Australia 491	30	Latvia 487	30	Croatia 479
31	Russia 488	31	Spain 483	30	Latvia 479
32	Italy 487	32	Lithuania 482	30	Russia 479
33	Slovakia 486	33	Hungary 481	33	Hungary 476
34	Luxembourg 483	34	Russia 478	33	Italy 476
35	Lithuania 481	35	Luxembourg 477	33	Lithuania 476
35	Spain 481	36	Iceland 475	36	Belarus 474
35	Hungary 481	37	Croatia 472	36	Iceland 474
38	United States 478	38	Belarus 471	38	Israel 470

In considering a comparative of college readiness in the U.S. to dozens of other countries whose students perform better on the PISA exam, questions of cultural myopia or far-sightedness

come into frame. This raises the key question of whether college access presents a dilemma in other, more academically successful countries. The answer is generally no. The construct of college access is in fact culturally dependent. Its value in the U.S. being derived largely from its scarcity as a resource that is predominantly monetized within a commodifying system.

Economic Implications and Proposed Changes

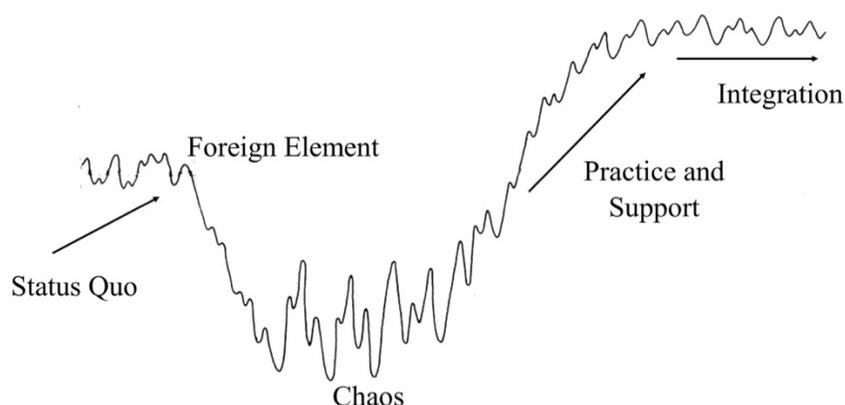
Implications include downstream economic fallout from stymied upward mobility across socioeconomic classes, with lost human capital potential leading to an increase in off-shore hiring for America's more lucrative career positions. Due to the dynamic nature of the myriad factors impacting and impeding access today, three tangible changes to help mitigate the college access dilemma are proposed as part of this section. The first will be necessarily detailed, as it encompasses a broad systemic approach to transformation. The last two will be more brief.

Proposed Change 1: Create a New College Bridge Division in the U.S. Department of Education. The churn of new administrations coming into power every 4 to 8 years has created a substantial hurdle for stakeholders in the U.S. Department of Education and related divisions such as the Federal Student Aid Office. Most endeavors they undertake and implement are contingent upon leadership that begins in the Oval Office. Workers may, therefore, be expected to calibrate their efforts with a measured approach as each presidential election arises. A new administration can easily interrupt momentum that the predecessor had built, as seen in the Trump presidency following 8 years of the Obama administration. It is recommended therefore that a dedicated College Access Bridget Division, with nonpartisan focus, be established within the U.S. Department of Education in the manner described in Figure 49. This safeguard can protect forward momentum toward increasing equitable access regardless of administration.

This recommendation proposes centralization of power to promote college access through administrative modifications, which will be shown in this section to be currently obstructed by antiquated organizational charts. A moderately revised organizational structure within the U.S. Department of Education can help implement change at scale. Following this primary recommendation, five additional suggestions will follow.

Proposed Organizational Change in the U.S. Department of Education. In order to increase equitable college access for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, existing divisions within the U.S. Department of Education will benefit from stronger connections between the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Office of Postsecondary Education. These, in turn, may benefit from functioning in a more integrated manner with the Federal Student Aid Office, which bears the brunt of ill-advised loans for misdirected students who navigated their posthigh school pathways with only public school guidance.

Satir's Model. The researcher acknowledges the expectation that this recommendation will be met with resistance. Nonetheless, Satir's five-stage transition model demonstrates one likely way such policy could evolve. Similar to Lewin's unfreeze-change-refreeze model (Lawler, 2007), this model recognizes the disruption necessary when deploying organizational change at scale. The status quo, in the context of this study, represents existing structures, as supported by U.S. presidential rhetoric about higher education pathways.

