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UNMASKING POWER IN THE DISCOURSE OF FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION INITIATIVES

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	The following questions guided this study: 1) What are the major types of four-year graduation policies and plans being implemented by public four-year colleges and universities? 2) What explicit and implicit messages do leaders convey in constructing four-year graduation policies and plans? 3) What messages might four-year graduation policies and plans send to minoritized student populations?
Background	Four-year graduation is a common goal across public institutions; to this end, university leaders often construct a four-year graduation policy or pledge. Scholars have not systematically examined the discourse within these policies to uncover the underlying structural barriers that may hinder minoritized students from achieving this goal. A one-size-fits all approach in policy can inadvertently promote a discourse of individual success or failure.
Methodology	In order to view policy as discourse and explore the tensions within the narrative of timely graduation, the authors utilized critical discourse analysis to explore the discourse within four-year graduation plans across 19 public, four-year universities.
Contribution	Institutional leaders often attempted to create mutually responsible commitments with students, but our reading of four-year graduation plans suggests that the majority of leaders created a uniform narrative, failing to acknowledge and make provisions for disproportionate impacts on minoritized populations.
Findings	Utilizing seven building tasks, we provided descriptive categories of four-year graduation initiatives, followed by interpretation and evaluation of the messaging conveyed by institutional leaders in constructing policies. Findings re-

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	vealed that many universities often place expectations on students with varying levels of corresponding resources or without the needs of minoritized student populations in mind.
Recommendations for Practitioners	The authors offer recommendations about ways that university leaders through policy creation can acknowledge the structural barriers that affect students' pathways to completion.
Recommendations for Researchers	Because of the underlying acceptance behind the problem that drives graduation policy (i.e., students should graduate in four years), a critical approach allows scholars to examine the text of policies in ways that might illuminate the viewpoints that leaders fail to consider.
Impact on Society	Four-year graduation initiatives should move beyond inspiring rhetoric to tackle the true structural barriers (e.g. unavailable courses, weak advising, developmental courses as stumbling blocks) for which institutional leaders as the creators of policy should be held accountable.
Future Research	Additional studies focusing on the rhetoric of student success initiatives can reveal language centered on dominant ways of knowing.
Keywords	four-year graduation, timely graduation, degree completion, discourse, critical discourse analysis

INTRODUCTION

Various U.S. higher education groups have investigated the issue of low four-year graduation rates at colleges and universities (national rate at 41%; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019); these numbers often mask disparities by race and socioeconomic status (Nichols et al., 2016). Further, as federal and state funding for institutions continues to decrease, public debate has intensified on the responsibility of universities to graduate students who increasingly take on the burden of paying for college (Selingo, 2001; Smith, 2012), with \$1.52 trillion in total student debt, an amount “second only to mortgage debt” nationwide (University of Pennsylvania, 2018, para. 2). Although six-year graduation rates reflect that many students cannot enroll full-time or finish in four years, four-year graduation rates continue to be the dominant goal for public, four-year institutions. Public university leaders often launch a messaging campaign and ask or require students to commit to a developed four-year graduation plan or pledge to support an institution-wide goal. Some examples that accompany this messaging include offering fixed-rate tuition for those who sign an optional four-year graduation pledge (e.g., University of Houston’s [2019] “UHin4” four-year graduation plan), a mandatory four-year graduation deadline (e.g., UNC Chapel Hill’s [2019] eight-semester time limit), and the provision of student support services designed to aid students in the four-year graduation goal (e.g., services that accompany the University of Hawaii’s [2016] “15 to Finish” campaign). These local policies and plans may be crafted at least partially in response to state and federal policies, such as performance-based funding of state universities (e.g., Dougherty et al., 2016; Kelchen, 2018) or initiatives such as the Texas “B-On-Time” loan program that forgave loans for students who complete bachelor’s degrees in four years (Shook, 2012). Although institutional campaigns may project four-year graduation as ideal, the texts that higher education institutions produce to promote this goal may conceal underlying structural barriers that may portray students who do not graduate in four years as deficient. Despite the emergence of these initiatives, scholars have not systematically identified the overall message that leaders convey as they construct such institutional policies related to four-year graduation rates.

