Private Costs, Public Benefits: An Analysis of 25 Years of Coverage on Access to Higher Education in Influential U.S. Newspapers

by

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ABSTRACT

Higher education enrollment and degree attainment rates have increased in the U.S. Yet higher education has remained inaccessible to many. Low- and middle-income students and students from particular racial and ethnic backgrounds enroll and attain degrees at lower rates than their peers. To gain insight into the topic of access to higher education, I used social constructionist, critical, and socio-cognitive perspectives to conduct a descriptive, content, and discourse analysis of 1,242 articles about access to higher education published from 1994-2019 in eight influential U.S. newspapers. I also explored the historical and social context in which this coverage was situated. I found that access to higher education was considered an important topic in the articles I analyzed. I also found that while definitions of access to higher education were varied and often intersected, content related to costs and funding of higher education dominated the coverage. In addition, a tension between public and private benefits of access to higher education emerged in the articles I analyzed, as did a tension between public and private costs of access to higher education. These costs and benefits were often misaglined in coverage. The most salient benefit of access to higher education in the majority of articles was a public benefit, which primarily benefits society. However, a private entity was deemed responsible for covering the costs of access to higher education in the majority of articles. This research could be used to promote more nuanced coverage on access to higher education as well as policies, practices, and additional research that addresses the multiplicity of ways in which disparities in access to higher education are created, sustained, and reproduced.

This dissertation is dedicated with all my love to my family.

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Introduction

Higher education participation and degree attainment have increasingly been perceived as requisite for success in the United States (U.S.). Accordingly, higher education enrollment and degree attainment rates have increased (Cahalan, Perna, Yamashita, Wright, & Santillan, 2018; National Center for Education Statistics, 2017e).

Research has shown that those with degrees tend to have higher lifetime earnings and greater upward economic mobility. Society benefits from these outcomes in the forms of increased tax revenues and lower unemployment and poverty rates. Those with college degrees tend to be healthier and are less likely to have to rely on social programs than those without college degrees. These benefits are intergenerational, as the children of those with a college degree have higher degree attainment rates (Perna & Finney, 2014).

Problem Statement

Despite these increases and benefits, higher education has remained inaccessible to many. Disparities in higher education enrollment and degree attainment rates based on income have remained wide (Cahalan et al., 2018), as have disparities in higher education enrollment rates based on race and ethnicity (NCES, 2017e). In addition, students from certain racial and ethnic groups have remained underrepresented in the percentage of degrees conferred in the U.S., relative to their representation in the U.S. population (Cahalan et al., 2018). According to researchers at the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2017e), 60% percent of high school graduates in the U.S. continued to a postsecondary institution in 1990. This rate increased to 70% by 2016.

Higher education enrollment rates for high school graduates from different racial and ethnic groups have fluctuated over time. However, disparities in enrollment rates among these groups have remained wide. According to NCES (2017e), Asian high school graduates have had the highest rate of postsecondary continuation among racial and ethnic groups tracked by NCES, since this category was included in their dataset in 1989. Asian high school graduates' continuation rate was 82% in 1990. In 2016, this rate had increased to 92% (NCES, 2017e). Sixty-three percent of White high school graduates continued to a postsecondary institution in 1990. In 2016, this rate had increased to 70% (NCES, 2017e). Hispanic high school graduates made the greatest gains in postsecondary continuation rates between 1990-2016, increasing from 43% to 72% (NCES, 2017e). The continuation rate for Black high school students was also 43% in 1990, though their rate only increased to 57% by 2016 (NCES, 2017e).

Researchers at The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education found that disparities in higher education enrollment rates based on family income have also remained wide. In 2016, 61% of high school graduates whose families were in the lowest income quartile continued to a postsecondary institution. Whereas, 87% of high school graduates whose families were in the highest income quartile continued to a postsecondary institution. This 26 percentage-point gap is wide but has narrowed somewhat over time. In 1990, there was a 31 percentage-point gap between the two groups (Cahalan et al., 2018).

In addition, Cahalan et al. (2018) found that disparities in degree attainment rates based on family income have remained wide. In 2016, 11% of students whose families were in the lowest income quartile received a bachelor's degree by age 24, compared to

58% of those whose families were in the highest income quartile. In 1990, 7% of those whose families were in the lowest income quartile received a bachelor's degree by age 24, compared to 57% of those from the highest income quartile (Cahalan et al., 2018).

According to researchers at NCES (2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2007d), the number of Associate's, Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctor's degrees awarded by postsecondary institutions in the U.S. increased between 1990-2016. The racial and ethnic distribution of these recipients changed during this time period, as did the racial and ethnic distribution of the U.S. population. However, according to Cahalan et al. (2018), Black and Hispanic students have remained underrepresented in the percentage of degrees conferred in the U.S., relative to their representation in the population age 18-24 in the U.S.

These statistics do not provide a complete picture of access to higher education in the U.S. Higher education enrollment and degree attainment rates have become more difficult to track as students have become increasingly mobile. Many enroll at different types of higher education institutions, transfer among them, and/or enroll intermittently (Gold & Albert, 2006; Trent, Orr, Ranis & Holdaway, 2007). It is clear from these statistics, however, that higher education has remained inaccessible to many in the U.S.

Access to higher education in the U.S. has become a popular topic of education research in recent years (Connor & Rabovsky, 2011). At the same time, education research has been heavily influenced by positivist and rationalist perspectives (Dumas & Anderson, 2014; Fischman & Tefera, 2014).

Many researchers have sought to determine causal relationships between individual or institutional characteristics and higher education enrollment or degree attainment rates through quantitative analyses (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016; Romano, 2011). These studies are based on the assumptions that an objective reality exists and that it can be identified through scientific research (Tierney & Venegas, 2009).

Cost/benefit and market analyses have also been common approaches to research on access to higher education (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016; McMahon, 2009; Romano, 2011). These types of studies are based on the assumptions that individuals make decisions in a conscious, logical, and value-free manner to maximize their interests, and that all individuals have complete access to the information needed to make these decisions (Tierney & Venegas, 2009; Lakoff, 2004).

Many researchers have found that higher education enrollment rates have not increased at the same rate that economic returns on higher education participation and degree attainment have increased (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016). Some have blamed this on imperfections in the market (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016). Others contend that these types of studies do not account for the social and cognitive complexities that impact education and decision-making processes (Berliner, 2002; Dumas & Anderson, 2014; Fischman & Tefera, 2014; Lakoff, 2004; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016; Tierney & Venegas, 2009).

Purpose of the Study

To gain insight into the topic of access to higher education and the social and cognitive dynamics that impact higher education enrollment and degree attainment rates, I conducted a descriptive, content, and discourse analysis of 1,242 articles about access to higher education published from 1994-2019 in eight highly-circulated U.S. newspapers: *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, The Denver Post, The Mercury News, The New York*

Times, The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Star Tribune, *USA Today,* and *The Washington Post.* I also explored the historical and social context in which this coverage was situated in order to gain a better understanding of the interplay between the discourse on access to higher education, related political, economic, demographic, and technological forces, and policies and practices regarding access to higher education.

Significance of the Study

This study represents a departure from much of the previous research on access to higher education, as it was guided by social constructionist, critical, and socio-cognitive perspectives rather than positivist and rationalist perspectives. This unique approach produced findings that can be used to help decrease disparities in higher education enrollment and degree attainment rates.

Research Questions

My research questions included:

- How was access to higher education defined in the coverage?
- What issues and solutions related to access to higher education were most salient in the coverage?
- How were these issues and solutions framed?
- What values and tensions were manifested in these frames?
- How did the coverage change over time?
- How did the coverage vary among different newspapers?

Key Terminology

In this dissertation, I will use the terms higher education and postsecondary education interchangeably. My research is primarily focused on colleges and universities, as the vast majority of newspaper articles about access to higher education analyzed were about these types of degree-granting institutions.

In the content about enrollment and degree attainment rates, as well as student demographics, I used the same racial, ethnic, and income-based descriptors used by the researchers cited.

Racial, ethnic, and income-based descriptors varied widely among the articles I analyzed. To identify and describe trends in the data and to use more current descriptors, I organized the racial and ethnic descriptors from the articles into the following categories: African, African American, Asian American or Pacific Islander, Latinx, Native American, and White. I categorized the income-based descriptors as either low-income or middle-income. Of course, many other racial, ethnic, and income-based categories exist. However, these were the categories that emerged in the articles I analyzed.

Overview of the Dissertation

In this introductory chapter, I outlined the disparities in higher education enrollment and degree attainment rates in the U.S. I also described the most prevalent types of studies on access to higher education, the perspectives that guide this research, and how my research departs from these perspectives. In Chapter 2, I will provide a brief overview of the history of higher education in the U.S. and the political, economic, demographic, and technological shifts that have influenced access to higher education in the U.S. I will also outline my conceptual framework, describing the concepts from text analysis, critical theory, and media effects research that guided my research. In addition, I will review the empirical, peer-reviewed studies published in the last ten years in which researchers used text analysis to examine how education is portrayed in the news media. In Chapter 3, I will describe the data sources I analyzed, how I collected them, and the tools and methods I used to analyze them. I will also outline the limitations of my study and my positionality. In Chapter 4, I will describe three themes I identified in my research and support them with findings from each stage of my analysis and data displays.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

In this chapter, I will situate the coverage on access to higher education in the U.S. within the larger historical and social context of higher education in the U.S. I will explain the social constructionist, critical, and socio-cognitive perspectives that guided my research. I will outline the topics, sources, and conceptual frameworks from 20 empirical, peer-reviewed studies published in the last ten years in which researchers used text analysis to examine how education is portrayed in the news media. I will also highlight the methodologies and findings of two of these studies which were particularly relevant to my research. In addition, I will describe how my research choices were influenced by this research.

I identified the literature cited in this chapter by searching educational research databases and Google Scholar for relevant books and peer-reviewed articles. I cross-referenced the bibliographies of these materials to find additional relevant literature. The majority of this literature was published in the last ten years. However, for the historical and social context and conceptual framework sections of this chapter, I also used content from a limited number of seminal and/or particularly relevant books and peer-reviewed articles published from 1971-2009.

For the historical and social context section, where applicable, I supplemented information from relevant books and peer-reviewed articles with related data on higher education enrollment and degree attainment rates, student demographics, higher education funding and tuition costs, and income inequality. I also drew upon a limited amount of content from education news media sources, blog posts, policy documents, and conference presentations to describe current perspectives on access to higher education in the U.S.

Historical and Social Context

Tensions that underlay perspectives on access to higher education.

To understand the current state of access to higher education in the U.S., it is important to understand the history of higher education in the U.S. and the political, economic, demographic, and technological shifts that have influenced it. Dorn (2018) explained:

> Observers…cannot legitimately criticize them [colleges and universities] for being inaccessible without understanding who has-and has not-gained entry to the wide variety of higher-education [*sic*] institutions established in the United States over the past two centuries. In short, we can't know why higher education functions as it does in the present without fully comprehending what it was in the past" (p. 2).

Higher education in the U.S. has undergone many changes since the nation was founded. Transformation has been particularly rapid since World War II. This time period has been marked by extraordinary growth, fluctuating federal and state involvement, and the adoption of market-based approaches and new technologies in higher education.

According to Haas and Fischman (2010), understandings of the purposes of higher education vary greatly and have shifted over time. In their research, they found that two tensions underlay most of these understandings: a tension between quality and access in higher education and higher education as a public good and a private good (Haas & Fischman, 2010).

Most agree that one of the main purposes of higher education is to prepare individuals to assume productive roles in society. However, different perspectives on quality and access have greatly influenced higher education in the U.S. As Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin (2005) noted:

> There has been a long simmering debate over whether it is better to educate a small number of people to a very high standard or to extend educational opportunities more broadly- even if this means accepting a somewhat lower standard of performance (p. 2).

Different perspectives also abound regarding whether higher education primarily benefits individuals or society and, accordingly, whether individuals or society should cover the costs of higher education. These perspectives have also greatly impacted higher education in the U.S. They are at the heart of the tension between higher education as a private good and a public good. (Altbach, 2016; Haas & Fischman, 2010).

Higher education and the new nation.

Early U.S. colleges and universities primarily trained wealthy white males for religious and civil leadership positions. Although they were seen government and institutional leaders as institutions that could help promote citizenship and shape the new nation, most were privately controlled and subject to very little governmental regulation (Bowen et al., 2005; Geiger, 2016; Thelin, 2011).

Overall, colleges and universities have remained semi-autonomous. The higher education system has, however, become increasingly differentiated. The federal government has played a large role in this, as it has recognized that different types of higher education institutions can serve different societal needs. Today, elite colleges and universities, both public and private, exist alongside a number of more accessible institutions. Institutional autonomy and differentiation are trademarks of the U.S. higher education system (Kerr, 2001; Labaree, 2017; Smelser, 2013; Trow, 1988).

The Morrill Land Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890 were two of the first major federal higher education interventions that greatly increased the number and types of colleges and universities. The Act of 1862 provided each state with federal land and funds to create colleges and universities. These institutions were created to train students for agricultural, mechanical, and manufacturing positions needed to support the growing nation after the Civil War (Geiger, 2016; Mumper, Gladieux, King, & Corrigan, 2016). According to Thelin (2011), land grant institutions were hailed as "democracy's colleges-sources of affordable, practical education" (p. 75). The Act of 1890 stipulated that federal funds would not be given to states that denied admission to these colleges based on race, unless separate but equal facilities were provided for students of color. This separate but equal doctrine was also applied in the U.S. Supreme Court's *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1892. In response, many states created land grant institutions specifically for African American students. These institutions would later come to be known as historically Black colleges and universities or HBCUs (Thelin, 2011).

The shift from an elite to a universal system of higher education.

Many began to identify education as the primary driver of economic growth in the 1900s, a period that was later dubbed the "human capital century". Colleges and universities were increasingly seen as institutions that could prepare people to be productive members of the workforce (Rury, 2009). However, higher education in the U.S. did not expand dramatically until after World War II, when the federal government passed the Serviceman's Readjustment Act, known as the GI Bill, in 1944 to prevent post World War II unemployment and another economic depression. The GI Bill provided veterans and their families with a number of benefits, including funding to participate in higher education (Mumper et al., 2016; Thelin, 2011; Zhou & Mendoza, 2017). Higher education enrollment increased rapidly as a result of the GI Bill. Before World War II, only 1.5 million total students were enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities. By 1950, veteran enrollment alone exceeded two million (Thelin, 2011).

The effects of the GI Bill were not short lived. This legislation helped secure the financial future of many veterans, which sparked the post-war baby boom. The U.S. population increased by 60% between 1945-1975. Higher education enrollments increased by over 500% during the same time period, from approximately two million students to 11 million students. New colleges and universities were needed to accommodate this growth. In 1945, there were 1,768 higher education institutions in the U.S. By 1975, there were 3,004 (Cohen, 2009). The number of community colleges increased at a particularly extraordinary rate. It has been estimated that, on average, one public, two-year college opened per week during the 1960s (Thelin, 2011).

These enrollment shifts represent what Trow (1973, 2000) called an elite system of higher education to a mass system to a universal system. In an elite system, access to colleges and universities is limited to less than 16% of the traditional age group; it is seen as a privilege of birth and/or talent. The purpose of higher education in an elite system is to prepare individuals for leadership roles in society. In a mass system, 16-50% of the traditional age group participates. Higher education access is perceived as a right for students who meet certain, primarily meritocratic, criteria. The purpose of higher education in a mass system is prepare a broader range of individuals for roles in technical and economic organizations in society. In a universal system, more than 50% of the traditional age group participates in higher education. College and university student bodies become increasingly diverse as a greater percentage of the traditional college age group enrolls in colleges and universities. In a universal system, the purpose of higher education is to prepare students to adapt to rapid social and technological change. Participation is perceived as an obligation, particularly for students from middle and high-income families and certain racial and ethnic groups (Trow, 1973 & 2000). Gumport, Ianozzi, Shaman, and Zemsky (1997) noted that as the higher education in the U.S. shifted from an elite to universal system, it began to be identified as a public good which merited public funding.

The push for equity and equality in higher education.

While college and university enrollments increased dramatically as a result of the GI Bill, equality in higher education did not. Underrepresented groups continued to be marginalized in U.S. colleges and universities (Loss, 2011; Thelin, 2011). The vast majority of the veterans who initially participated in the GI Bill's higher education benefits were white males. Consequently, the proportion of female enrollments decreased from 40% in 1939 to 32% in 1950. African American veterans were eligible to receive GI Bill benefits. However, many higher education institutions remained highly segregated (Thelin, 2011).

Equity in higher education in the U.S. increased, albeit slowly, as a result of federal interventions implemented in the 1950s-1970s (Mumper et al., 2016). The National Defense Education Act of 1958 (NDEA) was enacted in response to Russia's 1957 launch of Sputnik, amidst fears the U.S. was losing ground in the Cold War. It provided nearly one billion dollars of federal funding to K-12 and higher education, in hopes that it would increase U.S. competitiveness. Millions of dollars were allocated to defense related programs and research in colleges and universities (Loss, 2011). In addition, the first federal financial aid program was established under the NDEA (Loss, 2011; Zhou & Mendoza, 2017). It provided low-interest loans to approximately 1.5 million students, many of whom would have not been able to afford college otherwise (Loss, 2011).

Other federal interventions that promoted both equity and equality in higher education in the U.S. in the 1950s-1960s were part of the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Rights Movement, and the War on Poverty (Gumport et al., 1997). The U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* allowed students of color to seek admission to all-white colleges and universities. However, residence halls as well as fraternities and sororities remained segregated in many institutions. In addition, many students of color were prohibited from participating in athletics, theater productions, and student government. These practices, and many other major forms of discrimination, were later outlawed by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson (Cohen, 2009; Thelin, 2011).

President Johnson led many reforms that increased the number of underrepresented students attending colleges and universities in the U.S, including The

Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. It reinstated the federal work-study program, which was initially part of the New Deal legislation passed under President Franklin D. Roosevelt. It also created federally funded student support service programs such as Upward Bound, set up to help low-income and first-generation students prepare for college (Loss, 2011).

The Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA) was passed the following year. It provided 2.7 billion dollars in federal higher education funding. This funding was dispersed to students through a newly created grant program and previously established low-interest loan and work-study programs. In addition, funding was dispersed to colleges and universities to build new facilities and to implement programs aimed at decreasing poverty in the U.S. (Cohen, 2009; Loss, 2011; Mumper et al., 2016; Zhou & Mendoza, 2017).

It was also in 1965, during a speech given at Howard University, that President Johnson argued the U.S. should take an active role increasing the participation of people of color and women in the workforce and in higher education. Subsequently, many colleges and universities adopted affirmative action policies, giving preference to applicants from underrepresented populations (Anderson, 2002).

Affirmative action policies were and are often viewed as a way to promote equity in higher education and redress past discrimination in the U.S. (Liu, 2011; Moses, Maeda, & Paguyo, 2018; Rury, 2009). However, many have argued that affirmative action policies are discriminatory and go against the meritocratic ideals of higher education in the U.S. (Liu, 2011). The constitutionality of a number of these policies has been challenged but upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in cases including *Bakke v. the Regents* *of the University of California* (1978), *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003), *Fisher v. University of Texas- Austin (2013),* and *Fisher v. University of Texas-Austin (2016)* (Moses et al., 2018).