Figure 47*Satir's Model of Transition*

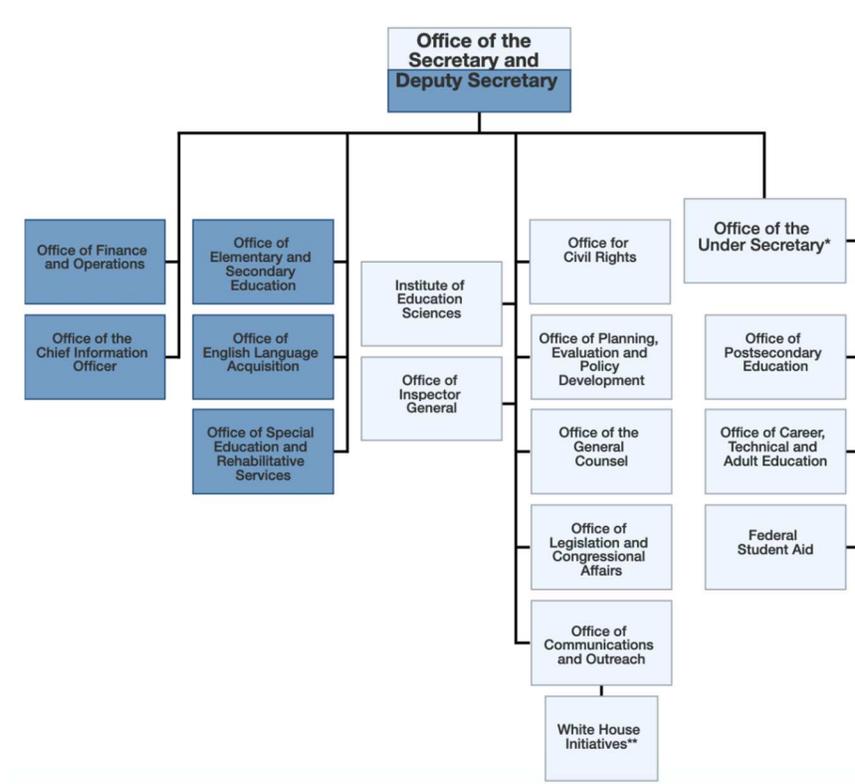
The foreign element in this model represents the introduction of a unified definition of college access overseen by the proposed College Bridge Division. This can be projected at first to generate chaos, as thousands of nonprofit and for-profit organizations, as well as more than 13,000 public school districts jockey to adapt to such clarified leadership. Predictable albeit ineffective patterns of behaving will need to give way, leading to an internal shift, a conscious and deliberate change in the business-as-usual order of things. The chaos in this model represents entrenched ideas, confusion, resistance, fear, and/or anxiety required for all stakeholders—from the classroom to the White House. Collaboration will be the price of effective change.

Out of Chaos. Of note, in Satir's Model the way out of chaos necessitates both practice and support. To that end, with or without implementation of this particular recommendation, future analysis within public school districts and charter school networks will need to comprise a central focus of future research. In particular, assessing the tethers between administrative rhetoric, policy, and initiative implementation will be necessary, with data-driven reports disseminated both up and down decision-maker chains.

U.S. Department of Education Considerations Impacting College Access. Bureaucratic concerns have often been shown to undermine effective implementation of policy (Rinfret, 2019). However, focusing events—like that of the Covid-19 pandemic and its negative impact on public education—often catapult back-burner issues to the forefront. With numerous competing priorities, though, maintaining administrative focus on educational initiatives can just as quickly fall to the side. The push for vaccination of high school students in 2021 above or concurrent with helping them pursue college admissions success provides one recent example. The current organizational chart at the U.S. Department of Education is once again displayed, this time as Figure 48 (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Figure 48

U.S. Department of Education Organizational Chart, 2021



Note. From an original concept created by the researcher.

The official U.S. Department of Education website shows numerous vacancies in existing positions, which include many impacting underserved populations. As of January 2022, these empty positions included Executive Director of the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, Executive Director of the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans, Executive Director of the White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education, and Executive Director of the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

Among existing positions within the department, current structures beg the following two central questions: (a) Why are the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Office of Postsecondary Education entirely separated and reporting to different administrators in separate offices? and (b) Why is the Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development reporting directly to the Secretary of Education while the Federal Student Aid office, which oversees over \$1.7 trillion in current student debt, reports to the Office of the Undersecretary?

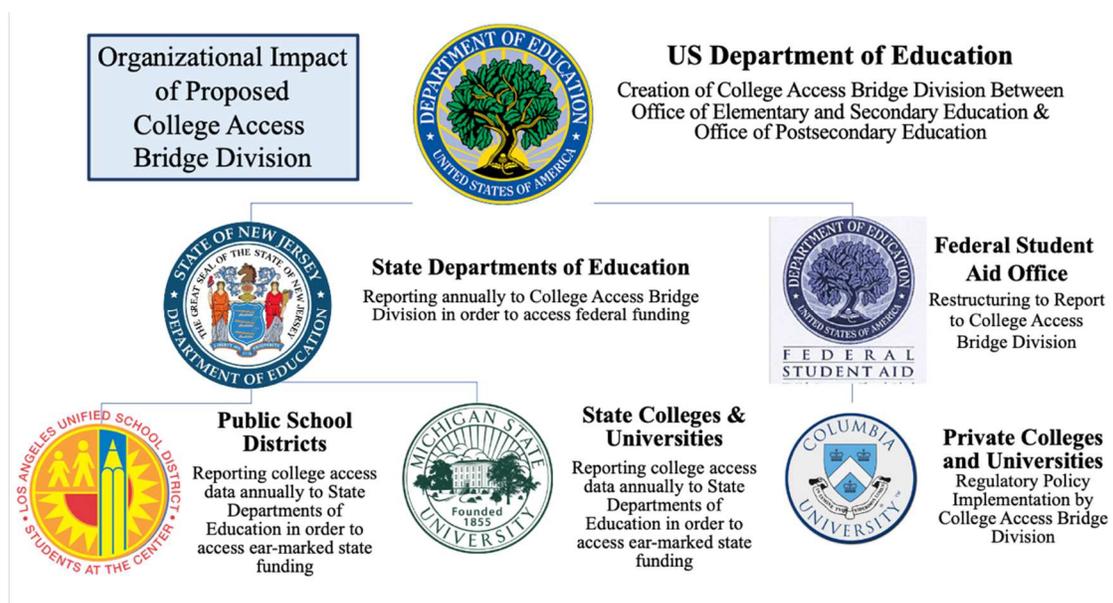
As seen on the current organizational chart, the Office of the Under Secretary is responsible for the administration of the White House Initiatives on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity. Nonetheless, the necessary connective threads to facilitate such advancement—in the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education—exists entirely apart from that division. Meanwhile, the Office of Postsecondary Education openly references the construct of college access, focusing on promoting and expanding access to postsecondary education to “increase college completion rates for America’s students, and broaden global competencies that drive the economic success and competitiveness of our Nation” (U.S. Department of Education, 2021 para. 1). The primary means to these ends in the Office of Postsecondary Education’s three divisions focus upon attending to grant programs for

colleges and overseeing the review process for accreditation to ensure that the education provided by the institutions of higher education meet acceptable levels of quality.

Figure 49 offers one way to view the impact of this study's proposed reorganization, where a new College Access Bridge Division's integration with existing offices can promote sustainable, equitable college access. This focus would prioritize what is needed by the students themselves to promote successful matriculation, and not focus primarily on institutions of higher education, as in the Office of Postsecondary Education, or other related offices without clear mandates to protect student interests. Rather than presuming to present an actual revised organizational chart, the purpose of this proposed change is to open exploration of desirable modifications, with a focus on fiscal accountability along federal, state, and institutional lines.

Figure 49

Proposed College Access Bridge Division for the U.S. Department of Education



Note. From an original concept created by the researcher.

Once stakeholders across the spectrum have practiced new behaviors and skills with renewed attitudes aligned with federal definitions, integration can lead to a new and more

equitable status quo. As with all organizational change, any new policy or structural modifications must be accompanied by incentives. In an ecosystem that involves tens of millions of people—from students and their families to teachers, administrator, and industry stakeholders—a commitment must be nurtured from school districts to the federal level. These will need to be based upon emerging definitions and related realizations to guide future initiatives and their implementation. As with the rest of this study, these will necessarily emerge from federal communications, since essentially every major education policy is based on the machineries of the federal system, while depending on state and local governments for implementation (Rinfret, 2019).

With transformative leadership, a single, coherent, and well-publicized series of directives from the U.S. Department of Education could support the objectives of state boards of education as well as colleges and universities. The structural need for better communication and directed initiatives must offset what some, including Capper and Young (2014) call “the plethora of equity policies and practices where inclusion/ integration, student learning and achievement, and the range of student identities are not central” (p. 162).

To bring together disparate stakeholders, changes enacted would need to target the abolishment of profit-driven micro-agendas. These currently exist across and within federal, state, and local governmental bodies as well as within nonprofit and corporate stakeholders populating the higher education space, not the least of which are in the colleges and universities themselves.

Proposed Change 2: Incorporate Kin Networks Into Pathway Programs. In order for the rhetoric to align with the reality of the current U.S. culture and economy, it is recommended that U.S. presidents work to ensure the U.S. Department of Education incorporates kin networks

by 7th grade into the way it deploys pathway programs such as TRIO. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds have limitations that often center around home-based belief systems and an information gap. Their families do not know what they do not know. Without structural re-envisioning and policy modifications to support first generation aspirations, students will find it difficult to compete on a level playing field with wealthier students able to access information about how, precisely, to aspire toward and through higher education. While many current pathway programs related to college access begin in high school, personal perceptions that one has the ability or inability to aspire to postsecondary education is well established by middle school age. The point: sociocultural norms inform these economic factors. Competing narratives on the meaning and purpose of higher education impact marginalized communities, so the external support for underserved students must realistically incorporate solutions that address sociocultural barriers to entry.

To solve for college access, presidential rhetoric and related policies need to address the true breadth of the problem. As Bulman et al. (2017) and others have established, lacking financial means is not necessarily the primary reason for gaps in degree attainment among people from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds (Barr, 2021). Even when scholarships or loans seem to solve the affordability problem, most financial aid packages do not address the information gap. Impediments faced by low-income students, as discussed in Chapter 2 of this study, are comprised of hurdles and barriers of a more nuanced and human nature. Questions about belonging, family capital, emotional doubts, and psychological concerns can eclipse curiosity and stymie a choice to aspire. Student vulnerabilities abound, from the prospect of selecting institutions where they'll apply to writing deeply personal essays that they don't know how to approach. Not only do they often not know from which colleges they are most likely to graduate

and receive a meaningful return, they lack the confidence to aspire because their public high schools lack sufficient operations and support for effective college counseling. Better informing parents through effective training can help to rally an invisible army of support.