The period between World War II and the Vietnam War was one of long-term economic growth in the U.S. (Goldin & Katz, 2008). Colleges and universities were especially prosperous. This era has been called the Golden Age of higher education because public support for these institutions was widespread and the system grew rapidly (Thelin, 2011). But this expansion led to increased expectations about higher education's role in society. It left many colleges and universities stretched thin as they attempted to be all things to all people (Cohen, 2010; Thelin, 2011). Faith in higher education began to decrease noticeably in the 1970s (Thelin, 2011). There was also an economic recession in the U.S. after the Vietnam War. In addition, students began to be viewed as consumers (Thelin, 2011). Each of these shifts had long term implications for colleges and universities.

The federal government continued to intervene in higher education to promote equality and equity in the 1970s. Near the end of Johnson's presidency, the Education Amendments of 1972 were passed. Title IX of the Act had a profound impact on access and equity in higher education. The Basic Educational Opportunity Grant (BEOG) Program was established under Title IX. This program was later named for Senator Claiborne Pell (D-RI), who initiated the changes to the previously established federal grant program (Zhou & Mendoza, 2017; Thelin, 2011). According to Thelin (2011), the program was originally intended to cover up to half the costs of attending most colleges and universities. Senator Pell lauded the program as a "GI Bill for everybody" (Thelin, 2011, p. 212). Pell Grants were the first the first portable financial aid program, awarded to directly to students, not colleges and universities. Institutions began to compete to attract students who were awarded financial aid (Thelin, 2011).

Title IX also prohibited gender discrimination in federally funded education programs (Cohen, 2009; Thelin, 2011). By 1976, women participated in higher education at rates near that of males (NCES, 2010). But equality concerns remained. There was still a substantial disparity between enrollments white students and those of students of students of color. In 1976, white students made up 82% of college and university enrollments. Black, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander students made up ten, four, and two percent, respectively, of enrollments (NCES, 2010).

More students began to feel they should have a voice in higher education. Many argued that colleges and universities in the U.S. should play a role promoting social change; that they had "an obligation to contribute not only to the equalization of educational opportunities but also to collective projects that promote social…justice and ultimately alter existing social, economic, and political relationships" (Schugurensky, 2006, p. 303). Political unrest on campuses escalated. Most was in reaction to the Vietnam War (Geiger, 2016). Protests over the war and federally sponsored defense research in higher education took place at a number of colleges and universities. Some became violent. In 1970, students at both Kent State University and Jackson State University were killed by National Guardsman while protesting the Vietnam War. Many members of government and the public followed the extensive news media coverage on the student protests and questioned the ability of colleges and universities to produce enlightened citizens (Loss, 2011).

However, most people were far more concerned that higher education in the U.S. was not adequately preparing students to be successful in the marketplace (Cohen, 2010). These doubts heightened when the economy weakened dramatically after the Vietnam War. Between 1973 and 1975, the inflation rate doubled while the unemployment rate increased from 5.7 to 7.5 percent. Federal aid to students, as well as to colleges and universities, decreased significantly. At the same time, tuition skyrocketed at a rate higher than inflation (Loss, 2011).

Access redefined in the era of neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism emerged in the U.S. in response to the slowed economic growth and increased inflation and unemployment of the 1970s (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Neoliberalism is a term used to describe a number of economic, social, and political policies and practices (Saunders, 2010). Torres and Rhoads (2006) explained that the aim of these policies and practices is "to privatize virtually every process or service that can possibly be turned over to private capital" (p. 8). Accordingly, "neoliberals call for an opening of national borders for the purpose of increased commodity and capital exchange, for the elevation of free markets over state-controlled markets and interventions" (Torres & Rhoads, 2006, p. 8).

In neoliberal policies and practices, individuals are seen as rational economic actors, or consumers, "who see everything they do in terms of maximizing their…capital" (Baez, 2007, as cited in Saunders, 2010, p. 46). Also, knowledge is perceived as an important, if not the most important, form of capital in the new global economy (Olssen & Peters, 2005).

A number of neoliberal policies and practices emphasizing accountability in have been adopted in recent years. Colleges and universities have become more commercialized. And excellence is most often defined by the returns colleges and universities can offer students on their investments and how well they can generate knowledge for profit (Fischman, Igo, & Rhoten, 2007; Giroux, 2014; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Saunders, 2010; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2016; Sum & Jessop, 2013; Torres & Rhoads, 2006).

Demands for education reform were spurred by the 1983 release of *A Nation at Risk*, a report commissioned by President Ronald Reagan. It claimed that U.S. schools were failing (Rury, 2009). The first *U.S. News and World Report* college and university rankings were also released in 1983. The publication initially surveyed U.S. college and university presidents to determine what institutions had the best academic reputations (Morse, 2008). This data is included in the current rankings. Colleges and universities are also judged on market-based indicators including alumni giving rates, faculty salaries, and research spending (Morse, Brooks, & Mason, 2018).

"Accountability mania" has greatly impacted colleges and universities in the U.S. (Smelser, 2013, p. 3). Public calls for increased productivity and efficiency in higher education have escalated. They have largely been centered around the need to promote workforce development, economic growth, and global competitiveness (Conner & Rabovsky, 2011; Smelser, 2013). As a result, many states have adopted higher education performance funding policies, which tie appropriations to specific outcomes (Conner & Rabovsky, 2011; Schmidtlein & Berdahl, 2011). Higher education institutions have also been held more accountable by institutional governing boards, state higher education governing boards, accreditation agencies, and the federal government, which has further reduced their autonomy (Conner & Rabovsky, 2011; Schmidtlein & Berdahl, 2011; Smelser, 2013).

The commodification and marketization of research in colleges and universities is a prime example of how neoliberalism has blurred the boundaries between the market, state, and higher education (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2016). This began when the federal government passed the Bayh-Dole Act in 1980 to increase U.S. competitiveness in new knowledge-based economy. It allowed college and universities, as well as businesses, to retain intellectual property rights on federally funded research. Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) explained that because of this act and other federal interventions, knowledge is no longer perceived as a public good, but "a critical raw material to be mined and extracted from any unprotected site; patented, copyrighted, trademarked and held as a trade secret, and then sold in the marketplace for a profit" (p. 4).

Higher education, by extension, has also changed from being perceived as a public good to a private good for which individuals should cover the cost. Accordingly, public funding for higher education has decreased and tuition has increased (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2016; Zusman, 2011). Giroux (2009) explained:

> As higher education is increasingly subject to the rule of market values and corporate power, youth become neither a resource of social investment nor a referent for society's obligations to the future. Instead, they become customers, clients, and sources of revenue (p. 37).

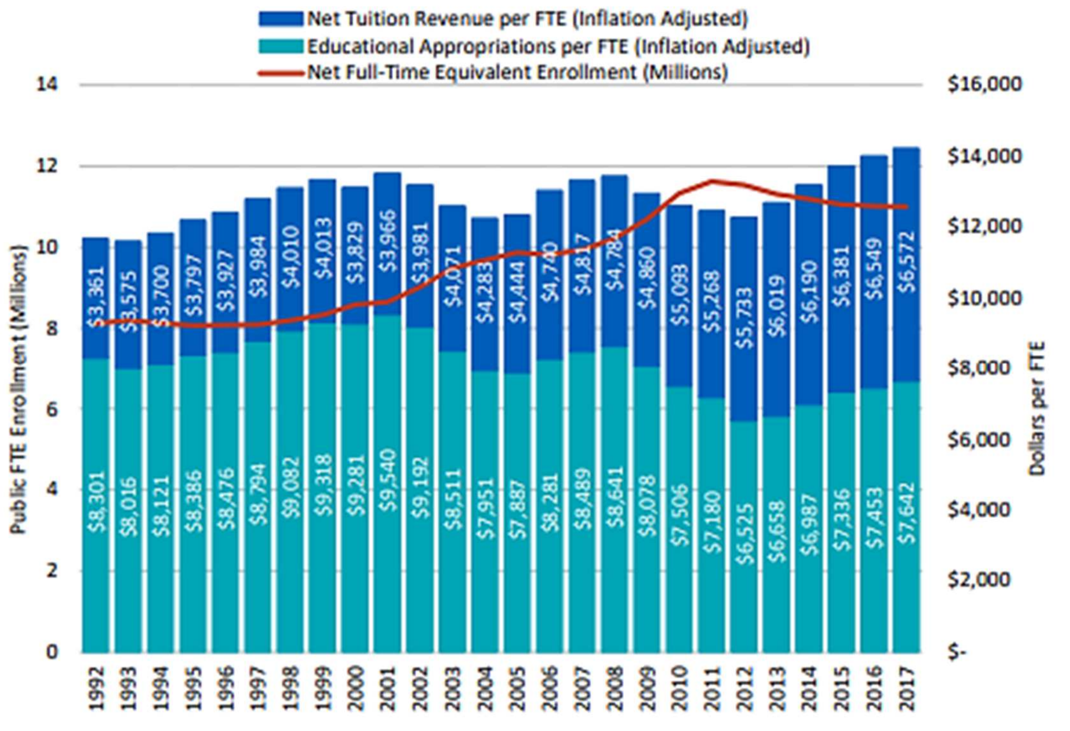
A financial crisis in 2008 led to a major economic recession. Some have blamed this recession on neoliberal policies and practices (Kotz, 2009; Palley, 2009). Researchers at the Midwestern Higher Education Compact analyzed tuition rates and state higher education appropriations from 1992-2017 (Tandberg & Laderman, 2018). They found that tuition increased and state higher education appropriations decreased particularly dramatically after 2008. Mumper et al. (2016) explained that this is because most state governments are required to balance their budget. In times of economic decline, higher education funding is one of the first things to be cut (Smelser, 2013). This is also due to the fact that higher education, unlike other social services, has a revenue generating mechanism: colleges and universities can increase tuition (Smelser, 2013). As shown in Figure 1 below, state higher education appropriations and tuition costs have not returned to pre-recession levels (Tandberg & Laderman, 2018).

Income inequality has also increased over the last three decades. According to Forster and Levy (2018) of OECD, the only OECD nations with greater income inequality than the U.S. are Turkey, Mexico, and Chile. Saenz (2018) explained what this trend looks like in terms of household income distribution in the U.S.:

> From 1993 to 2015…average real incomes per family grew by only 25.7 percent over this 22-year period. However, if one excludes the top 1 percent, average real incomes of the bottom 99 percent grew by only 14.3 percent from 1993 to 2015. Top 1 percent incomes grew by 94.5 percent from 1993 to 2015. This implies that the top 1 percent incomes captured 52 percent of the overall economic growth of real incomes per family over the period 1993-2015 (para. 7).

Figure 1

Public FTE Enrollment, Educational Appropriations, and Net Tuition Revenue, U.S. 1992-2017



Note. Reprinted from *MHEC Policy Brief: Evaluating State Funding Effort for Higher Education* by Tandberg, D. & Laderman, S., 2018. Retrieved February 15, 2019 from http://www.sheeo.org/sites/default/files/publications/mhec_affordability_series6_20180621_2.pdf. Copyright 2018 Midwestern Higher Education Compact. Reprinted with permission.

More students than ever are relying on financial aid, due in large part to these economic trends. At the same time, in keeping with the notion that higher education is a private good, the federal government has shifted aid programs away from grants toward tax credits and student loans (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2016; Zhou & Mendoza, 2017;). As a result, outstanding student debt in the U.S. currently totals more than $1.5 trillion dollars (The Federal Reserve, 2018).

Like many neoliberal policies, these financial aid changes have hurt those from low and middle-income backgrounds and helped the affluent. The Middle Income

Student Assistance Act of 1978 and the Higher Education Amendments of 1992 made federal loans, subsidized and unsubsidized, more accessible (Loss, 2011; Zhou and Mendoza, 2017). These programs are aimed at low and middle-income students. The Taxpayer Relief Act of 1997, aimed at higher income students, provided tax credits- the Hope Scholarship Credit and the Lifetime Learning Credit- for college participation (Loss, 2011; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2016; Zhou & Mendoza, 2017).

Despite increases in tuition, decreases in state higher education expenditures, and changes in financial aid policies, higher education enrollment and degree attainment rates have continued to increase in the U.S. (Cahalan et al., 2018; NCES, 2017e). However, as discussed in Chapter 1, disparities in higher education enrollment and degree attainment rates based on income have remained wide (Cahalan et al., 2018), as have disparities in higher education enrollment rates based on race and ethnicity (NCES, 2017e). In addition, students from certain racial and ethnic groups have remained underrepresented in the percentage of degrees conferred in the U.S., relative to their representation in the U.S. population (Cahalan et al., 2018).

Disparities in degree attainment rates are due, in part, to the fact that more students of color, as well as low-income students, are enrolled in less selective institutions, such as community colleges, which reduces their chances of ultimately receiving a bachelor's degree (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011; Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

For-profit institutions also enroll a disproportionately high number of students of color and low-income students, as well as female and non-traditional students (Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment, 2018; Deming, Goldin, & Katz, 2012; Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Tierney & Hentschke, 2007). These institutions have thrived in an environment where students are seen as consumers and higher education is seen as a requisite for employment (Tierney & Hentschke, 2007). By 2010, for-profit institutions enrolled more than ten percent of students (Thelin, 2011). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2017f), enrollment at these institutions has decreased since 2010. However, as of 2016, nearly six percent of students at degree-granting institutions in the U.S. were enrolled at a for-profit institution.

For-profits have been marketed as institutions where students can gain relevant skills on their terms, through short-term, online, and evening courses (Tierney & Hentschke, 2007; Deming et al., 2012). But claims of the availability of employment opportunities for for-profit graduates have been greatly exaggerated (Thelin, 2011). Deming et al. (2012) found that students who attended for-profit institutions are more likely to not be employed or attending school six years after starting college than those who attended non-profit institutions. Those who are employed make less and have lower job satisfaction than students who attended non-profit institutions. In addition, students who attended for-profit institutions have higher student loan debts and default rates than students who attended non-profit institutions.

College and university enrollments are expected to become more diverse as U.S. demographic patterns shift. Researchers at the Western Interstate Commission of Higher Education have projected that higher education enrollments of Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islander students will increase dramatically through 2025 as a result of recent changes in immigration patterns (Brandberger & Michelau, 2016).

Higher education enrollment and degree attainment rates are expected to continue to rise in the U.S. and abroad. Many believe that this is necessary in order for nations to be successful in the new knowledge-based global economy, a sentiment that has been promoted through political discourse (Uvalić-Trumbić & Daniel, 2011). In 2009, President Obama challenged Americans to get at least one year of postsecondary training and set a goal that by 2020, the U.S. will have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world (Kanter, 2011). In 2015, he proposed making community college free for all students. Similar proposals were debated heavily in the 2016 presidential election (Zhou & Mendoza, 2017).

Since the late 2000s, private foundations such as the Lumina Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have invested heavily in programs and promoting policies aimed at increasing degree attainment (McGuinness, Jr., 2016). These foundations and the corporate values they espouse, such as competition and accountability, have influenced higher education in the U.S. greatly (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2016; Smelser, 2013).

Slaughter and Rhoades (2016) problematized these shifts, noting that "the idea of higher education as a public good has been readvanced though in a neoliberal competitive discourse" (p. 513). However, this "push [for increased degree attainment] is not matched by a push for new investment" (p. 513). Similarly, Kumar and Hill (2017) argued that "while there is a euphoric façade of rhetoric such as 'education for all' on one hand, there is a diminishing role of the state on the other" (p. 1).

New technologies and their impact on access to higher education.

Technology may help meet the growing demand for higher education, as it has played a role in increasing access in the last century. In the 1930s, distance education was facilitated through the radio and beginning in the 1950s, through television and film. Some argued these innovations would revolutionize higher education, but these claims never came to fruition. Technology did not dramatically impact college and university enrollments until the 1990s when the internet and personal computers became more accessible and online courses started to be offered (Cohen, 2009). As of 2016, over six million students, representing nearly one-third of all those enrolled at degree granting institutions in the U.S., were enrolled in at least one distance education courses (Seaman, Allen & Seaman, 2018).

These innovations have been received with a mix of hope and skepticism. Christensen and Eyring (2011) argued that digital technologies can help higher education institutions increase access, decrease costs, and enhance learning. Many scholars agree that online education can increase access to higher education, but some question whether over reliance digital technologies will lead to lower quality of instruction (Perna & Ruiz, 2016; Willinsky, Fischman, & Metcalfe, 2011).

Some believed these concerns might be alleviated by Massive Open Online Courses, also known as MOOCs (Barber, Donnelly, & Rizvi, 2013; Harden, 2012). MOOCs are free, college-level courses that are offered online primarily through elite U.S. colleges and universities, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stanford University, and Harvard University, in partnership with private companies such as Udacity, Coursera, and edX. Through MOOCs, one professor can teach thousands of students at a time (Perna & Ruiz, 2016; Willinsky et al., 2011). Others argued that MOOCs would further commercialize and stratify higher education (Carlson & Blumenstyk, 2012; Holmewood, 2013). However, MOOCs have not yet impacted access to higher education greatly. The number of higher education institutions offering MOOCs and the rate at which students who enroll in MOOCs and complete them have remained low (Perna & Ruiz, 2016).

In summary, colleges and universities in the U.S. were initially seen by institutional and government leaders as elite institutions and higher education was perceived as a private good. After the Civil War, higher education began to be perceived by many as a public good which merited public funding. After World War II, access increased as enrollments and the number and types of institutions increased. Higher education enrollment rates have continued to increase and new technologies have allowed more students to participate in higher education. As a result of neoliberalism, higher education has been perceived by many as a private good rather than a public good in the U.S.

The values, tensions, and political, economic, demographic, and technological forces that have impacted higher education in the U.S. over time also impact and are impacted by the news media coverage on access to higher education. I will explore these themes in my findings and discussion.

Conceptual Framework

I used multiple approaches to text analysis in my research including content and discourse analysis. These approaches were guided by concepts from critical theory, including ideology, hegemony, and power, as well as concepts from media effects research, including agenda setting and framing theory. In this section, I will outline the tenets of the approaches I used and explain how these concepts guided my research.

Approaches to text analysis.

There are many different approaches to text analysis including content analysis, discourse analysis, and critical approaches to discourse analysis, among others (Schifferin, Tannen & Hamilton, 2015; Gee, 2011). There is little agreement regarding what exactly differentiates different approaches to text analysis, as theories and methods that guide each of these approaches intersect.

Content analysis.

Content analysis involves identifying the presence and frequency of keywords or themes. These themes can come from the data, from prior knowledge or theory, or from a combination of these approaches. Researchers who use this method focus on manifest content, content that is observable (Bernard, Wutich, & Ryan, 2016; Gee, 2011).

Discourse analysis.

Like content analysis, discourse analysis involves identifying themes among manifest content in a text. However, it also involves interpreting latent content, the underlying meaning in a text. Discourse analysts view language as a social practice. They look at how a text is used to build identities, relationships, and belief systems. They believe that language impacts and is impacted by its larger social context and focus on this in their analyses (Gee, 2011; Fairclough, 1993).

Critical approaches to discourse analysis.