Proposed Change 3: Reassess Criteria for Pathway Programs, and Adjust According to Poverty Levels Regardless of Race. It is recommended that policymakers placing budget toward solving the college access dilemma structure pathway programs based on poverty levels, not just race/ethnicity groupings. They should take care to include Caucasian students from low-income households. The problem of inequitable access crosses all populations in terms of race/ethnicity. There are high net-worth students of color in many U.S. cities, for example, while White students with food insecurity eek by in the hollers of Appalachia. While numerous pathway programs identified in this study are earmarked for Latino, African-American, Asian-Pacific Islander, and Native-American populations, there are no such earmarked funds for the significant numbers of White students living in high or mid-to-high poverty. Millions of these students qualify for free or reduced lunch (see Figure 5). The access dilemma is largely a function of financial scarcity, not solely racial or ethnic backgrounds.

Future studies could assess how such programs have developed this blind spot, where race/ethnicity have been used as a proxy for poverty or assumptions about who is or is not socioeconomically disadvantaged. Discreet connections between small-d discourses and capital-D Discourse within the college access space would useful for effecting such change (Mayr, 2008). Mismatched discourse frames (Tannen, 1993) may have contributed over time in the widening opportunity gap seen today in U.S. higher education. With such an inquiry, the exacerbation of inequitable college access may be better addressed.

Researcher's Past and Future Focus

Researcher's Previous Papers and Presentations

The researcher has previously presented studies related to college access at numerous conferences. At the Research Association for Interdisciplinary Studies (RAIS) Conference in August 2020, she presented “Increasing College Readiness for Disadvantaged Students Through an Online Growth Mindset Summer Bridge Program”. At the University Council for Education Administration UCEA Conference in November 2020 she presented “Increasing College and Career Readiness for Disadvantaged Students Leveraging Conley’s Four Keys Model”. At the Quantitative Ethnography Data Challenge in April, 2021, she copresented with Dr. Seung Lee “The Pandemic’s Impact on College Admissions Criteria in the United States,” which included ENA-generated data analyzing rhetoric in higher education industry journals regarding the pivot toward test-optional policies in U.S. colleges.

Researcher's Future Papers and Presentations

As a result of this study the researcher intends to identify existing or prospective pilot programs to support increasing equitable access at the high school level. Learnings from an initiative conceptualized and executed from 2016-2018 tentatively called the GRADS Initiative (Greater Retention and Access for Disadvantaged Students) may inform such research. Incorporating educational technology will likely play a role. Longitudinal research with Randomized Clinical Trials (RCTs) is anticipated. Using forecasting methods, the valuable ability to iterate in real time may help mitigate the challenge that, as some theorists have observed (Kraft, 2018), policymakers in public education “face a moving target” (p. 204).

Evaluation

This study limited its focus to presidential discourse from 2009-2021, but numerous other federal communications about college access were conveyed in written and spoken form during that time period. Those not integrated in this study included speeches and documents from leaders at the U.S. Department of Education as well as members of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. The long-view of the evolution of the construct of college access far preceded the 2009 start date of this study, and has continued since its final data was included. Therefore: although robust, the study is not all-encompassing.

While all White House documents and released speeches and writings described in Chapter 3 were included, each president of course made additional comments and speeches, and created additional written communications, that were not included in this study. Inclusion here was limited to only official communications conveyed through the White House.

Given the opportunity to apply 20/20 hindsight to this study, the researcher acknowledges that several modifications would have been helpful. This section will be conveyed in first person.

1. If I could do this again, a reconsideration of the time frame may have simplified this process. I was aware that contrasting an eight-year administration's communications with 4-year and nascent comparatives was problematic. I considered going further back in time to compare two 2-term administrations, for example Obama and Clinton. However, my objective to impact current administrative thinking and policy would have been compromised by such an alteration. I have acknowledged those discrepancies while still identifying valid data related to the RQ.
2. In hindsight, I would have better prepared myself for the impact of conducting this research. In order to assess college access at what I have hypothesized and

demonstrated to be its axis, I've drawn upon over twenty years as in the field as a practitioner in college admissions field, starting with my work in 1996 as a high school English teacher earning \$35,000 a year. It has been important to me to remain transparent about my personal investment in helping propose solutions. As a lower-SES, first-generation student who grew up White, I have straddled both a level of racial privilege and an economic disadvantage as I came of age to parents with no means to help me launch. Conducting this research challenged many of the assumptions that were taught to me within my own family of origin.

My father, a patriot who made sure an American flag flew in our yard throughout my childhood, trusted that when he heard about the American dream it meant that even a country kid like him had a chance at it. He never got his shot. The military enlisted him with promises of college at a later date, and trained him to be a nuclear reactor operator on the submarine USS Scamp, but by the time he applied to be permitted to start college he was told he had aged out of the program. My dad passed away at age 64, having had to work multiple jobs to make ends meet until the day he died. As I have been writing this dissertation I've thought often of his lived experience, and that of my beloved mother also. The stakes of college access are not just political, they are deeply personal.

3. In hindsight, I would like to more deeply comprehend the algorithms and logic underpinning ENA. While I have enjoyed its benefits, I feel I have only begun to scratch the surface of its potential for future research.

Recommendations

Four recommendations for future research to be conducted by others are listed below.