Researchers who use critical approaches to discourse analysis bring micro approaches to textual analysis together with macro approaches to social theory, specifically critical theory, to explain how discourse constructs and is constructed by the social world (Rogers, 2011; Rogers, 2017; van Dijk, 2015). They are interested in investigating they ways in which language is used to create, sustain, and reproduce privilege and oppression (Rogers et al., 2011; Rogers, 2017; van Dijk, 2015; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Those who use critical approaches to discourse analysis also seek to apply their work, to use their analyses "to speak to, and perhaps intervene in, social or political issues, problems, and controversies in the world" (p. 9). Gee (2011) contends that all language is political because "in using language, social goods and their distribution are always at stake" (p. 7). Accordingly, all approaches to discourse analysis can be critical, including content analysis.

Those who use critical approaches to discourse analysis are particularly interested in the historical and social context in which discourses are situated (Bloor & Bloor, 2013; Fairclough, 2013; Gee, 2014; Rogers, 2011; van Dijk, 2015; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Fairclough and Wodak (1997) explained the relationships between context, discourse, and power:

> Describing discourse as a social practice implies a dialectical relationship between the particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s), which frame it: the discursive event is shaped by them, but it also shapes them…Discursive practices may have major effects- that is, they can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations…through the ways in which they represent things and position people (p. 258).

I took a critical approach to my research, using methods from both content and discourse analysis, because I believe that language is a powerful means through which disparities in access to higher education are created, sustained, and reproduced and I wanted to investigate how language was used in coverage on this topic. I explored the historical and social context in which this coverage was situated in order to gain a better understanding of the interplay between the discourse on access to higher education, related political, economic, demographic, and technological forces, and policies and practices regarding access to higher education.

Critical theory concepts.

Ideology, hegemony, and power.

Critical theory comes from the Frankfurt School, a group of neo-Marxist theorists who rejected the positivism of economic determinism. Critical theorists take an interdisciplinary approach to look at the multiple ways in which privilege and oppression are created, sustained, and reproduced (Rogers et al., 2005; Rogers, 2017; van Dijk, 2015; Wodak & Meyer, 2015).

Ideology and hegemony are central concepts in critical theory (Bloor & Bloor, 2013; Fairclough, 2013; Rogers, 2011; van Dijk, 2015; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Jefferies (2009) described ideologies as "a set of attitudes, values, and perceptions through which we come to see the world" (p. 21). He explained that ideologies "work to situate people differently and provide explanations for these positions" (p. 27). Ideologies can become so embedded in society they are considered common sense. Gramsci (1971) called this form of dominance hegemony. Researchers who use critical approaches to discourse analysis examine how language is used to promote ideologies and hegemony (Bloor &

Bloor, 2013; Fairclough, 2013; Rogers, 2011; van Dijk, 2015; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). In my research, I identified the ideologies in the coverage on access to higher education and explored the ways in which they were used to justify policies and practices that impact access to higher education.

Foucault's (1975) theories on power are used to explain how the media impacts and is impacted by public and political perceptions and action. Foucault believed that power is a fundamental part of society. Societies can exert power through violence through channels such as the military and prisons. Although this process occurs more often through more subtle channels such as the media and education. Those in power have a greater ability to control ideologies promoted through discourse (van Dijk, 2015). However, as Luke (1995) pointed out, this is not just a top-down form of domination: "Communities participate in discourse in local, often idiosyncratic ways, both resisting and becoming complicit in their own moral regulation" (p. 9).

In my research, I examined how higher education stakeholders, including journalists, education leaders, policy makers, and community members, contributed to and influenced the discourse on access to higher education in the newspaper articles I analyzed. I identified the tensions and values that underlay the coverage and how they related to higher education policies and practices.

Media effects research.

Agenda setting theory and framing theory.

This study is also guided by two theories from media effects research: agenda setting theory and framing theory. Media effects researchers have shown that the amount of news media coverage devoted a topic can influence the degree to which it becomes a public concern (Graber & Dunaway, 2017; Iyengar, 2018; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). McCombs and Shaw (1972) first recognized this "transfer of salience from the media agenda to the public agenda" (p. 5) and called it the agenda setting function of the press.

The relationship between the press and the public is symbiotic. Gamson and Modigliani (1989) explained:

> Each system interacts with the other: media discourse is a part of the process by which individuals construct meaning, and public opinion is part of the process by which journalists and other cultural entrepreneurs develop and crystallize meaning in the public discourse (p. 2).

One way this happens is through framing. Frames are cognitive categories we use to organize information and interpret our surroundings (Haynes, Merolla, & Ramakrishnan, 2016). Reese (2007) explained that frames "work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world" and that they "are socially shared and persistent over time" (p. 11). Goffman (1974) introduced the concept of frames to explain how people make sense of the world around us; he noted that we use frames in order to "negotiate it, manage it, comprehend it, and choose appropriate repertories of cognition and action" (as described in Gitlin, 1980, p. 6). According to Entman (1993):

> Frames *define problems*- determine what causal agent is doing what with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values; *diagnose causes*- identify the forces creating the problem; *make moral judgements*- evaluate causal agents and their effects; and *suggest remedies*- offer and justify treatments and predict their likely effects (p. 52).

Journalists are influenced by their own knowledge and beliefs, those of their audience, and their news organizations' economic and political interests when they select issues to cover and how to cover them (Fairclough, 1995; Gitlin, 1980; Graber & Dunaway, 2017). By using frames, they emphasize certain aspects of selected issues and de-emphasize others (Gitlin, 1980; Graber & Dunaway, 2017; Iyengar, 2018). Gitlin (1980) noted that frames allow journalists to "process large amounts of information quickly and routinely…and to package it for efficient relay to audiences" (p. 7). Research has shown that frames in the news media can influence how people think about an issue (Haynes et al., 2016). Frames in the news media can also motivate public and political action (Graber & Dunaway, 2017; Iyengar, 2018).

Haynes et al. (2016) explained how different entities use frames to promote their agendas: "Given that frames help individuals make sense of the world, it is no surprise that social movement organizations, political elites, and other relevant actors try to influence the frames that make it into public discourse" (p. 17). The news media is a primary channel through which this happens (Haynes et al., 2016; Lakoff, 2014).

I drew on agenda setting theory and framing theory in my research to gain a better understanding of the coverage, how it has changed over time, and how different stakeholders used the news media to promote their agendas regarding access to higher education. In Chapter 4 and 5, I use these theories and concepts to explain my findings and discuss their implications.

Text Analyses on Media Coverage of Education

I found 20 empirical, peer-reviewed studies published from 2009-2019 in which researchers used text analysis to examine how education is portrayed in the news media.

In this section, I will give an overview of the topics and sources analyzed as well as the conceptual frameworks and methodologies used in these studies, emphasizing two studies that are most relevant to my research: Jeffries' (2009) analysis of articles in local Massachusetts newspapers about undocumented students' access to higher education published from 2002-2008 and Haas and Fischman's (2010) analysis of opinion and editorial articles about higher education published in major national newspapers from 1980-2005.

Topics and sources.

The majority of these studies were on media coverage of primary or secondary education (Catalano & Gatti, 2017; Cohen, 2009; Goldstein, 2011; Keogh & Garrick, 2011; Khiang, Ahmad, Ibrahim & Kee, 2015; Lanvers & Coleman, 2017; Russell, 2010; Saenz & Moses, 2010; Tasdemir & Kus, 2011; Wiklund, 2018; Yemini & Gordon, 2017). One study was on media coverage of primary, secondary, and higher education (Tamir & Davidson, 2011). Another was on media coverage of pre-kindergarten education (Brown & Wright, 2011). The remaining studies were on news media coverage of higher education (Bishop, 2009; Bulfin, Pangrazio, & Selwin, 2014; Haas & Fischman, 2010; Jeffries, 2009; Paltridge, Mayson, & Schapper, 2014; Rhoads, Comancho, Toren-Lindsey & Lozano, 2015; Stephenson, 2011).

The range of news media sources the researchers analyzed included: articles from local and/or national newspapers (Bishop, 2009; Brown & Wright, 2011; Bulfin et al., 2014; Cohen, 2010; Goldstein, 2011; Jeffries, 2009; Keogh & Garrick, 2011; Khiang et al., 2015; Lanvers & Coleman, 2017; Paltridge et al., 2014; Rhoads et al., 2015; Russell, 2010; Saenz & Moses, 2014; Stephenson, 2011; Tamir & Davidson, 2011; Tasdemir &

Kus, 2011; Wiklund, 2018), op-ed pieces published in local and national newspapers (Haas & Fischman; 2010; Stephenson, 2011), articles from financial newspapers (Yemini & Gordon, 2017), articles from news magazines (Goldstein, 2011; Saenz & Moses, 2010), articles from online news sources (Catalano & Gatti, 2017; Saenz & Moses, 2010), and articles from education news media sources (Brown & Wright, 2011, Bulfin et al., 2014; Rhoades et al., 2015; Stephenson, 2011).

Some researchers examined issues and trends from a national perspective, analyzing national news sources. For example, Haas and Fischman (2010) analyzed opinion articles and editorials about higher education published in *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Washington Post* to research how the public understands the concept of colleges and universities. Goldstein (2010) analyzed articles about No Child Left Behind (NCLB) published in *The New York Times* and *Time Magazine* to identify how NCLB and related market-based education reforms were framed.

Others examined issues and trends from a local perspective, analyzing local news sources. For example, Jefferies (2009) analyzed coverage published in eight local Massachusetts newspapers to determine how the arguments for and against two bills related to undocumented students' access to higher education were shaped.

Haas and Fischman (2010) analyzed op-eds published from 1980-2005 which allowed them to determine how the coverage changed over time. Russell (2010) had similar objectives. She examined how public discourse about kindergarten evolved over a 60-year period in her analysis of newspaper articles from the *Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times*, as well as policy documents from the California Kindergarten Association published from 1950-2009.

Other researchers gained insight into current issues in education through their analyses of media portrayals of education. For example, Jeffries (2009) analyzed newspaper articles about Massachusetts education debates published as the debates were happening, from 2002-2008. Bishop (2009) observed that students have become increasingly anxious about the college application process. To examine this phenomenon, he analyzed newspaper coverage of the college application process published from September 2006 through March 2007, which is a peak time when students apply to college.

Social constructionist, critical, and socio-cognitive perspectives.

All of the studies were guided by social constructionist and critical perspectives. For example, Brown and Wright (2011) used Edelman's political spectacle theory to guide their analysis national newspaper coverage of universal pre-Kindergarten education and explain the political forces that influenced the movement toward adopting a universal pre-Kindergarten program in the U.S. Edelman (1988) argued that the policy making process is not a rational one, but rather a "set of shifting, diverse, and contradictory responses to a spectrum of political interests" (as cited in Brown & Wright, 2011, p. 116). He described how the media impacts society and the policy making process, that it "constructs the social reality to which people respond, and in the process, reinforces established power structures and value hierarchies" (as cited in Brown & Wright, 2011, p. 117). Jefferies (2009) used Gramsci's perspectives on ideologies to explain how meritocracy dominated the newspaper coverage in Massachusetts on undocumented students' access to higher education.

Socio-cognitive perspectives were also common. Many researchers used framing theory to guide their analyses (Bishop, 2009; Cohen, 2010; Goldstein, 2011; Jefferies, 2009; Tamir & Davidson, 2011). Haas and Fischman (2010) used prototype theory, which will be described below. Like framing theory, prototype theory helps explain how people understand concepts and how these understandings influence and are influenced by the media.

Methodologies and findings.

The methodologies and findings from Jefferies' (2009) study and Haas and Fischman's (2010) study are particularly relevant to my study. They used social constructionist, critical, and socio-cognitive perspectives to conduct discourse analyses of coverage about higher education published in influential newspapers. Their research provided insight into policy and practices regarding access to higher education.

Jefferies (2009) conducted a discourse analysis of 113 news articles published in *The Boston Globe, The North Adams Transcript, The Sentinel & Enterprise, The Telegram & Gazette, The Berkshire Eagle, The Patriot Ledger,* and *The Sun* from September 2002 through September 2008 about two state bills that if passed, would have allowed undocumented students to pay in-state tuition rates to attend public colleges and universities in Massachusetts. He selected these publications based on their high circulation and influence on coverage in other news outlets. He found articles by conducting a keyword search in an electronic database.

Jefferies (2009) conducted a content analysis to identify the ideologies and frames used in each of the articles. To do this, he analyzed the actors, events, struggles, and tensions mentioned in the articles and the language used to describe them.

He found the three main frames in the coverage: a fiscal frame, an American dream frame, and a legal frame. In articles with a fiscal frame, writers positioned the issue of undocumented students' access to higher education in a way that showed how it would help or hinder the state economically. These cost/benefit analyses aligned with neoliberal economic perspectives.

The American dream frame was used on one hand to argue that denying undocumented students in-state tuition rates would restrict them from accessing the American dream. On the other hand, it was also used to argue that if undocumented students were allowed this privilege, it would take funds away from citizens, "disqualifying them from their own 'dream'" (Jeffries, 2009, p. 26).

Writers who used the legal frame to oppose the bills used the term used the term "illegal" to categorize undocumented students, "immediately assigning an identity of criminality and denying membership into American Society" (Jeffries, 2009, p. 26). Those in favor of the bills used the terms "immigrants" or "noncitizens" to describe undocumented students (Jeffries, 2009, p. 26). Those who used the American dream frame and the fiscal frame relied on the ideology of meritocracy in their reasoning. Jeffries (2009) cited McNamee and Miller (2004) and explained that "from the perspective of this ideology, everybody in the United States is able to 'succeed' in society." When people do not succeed, it is "attributed to some innate characteristic, lack of hard work or lack of high moral character and integrity" (p. 27), rather than on structural barriers.

Haas and Fischman (2010) conducted a discourse analysis of 1,053 opinion and editorial articles about higher education published in *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles*

Times, and *The Washington Post* published from 1980 through 2005. They selected these newspapers based on their high circulation, their diverse readership, and because coverage in these publications was perceived to be fair and balanced. They found the articles in LexisNexis, an electronic database of journalistic documents, using a keyword search.

Haas and Fischman's (2010) goals were to identify key tensions and the prototypes about colleges and universities used in the articles. They explained prototypes as follows:

> People understand the world by constructing mental models of categories or groupings of concepts. We understand these conceptual categories not through definitions…but through prototypes. Prototypes are central examples of the concepts that represent the primary features of how we have categorized the many single examples we have experienced (p. 536).

Haas and Fischman (2010) first conducted a descriptive analysis of the 1,053 articles in the dataset. They recorded the publication in which each op-ed appeared, as well as the type of article, the publication date, title, and information about each author. Next, using the qualitative text analysis software program Nvivo, they conducted a close-text analysis of a randomly selected subset of 249 of the articles. They read, coded, and recoded the articles multiple times to find patterns in the discourse.

Haas and Fischman (2010) found two key tensions in the articles: a tension between quality and access in higher education and a tension between higher education as a private good a public good. These tensions were manifested in three higher education prototypes: *Academic Nostalgia* (AN), *Educational Entrepreneurship* (EE), and *Redemptive Educational-Consumerism* (REC).

Haas and Fischman (2010) explained that the AN prototype aligns with traditional conceptualizations of higher education, or what “is generally understood to be the original structure of higher education” (p. 545). Op-ed writers who used the AN prototype believed colleges and universities should be supported by the state but should be autonomous. The AN prototype addresses the public and private benefit tension by purporting that both the public and individuals who participate in higher education benefit from colleges and universities. Access to higher education should be increased because these institutions will produce students who will serve society (p. 544).

The *Educational Entrepreneurship* prototype is the opposite of AN. Those who used the EE prototype felt higher education should be privatized, that it should be run like a business in which students are the consumers. The EE prototype presumes a level playing field. Individuals should be responsible for access. Quality will be maintained because only those who work the hardest and have the most academic merit will thrive in these institutions. Haas and Fischman (2010) explained that the private-public tension is resolved in the EE prototype because the public will benefit from the products private colleges and universities provide. Education in the U.S. tends to focus on competition, individual achievement, and meritocracy. People are constantly being exposed to images relating to these concepts through the media; they ring true to many who have been through the education system. Haas and Fischman (2010) noted that because of this, EE is the most common prototype.

Haas and Fischman (2010) suggested that the *Redemptive Educational-Consumerism* prototype may have developed in response to the weaknesses of the AN and the EE prototypes. It incorporates concepts from both but seems to align more with EE, maintaining the meritocratic view of higher. Those who used the REC prototype believed the U.S. should intervene in higher education and should increase access in order to help the nation become more competitive in a globalized society. Haas and Fischman (2010) explained that the REC prototype depends "heavily on the idea that social programs can be thoroughly engineered to achieve a level playing field and equity in education. In so doing, it seeks to simultaneously resolve the two key tensions of access-quality and public-private benefit" (p. 554).

I was interested local and national perspectives on access to higher education. Accordingly, I analyzed articles from local and national newspapers. I was also interested in how coverage in these perspectives changed over time, so I analyzed articles published over a 25-year span, from 1994-2019. Like many of the researchers cited above, I used social constructionist, critical, and socio-cognitive perspectives to guide my study and gain insight into the social and cognitive dynamics that impact higher education enrollment and degree attainment rates.

I used a combination of the methodologies used by Fischman and Haas (2010), who used descriptive analysis and discourse analysis, and Jeffries (2009), who used content analysis. Some of my findings were similar to those of Jeffries (2009) and Fischman and Haas (2010). I will detail my methodology and outline my findings and how they aligned and added to those of Jeffries (2009) and Fischman and Haas (2010) in subsequent chapters.

Summary.

In this literature review, I situated my study in the larger historical and social context and outlined the political, economic, have demographic, and technological shifts that have influenced access to higher education in the U.S. I outlined the tenets of the approaches to text analysis that I used and explained the concepts that influenced my research. I also reviewed the empirical, peer-reviewed studies published in the last ten years in which researchers used text analysis to examine how education in portrayed in the news media. In addition, I introduced how my research relates to these studies. In Chapter 3, I will detail my research choices and rationale.

Chapter 3

Methodology

In this chapter, I will discuss the data sources I selected and how I collected and organized them. I will outline the methods and tools I used to analyze these sources. I will explain the rationale for my research choices, my positionality, and the limitations to my approach.

Rationale for Research Approach

The purpose of my study was to gain insight into the topic of access to higher education. As noted in Chapter 1, much of the previous research on access to higher education is quantitative and guided by positivist and rationalist perspectives. I departed from these perspectives and used a primarily qualitative approach guided by social constructionist, critical, and socio-cognitive perspectives. Specifically, I conducted a descriptive, content, and discourse analysis of newspaper articles about access to higher education. This unique approach allowed me to better understand the social and cognitive dynamics that impact higher education enrollment and degree attainment rates.

Data Sources

Highly circulated local and national newspapers are among the most powerful media outlets in the U.S. Researchers have shown that coverage in these publications influences the public and policymakers at the local, state, and national levels (McCombs, 2014; Tan & Weaver, 2009). Researchers have also found that coverage in *The New York Times* (Boydstun, 2013; Denham, 2014; Golan, 2006; McCombs, 2014) and *The Washington Post* influences coverage in other media outlets (McCombs, 2014).

I included articles about access to higher education published in the following highly circulated local and national newspapers in the dataset: *The Atlanta Constitution-Journal, The Denver Post, The New York Times, The Mercury News, The Philadelphia Enquirer, The Star Tribune, The Washington Post*, and *USA Today.* In addition to their high circulation, I selected these publications based on their geographic diversity and availability in the Nexis Uni database.[1] When I selected these newspapers, their print editions were among the top 25 most highly circulated in the U.S. The online editions were among the top 20 most popular newspaper websites in the U.S. (BurrellesLuce, 2014). Table 1 below shows the daily edition circulation, Sunday edition circulation, print edition ranking, and online edition ranking of each of the included publications.

According to Barthel (2018) at the Pew Research Center, U.S. daily newspapers' print edition circulation decreased from 2014 to 2017, while U.S. daily newspapers' digital circulation increased during this time period. He estimated that total weekday print edition circulation of U.S. daily newspapers dropped by nearly 24%, from40,420,000 to 30,948,419, while Sunday print edition circulation dropped by just over 21%, from 42,751,000 to 33,971,695. Barthel (2018) also estimated that the average monthly unique visitors to websites of the top 50 U.S. newspapers by circulation increased by nearly 29%, from 8,233,522 to 11,527,744.

[1] I used a previous version of this database called LexisNexis Academic to pull articles published in 1994-2017.

Table 1

Publication, Daily Circulation, Sunday Circulation, Print Ranking, and Online Ranking of Newspapers in the Dataset

Publication	Daily Circulation	Sunday Circulation	Print Ranking	Online
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution	249,390	667,155	23	14
The Denver Post	403,039	618,571	13	15
The New York Times	1,897,890	2,391,986	3	1
The Mercury News	546,282	700,437	6	18
The Philadelphia Inquirer	310,002	465,835	17	13
The Star Tribune	300,495	582,956	18	19
USA Today	2,876,586	N/A	1	3
The Washington Post	431,521	800,643	10	4
Total	7,021,399	6,227,583		

Note. Adapted from *Top Media Outlets: Newspapers, Blogs, Consumer Magazines, Broadcasters, Websites & Social Networks* by BurrellesLuce, 2014. Retrieved from http://www.burrellesluce.com/resources/top_media_outlets.

Timeline

I analyzed articles about access to higher education published in these newspapers over a 25-year span, from 1994-2019 [2,3] because I was interested in how coverage on access to higher education has changed over time. Also, this time period has been marked by particularly dramatic social change caused by shifts in political, economic, demographic, and technological forces. By analyzing articles published during this time period, I positioned myself to better understand the interplay between discourse on access

[2] Articles published in *The Denver Post* after 2016 were not available in the database and not included in the dataset.
[3] Articles published in *The Star Tribune* after 2017 were not available in the database and not included in the dataset.

to higher education, policies and practices regarding access to higher education, and these social forces.

Articles in Nexis Uni are automatically assigned pre-defined index terms through a rule-based system. Categories include subject, company, organization, person, and geographic. Each indexed term in an article is assigned a relevance score based on the term's frequency, location in the document, how much discussion of the topic occurs. Terms with a score of 90-99% are considered a major reference (Pfeffer & Carley, 2012).

I used the Nexis Uni advanced search tool to find all available articles published in these newspapers that contained at least one of the following major subject terms: colleges & universities, education systems & institutions, or students & student life, annd at least one of the following phrases: access to higher education, higher education access, college access, or access to college.[4]

Once duplicate articles were removed, this search produced a total 1,242 articles: 117 published in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution,* 94 published in *The Denver Post,* 132 published in *The Mercury News*, 331 published in *The New York Times*[5]*,* 82 published in *The Philadelphia Inquirer,* 55 published in *The Star Tribune*, 70 published in *USA Today,* and 361 published in *The Washington Post.*[6] I randomly selected 25% of the articles from each publication, which produced an initial subset of 313 articles.[7]

[4] The exact search used to find articles in LexisNexis Academic was: SUBJECT (colleges & universities 9*%) or SUBJECT (education systems & institutions 9*%) or SUBJECT (students & student life 9*%) and "access to higher education" or "higher education access" or "college access" or "access to college".

[5] *The New York Times* dataset included three online articles and 32 blog posts.

[6] *The Washington Post* dataset included ten online articles and 85 blog posts.

[7] I rounded decimals when calculating 25% of articles from each publication. This resulted in three more articles than 25% of the entire dataset, 313 v. 310.

Next, I reviewed the articles in the subset and removed those that did not include at least one issue or solution related to access to higher education. I removed 54 articles, 17% of the initial subset of 313, leaving 259 articles in the subset.

Descriptive Analysis of the Dataset

I conducted a descriptive analysis of the 1,242 articles in the dataset. I recorded the publication, publication date, headline, author, word count, section number, and page number from each article on an Excel spreadsheet. I recorded whether the article contained a graphic. I also recorded the major subject, geographic, person, and organization terms, as indexed in Nexis Uni. I used this information to begin to find themes in the dataset. In addition, I calculated the number of articles published in each newspaper and among all eight newspapers during each five-year span between 1994-2019[2,3].

I used the Excel spreadsheet to analyze the major geographic terms were assigned to articles in Nexis Uni. These terms represented cities, states, countries, and regions. I counted the number of articles that included at least one major geographic term and the number of states represented in the major geographic terms. I also identified the most prevalent major geographic and subject terms in the dataset. I excluded the major subject terms I used in my article search (colleges & universities, education systems & institutions, and students & student life) from this analysis.

Content Analysis of the Subset

I conducted a content analysis in of each article in the subset of 259 articles using MAXQDA, qualitative data analysis software, to identify how higher education access was defined in the coverage. The questions I used to guide this coding included:

- What is access?
- Access for whom?
- Access to what?

Where applicable, I used multiple codes for each question, per article, to identify the breadth of how higher education was defined in the data. MAXQDA includes a tool that allows the user to analyze when and how codes intersect. I used this tool to analyze the intersection of codes when individual articles included more than one code per question listed above. I also used this tool to analyze how codes in different categories intersected.

Discourse Analysis of the Subset

I used MAXQDA to a conduct more in-depth content analysis of the subset. I also conducted a discourse analysis of the subset, paying particular attention to the language writers used, to further analyze codes and themes found in content analysis.

To identify what issues and solutions related to access to higher education were most salient in the coverage, I first selected the issue and solution that were covered in the most detail and at the most length per article, where applicable. I also took into consideration the location of each issue and solution in each article, as news writers are trained to include the most relevant information in an article in the headline, lead, and initial paragraphs (Scanlan & Craig, 2013).

Next, I used Entman's (1993) definition of frames, cited in Chapter 2, to begin to identify how the most salient issues and solutions were framed and what value(s) and/or tension(s) were manifested in these frames. Not all articles in the subset included all aspects of Entman's definition of frames. Per Entman (1993), this is not required to identify frames.

Coding the articles in the subset using Entman's (1993) definition of frames helped me identify themes in the data. However, when this step was complete, I felt I needed to explore these themes further. To do so, I identified and used the following nine questions to refine my codes for each article in the subset.

- Is access to higher education important?
- If yes, what is the most salient benefit of access to higher education or reason why is access to higher education important?
- What is the most salient issue related to access to higher education?
- What is the cause or are the causes of the most salient issue?
- What value(s) and/or tension(s) underlay the most salient issue?
- What is the most salient solution related to access?
- What entity is responsible for covering the costs of access to higher education, based on the most salient solution?
- What is the predicted effect or are predicted effects of the most salient solution?
- What value(s) and/or tension(s) underlay the most salient solution?

Not all articles in the subset included information for each question.

To identify if access was deemed important in each article, I selected one of two options per article: yes or no. I selected yes for each article in which the writer expressly deemed access to higher education important. I selected no for each article in which the writer expressly deemed access to higher education unimportant. For each article in which the writer did not express either sentiment, I selected yes. I assumed that by including an issue or solution related to access to higher education, the writer deemed access to higher education important.

I selected the most salient benefit of access to higher education or reason access to higher education was deemed important, adopting the same criteria I used to identify the most salient issue and solution. I also used these criteria to identify the entity responsible for covering the costs of access to higher education, per article, based on the most salient solution. In addition, I analyzed how these codes overlapped.

Where applicable, I used multiple codes for the remainder of the questions, per article, to identify the breadth of value(s) and/or tension(s), as well as the predicted effect(s) of the solution. Where applicable, I also coded information in each article that was not explicitly relevant to the eight questions listed above but seemed potentially meaningful.

To see how the coverage changed over time and how it varied among newspapers, I put each article in the subset into different document sets in MAXQDA, organized by the newspaper and five-year span from 1994-2019 in which it was published. MAXQDA includes a tool that allows the user to run code frequencies by document sets. I used this to identify what codes were more prevalent in each newspaper and in each five-year span.

Reflexivity, Positionality, and Limitations

Reflexivity is a hotly contested issue among discourse analysts. Some feel reflexivity aligns with scientific approaches to research and that it does not have a place in the field. Others believe that researchers should document how and why they made their decisions at each stage of the research process and address the ways in which their perspectives impact their role as a researcher in order to identify their role in constructing meaning (Rogers et al., 2005).

As noted above, my research was not guided by positivist perspectives. Accordingly, for this primarily qualitative study, I did not use the same measures of research quality that quantitative researchers use, such as traditional measures of validity. However, I feel it is contradictory for researchers to write about the relationships between discourse and larger social contexts without taking into consideration their positionality and assumptions. I also feel that discourse analysis is less likely to be respected as legitimate form of inquiry if researchers fail to document their research processes and how they analyzed their data.

I attempted to be as systematic as possible in analyzing my data. In writing my dissertation, I also sought to be as transparent as possible about the decisions I made during my research process. I triangulated my data by exploring themes that emerged in multiple stages of my analysis and then describing how those themes appeared in each applicable stage. I identified and included exemplars to support my findings. I also researched and explained the historical and social context in which the coverage I analyzed was situated, in order to better understand and provide the reader with a better understanding of the discourse on access to higher education and its implications.

While I aimed to be as rigorous as possible in my analysis and describing my findings, I also recognize that my identity greatly impacted the research choices I made. I grew up and was educated in fairly homogenous communities and schools in Utah. It was not until I worked as a tutor and counselor in an Upward Bound program during my summers as an undergraduate student that I began to recognize some of the ways that disparities in access to higher education are created, sustained, and reproduced. All of the students I worked with were low-income, first-generation, and/or academically at-risk students. Many were also students of color. The Upward Bound students talked to me about the barriers they faced as underserved students, barriers that I had not faced as a white student from a middle-class family whose parents graduated from college. These experiences heavily influenced my academic choices and career trajectory.

After working for Upward Bound, I decided to pursue a career in higher education and earn graduate degrees in Education Policy. As a graduate student, whenever possible, I took courses focused on critical theory and qualitative methods. During this time, I also worked as a residential education coordinator, admissions counselor, retention coordinator, academic advisor, and internship coordinator. These positions allowed me to work with many different types of students and see many of the ways in which access to higher education is inhibited at different educational stages.

Because of these experiences, I believe that access to higher education is important. I believe disparities in access to higher education should be researched and to the extent possible, findings from this research should be used to help eliminate these disparities. I also believe that critical perspectives and qualitative methods are particularly helpful lenses and tools through which inequalities and inequities in education can be explored and addressed. Accordingly, I selected access to higher education as my dissertation topic and used critical perspectives and qualitative methods to identify how this topic was covered in the media and gain insight into the policies and practices that impact higher education enrollment and degree attainment rates.

I believe my academic and work experiences impacted which barriers to access I identified in the coverage and the ways in which I wrote about this discourse and its implications in my dissertation. I also believe that to some extent, the experiences I have not had, namely that I have not personally faced any major barriers to access to higher education, limited my ability identify and write about these barriers.

Another limitation of this research is that newspaper readers are more likely to have higher education and income levels and are more likely to be white than the general U.S. population (Pew Research Center, 2015). In order to maintain readership and make a profit, those involved in publishing newspapers must align their coverage with the perspectives of their audience (Fairclough, 1995). Accordingly, the perspectives in the coverage I analyzed are limited. In my concluding chapter, I will discuss directions for further research, including suggestions on how this research might be expanded to include more diverse perspectives.

Summary

In this chapter, I reiterated the purpose of my study and research perspectives. I provided a rationale for these perspectives and discussed the limitations of my approach. I also described the data sources I analyzed, why I selected them, and how I collected and organized them. In addition, I explained the stages in my analysis, which included descriptive, content, and discourse analysis, the research choice I made in each stage, and the tools I used to conduct my analysis. In Chapter 4, I will share my findings and expound upon the research choices I made throughout my analysis.

Chapter 4

Findings

In this chapter, I will outline three primary themes found in my analysis. These themes are organized and supported by findings and data displays from each relevant stage of my analysis.

The first theme I identified is that access to higher education was considered an important topic in the newspapers included in the dataset and the articles in the subset. The number of articles about access to higher education published in these newspapers increased from 1994-2019. Also, 90% of the articles in the subset I analyzed included at least one reason benefit of access to higher education or reason why access to higher education is important.

The second theme I identified is that access to higher education is defined and discussed in many, often overlapping, ways in the articles I analyzed. However, content related to costs and benefits of access to higher education dominated the coverage. Writers often employed an economic frame to describe issues, causes, and solutions related to access to higher education.

The major subject terms assigned by Nexis Uni for each article in the dataset were varied and included terms about costs or funding of higher education, preparation for higher education, policy and policy-making entities, and higher education admissions. The majority of the major subject terms were related to costs or funding of higher education. These included budgets, grants, scholarships, student expenses, student financial aid, and tuition fees.

Intersecting codes emerged in the majority of articles in the subset regarding the questions, “What is access?”, “Access for whom?”, and “Access to what?”. Many articles included content about multiple aspects of access to higher education, for multiple student populations, at multiple types of institutions. Many of the definition codes that emerged were related to costs or funding of higher education. Regarding the question, “What is access?”, ability to pay or funding was the most prevalent code. It emerged more frequently over time. Also, half of the articles in the subset contained content about access to higher education for low- and middle-income students.

The most salient issues, solutions, and causes of the issues in the articles in the subset were varied. However, the majority were related to costs or funding of higher education. Also, the issues, causes, and solutions in these articles were often framed in economic terms. In many articles, students were described as consumers.

The most prevalent tensions and values that underlay the coverage were related to costs and benefits of access to higher education. A tension between public and private benefits of access to higher education emerged in the articles, as did a tension between public and private costs of access to higher education. Meritocracy, accountability, efficiency, and innovation were the values most often associated with the costs and benefits of access to higher education in the subset.

The third theme I identified is that the costs and benefits of access to higher education were often misaligned in the articles in the subset. In many articles, the entity identified as the primary beneficiary of access to higher education was not the entity deemed responsible for covering the costs of access to higher education. For example, 23% of the articles in the dataset included a public benefit of access to higher education, one that primarily enhances society, and also included a solution that requires individuals to cover the costs of access to higher education.

Importance of Access to Higher Education.

Descriptive analysis of dataset.

As outlined in my conceptual framework, the amount of news media coverage devoted to a topic can influence the degree to which it becomes a public concern (Graber & Dunaway, 2017; Iyengar, 2018; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Access to higher education was an increasingly prevalent topic among the eight newspapers included in the dataset. As such, it may be considered an increasingly important topic of concern.

In the descriptive analysis of the 1,242 articles, I found the total number of articles published in each five-year span increased between 1994-2019. As shown in Table 2 and Figure 2 below, 139 articles, 11% of the dataset, were published in 1994-1999 whereas 378 articles, 30% of the dataset, were published in 2014-2019. This represents a 172% increase in the number of articles published from the first five-year span in 1994-2019 to the last.

The largest number of articles in the dataset were published in *The Washington Post*. As shown in Table 2, these 361 articles comprised 29% of the dataset, followed by *The New York Times*, in which 331 articles, 27% of the dataset, were published.

I also found in the descriptive analysis that coverage on access to higher education in the newspapers in the dataset was geographically widespread within the U.S. Sixty-seven percent of the dataset, 827 articles, included at least one major geographic term. Ninety-six percent of the major geographic terms represented locations in the U.S.

These terms included Washington D.C. and locations in 44 states[8].

Table 2

Number of Articles in the Dataset Total and per Publication and Five-Year Span, Percentage of Articles in the Dataset Total and per Publication and Five-Year Span

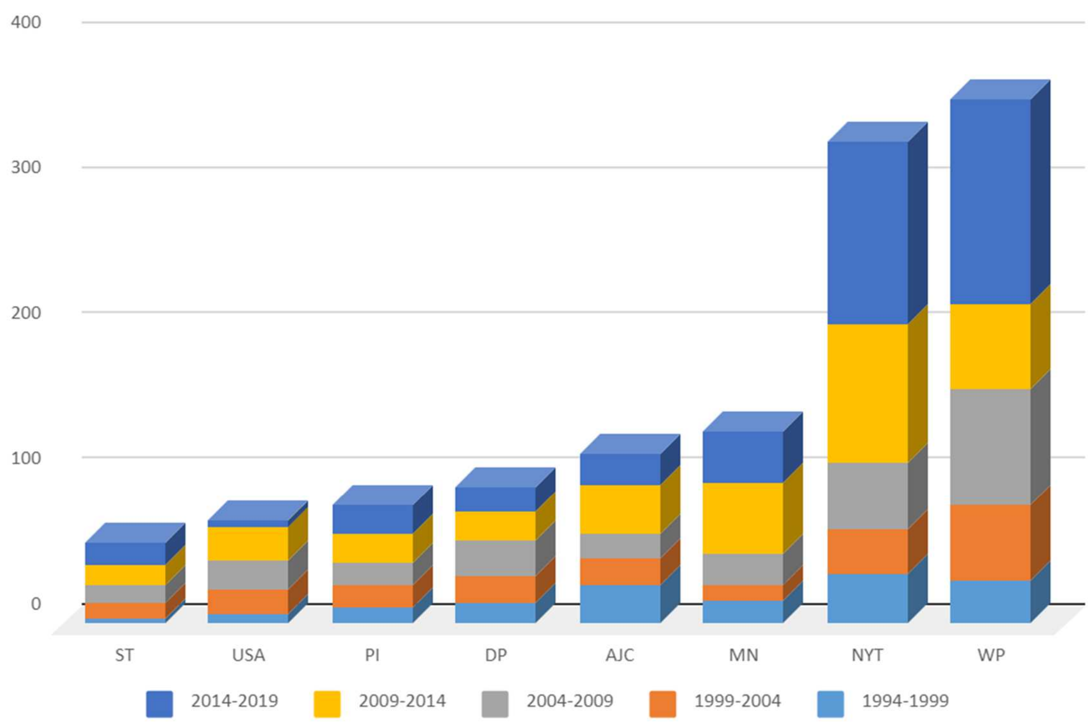
Five-Year Span	**AJC**	**DP**	**NYT**	**MN**	**PI**	**ST**	**USA**	**WP**	**Total # Total %**
1994-1999	26	14	34	15	11	4	6	29	**139 11%**
1999-2004	19	19	30	12	16	10	17	53	**176 14%**
2004-2009	16	24	47	21	14	12	20	79	**233 19%**
2009-2014	35	20	95	49	21	14	23	59	**316 25%**
2014-2019	21	17[2]	125	35	20	15[3]	4	141	**378 30%**
Total # Total %	**117 9%**	**94 8%**	**331 27%**	**132 11%**	**82 7%**	**55 4%**	**70 6%**	**3612 9%**	**1,242 100%**

Note. Names of Publications are listed by initials: AJC= *The Atlanta Constitution-Journal,* DP= *The Denver Post,* NYT= *The New York Times,* MN= *The Mercury News,* PI= *The Philadelphia Enquirer,* ST= *The Star Tribune,* WP= *The Washington Post*, and USA= *USA Today.*

[8] Locations in Alaska, Hawaii, Nebraska, Nevada, Utah and Wyoming were not included in the geographic terms.