1. A deeper exploration is recommended to explore how rhetoric within and from the U.S. Department of Education—in particular the Federal Student Aid Office—impacts economic systems that culminate in federal student loans, which currently top \$1.7 trillion in debt while generating approximately 6% interest payable to the U.S. government. In parallel, alliances between the federal government and privately owned banks are recommended to be investigated by economists, to increase transparency and call into question current paradigms, which benefit corporations at the expense of students.
2. Future analyses will benefit from qualitative research regarding what underserved students presently believe they must do to aspire to higher education immediately after high school as compared to professional perspectives. In order to clearly codify the connection between the information gap and the opportunity gap, programs that debunk misunderstandings and replace them with accessible information between the bells of the school day in public high schools is recommended as a future initiative.
3. A more intentional study assessing where policy—and more particularly funding—falls short of providing necessary support to move all populations along the college access pathway is indicated. Individual areas of research needed include not only African-American, Hispanic/Latino/Latina, Native American, Asian-American/Pacific Islander, and other racial-ethnic sub-demographics, but also studies assessing students with discrete learning differences—including but not limited to separate studies of students with ADHD, dyslexia, clinical depression, and other

- mood disorders. Also recommended: separate studies on the college access needs of students with physical disabilities—including but not limited to separate studies of students who are deaf/hard of hearing, blind/visually-impaired, or wheelchair-bound. A final recommended focus area would assess the college access needs and roadblocks for students who identify as LGBTQIA. In order for America's higher education system to become inclusive, it needs to welcome all students, many of whom have lived experiences intersecting the aforementioned demographic groups.
4. Speech and writing often combine to influence actual social or political practice, but the neurolinguistic differences in the way people process what they hear versus what they read may prove to be areas for further research related to this study. A future study may want to assess the separate implications of spoken words as compared to written communications.

Chapter Summary

The researcher has identified Donnelly's *Axis of Access* as a central concept of this study. This concept, as illustrated in Figure 46, states that: (a) the rhetorical construct of college access in the U.S. constitutes a dilemma that can be accurately described as circular (b) presidential Discourse sits at the center of this dilemma, and (c) increasing equitable access hinges on policy leveraging a nuanced approach to both problem-based and solution-based aspects.

This study has proposed that with careful use of language and clear definitions of the college access construct, progress may be made toward a more level playing field. Therefore, the study's proposed definition for college access can be summarized as follows: (a) College access is a rhetorical construct promoting equitable student aspiration to and through higher education

degree attainment, accruing in Discourse that interweaves complex problem-related and solution-related concepts, and (b) The axis of access begins with U.S. presidential communications.

Closing Comments

Whose responsibility is it to ensure equitable college access in the United States, and what obligation should fall to individuals as compared to the U.S. government? The intertwined and sometimes conflicting priorities of stakeholders along the chain from presidents to high school classrooms and guidance offices require careful consideration. So much of the dilemma boils down to one need: effectively balancing budgets while championing educational objectives.

Because of the researcher's affinity for literature as antecedent to this study's approach to the problem of increasing equitable college access, several poems by Langston Hughes were referenced in early chapters. In conclusion, an additional perspective—by W.B. Yeats, a contemporary of Hughes—is offered for broader interpretation and consideration.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
 The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
 Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned...

—The Second Coming (excerpt)

(Yeats, 1920)

The imagery of the gyre—that is, circle—harkens to both the circular image of Campbell's Hero's Journey and the researcher's wheel of access with presidential rhetoric at the center of the hub, the axis of that concept. Yeats' poem was originally composed in the wake of

World War I, but has been referenced across the last 100 years as a commentary on numerous nonmilitary forms of conflict. Under leadership from president after president, dating all the way back to the earliest origins of higher education in the U.S., the dilemma of inequitable access has kept millions of students every year from being able to aspire. These presidents, metaphorically conceived here as falconers of a sort, spin rhetoric that tethers directly, via policy, to the potential for equity. The students, those falcons hoping to soar, cannot hear their way to the so-called American dream for the many reasons outlined in this study.

The center of rhetoric has not proven to hold or sufficiently promote access in public school students' lived experiences, and things have indeed fallen apart. With \$1.7 trillion in student debt and widespread under-aspiration, America's future as an economic superpower with an effective, relevant higher education system is presently in peril. As in Langston Hughes' imagined explosion of a dream deferred, the blood-dimmed tide of the lost dreams of students from public school backgrounds is loosed, while the ceremony of innocence—that naiveté of a level playing field—is drowned in its wake.

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APPENDIX A

Definition of Terms Glossary

The following words and acronyms are defined for epistemological clarification in terms of how they are utilized within the context of this study.

- *Access* – “Access refers to the ways in which educational institutions and policies ensure—or at least strive to ensure—that students have equal and equitable opportunities to take full advantage of their education.” (EdGlossary,n.d.)
- *ACT* - American College Test, a standardized exam widely used for college admissions in the United States. A competitor of the SAT. (Researcher Definition)
- *Affirmative action* – “In the United States, an active effort to improve employment or educational opportunities for members of minority groups and for women. A government remedy to the effects of long-standing discrimination against such groups and has consisted of policies, programs, and procedures that give limited preferences to minorities and women in job hiring, admission to institutions of higher education, the awarding of government contracts, and other social benefits.” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2021)
- *ALAS* – Association of Latino-American Superintendents. (ALAS, 2021)
- *At-risk* – “The term at-risk is often used to describe students or groups of students who are considered to have a higher probability of failing academically or dropping out of school. The term may be applied to students who face circumstances that could jeopardize their ability to complete school, such as homelessness, incarceration, teenage pregnancy, serious health issues, domestic violence, transiency ... or other learning-related factors that could adversely affect the educational performance and attainment of

some students.” (EdGlossary, n.d.)