Figure 2

Number of Articles in the Dataset Total and per Publication and Five-Year Span, Percentage of Articles in the Dataset Total and per Publication and Five-Year Span



Note. Names of Publications are listed by initials: AJC= *The Atlanta Constitution-Journal,* DP= *The Denver Post,* NYT= *The New York Times,* MN= *The Mercury News,* PI= *The Philadelphia Enquirer,* ST= *The Star Tribune,* WP= *The Washington Post*, and USA= *USA Today.*

Discourse analysis of subset.

Access to higher education was expressly deemed unimportant in only one article in the subset, an opinion piece published on January 19, 2009 in *The Atlanta Constitution-Journal* in which the writer questioned the belief that higher education is necessary for an individual's success (Korff, 2009). In the remaining 258 articles in the subset, access to higher education was either expressly deemed important by the writer or, at a minimum, the writer included an issue or solution related to access to higher education. Of these 258 articles in which access to higher education was deemed important, 233, or 90%, included a benefit of access to higher education or reason why access to higher education was important.

In summary, access to higher education was an increasingly prevalent topic among the eight newspapers included in the dataset. The number of articles on this topic published increased over time. The locations in which this coverage was set were geographically widespread. Also, access to higher education was deemed important in all but one article in the subset. In addition, nearly all of these articles included a benefit of access to higher education or reason why access to higher education was important.

I will list and expound on the benefits of access to higher education in the subset in the section below. I will describe the most salient issues and solutions related to access to higher education that were included in the coverage. I also will outline the entities deemed responsible for covering the costs of access to higher education in the articles in the subset. In addition, I will discuss the primary tensions and values that underlay the coverage.

Overlapping Definitions and Economic Framing of Access

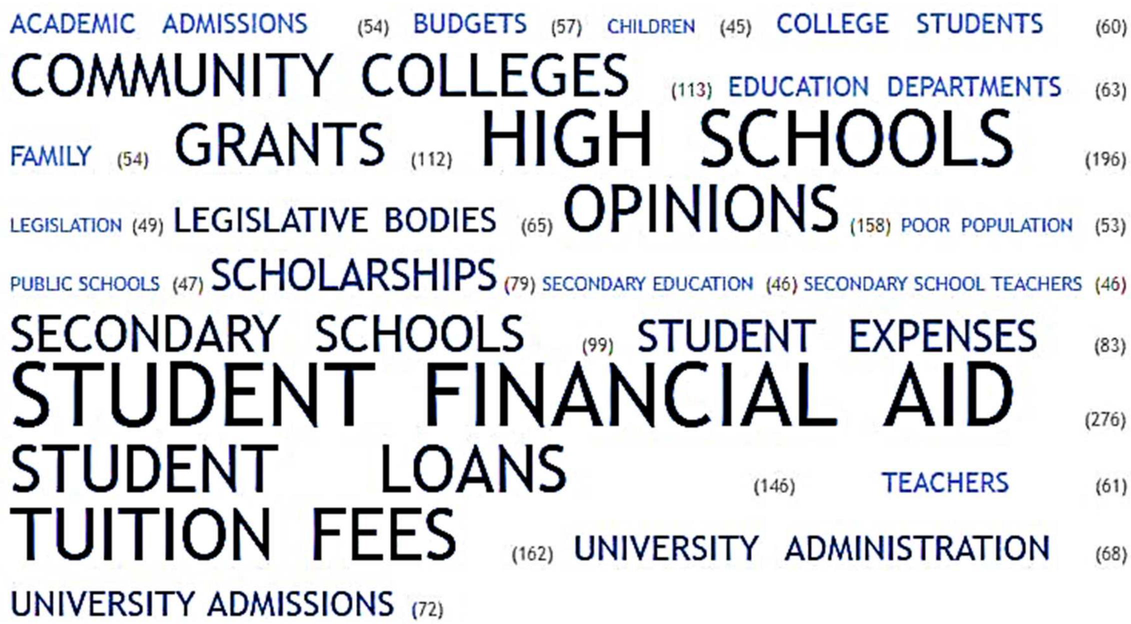
Descriptive analysis of dataset.

Access to higher education is defined in many, often overlapping ways in the articles I analyzed. However, content related to costs and benefits of access to higher education dominated the coverage.

Each article in the dataset included at least one major subject term assigned by Nexi Uni. The majority of these articles included multiple subject terms. These terms varied and included terms about costs or funding of higher education, preparation for higher education, policy and policy-making entities, and higher education admissions. In the descriptive analysis, I found that among these major subject terms, those related to costs and funding of higher education were most prevalent. The most prevalent terms were those related to costs or funding of higher education, including budgets, grants, scholarships, student expenses, student financial aid, and tuition fees. The second most prevalent terms were those related to preparation for higher education, including children, high schools, public schools, secondary education, secondary school teachers, secondary schools, and teaching. The third most prevalent terms were those related to policy and policy-making entities, including education departments, legislation, legislative bodies, and university administration. Terms related to higher education admissions, including academic admissions and university admissions, were fourth most prevalent. Figure 3 below is a word cloud that shows the top 25 major subject terms in the dataset, excluding the three major subject terms used to find the articles.

Figure 3

Top 25 Major Subject Terms Word Cloud



Note. The terms that are larger and darker appeared most often in the dataset. The number of articles in which the term appeared is listed to the right of each term.

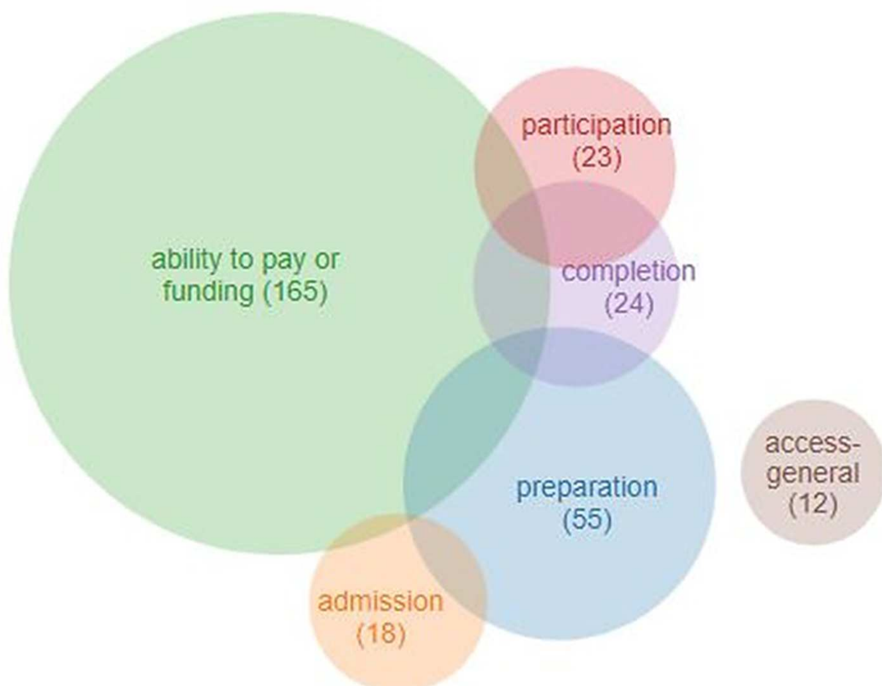
Content analysis of subset.

I also found that access to higher education was defined in many, often overlapping, ways in the content analysis of the subset of articles. Many aspects of these definitions were related to costs or funding of higher education. As outlined in my methodology chapter, I identified what aspect or aspects of access were covered in each of the 259 articles using the guiding question, “What is access?”. I also identified to what student population or populations they were referring in each article using the guiding question, “Access for whom?”. In addition, I identified the type or types of institutions discussed in each article using the guiding question, “Access to what?”. Many of the articles contained multiple codes per question. Many of the codes that emerged were related to costs or funding of higher education.

Figure 4 below is a Venn diagram that shows the top six codes that emerged regarding the question, "What is access?". These included: ability to pay or funding, preparation, completion, participation, admission, and access-general. I used the code access-general for content that was about access to higher education but not related to a specific aspect of access to higher education. There were two additional codes in the category that were not included in the Venn diagram: ability to transfer from a two to four-year institution and retention. These codes emerged in three and five articles in the subset, respectively.

Figure 4

What is Access? Venn Diagram



Note. The number adjacent to each code shows the number of articles in which the code emerged. The size of the circles represents the proportion of articles in which this code emerged. The intersecting circles represent the most prevalent overlaps among codes.

The two most prevalent codes that emerged in this category were similar to those found in the subject terms found in my descriptive analysis. Ability to pay or funding was the most prevalent code; it emerged in 64% of the articles in the subset. Preparation was the second most prevalent code; it emerged in 21% of articles in the subset.

The ability to pay or funding code emerged more frequently over time. It emerged in 52% of the articles in the subset published in 1994-1999. Whereas, it emerged in 73% published in 2014-2019.

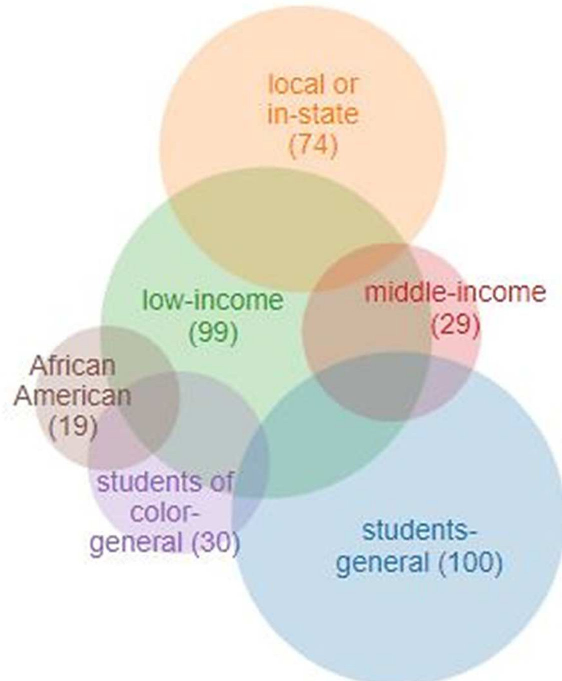
Fourteen percent of articles in the subset contained content about two or more of the top six aspects of access. The writers of many of these articles addressed how different aspects of access were interrelated. For example, many addressed achievement gaps among different student populations in K-12 education and how this contributes to disparities in admission, enrollment, and degree attainment rates.

Figure 5 below is a Venn diagram that shows the top six codes that emerged regarding the question, “Access for whom?”. Each of these codes was a student descriptor. These included: students-general, low-income, local or in-state, students of color, middle-income, African American.

There were 15 additional codes in this category. The codes and number of articles in which they emerged included: Latinx (12), first-generation (12), high-achieving (9), non-traditional, (7), English language learners (4), low-performing or underprepared (4), students with disabilities (4), veterans or active military (4), Asian American or Pacific Islander (3), Native American (3), rural (2), White (2) female (1), African (1), students who have committed a crime (1), and students in foster care (1).

Figure 5

Access for Whom? Venn Diagram



Note. The number adjacent to each code shows the number of articles in which the code emerged. The size of the circles represents the proportion of articles in which this code emerged. The intersecting circles represent the most prevalent overlaps among codes.

Income-based descriptors of students were the most prevalent type of codes among the top six in this category. The code low-income emerged in 38% of the articles in the subset and middle-income emerged in 11%. The code students-general emerged in 39%. Local or in-state students emerged in 29%. It is notable that racial and ethnic descriptors of students were the least prevalent type of codes among the top six in this category. The code students of color emerged in 12% of articles in the subset and African American emerged in 7%.

Income-based descriptors were more prevalent in articles published in national newspapers, including *The New York Times, The Washington Post*, and *USA Today.*

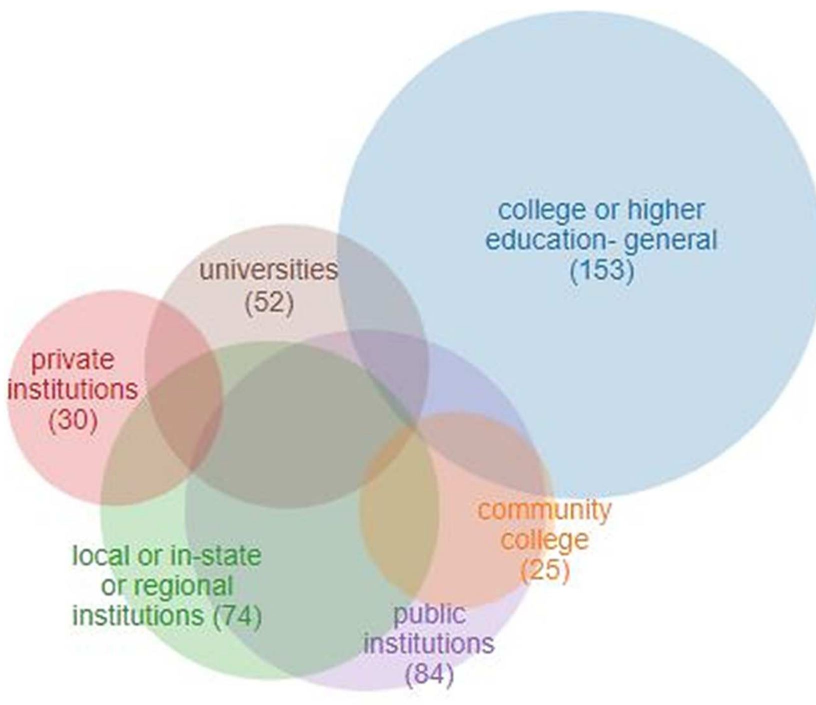
Whereas, the code local or in-state was more prevalent in articles published in the remaining newspapers, which are local publications.

Forty-two percent articles in the subset contained content about more than one student population. The writers of these articles addressed issues such as links between race and socio-economic status and how they impact access to higher education.

Figure 6 below is a Venn diagram that shows the top six codes that emerged regarding the question, “Access to what?”. These included: college or higher education-general, public institutions, universities, local or in-state institutions, community colleges and private institutions.

Figure 6

Access to What? Venn Diagram



Note. The number adjacent to each code shows the number of articles in which the code emerged. The size of the circles represents the proportion of articles in which this code emerged. The intersecting circles represent the most prevalent overlaps among codes.

There were six additional codes, or types of institutions, in this category. The codes and number of articles in which they emerged included: four-year institutions or bachelor's degree programs (15), selective or elite institutions (13), for-profit institutions (9), vocational or technical schools (9), first two years of college (7), and historically black colleges and universities (3).

College or higher education- general was the most prevalent code in this category; it emerged in 59% of the articles in the subset. I used the code higher education-general for content that was about access to higher education but not related to a specific type of higher education institution. The second most prevalent code in this category was public institutions; it emerged in 32% of the articles in the subset.

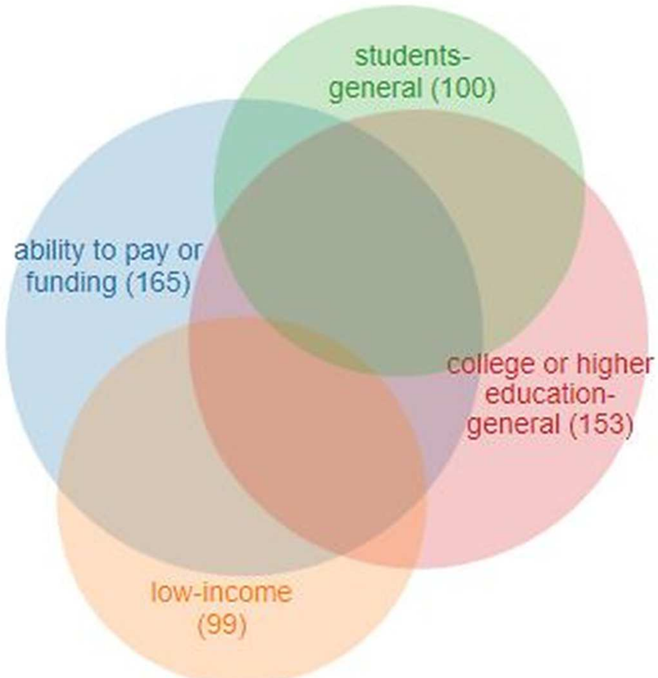
Figure 7 below is a Venn diagram that shows the most prevalent overlapping definition codes. The most prevalent overlapping "What is access?" and "Access for whom?" codes were ability to pay or funding and low-income students; they emerged in 72 articles, 28% of the subset. Ability to pay or funding and students- general was a close second; these codes emerged together in 71 articles, 27% of the subset.

The most prevalent overlapping "What is access?" and "Access to what?" codes were the ability to pay or funding and college or higher education (general), which emerged together in 102 articles, 39% of the subset.

The most prevalent overlapping "Access for whom?" and "Access to what?" codes were students- general and college or higher education- general, which emerged together in 81 of the articles, 31% of the subset.

Figure 7

Most Prevalent Overlapping Definition Codes Venn Diagram



Note. The number adjacent to each code shows the number of articles in which the code emerged. The size of the circles represents the proportion of articles in which this code emerged. The intersecting circles represent the most prevalent overlaps among codes.

Discourse analysis of subset.

As mentioned in the previous section, 90% of articles in the subset included a benefit of access to higher education or reason why access to higher education is important. I selected the most salient benefit or reason in each of these articles. A tension between public and private benefits of access to higher education emerged in the articles in the subset. The writer(s) of these articles either emphasized a benefit that primarily enhances society, at any level from a school community to the global community, or emphasized a benefit that primarily enhances individual lives. I coded benefits in the former category as public benefits and benefits in the latter category as private benefits. I paid particular attention to the language the writer used to describe a benefit or reason in order to determine how to categorize each one. For example, many of the articles included information about how higher education can promote career development. When a writer described career development as a societal benefit, I used the code "higher education as a workforce development tool" and categorized it as a public benefit. When a writer described career development as an individual benefit, I used the code "to prepare individuals for careers" and categorized it as a private benefit.

Public benefits were far more prevalent than private benefits. I categorized the most salient benefit or reason as a public benefit in 203 articles, or 78% of the subset, included a benefit or reason. Only 30 articles, or 12% of the subset, included a private benefit. Table 3 below shows each of the public benefit or reason codes and the number and percentage of articles in the subset in which the code emerged.

The code "to educate the public, taxpayers, constituents, or students" was the most prevalent benefit of access to higher education or reason why access to higher education is important included in the articles. I assigned this code to content about a general need, not tied to a more specific benefit or reason, to provide access to higher education to a group. These groups included the public, taxpayers, constituents, or students. Writers, policymakers, education advocates, and researchers most often used this reason to argue for or justify federal action aimed at making higher education more affordable. These actions included reforming student loan programs, increasing student grant awards, and providing tax credits to students or their parents.

Table 3

Public Benefits, Number and Percentage of Articles in the Subset

Benefit	**#**	**%**
To educate the public, taxpayers, constituents, or students	91	35%
Higher education as a workforce development tool	26	10%
To promote equity	24	9%
To promote equality	12	5%
For the U.S. to be globally competitive	11	4%
Higher education as an economic driver	10	4%
Societal benefits- general	8	3%
To decrease poverty	5	2%
To maintain or promote diversity	4	2%
To promote social mobility	3	1%
Student loan debt inhibits the economy	3	1%
Higher education as a means to redress past discrimination	2	<1%
Those who earn a degree make more money and pay more taxes	2	<1%
To prepare citizens	2	<1%
To produce leaders or scholars	2	<1%
To enhance public safety	1	<1%
To train and retain soldiers	1	<1%

A good example of this code "to educate the public, taxpayers, constituents, or students" is from an article published in *The New York Times* in 2017 about federal legislation proposed to increase Pell Grant awards. In this article, Senator Edward M. Kennedy was quoted as saying the bill was "an important down payment by Democrats on our commitment to help families with high college costs" (Schemo, 2017).

Like the code "to educate the public, taxpayers, constituents, or students", the codes "higher education as a workforce development tool", "higher education as an economic driver", and "for the U.S. to be globally competitive" were most often used to argue for or justify policies aimed at making higher education more affordable. Content related to these codes often appeared in combination with one another, although I only selected one benefit or reason, the most salient, per article.

A good example of content that related to both higher education as a workforce development tool and economic driver is from an article published in 2015 in *The Denver Post* about a proposed Denver city tax increase to be used to fund scholarships for residents. In this article, Jim Chavez, Executive Director of the Latin American Education Foundation, was quoted as saying, “Families and parents value education. Businesses and economic groups are very much in support. They know their future success and prosperity is critically dependent on a more educated workforce than we have now.” (Robles, 2015).

The code “for the U.S. to be globally competitive” emerged in more articles about federal policy than articles about state or local policy. A good example of this code is from an opinion piece in *USA Today* in 2006 written in reaction to an article about the rising costs of college. The writer argued the following:

> It is important to understand that any financial barriers that limit access to higher education are a dagger in the heart of global competitiveness. The U.S. Department of Education needs to think more strategically about the long term [*sic*] impact of student loans before their policies close the doors to education that once made us a world leader (Jones, 2006).

The codes “higher education as a workforce development tool”, “higher education as an economic driver”, and “For the U.S. to be globally competitive” emerged more frequently in recently published articles. Eleven percent of the articles in the subset published in 1994-1999, or 3 of 27, included one of these three codes. Whereas, 21% of the articles in the subset published in 2014-2019, or 15 of 73, included one of these codes

Table 4 below shows each of the private benefit or reason codes and the number and percentage of articles in the subset in which the code emerged. “To protect student’s rights as consumers” was the most prevalent private benefit code. It was the most salient benefit in nine articles. Eight of these were published in *The New York Times*. One was published *The Washington Post.* All were published since 2007. Eight of the articles were about predatory practices of for-profit higher education institutions or private loan companies. One article was an opinion piece written in response to an article published in *The New York Times* in 2016 about a New Jersey state student loan program which required co-signers to pay off the debts of students who had died. The writer argued that “the list of what students and their families need to be wary of in our current higher-education [*sic*] system keeps growing: predatory for-profit colleges, deceptive financial aid letters, private lenders with high interest rates – and now state loans as well!” (Hildreth, 2016).

More of the codes about benefits of access to higher education and reasons why access to higher education is important in the subset of articles were related to economic outcomes than social outcomes, although some did not fall clearly into one of these categories over the other.

Table 4

Private Benefits, Number and Percentage of Articles in the Subset

Benefit	**#**	**%**
To protect student's rights as consumers	9	3%
Higher education as a contributor to an individual's success	5	2%
Individuals who earn a degree earn more	5	2%
Student loan debt inhibits individual's job choices	2	<1%
To prepare individuals for careers	2	<1%
To allow individuals to change their circumstances	1	<1%
To meet individual student needs	1	<1%
To provide "hope" to individuals	1	<1%

The two most prevalent benefit or reason codes related to social outcomes were "to promote equity" and "to promote equality". Both codes were related to the need to minimize or eliminate educational disparities for underserved students. I coded content related to minimizing or eliminating educational disparities that was about providing resources or opportunities to underserved students that are not available to others as "to promote equity'. The phrase "level the playing field" was often used to describe this benefit. This code was often used explain the purpose of college preparation programs for underserved students.

I coded content related to minimizing or eradicating educational disparities that was about providing underserved students with the same resources or opportunities that others have as "to promote equality". A good example of this code came from an article published in *The New York Times* published in 2013 about New York legislation proposed to make state financial aid available to undocumented students. In this article, Sheldon Silver, a constituent, was quoted as saying that undocumented students "know no other country, they came as infants, they should have equal access...It's about fairness" (Semple, 2013).

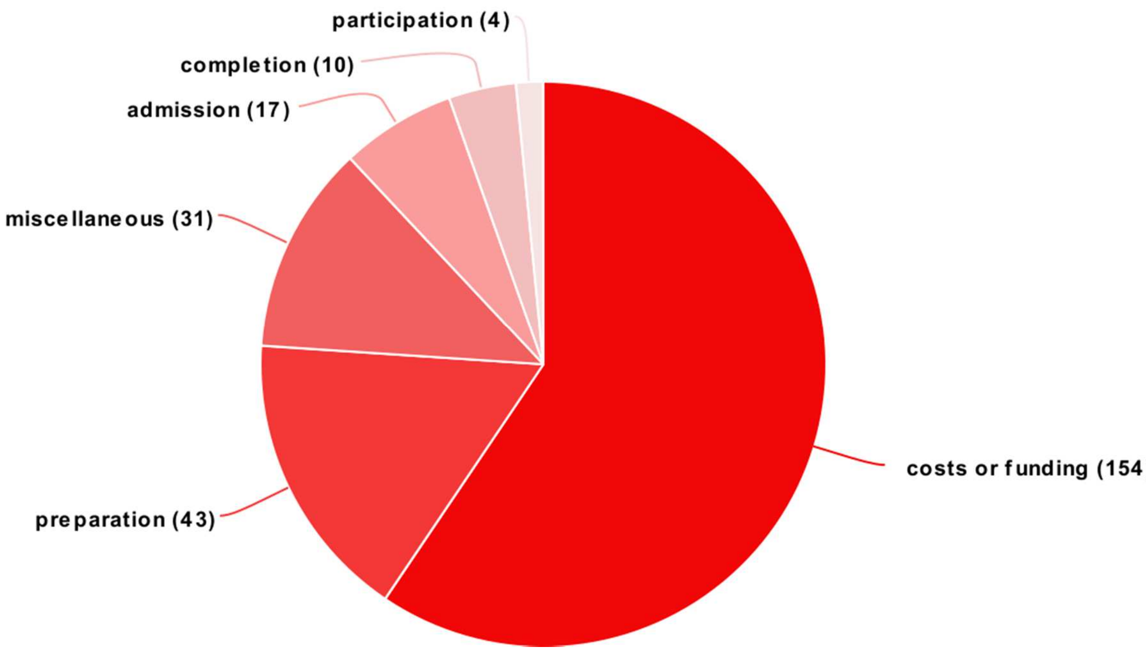
Interestingly, the code "to promote equity" emerged in a lower percentage of articles over time. Whereas, the code "to promote equality" emerged in a higher percentage of articles over time. "To promote equity" was the most salient benefit in 15% of articles in the subset published in 1994-1999, or 4 of 27. It was the most salient benefit in 5% of the articles in the subset published in 2014-2019, or 4 of 73. "To promote equality" was the most salient benefit in none of the articles in the subset published in 1994-1999. However, it was the most salient benefit in 8% of the articles in the subset published in 2014-2019, or 6 of 73.

It is also notable that "to prepare citizens", and "to produce leaders and scholars" were among the least prevalent benefit codes; each of these was the most salient benefit in only two articles in the subset.

All 259 articles in the subset included at least one issue related to access to higher education. I selected the most salient issue in each article. These issues were varied; 59 different issues emerged. The categories of the issues that emerged were similar to those found in the descriptive analysis of the dataset and content analysis related to how access was defined in the subset. Figure 8 below is a pie chart which shows each issue category and the proportion and number of articles in which it emerged. The most salient issue in fifty-nine percent of the subset of articles was related to costs or funding; 17% of the most salient issues were related to preparation; 7% were related to admission; 4% were related to completion; and 4% were related to participation. In 12% of articles in the subset, the most salient issue was not related to one of these categories. I categorized these as miscellaneous.

Figure 8

Issue Category Pie Chart



Note. The number adjacent to each code shows the number of articles in which the code emerged.

I paid particular attention to how a writer described an issue in order to identify and categorize it. For example, there were five issue codes about low-income students' access to higher education. Two were related to preparation: "lack of higher education preparation of low-income students" and "disparities in SAT/ACT scores for low-income students". I identified them as separate codes because in the latter articles, the writer focused specifically on this outcome of lack of preparation, versus on lack of preparation in general. Similarly, there were five codes related to access to higher education for students of color. Two of the codes share the same name, "lack of higher education access for students of color”. However, one code emerged in an article about a general lack of access to higher education for students of color, so I categorized it as a miscellaneous issue. Whereas, the other code emerged in articles about affirmative action, so I categorized it as an admission issue.

The most prevalent issues in the subset were “cost as a barrier to access to higher education- general”, “cost as a barrier to access for local or in-state students”, “cost as a barrier to access to higher education for low-income students”, and “students acquiring large student loan debts”. They were all categorized as issues related to costs or funding. Over half of the articles in the subset included one of these codes. Table 5 below includes the list of issues related to cost or funding and the number and percentage of articles in the subset in which each issue emerged.

Table 5

Cost or Funding Issues, Numbers and Percentage of Articles in the Subset

Issue	**#**	**%**
Cost as a barrier to access to higher education- general	41	16%
Cost as a barrier to access to higher education for local or in-state students	34	13%
Cost as a barrier to access to higher education for low-income students	34	13%
Students acquiring large student loan debts	24	9%
Cost as a barrier to access for undocumented students	6	2%
Students having difficulty applying for financial aid	5	2%
Cost as a barrier to access to higher education students of color	4	2%
Lack of information available about costs of higher education	2	<1%
Lack of state higher education funding	2	<1%
Need to decrease costs of educating students	1	<1%
Private loan companies taking advantage of a loophole in the law	1	<1%

Separate lists of issues in each of the remaining categories including preparation, completion, admission, miscellaneous, and preparation and the number and percentage of articles in the subset in which each issue of these issues emerged can be found in Appendices A, B, C, D, and E, respectively.

The term "crisis" was often used to describe these issues and the economic conditions identified as causing them. The following excerpt from an article published in *The Denver Post* in 2013 about a speech President Obama gave on access to higher education is a good example of how this term was used:

> Obama cited College Board statistics that showed that while the average tuition at public four year [*sic*] colleges has increased by more than 250 percent over the past three decades, incomes for typical families grew by 16 percent. This trend, he said, is a 'crisis' and represents 'a barrier and a burden to too many American families.' (Limerick, 2013).

Issues related to costs or funding emerged more frequently over time. The most salient issues in 48% of the articles in the subset published in 1994-1999, or 13 of 27, were related to costs or funding. Whereas, the most salient issues in 68% of the articles in the subset published in 2014-2019, or 49 of 72, were related to this category. The code "students acquiring large student loan debts" increased by the highest percentage. It did not emerge in any of the articles in the subset published prior to 2007. However, it emerged in 15% of the articles in the subset published in 2014-2019, or 11 of 72.

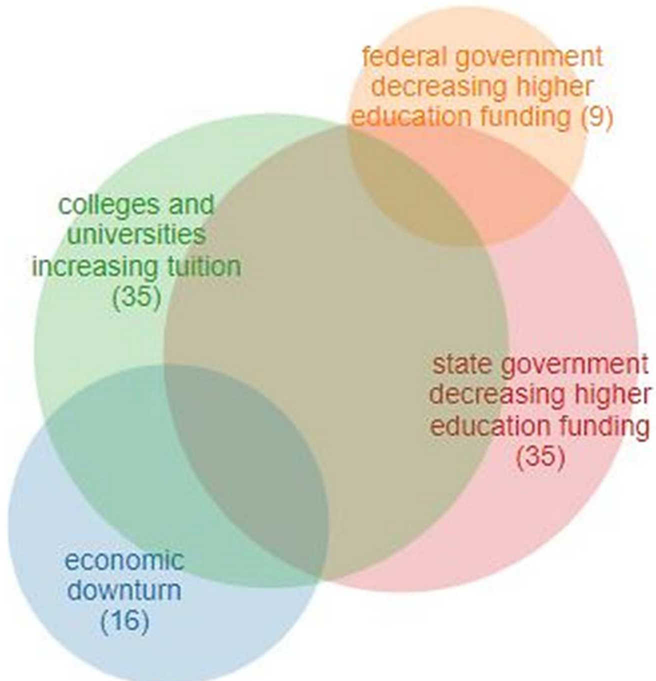
Many causes of these issues emerged in the subset, 50 in total. The complete list of causes and number of articles in which each emerged can be found in Appendix F. Some articles included multiple, overlapping causes of the most salient issue.

The four most prevalent causes were related to costs or funding. The Venn diagram in Figure 9 below shows these codes, the number of articles in which each emerged, and the most prevalent overlaps of these codes. Both "higher education institutions increasing tuition" and "state government decreasing higher education funding" emerged in 14% of articles in the subset. "Economic downturn" emerged in 6%. "Federal government decreasing education funding" emerged in 3%. The prevalence of these codes peaked in articles published in 2009-2014. One or more of these codes emerged in 25%, or 16 of 65, of the articles in the subset published in this five-year span. Many of these articles were about the impacts of the economic recession that occurred during this time period.

The four most prevalent causes all emerged in an article published in *The Atlanta-Constitution Journal* in 2013 about enrollment decreases at public higher education institutions in Georgia. In the article, the writer noted that these decreases were tied to "the effects of the weak economy and changes to financial aid programs, such as the federal Pell Grant and Georgia's HOPE Scholarship that reduced award payouts for some recipients." Later in the article, the writer noted that "the system's enrollment dip comes…after the regents approved yet another round of tuition increases…On the most prestigious campuses, tuition at the University of Georgia and Georgia Tech has jumped by more than 65 percent since fall 2008." (Torres, 2013).

Figure 9

Most Prevalent Causes of the Issues Venn Diagram



Note. The number adjacent to each code shows the number of articles in which the code emerged. The size of the circles represents the proportion of articles in which this code emerged. The intersecting circles represent the most prevalent overlaps among codes.

Of the 259 articles in the subset, 245 included at least one solution related to access to higher education. I selected the most salient solution in each article. The solutions were varied; 174 different solutions emerged. The majority were related to costs or funding. Three of the four most prevalent solutions were related to costs or funding. These included “donors providing scholarships”, which emerged in 5% of articles in the subset; “federal government reforming loan programs”, which emerged in 4%; “federal government increasing Pell Grant amount”, which emerged in 3%.

It was not possible to categorize all of the solutions the same way the issues were categorized, as some were solutions to multiple issues in different categories. For example, the code “higher education institutions instituting online programs” was the most salient solution to issues in three different articles in the subset. These issues included “cost as a barrier to access to higher education for local or in-state students”, “cost as a barrier to higher education- general”, and “lack of access to higher education-general.” The first two issues were related to costs or funding. The latter was categorized as a miscellaneous issue.

I identified the entity responsible for covering the costs of access to higher education, based on each solution. If it was unclear from the solution what entity was responsible for covering the costs of access to higher education, then I identified the entity responsible for covering the costs of the solution itself. If it was unclear what entity was responsible for covering the costs of the solution, I identified the entity responsible for enacting the solution.

A tension between higher education as a public good which merits public funding and higher education as a private good, of which individuals should cover the costs, emerged in the articles in the subset. I paid particular attention to how a writer described a solution in order to categorize it. When a writer emphasized a solution that requires individuals to cover the costs of access, I categorized it as a private solution. The private entities mentioned in the subset included students, their families, donors, non-profit organizations, and businesses. When a writer emphasized a solution that requires society to cover the costs of access, I categorized it as a public solution. In the subset, these public entities included local, state, and federal government as well as state higher education systems. Finally, when a writer emphasized a solution that requires a higher education or K-12 institution or institutions to cover the costs of access or the solution, I categorized it as a higher education or K-12 solution, respectively.

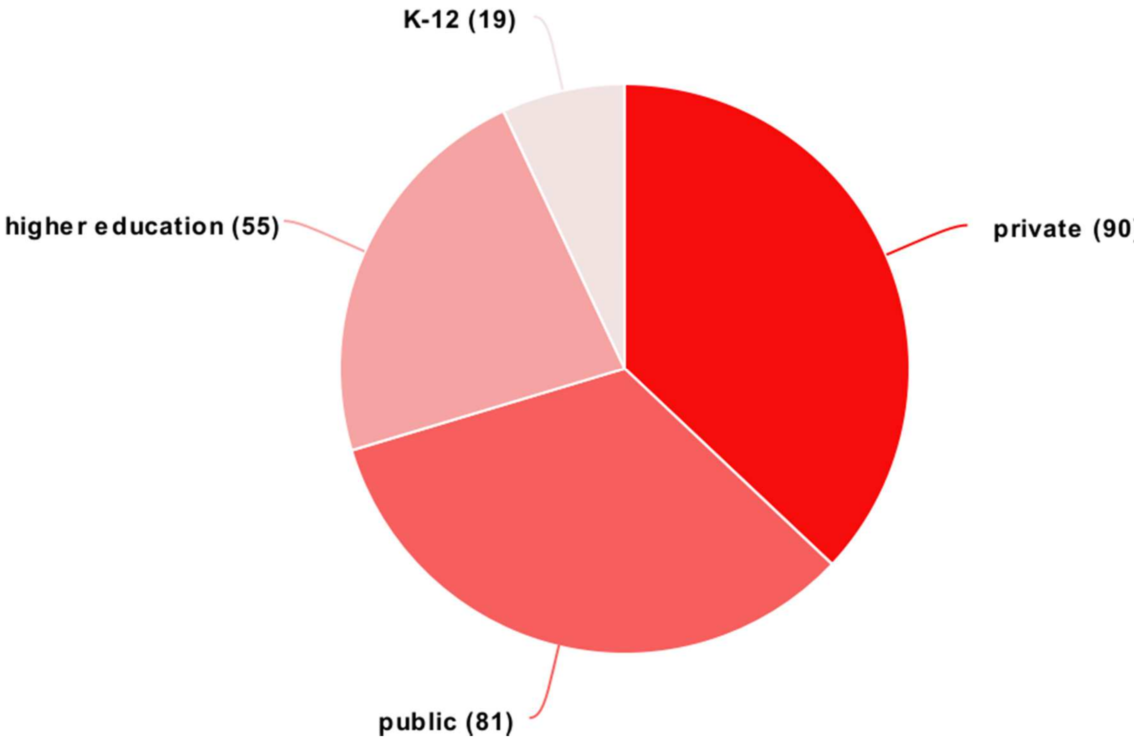
I separated higher education and K-12 solutions from public and private solutions for two reasons: 1) because the most salient solution in some articles required both public and private higher education or K-12 institutions to cover the costs of access or the solution, and 2) because I wanted to track how higher education and K-12 institutions were included in the coverage on what entities should cover the costs of access to higher education.