- *College access* - The study’s proposed definition for ‘college access’ can be summarized as follows: (a) *College access is a rhetorical construct promoting equitable student aspiration to and through higher education degree attainment, accruing in Discourse that interweaves complex problem-related and solution-related concepts, and (b) The axis of access begins with U.S. presidential communication.* (Researcher Definitions)
- *College-bound* – Students in high school who express an interest and/or intention to apply to college in their senior year. For the purposes of this study, only accredited four-year institutions or cases where a student began at a two-year community college and then transferred are included. (Researcher Definition)
- *College eligibility* – Not to be confused with college readiness, college eligibility means that a student may graduate high school with sufficient credits to enroll in a postsecondary institution and be qualified, but still lack the study habits, academic skills, social capital, and necessary information to succeed. (Researcher Definition)
- *College ready* – “The term college-ready is generally applied to (1) students who are considered to be equipped with the knowledge and skills deemed essential for success in university, college, and community-college programs, or (2) the kinds of educational programs and learning opportunities that lead to improved preparation for these two- and four-year collegiate programs.” (EdGlossary, n.d.)
- *CoSN* - The Consortium for School Networking is a member-based association and advocacy group based in Washington, DC, United States, which promotes awareness of emerging technologies among technology decision-makers in K-12 education. (Researcher Definition)

- *CSS Profile* - Owned by The College Board, this application collects information used by hundreds of elite colleges to award financial aid from sources outside of the federal government. (Researcher Definition)
- *Disadvantaged* – “Not having the benefits, such as enough money and a healthy social situation, that others have, and therefore having less opportunity to be successful.” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021)
- *Diversity* - The range of demographic differences that can either positively or negatively impact available college pathways. These include but are not limited to race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and social class. (Researcher Definition)
- *Education policy* –The collection of laws that guide education from distributive and political angles. (Researcher Definition)
- *EFC* – The Expected Family Contribution is what the federal governments uses to determine student eligibility for federal student financial aid. This is calculated according to a formula established by law, and considers both parent and student taxed and untaxed income. (Researcher Definition)
- *Epistemology* - “The term epistemology comes from the Greek words *episteme* and *logos*. *Episteme* can be translated as knowledge or understanding or acquaintance, while *logos* can be translated as account, argument, or reason.” (Stanford University, 2021)
- *Equity* – “The term equity refers to the principle of *fairness*. While it is often used interchangeably with the related principle of *equality*, equity encompasses a wide variety of educational models, programs, and strategies that may be considered fair, but not necessarily equal.” (EdGlossary, n.d.)
- *ETS* - Educational Testing Service, a College Board division focusing on the SAT exam

and AP program. (Researcher Definition)

- *FAFSA* - Free Application for Federal Student Aid, which all students applying to colleges must complete in order to qualify for government loans and/or grants.

(Researcher Definition)

- *First generation* – Any student for whom neither their natural nor adoptive parents have completed a four-year college or university degree. (Researcher Definition)

- *GEAR UP* [Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs] - “This discretionary grant program is designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education.” (U.S. Department of Education, 2021)

- *Information asymmetry* – An economic principle relating to a transaction in which one party has relevant information that is not known by or available to the other party. (Researcher Definition)

- *Low-SES* – This term refers to students and families from low socioeconomic status, as defined by qualifying for free or reduced lunch programs in the local public high school. (Researcher Definition)

- *Marginalized* - Students who have historically been treated as insignificant or peripheral within educational systems. The outcome of social exclusion. (Researcher Definition)

- *NACAC* – National Association of College Admissions Counselors, is an organization of more than 13,000 professionals dedicated to serving students transitioning from secondary to postsecondary education. (NACAC, 2018)

- *SAT* - Scholastic Aptitude Test, a standardized exam widely used for college admissions in the United States. A competitor of the ACT. (Researcher Definition)

- *Selective Colleges and Universities* – A selective college or university is an institution that has enough demand among consumers to admit students only on the basis of selection criteria. Selectivity is measured by yield, which is the percentage of students who are admitted as compared to those who apply. High yield = high selectivity. (Researcher Definition)
- The College Board—A highly profitable nonprofit that manages assessments for which it charges fees for services to students, parents, colleges and universities in the areas of college planning, recruitment, admissions, and retention. (Researcher Definition)
- *TRIO program* - a federally supported college access program, serving low income, first-generation college students in three areas: Upward Bound, Student Support Service, and Talent Search, all of which were sustained within the reauthorization of The Higher Education Act. (Researcher Definition)
- *Underserved, under-represented* – Demographic groups inadequately present in populations of successful college applicants and matriculants according to their percentage makeup within the larger populace. (Researcher Definition)

APPENDIX B

Email Communication With Federal Offices Regarding Resource Access

Original Question

May 06 2021, 09:58am via System

Dear LOC Staff: Hope you are well. I'm a PhD student conducting research for my dissertation and am hoping you can help me locate required documents. In particular, I am seeking to locate an exhaustive list of ALL written or spoken communications from presidents of the U.S. and/or U.S. Secretaries of Education that use the phrase "college access". Relatedly, any communications referencing related constructs would be important to include. I am conducting a discourse analysis and truly appreciate your support. Thank you.