Figure 10 below is a pie chart which shows each solution category and the proportion and number of articles in which it emerged. The most salient solution in 35% of articles in the subset was a private solution. The most salient solution in 31% of the articles in the subset was a public solution. The most salient solution in 21% of the articles in the subset was a higher education solution. And the most salient solution in 7% of the articles in the subset was a K-12 solution.

It was clear in many articles in the subset, based on the most salient solution, what entity was responsible for covering the cost of higher education. For example, in nine of the articles, "federal government increasing Pell Grant amount" was the most salient solution. Because the federal government was required to cover the costs of this solution, I categorized this as a public solution. In another article, "students using social lending programs" was the most salient solution. Because this solution requires that individuals are required to cover the cost, I categorized it as a private solution.

Figure 10

Solution Category Pie Chart



Note. The number adjacent to each code shows the number of articles in which the code emerged.

Table 6 below shows the solutions categorized as private and the number and percentage of articles in which each solution emerged. Many of these solutions categorized as private may not upon first glance appear to be private solutions. "Donors providing scholarships" is a good example. It was the most prevalent private solution, emerging in 14 articles, or 5% of the subset. Although the individuals receiving the scholarships and participating in higher education do not have to cover the costs, other individuals, donors in this case, do. I applied the same logic to any solution in which donors, businesses, or non-profit organizations were the entity responsible for covering the costs of the solution. In total, 38 articles, or 15% of the subset, included a private solution for which donors, businesses, or non-profit organizations to cover the costs of access to higher education.

Table 6

Private Solutions, Number and Percentage of Articles in the Subset

Solution	**#**	**%**
Donors providing scholarships	14	5%
Non-profit organizations providing college preparation programs	13	5%
Federal government reforming loan programs	11	4%
Federal government providing tax credits for higher education participation	5	2%
Federal government withholding funds for inaccessible colleges and universities	5	2%
Students selecting a higher education institution that is the best value	3	1%
Donors providing funding to higher education institutions	2	<1%
Federal government continuing private student loan partnership	2	<1%
Federal government decreasing loan interest rates	2	<1%
Federal government funding higher education institutions based on accessibility	2	<1%
Federal government providing more student loans	2	<1%
Higher education institutions spending their endowment to increase financial aid	2	<1%
Individuals lobbying for increased higher education access	2	<1%
State government offering a college savings account program	2	<1%
State government using performance funding measures for higher education	2	<1%
Businesses providing a free college preparation program to students	1	<1%
Businesses providing a free SAT preparation program to students	1	<1%
Businesses providing massive open online courses to students	1	<1%
Community colleges adopting a tiered tuition program	1	<1%
Federal government creating higher education score cards with cost information	1	<1%
Federal government offering a college savings account program	1	<1%
Federal government providing flexible loan repayment programs to students	1	<1%
Federal government restricting use of federal funds for for-profit institutions	1	<1%
Higher education institutions improving completion rates	1	<1%
Higher education institutions increasing tuition	1	<1%
Higher education institutions providing college completion loans	1	<1%

Table 6 (continued)

Private Solutions, Number and Percentage of Articles in the Subset

Solution	**#**	**%**
Higher education institutions using student fees to increase student aid	1	<1%
Non-profit organization lobbying for increased higher education access	1	<1%
Non-profit organization providing internet access to students	1	<1%
Non-profit organization providing summer learning opportunities to students	1	<1%
State government allowing undocumented students to attend public institutions	1	<1%
State government selling bonds for families to save for higher education	1	<1%
State government subsidizing non-profit loan companies	1	<1%
Students using social lending programs	1	<1%
Testing companies improving measures of academic aptitude	1	<1%

Government entities were deemed responsible for enacting many of the private solutions, however, the government is not ultimately required to cover the costs of access to higher education. The best examples of these solutions were related to student loan programs. Although many state and government entities administer these programs, ultimately, it is up to the individuals who take out these loans to participate in higher education to cover the costs, plus interest. Accordingly, I categorized these as private solutions. Solutions related to student loans emerged in 20 articles, or 8% of the subset.

Like the issues related to loans in the subset, solutions related to loans emerged in articles in the subset published more recently. The first article in the subset in which an issue related to loans emerged entitled “Proposal Raises Issue of Who Should Pay What for College” was published on April 9, 2014 in *The New York Times*. The tension between higher education as a public good or a private good and the entanglements associated with market-based solutions related higher education access are addressed in the initial paragraphs of this article:

> If Congress changes the rules of college loans, taking away the opportunity for students to consolidate them at low fixed rates, the average graduate will have to pay an extra $3,1114 to $5,484 in interest over the life of the loan, the Congressional Research Service has found.
>
> The report, which has not yet been released, addresses on of the more contentious questions facing Congress this year: How much of the burden of college debt should be shouldered by the government and how much by students themselves?
>
> As the debate over the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act gets under way, a fierce fight has sprung up over the answer. Currently graduates can consolidate their loans and lock in low interest rates, some as low as 3.5 percent, for years to come. But when market rates rise above that fixed rate, the government is obliged to make up the difference, guaranteeing lenders a certain profit (Winter, 2004).

I also categorized solutions related to government college savings programs and tax credits as private solutions. The solution "federal government providing tax credits for higher education participation" was the third most prevalent private solution. It emerged in five articles, or 4% of the subset of articles. Although the federal government loses tax revenue from middle- and high- income students and families who claim these credits, the federal government is not ultimately covering the costs of access to higher education for these students. Further, lower-income students are not eligible for these credits because they pay little or no federal tax (Mumper, et al., 2016).

Students were described as consumers in many of the articles in the subset. These descriptions were particularly prevalent in articles in which a private solution emerged. In a number of articles in the subset, writers and policy makers encouraged students to "shop around" when selecting a college or university to attend. "Students selecting a higher education institution that is the best value" was the sixth most prevalent private solution. It emerged in three articles, or 1% of the subset.

In an article entitled "Generation Hobbled by College Debt" published in *The New York Times* on May 13, 2012, the writers describe how higher education institutions are marketed to students:

> At Ohio State, 'college can be a reality for everyone, no matter your income or background…while at Ohio Northern, future students are urged to get over the 'sticker shock' and focus instead on 'return on investment'…The University of Dayton declares itself 'one of the most affordable private Catholic schools in the country and a 'lifetime investment, appreciating over the course of time' (Martin & Lahren, 2012).

Private loan companies also contributed to the coverage related to students as consumers in the subset of articles. Many articles included quotes from private loan company leaders regarding the student loan industry and the federal government's direct student loan program. In an opinion piece entitled "Competitive Student Loans" published in *The New York Times* on March 13, 2009, Kevin Bruns, Executive Director of America's Student Loan Providers, argued that the private loan industry has provided many benefits to students: "Competition in student loans has created significant consumer benefits: free delinquency and default prevention services, increasingly important to this economy, as well as better terms, college access program and consumer-friendly processes" (Bruns, 2009).

Public solutions emerged in 81 of the articles in the subset. Table 7 below shows the solutions categorized as public and the number and percentage of articles in which each solution emerged. The three most prevalent public solutions were "federal government increasing Pell Grant amount", which emerged in nine articles, or 3% of the subset, "federal government paying for the first two years at a public institution", and "state government increasing higher education funding", which emerged in five articles, or 2% of the subset, each.

Table 7

Public Solutions, Number and Percentage of Articles in the Subset

Solution	**#**	**%**
Federal government increasing Pell Grant amount	9	3%
Federal government paying for the first two years at a public institution	5	2%
State government increasing higher education funding	5	2%
Local government increasing sales tax to fund scholarships for residents	4	2%
State government allowing undocumented students to receive financial aid	3	1%
State government conducting inquiry into costs of higher education in the state	3	1%
Federal government aligning FAFSA timeline with college application deadlines	2	<1%
Federal government forgiving loans of students who attended bankrupt schools	2	<1%
Federal government providing grants for D.C. students	2	<1%
State government allowing undocumented students to pay in-state tuition	2	<1%
State government increasing taxes to increase higher education expenditures	2	<1%
State government providing students grants to attend private institutions	2	<1%

Table 7 (continued)

Public Solutions, Number and Percentage of Articles in the Subset

Solution	**#**	**%**
City government providing college access program for homeless students	1	<1%
Federal government providing Pell grants for short-term job training	1	<1%
Federal government providing more student loans	1	<1%
Federal government reforming financial aid system	1	<1%
Federal government increasing spending on early childhood education	1	<1%
Federal government striking down affirmative action policies	1	<1%
Local government providing new facility for distance education	1	<1%
National government (Dagestan) reforming entrance exam process	1	<1%
State government analyzing impact of adjuncts on higher education access	1	<1%
State government enabling law to protect disabled or dying loan borrowers	1	<1%
State government expanding scholarship program	1	<1%
State government funding SAT prep course	1	<1%
State government improving K-12 education for Latinx students	1	<1%
State government investigating for-profit institutions for student loan defaults	1	<1%
State government maintaining financial aid program	1	<1%
State government paying for first year of community college for residents	1	<1%
State government adopting policies to integrate low-income students	1	<1%
State government providing funding to increase community college enrollment	1	<1%
State government providing need-based financial aid over merit-based aid	1	<1%
State government providing scholarships for low-income students	1	<1%
State government requiring students to take a skills test in high school	1	<1%
State higher education system creating a new geographic location	1	<1%
State higher education system providing distance education opportunities	1	<1%
State government mandating and funding tuition decreases for in-state schools	1	<1%

Public solutions often emerged in the same articles in which the "to educate the public, taxpayers, constituents, or students" benefit emerged. For example, in an article published on September 17, 2009 in *The Washington Post* about a bill proposed to end subsidies for private student loan lenders in order to increase Pell Grant awards, Representative George Miller was quoted as saying, "This is a can't-miss opportunity to do the right thing…Let's remember whose voices really matter here. It's time to listen to our students and families."

A theme of meritocracy also emerged in many of these articles, with policy makers and other officials articulating the need to reward deserving and hard-working students. For example, in an article published January 9, 2015 in *The Washington Post*, President Obama was quoted regarding his plan to make community college tuition free: "Put simply, what I'd like to do is see the first two years of community college free for everybody who's willing to work for it…That's right. Free for everybody who's willing to work for it." (Anderson, 2015).

Many public solutions, including those related to HOPE scholarships provided by state governments, require that recipients meet specific academic standards in order to receive funding. Glenn Newsome, executive director of the Georgia Student Finance Commission, was quoted regarding Georgia's HOPE scholarship program in an article published in *The Washington Post* on June 4, 2002: "We wanted to keep our best and brightest students in Georgia…If you make a B average, this state says it's going to pay your tuition. That has really driven the whole notion of academic achievement down deeper than I ever thought" (Fletcher, 2002).

Higher education solutions emerged in 55 articles in the dataset. Table 8 below shows the higher education solutions and the number and percentage of articles in which each solution emerged. Solutions in which public higher education institutions were specifically deemed responsible for covering the costs of access or the costs of the solution were most prevalent, emerging in 31 articles, or 12% of the subset. Private higher education institutions were specifically deemed responsible to cover the costs of access or of the solution in only five articles.

Accountability was a value espoused in many of the articles in which higher education institutions were deemed responsible to cover the costs of access to higher education or of the solution. For example, in an article published on September 7, 2006 in *The Mercury News* entitled "Nation Falling Behind in Grads; Better Educated Workers Abroad, Report Indicates", Dr. Michael Kirst, a professor from Stanford University, argued that there "has been a 'gradual erosion' of completion rates in the nation's colleges…The colleges have to be held more accountable and people have to put pressure on them so they can't just put the blame onto students." (Maitre, 2006).

Efficiency and innovation were also values espoused in many of these articles. Writers, policymakers, and other higher education stakeholders articulated the need for higher education institutions to be creative in order to find ways to serve more students at lower costs.

Table 8

Higher Education Solutions, Number and Percentage of Articles in the Subset

Solution	**#**	**%**
Higher education institutions letting students apply without SAT or ACT scores	3	1%
Higher education institutions providing disability services	3	1%
Higher education institutions instituting online programs	3	1%
Federal government requiring higher education institutions to provide cost info	2	<1%
Higher education institutions providing financial aid to low-income students	2	<1%
Public higher education institutions providing scholarships to students of color	2	<1%
Public university maintaining open access college	2	<1%
State government allowing community colleges to grant four-year degrees	2	<1%
Community college expanding facilities	1	<1%
Community colleges and universities partnering to award four-year degrees	1	<1%
Community colleges improving student advising	1	<1%
Community colleges increasing enrollment	1	<1%
Community college providing college information in Spanish	1	<1%
Community colleges and universities partnering to improve transfer process	1	<1%
Elite institutions becoming more accessible to low- and middle-income students	1	<1%
Federal government emphasizing community colleges to promote participation	1	<1%
Higher education institutions awarded need-based over merit-based student aid	1	<1%
Higher education institutions being more transparent about their finances	1	<1%
Higher education institutions collaborating to increase access	1	<1%
Higher education institutions teaching students critical thinking skills	1	<1%
Private college becoming a sanctuary campus for undocumented students	1	<1%
Private elite university admitting more diverse students	1	<1%
Private university freezing tuition costs	1	<1%
Private university providing accelerated program for students to graduate faster	1	<1%
Private university providing scholarships to local students	1	<1%
Public higher education institutions improving advising	1	<1%
Public higher education institutions collaborating to increase efficiency	1	<1%
Public higher education institutions expanding facilities	1	<1%
Public higher education institutions offering distance education options	1	<1%

For example, in an article published in *The Washington Post* on December 5, 2013 entitled “Report: 70% of student graduate with loans”, a Regent University spokeswoman touted efforts by the institution to decrease time to graduation, saying the University “has been responding to increased student debt and changes in the academic marketplace by accelerating programs so that students can graduate faster…We are continually reviewing and revising programs to provide greater efficiencies and savings for students.” (Anderson, 2013).

K-12 solutions emerged in 19 articles in the dataset. Table 9 below shows the K-12 solutions and the number and percentage of articles in which each solution emerged. Seventeen of these articles were about the need for K-12 institutions to prepare students to be academically successful at the postsecondary level. The majority were specifically about providing students access to a college preparation curriculum.

Table 9

K-12 Solutions, Number and Percentage of Articles in the Subset

Solution	#	%
Public K-12 institutions providing students access to advanced courses	8	3%
State government mandating college preparation public K-12 curriculum	2	<1%
Federal government mandating college preparation public K-12 curriculum	1	<1%
K-12 institutions encouraging students to apply for financial aid	1	<1%
K-12 institution counselors informing students about non-elite college options	1	<1%
Public K-12 institution providing a college going culture	1	<1%
Public K-12 institutions covering costs of AP and IB exams	1	<1%
Public K-12 institutions focusing on improving standardized test scores	1	<1%
Public K-12 institutions improving services for ELL students	1	<1%
Public K-12 institutions providing ACT/SAT preparation programs	1	<1%
Public K-12 institutions providing dual enrollment programs	1	<1%

In summary, public/private tensions were prevalent in the articles in the subset. The majority of articles in the subset included a public benefit, one that primarily benefits society, as opposed to a private benefit, one that primarily benefits individuals. The majority of the most salient issues and solutions related to access to higher education were related to costs or funding. Also, many of the issues and solutions were framed in economic terms. There were more articles in the subset in which private entities, versus public entities, were deemed responsible for covering the costs of access to higher education. The most prevalent values that underlay the coverage were related to costs and benefits of higher education.

I also selected the most salient solution related to access to higher education in each article, where applicable. In addition, I identified the entities responsible for covering the costs of access to higher education, based on each solution, where applicable. Four categories of entities responsible emerged: public costs, private costs, higher education costs, and K-12 costs. The majority articles included a solution that required individuals, higher education institutions, or K-12 institutions, versus the public, to cover the costs of access to higher education.

In the next section, I will outline how the benefits discussed in this section and the entities responsible for covering the costs of access to higher education intersected in the articles in the subset.

Misalignment of Costs and Benefits of Higher Education

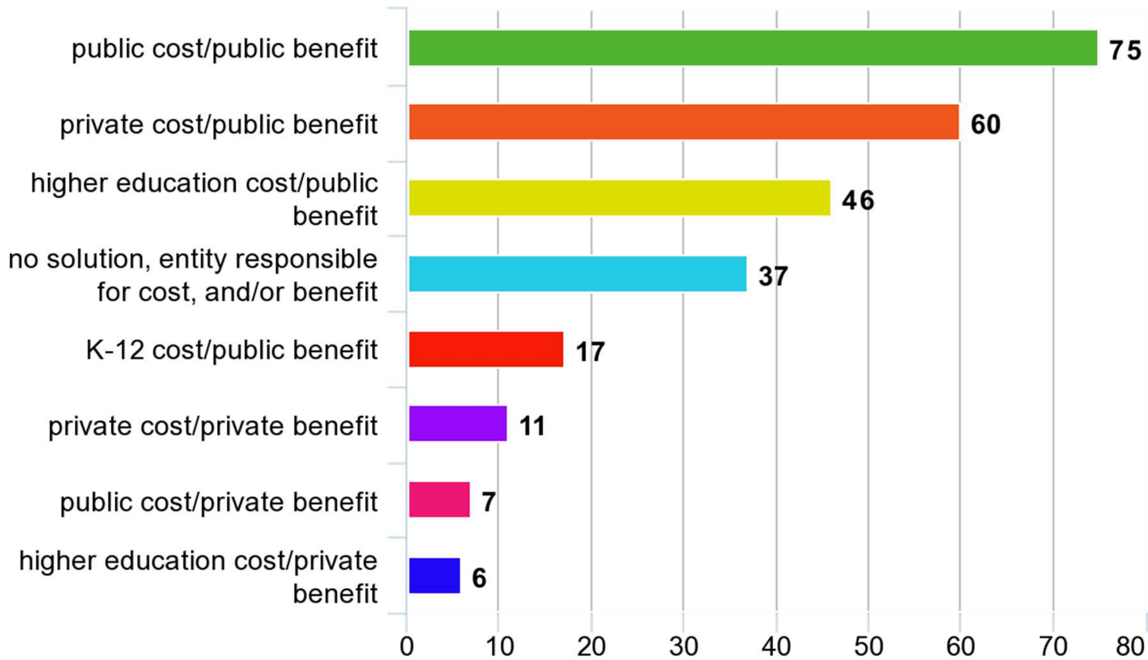
Discourse analysis of subset.

The next step in my research was to analyze the intersection of the category of the most salient benefit, public benefit or private benefit, and the entity responsible for covering the costs of access to higher education in each article in the subset, public solution, private solution, higher education solution, or K-12 solution, in each article.

The number of articles in the subset in which each combination of these categories emerged is shown in Figure 11 below, a cost/benefit bar chart, below. The most prevalent intersection of these categories was public cost and public benefit, which emerged in 29% of articles in the subset. The second most prevalent intersection was private cost and public benefit, which emerged in 23% of articles in the subset. The third most prevalent intersection was higher education cost and public benefit, which emerged in 18% of the articles in the subset. The fourth most prevalent intersection was K-12 cost and public benefit, which emerged in 7% of articles in the subset. The intersection of private cost and private benefit emerged in 4% of the articles in the subset. The intersection of public cost and private benefit emerged in 3% of the articles in the subset. The intersection of higher education cost and private benefit emerged in 2% of the articles in the subset. There were no articles in which the intersection of K-12 cost and private benefit emerged. Finally, there was no solution, entity responsible to cover the costs of higher education, and/or benefit stated in 14% of articles in the subset.

Figure 11

Cost/Benefit Bar Chart



Note. The number adjacent to each bar shows the number of articles in which the code emerged.

The costs and benefits were often misaligned in the articles in the subset. The entity responsible for covering the costs of access higher education was also the primary beneficiary of access to higher education in 86 of the articles, or 33% of the dataset. Whereas, an entity other than the primary beneficiary of access to higher education was deemed responsible for the costs of access to higher education in 53% of the articles.

Some examples of misalignment of costs and benefits of higher education were found in articles about federal higher education tax credits instated as part of President Clinton's education initiatives. I categorized this solution as private because although the federal government loses tax revenue from middle- and high-income students and families who claim these credits, with this solution, students and families, not the federal government, ultimately cover the cost of access to higher education. Also, it is important to note that many students and families are not eligible to receive these tax credits because they pay little or no federal tax (Schudde & Goldrick-Rab. 2016). These tax credits were the most salient solution in five articles in the dataset. The most salient benefit in each of these articles was a public benefit. One of these articles was published on June 5, 1006 in *The New York Times*. In it, the writer described an event at Princeton University at which President Clinton proposed these tax credits. The following is the lead from that article:

> "Proclaiming higher as the linchpin of economic progress, President Clinton came to one of the most costly colleges in the nation today to propose a new $1,500 tax credit aimed at making the first two years of college as commonplace for American's as high school already is." (Purdum, 1996).

Later in the article, President Clinton was quoted as saying to the Princeton crowd, "You will, of course, have the ability to success in the global economy, even if you have to secede from those Americans trapped in the old economy. But you should not walk away from our common purpose." (Purdum, 1996). This is a good example of how a public benefit was used to promote a private solution.

Summary

In this chapter, I outlined three primary themes found in my analysis and supported them by findings and data displays from each relevant stage of my analysis. I also detailed the research choices I made throughout my analysis.

The first theme found in my analysis was that access to higher education was considered an important topic in the newspapers included in the dataset and in the articles in the subset. The second theme is that although access to higher education was defined in many, often overlapping ways in the articles in the dataset, content related to costs and benefits of access to higher education dominated the coverage. The majority of the most salient issues and solutions in the subset were related to costs or funding of higher education. These issues and solutions were often framed in economic terms. There were more articles in the subset in which private entities, versus public entities, were deemed responsible for covering the costs of access to higher education. The most prevalent values that underlay the coverage were related to costs and benefits of higher education. The third theme is that the costs and benefits of access to higher education were often misaligned in the articles in the subset.

I will discuss the implications of these themes and findings, make recommendations for policy and practice, outline the ways in which this research aligns and adds to research on this topic, and suggest areas for further research in the final chapter of this dissertation.

Chapter 5

Conclusions

I was able to gain a better understanding of the interplay between the discourse on access to higher education, related political, economic, demographic, and technological forces, and policies and practices regarding access to higher education by analyzing how access to higher education was portrayed in eight influential U.S newspapers and situating this coverage in the larger historical and social context of higher education in the U.S. I was also able to identify how shifting tensions and values that underlay this coverage and context have influenced media framing of who has access to higher education, who benefits from access to higher education, and who is responsible for covering the costs of access to higher education in the U.S. To conclude this dissertation, I will reiterate key findings, outline the implications of my findings on policy and practice, describe the contributions this study makes to the field of education research, and provide recommendations for further research.

Implications for Policy and Practice

In my analysis, I found that access to higher education was defined and described in many, often overlapping ways in the coverage. Definitions of access to higher education intersected and the issues, causes, and solutions were varied. For example, 42% of articles in the subset contained content about more than one student population. The writers of these articles addressed issues such as links between race and socio-economic status and how they impact access to higher education.

Those interested in eliminating disparities in access to higher education, including higher education researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and members of the public, could help promote more nuanced news media coverage on this topic by contacting journalists and news media outlets to laude this type of coverage and share information and stories on the many ways in which disparities in access to higher education exist and can be eliminated. These stakeholders could also promote more nuanced coverage on the topic by supporting news media outlets that provide more in-depth coverage on access to higher education.

While access to higher education was defined and described in varied and intersecting ways in the coverage, the coverage was primarily focused on costs and funding higher education. Writers often employed an economic frame to describe issues, causes, and solutions related to access to higher education. Also, the tensions and many of the values that emerged in the data were related to economic perspectives and outcomes.

In the descriptive analysis, I found that major subject terms related to costs or funding were most prevalent in the dataset, including budgets, grants, scholarships, student expenses, student financial aid, and tuition fees. In the content analysis, I found that ability to pay or funding was the most prevalent aspect of access to higher education in the articles in the subset. This code emerged more frequently over time. Regarding the question "Access for whom?", income-based descriptors of students, including low-income and middle-income, were more prevalent than other types of descriptors, including racial and ethnic descriptors of students, including students of color, African American, Latinx, Asian or Pacific Islander, Native American, White, and African. The most salient issues, solutions, and causes of the issues associated with access to higher education in the subset of articles identified in the discourse analysis were varied but the majority were related to were related to costs or funding of higher education.

Public benefits were far more prevalent than private benefits of access to higher education in the subset of articles. At the same time, private solutions were more prevalent than public solutions.

Some of the most prevalent public benefits to access to higher education or reasons why access to higher education is important included "for the U.S. to be globally competitive", "higher education as a workforce development tool", and "higher education as an economic driver", which are all aims of neoliberalism. These codes emerged more frequently over time. Whereas, other public benefits of access to higher education or reasons why access to higher education is important that have historically been touted, such as "to promote equity", "to prepare citizens" and "to produce leaders and scholars", emerged less frequently over time or minimally in the subset of articles.

The most prevalent issues in the dataset, which, as noted above, were related to costs or funding of higher education, were often described as crises. Cohen (2010) identified crisis rhetoric in her analysis of coverage on education published from 2006-2007 in *The Chicago Tribune*. She noted it was often used to promote neoliberal reforms in education. Fischman, Igo, and Rhoten (2011) suggested the same in their analysis of discourse on public research universities. Similarly, the most prevalent solutions in the coverage I analyzed were neoliberal reforms. Some examples include "donors providing scholarships", "non-profit organizations providing college preparation programs", "federal government reforming loan programs", and "federal government providing tax credits for higher education participation." These are all private solutions, in which individuals, not the public, are responsible to cover the costs of access to higher education.

Economic terms were used to frame these solutions and related issues. Students were often described as consumers in the articles in which a private solution emerged. In many articles, writers and policy makers encouraged students to "shop around" to select the higher education institution that is the best value.

The ideology of meritocracy emerged in articles in which the public was deemed responsible for covering the costs of access to higher education. Many of the related solutions require that students meet specific academic standards in order to receive public funding to access higher education. By putting the onus primarily on students to cover the costs of access to higher education and/or be academically successful in higher education, again, writers, policymakers, and other higher education stakeholders quoted in these articles failed to address the multiplicity of ways in which disparities in access to higher education are created, sustained, and reproduced.

Neoliberal ideologies including accountability, efficiency, and innovation emerged in articles in which higher education institutions were deemed responsible for covering the costs of access to higher education. Those involved in framing these articles often overlooked, or even justified, public disinvestment in higher education by putting the onus on higher education institutions to identify and adopt creative ways to serve more students at lower costs.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, those involved in publishing newspapers must align their coverage with the perspectives of the audience in order to maintain readership and make a profit (Fairclough, 1995). Because of the emphasis on issues, causes of issues, and solutions related to costs and funding of higher education in the coverage, it can be inferred that the readership of newspapers views issues related to costs and funding of higher education as barriers to access and is interested in solutions that address these issues and causes of these issues. Because the majority of benefits of access to higher education touted in the coverage on access to higher education were public benefits, it can also be inferred that the newspaper readership believes access to higher education is important in large part because of how it benefits society.

These findings could be used to encourage policymakers to find solutions that address issues and the causes of issues related to costs and funding of access to higher education. These findings could also be used to highlight the public benefits of access to higher education and show policymakers that because society benefits from increased access to higher education, it warrants public investment.

In addition, these findings could be used to show those interested in eliminating disparities in access to higher education, including higher education researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and members of the public, how the ideologies emphasized in this coverage may be creating, sustaining, and reproducing inequalities and inequities in higher education and in in the larger education, economic, and social systems. These stakeholders could contact journalists and news media outlets to voice their concerns about these ideologies and this coverage. These stakeholders could also help address these inequalities and inequities by sharing information and stories related to access to higher education that are not currently emphasized in the coverage, such as the unique barriers to higher education that certain populations, such as students of color, face. Further, they could help promote public investment in solutions that decrease disparities in access to higher education by sharing information and stories about the public benefits of access that are not currently emphasized in the coverage, including information on the ways in which access to higher education promotes equality and equity and helps prepare citizens and produce leaders and scholars.

Contributions to Education Research

Jeffries (2009) and Fischman and Haas (2010) found themes in the news media coverage they analyzed related to access to higher education that were similar to those I found in my research. As noted in Chapter 2, Jeffries (2009) found that cost/benefit analyses and fiscal framing of issues and solutions were common in articles published in local Massachusetts newspaper regarding undocumented students' access to higher education. Meritocracy was a prevalent ideology in these articles as well as in the opinion and editorial articles about higher education published in national newspapers that Fischman and Haas (2010) analyzed. My research provides additional examples and details on how these themes emerge in the discourse and how they are used to justify policies that promote disparities in access to higher education.

Like Fischman and Haas (2010), I found a tension regarding public and private costs of access to higher education emerged in my research, as well as a tension between public and private benefits of access to higher education. However, I also found that these costs and benefits were often misaligned in the articles. In many articles, the entity identified as the primary beneficiary of access to higher education was not the entity deemed responsible for covering the costs of access to higher education.

This finding adds to the argument made by Fischman and Haas (2010) and others including Tierney & Venegas (2009) and Lakoff (2009) that individuals do not make decisions in a conscious, value-free, and logical manner. If those involved in framing the articles in the subset I analyzed made all their decisions in a conscious, value-free, and logical manner, then presumably, they would have aligned the costs and benefits in these articles. However, they, like everyone, are subject to social and cognitive complexities that impact the decision-making process (Berliner, 2002; Dumas & Anderson, 2014; Fischman & Tefera, 2014; Lakoff, 2004; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016; Tierney & Venegas, 2009). My hope is this additional evidence I have provided encourages other researchers to use qualitative, discourse analysis, and/or media analysis methods to further investigate these complexities and how they impact education and help refute the positivist and rationalist assumptions that promote inequalities and inequities in our education, economic, and social systems.

Directions for Further Research

My research focus, to identify how access to higher education was portrayed in this coverage, was quite broad. However, I would like to narrow my focus for future exploration of the dataset to gain more insight into specific findings. For example, I would like to analyze in greater detail the ways in which students are described in the coverage on access to higher education and how this discourse may influence higher education participation and completion. I would also like to further investigate the trend of decreasing coverage on equity and increasing coverage on equality in the articles. In addition, I would like to take a deeper look at how accountability, efficiency, and innovation were included in this coverage and the implications of this discourse on colleges as universities, as these values were espoused in many articles in which higher education institutions were deemed responsible for covering the costs of access to higher education.

I would also like to analyze how the public/private tensions and the ideologies of meritocracy, equity, and equality have, or have not, emerged in news media coverage on the recent college admissions bribery scandal, a story that broke in March 2019. It has been interesting to read about how outraged the public is over the scandal. It seems to go against commonly held ideas about who deserves to attend elite higher education institutions and why they deserve to attend. However, there does not seem to be much coverage on systemic inequalities and inequities related to the scandal.

One of the limitations of my research is that the perspectives in the coverage I analyzed are limited because newspaper readership demographics do not reflect those of the general U.S. population. To address this, this research could be expanded to include analyses of other news media sources, including online and social media sources, which would likely include a wider array of perspectives on access to higher education. Also, it would also be interesting to analyze reader comments and posts to investigate the audience reaction to this coverage and how they participate in the discourse on access to higher education.

I intend to share my dissertation findings, and any findings from further research on this topic, with higher education stakeholders. Hopefully, this research will make a positive impact on the discourse, policies, and practices regarding access to higher education. I also hope this research will encourage others to use qualitative, discourse, and media analysis methods to investigate disparities in education, economic, and other social systems.

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APPENDIX A

PREPARATION ISSUES, NUMBERS AND PERCENTAGE OF ARTICLES IN THE SUBSET

Issue	#	%
Lack of access to advanced courses	8	3%
Lack of higher education preparation of low-income students	7	3%
Admitted students unprepared to do college-level work	5	2%
Disparities in SAT/ACT scores for students of color	5	2%
Lack of higher education preparation for local or in-state students	4	2%
Lack of higher education preparation- general	4	2%
Disparities in SAT/ACT scores for low-income students	2	<1%
Lack of higher education preparation for ELL students	2	<1%
Achievement gap for K-12 Latinx students	1	<1%
Disparities in STEM degrees earned by students of color	1	<1%
Lack of direction for high school students	1	<1%
Lack of higher education information for ELL students	1	<1%
Lack of higher education preparation for students in foster care	1	<1%
Students in the U.S. scoring low on international math and science exams	1	<1%

APPENDIX B

MISCELLANEOUS ISSUES, NUMBERS AND PERCENTAGE OF ARTICLES IN THE SUBSET

Issue	#	%
Lack of geographic access to a higher education institution	7	3%
Lack of higher education access- general	4	2%
Risk of deportation for undocumented students	4	2%
Lack of higher education access for students with disabilities	3	1%
Lack of higher education access for students of color	2	<1%
Assessment culture negatively impacting access to higher education	1	<1%
Concerns about quality of instruction from adjunct professors	1	<1%
Increasing stratification of higher education institutions	1	<1%
Lack of higher education access for homeless students	1	<1%
Lack of higher education access for nontraditional students	1	<1%
Lack of higher education access for underprepared students	1	<1%
Lack of higher education access for veterans	1	<1%
Lack of access to quality in-state higher education program for in-state students	1	<1%
Lack of access to elite higher colleges and universities	1	<1%
Lack of access to STEM programs in higher education	1	<1%
Online higher education courses lacking quality	1	<1%

APPENDIX C

ADMISSION ISSUES, NUMBERS AND PERCENTAGE OF ARTICLES IN THE SUBSET

Issue	#	%
Lack of access for low-income students to elite higher education institutions	3	1%
Need for open access higher education institutions	3	1%
Constitutionality of race-based college and university admissions policies	2	<1%
Lack of higher education access for students of color	2	<1%
Lack of access to elite colleges and universities for Asian American students	1	<1%
Lack of diverse students admitted to elite higher education institutions	1	<1%
Lack of higher education access for low-income students	1	<1%
Lack of higher education access for students who have committed a felony	1	<1%
Need for more quantifiable college and university admissions measures	1	<1%
Need for colleges and universities to admit and educate a diverse student body	1	<1%
State universities having to cap enrollment	1	<1%

APPENDIX D

COMPLETION ISSUES, NUMBERS AND PERCENTAGE OF ARTICLES IN THE SUBSET

Issue	#	%
Low and slow college completion rates	3	1%
Low and slow college completion rates for local or in-state students	3	1%
Low or slow community college completion rates	2	<1%
Low or slow community college completion rates for local or in-state students	2	<1%

APPENDIX E

PARTICIPATION ISSUES, NUMBERS AND PERCENTAGE OF ARTICLES IN THE SUBSET

Issue	#	%
Not enough space for in-state students at in-state colleges and universities	2	<1%
Low higher education enrollment rates in the state	1	<1%
Students not being able to access the courses they need	1	<1%

APPENDIX F

CAUSES OF THE ISSUES, NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF ARTICLES IN THE SUBSET

Cause	#	%
Higher education institutions increasing tuition	35	14%
State government decreasing higher education funding	35	14%
Economic downturn	16	6%
Federal government decreasing higher education funding	9	3%
For-profit higher education institutions using predatory techniques to recruit	6	2%
K-12 schools restricting access to advanced placement courses	6	2%
Increasing college age population	3	1%
Colleges and universities not providing accurate cost information to students	2	<1%
Federal government disabling FAFSA data retrieval tool	2	<1%
Federal government subsidizing private loans	2	<1%
Higher education institutions asking about felonies on admissions applications	2	<1%
Higher Education institutions not raising completion rates	2	<1%
Instability of student loan rates and costs	2	<1%
K-12 students not preparing students for higher education	2	<1%
State financial aid is not available to undocumented students	2	<1%
State government requiring undocumented students to pay out-of-state tuition	2	<1%
State or federal government awarding tax credits instead of direct student aid	2	<1%
Community colleges offering too many academic choices	1	<1%
Corruption in college entrance exam system	1	<1%
Disparities in K-12 school funding	1	<1%
Elite colleges and universities not admitting enough low-income students	1	<1%
Family influence	1	<1%
Federal court striking down scholarship program for students of color	1	<1%
Federal government deporting undocumented students	1	<1%
Federal government making the financial aid application process more difficult	1	<1%
Federal government providing student loans instead of grants	1	<1%
Federal government seeking to privatize higher education	1	<1%
Federal housing policies decreasing opportunities for students of color	1	<1%
Higher education institutions aggressively marketing to students	1	<1%

Cause	#	%
Higher education institutions awarding merit-based aid over need-based aid	1	<1%
Higher education institutions considering ability to pay in admissions decisions	1	<1%
Higher education institutions increasing admissions standards	1	<1%
Higher education institutions overspending to attract students	1	<1%
Higher education institutions using admissions standards that are too lax	1	<1%
Higher education institutions using race-based admissions policies	1	<1%
Increasing community college enrollments	1	<1%
Increasing higher education costs	1	<1%
Increasing number of high school graduates	1	<1%
K-12 not providing special instruction for ELL students	1	<1%
K-12 teachers’ low expectations of students of color	1	<1%
Lack of college preparation programs for low-income students	1	<1%
Parents education levels impacting student performance	1	<1%
Parents unaware of college preparation programs	1	<1%
Private loan companies taking advantage of a loophole in the law	1	<1%
State government awarding merit-based student aid over need-based aid	1	<1%
State government collecting on loans of deceased students	1	<1%
State government funding based on enrollment instead of quality	1	<1%
State higher education board voting to end race-based admissions policies	1	<1%
Students taking out private loans instead of applying for federal financial aid	1	<1%