May 11 2021, 01:01pm via System

Hello Ms. Donnelly:

Thank you for your inquiry concerning the phrase "college access" or related constructs as uttered or written by U.S. presidents or secretaries of education.

The Manuscript Division holds twenty-three groups of presidential papers, ranging in time from George Washington to Calvin Coolidge. In 1958 the Division began a program to arrange, index, and microfilm the presidential papers in its custody. The program, completed in 1976, made available approximately 2,000,000 manuscripts on some 3,000 reels of microfilm.

Accompanying item indexes were published for each collection. The indexes were keyed to the names of correspondents in the presidential collections. They were not designed to search the subjects of presidential correspondence.

The microfilm copies of the presidential papers in the Manuscript Division are now available through the Library's website at <https://www.loc.gov/rr/mss/ammem.html> .

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), a separate government agency from the Library of Congress, maintains the papers of all U.S. presidents beginning with Herbert Hoover. A description of the system of presidential libraries administered by NARA, along with contact information for each of the libraries, is available through the NARA website at <https://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries> .

The papers of several presidents have been published in selected and annotated letterpress editions by university presses and publishing houses around the country. For example, much of Washington's correspondence from collections at the Library of Congress and elsewhere has been published by the Papers of George Washington Project at the University of Virginia. The edition can be found in most university, college, and public libraries, and the volumes are also available for purchase from the University Press of Virginia. For further information, see the Project's website at <https://washingtonpapers.org/> . The site includes digitized documents and other educational resources about Washington.

Other presidents whose papers have been published in large editions include Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Andrew Jackson, James K. Polk, Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Johnson, Ulysses S. Grant, Woodrow Wilson, and Dwight Eisenhower. These annotated editions feature detailed subject indexes that you could search for your topic. Many of these editions are available online, usually through subscription services such as the University of Virginia's Rotunda American History Collection at <https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/AmericanHistoryCollection.html> . Searchable transcripts of selected papers of Washington, John Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and John Quincy Adams are available free of charge through the Founders Online website at <https://founders.archives.gov/> .

The papers of John Adams and John Quincy Adams are held and controlled by the

Massachusetts Historical Society. The Society administers the Adams Papers project, which according to the Society's website was founded in 1954 to prepare a comprehensive published edition of the manuscripts written and received by the Adams family. For further information, see the Society's website at <http://www.masshist.org/adams/adams-family-papers/>

To find references to "college access" in the papers of U.S. secretaries of education, it would first be necessary to determine when that office was established, then to identify the people who have held the office, and then to locate their papers. The Department of Education may have a historical office that could assist with that task.

I hope that this information is useful.

Bruce Kirby

Manuscript Reference Librarian

Manuscript Division, Library of Congress

Tue, May 11, 5:46 PM

Dear Mr. Kirby,

Many thanks for your kind email. I should have specified that the date range of interest is January 2008 through the present only. Do you know how I can locate those same items via either LOC or DOE? I'm not sure where to begin for this more recent range of resources sought.

In Gratitude,

Pamela Donnelly

Manuscript Division Reference Librarian

May 12 2021, 10:15am via System

Hello Ms. Donnelly:

Thanks for your response and for your important clarification.

Your new date range begins in the last year of George W. Bush's administration. The best places to begin your search are with the presidential libraries of Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump. Links to the presidential libraries administered by the National Archives are in my previous message.

Reports on college access that might have been published by the White House or the DOE may be in the Library's General Collections, which could be searched in the Online Catalog at <https://catalog.loc.gov>.

In addition, the National Archives, through the Federal Register, compiles and publishes the Public Papers of the Presidents containing the public writings, addresses, and remarks of the presidents beginning with Herbert Hoover. The post-1992 volumes are also available online at: <https://www.archives.gov/federal-register/publications/presidential-papers.html>. You can search the online texts for phrases of interest.

Best wishes,

Bruce Kirby

From: **Terence Daniely** <terence.daniely@nara.gov>

Date: Tue, May 25, 2021 at 2:26 PM

Subject: Re: PhD student request

To: Pamela Donnelly

Ms. Donnelly,

Most Presidential records are not publicly available for five years after the end of an administration, as per the requirements of the Presidential Records Act (PRA). In general, NARA will not make Obama Presidential records available to the public—in paper or digital formats—before January 2022.

Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests will be accepted by the Barack Obama Presidential Library starting on January 20, 2022. Requests will be processed on a first-come-first-served basis, and will be subject to the notification process as required under Section 2208 of the PRA. The records will then be made digitally available to the public through the National Archives Catalog and the Obama Library website.

We encourage you to check our website for updates and the most current information regarding records releases (after January 20, 2022). For additional information about the new digital model for the Obama Presidential Library, NARA has compiled answers to other Frequently Asked Questions.

Respectfully,
Terence

Terence W. Daniely
Archives Technician
Obama Presidential Library
T: 847.252.5752
F: 847.252.5799
terence.daniely@nara.gov

National Archives &
Records Administration
2500 West Golf Road
Hoffman Estates, Illinois 60169
M: 847.252.5700

----- Forwarded message -----
From: **answers** <answers@ed.gov>
Date: Thu, May 27, 2021 at 12:20 PM
Subject: RE: PhD request for research materials
To: Pamela Donnelly



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS AND OUTREACH

Dear Ms. Donnelly,

Thank you for contacting the United States Department of Education. Your email was submitted to the Information Resource Center in the Office of Communications and Outreach, and we are pleased to respond.

ED does not necessarily maintain an archive of all previous Secretary of Education speeches. However, you may want to reach out to the National Library of Education for help with your research. You may reach them at 1-800-424-1616 or 202-205-5015.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) is the statistical branch of the U.S. Department of Education. To search for statistical information please visit <https://nces.ed.gov/>. You can locate contact information for NCES by going to <https://nces.ed.gov/help/webmail/>.

Sincerely,

Information Resource Specialist

Information Resource Center | Office of Communications & Outreach

U.S. Department of Education | 400 Maryland Avenue, S.W. | Washington, D.C. 20202

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **Pamela Donnelly**
Date: Tue, Jun 1, 2021 at 7:50 AM
Subject: Urgent: PhD research support needed
To: <askalibrarian@ed.gov>

Dear Library of Education Staff:

Hope you are well. I'm a PhD student conducting research for my dissertation and am hoping you can help me locate required documents. In particular, I am seeking to locate an exhaustive list of ALL written or spoken communications from U.S. Secretaries of Education that use the phrase "college access". Relatedly, any communications referencing related constructs would be important to include. I am conducting a discourse analysis and truly appreciate your support.

I reached out to the Library of Congress, and they recommended that I reach you directly -- I tried the 202 phone number but that directed me here. Is there a librarian on staff that can support me in this regard? I'd be most grateful for a swift response, as I have deadlines pending and have reached an unexpected impasse in locating what I require.

Many thanks,

Pamela Donnelly
 Pepperdine University PhD Student
 Global Leadership and Change

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **AskaLibrarian** <AskaLibrarian@ed.gov>
 Date: Tue, Jun 1, 2021 at 10:36 AM
 Subject: RE: Urgent: PhD research support needed
 To: Pamela Donnelly

Hi Pamela,

Thank you for contacting the National Library of Education at the Department of Education. Unfortunately, the library does not maintain communication records from the Secretary. You have a couple of options you can explore:

1. For anything that has been published on the Department of Education's website, you can do a search for the phrase you are interested in. While this isn't perfect, it should yield some results you can use. A trick I like to use when searching our site is to actually use Google. The search statement I would try is <**site:ed.gov "college access" secretary**>.
2. You can submit a FOIA request to the Department of Education
<https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/leg/foia/foiatoc.html>
3. Another resource you can try is the National Archives and Records Administration (<https://www.archives.gov/research/catalog>). After a period of time (I am not sure what the time frame is), government records are turned over to NARA for storage. Many of the items have been digitized and are searchable.
4. You should also work with your university librarians to see if they have any databases that you can search which might have access to documents and transcripts of Department of Education communications.
5. Other government sites you can try: Federal Register (<https://www.federalregister.gov/>), Govinfo.gov (<https://www.govinfo.gov/>)

I hope this helps with your research.
 Thank you,

Karen

AskaLibrarian
National Library of Education
National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance
 Tel: 202 205 5015
askalibrarian@ed.gov

400 Maryland Ave SW
Washington, DC 20202
U.S. Department of Education

APPENDIX C

IRB Approval Notice

August 20, 2021

Protocol #: **82021**

Project Title: The Axis of Access: A Quantitative Ethnography of Federal Government Discourse on the Construct of College Access in the United States.

Dear Pamela:

Thank you for submitting a “GPS IRB Non-Human Subjects Notification Form” for *The Axis of Access: A Quantitative Ethnography of Federal Government Discourse on the Construct of College Access in the United States* project to Pepperdine University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) for review. The IRB has reviewed your submitted form and all ancillary materials. Upon review, the IRB has determined that the above titled project meets the requirements for *non-human subject research* under the federal regulations 45 CFR 46.101 that govern the protection of human subjects.

Your research must be conducted according to the form that was submitted to the IRB. If changes to the approved project occur, you will be required to submit *either* a new “GPS IRB Non-Human Subjects Notification Form” or an IRB application via the eProtocol system (<http://irb.pepperdine.edu>) to the Institutional Review Board.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite our best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the IRB as soon as possible. We will ask for a complete explanation of the event and your response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event. Details regarding the timeframe in which adverse events must be reported to the IRB and documenting the adverse event can be found in the *Pepperdine University Protection of Human Participants in Research: Policies and Procedures Manual* at <https://community.pepperdine.edu/irb/policies/>.

Please refer to the protocol number denoted above in all further communication or correspondence related to this approval.

On behalf of the IRB, we wish you success in this scholarly pursuit.