Policy shapes the field of higher education and has various implications for student outcomes such as graduation and retention; however, conventional approaches to policy analysis often legitimize socially constructed norms and the rationale behind policies. Within policy analysis, there often exists an underlying acceptance behind the problem determining policy (e.g., students should graduate in four years) without addressing how the problem might position individuals based on their identities. Iverson (2012, p. 153) posits that this lack of critique in the framing of a problem leads to a failure to “examine underlying assumptions about solutions embedded within how a problem is represented and the implications for these representations”. Viewing policy *as discourse* (Allan, 2012) allows for a critical approach to understand how institutions reinforce social positions in higher education. Although discourse constitutes making meaning of words within texts, the study of discourse does not characterize words as static but as representations of different social realities (e.g., individuals occupying various positions in the world). Policy documents provide opportunities to investigate tensions in the efforts of those in power to create change (e.g., increase graduation rates across all student demographics). Investigating discourses underlying policies can help illuminate issues of power and inequity; for instance, scholars have investigated discourses accompanying policies in areas such as university diversity policies (Iverson, 2012), transgender individuals in higher education (Dirks, 2016), English learners (King & Bigelow, 2018; Sampson, 2019), immigration (Koyama & Chang, 2019), and parent involvement in K-12 schools (Lai & Vadeboncoeur, 2012; Nakagawa, 2000). An analysis of policy through discourse can deconstruct the ways that the language that informs practice is often normalized.

Although scholars have utilized policy discourse analysis to study how subjects are positioned through policy, we recognize that local documents such as graduation pledges do not fall under the realm of traditional policy. However, these documents serve as a statement of a university’s ideals and provide a space to problematize the general language often used to inform expectations and university practices. Therefore, critical discourse analysis (CDA) allows for a connection between language and policies adopted within higher education that have implications for social status, equity, and power (Gee, 2011; Rogers, 2011). CDA can serve as both a theoretical and analytical tool to evaluate the ways that discourse acts as an indicator of power and the social distribution of goods (Fairclough, 2015). Woodside-Jiron (2011) utilized CDA to make sense of the ways that the text within policy informs social practices. In naming policy documents as sites to study various tensions in the ways that policy influences action, Woodside-Jiron emphasized that these documents “serve to redefine current thinking, and specific events where particular voices, ideas, or agendas are brought to the front and acted on” (p. 157). The purpose of this study is to problematize the language in four-year graduation pledges and policies that do not account for various student realities that may hinder certain groups from achieving an institutional goal. Using a CDA framework of building tasks (Gee, 2011), including the ways that the language utilized in documents makes certain realities or issues significant, we asked the following questions to guide the study:

1. What are the major types of four-year graduation policies and plans being implemented by public four-year colleges and universities?
2. What explicit and implicit messages do leaders convey in constructing four-year graduation policies and plans?
3. What messages might four-year graduation policies and plans send to minoritized¹ student populations?

¹ In this article, we follow Harper’s (2012) lead by using the term *minoritized* to highlight how particular populations are actively marginalized by institutions and systems of power: “I use ‘minoritized’ instead of ‘minority’ throughout this article to signify the social construction of underrepresentation and subordination in U.S. social institutions, including colleges and universities” (p. 9).

Gee (2011) asserted that individuals assign certain acts (e.g., graduating in four years) as significant based on what is considered as typical or normal. We acknowledge that minoritized students (students of color, low-income students, first-generation college students, and students labeled “non-traditional,” such as adult students, veterans/military-connected students, student parents and caregivers, financially independent students) might be deemed outside of the dominant (i.e., White, middle-class) norm through which graduation pledges and plans are established. We undertook this research to unveil the power dynamics behind the creation of graduation pledges and policies that normalize institutional values for all students without problematizing the messages that such language conveys.

RELEVANT LITERATURE

The extensive literature examining graduation rates at four-year universities has documented low graduation rates and time to degree beyond four years, institutional factors and student characteristics associated with graduation rates and time to degree, and political pressure to increase graduation rates. While institutions must report their six-year graduation rates to the federal government (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), we focus on four-year graduation rates because bachelor’s degree programs are generally designed to be completed in four years and because institutions chose and promoted this timeline in their graduation initiatives. We also focus on research about public institutions, as they are funded at least in part by state governments and thus absorb the effects of changing education funding policy, including government divestment in higher education. Though we use the terminology employed by researchers, we also trouble deficit-based language, such as “drop out,” and notions that students alone are responsible for their success without examining institutional responsibilities and larger power structures.

FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATES AND FACTORS INFLUENCING TIME TO DEGREE

Although the overall four-year graduation for first-time, full-time undergraduate students is 40%, the figure varies by race/ethnicity: 21% for Black students, 30% for Hispanic students, 44% for White students, and 48% for Asian students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Scholars have also noted a variety of institutional and student-level factors associated with time to degree. Increased time to degree is most concentrated in public colleges and universities that are not highly selective (Bound et al., 2012). Institutions that enroll a greater proportion of low-income students generally have lower graduation rates (Horn & Carroll, 2006). Increased state funding is associated with higher graduation rates (Zhang, 2008) and declines in institutional resources at public colleges may be associated with longer time to degree (Bound et al., 2012). Institutional factors, including student-faculty ratios, percentage of full-time faculty, and total expenditures — in other words, financial resources — often help explain graduation rates (Anstine, 2013; Goenner & Snaith, 2003).

Student background characteristics, including socioeconomic status and academic preparation, can help explain some of the difference in graduation rates and college completion (Adelman, 2006). For this reason, Horn and Carroll (2006) cautioned that graduation rates should be compared among institutions that enroll students with similar background characteristics to make more appropriate comparisons. Bound et al. (2012) found that changes in college preparation over time and demographics do not account for increases in time-to-degree, but increased student employment and difficulties in paying for college may help to explain the increase. Students whose enrollment is interrupted (“stopping out”) once are more likely to stop out again and their likelihood of graduation is decreased (Desjardins et al., 2006).

Factors predicted to increase the likelihood of graduation within four years include working on campus, high academic performance, and meeting regularly with a financial counselor (Letkiewicz et al., 2014). Though these factors are associated with reduced time to graduation, in this paper we seek to highlight institutional responsibilities and systemic factors rather than focusing exclusively on factors that individual students may or may not be able to control.

NEOLIBERALISM AND POLITICAL PRESSURE TO REDUCE COSTS AND SPEED TIME TO DEGREE

In recent years, public institutions have faced increased pressure, particularly from state legislatures but also from groups including parents and students, to increase graduation rates and speed time to degree (Selingo, 2001; Smith, 2012); this pressure intensified after the publication of the Spellings Commission report focused on higher education accountability (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). These pressures reflect increased neoliberalism, which privileges “personal responsibility over larger social forces, reinforces the gap between the rich and poor by redistributing wealth to the most powerful and wealthy individuals and groups, and it fosters a mode of public pedagogy that privileges the entrepreneurial subject” (Giroux, 2014, p. 1). Institutional neoliberalism frames students as consumers and learning as a means to secure individual economic gains and positions higher education as a private good, with responsibility for its costs left to those who can afford it (Giroux, 2014; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). The increased presence of neoliberal ideologies results in racialized harm for students of color, in areas such as increased outside work to cover tuition, greater reliance on loans, and lack of support to deal with marginalizing campus climates (Hamer & Lang, 2015).

In a reflection of increasing neoliberalism, state governments have disinvested in public colleges and universities and these institutions have passed these costs along to students by increasing tuition rates (Webber, 2017) – a shift from higher education as a public good to a private one. Tuition rates have increased faster than inflation during the last three decades (Letkiewicz et al., 2014). Several states have adopted mandatory fixed-rate tuition policies and argue that such policies will help keep costs down, or at least predictable, for students and families. Although a majority of states have implemented programs tying a portion of public funding to outcomes such as graduation rates, performance-based funding (PBF) has not significantly improved college completion (Dougherty et al., 2016) or enrollment of underrepresented students (Kelchen, 2018). Though some institutions have responded to PBF by becoming more selective, some states now include “provisions in their PBF systems that provide incentives for enrolling low-income, minority, and other at-risk students” (Kelchen, 2018, p. 719). PBF in Tennessee was not associated with changed retention or six-year graduation rates between 1995 and 2009 (Sanford & Hunter, 2011) and had little impact on college completion in Pennsylvania (Hillman et al., 2014). Indeed, PBF may largely reflect the quality of students self-selecting into the university (Ziskin et al., 2009), rather than reflecting a change in institutional efforts to speed time to graduation.

Even as institutions promote four-year graduation, other trends may work at cross-purposes with this goal. Colleges should not necessarily assume that all students want to or plan to graduate in four years. In the wake of the Great Recession, many students reported intentionally staying enrolled in college longer than necessary as they waited for the economy to improve (Chen & Yur-Austin, 2016). In essence, universities “function as warehouses, buffering students from unstable market conditions” (p. 32). While researchers have examined the causes of and potential solutions to low four-year graduation rates, this body of work has generally examined the *content* of the problem and potential solutions, such as state and federal programs, rather than the *discourse* universities use to frame four-year graduation goals and institutional policies. Researchers have examined obstacles to and interventions for speeding time to graduation rather than focusing on time-to-graduation messaging that communicate the purposes and features of these initiatives. This absence of focus on the language within graduation policies is particularly important, in that because policy ultimately determines outcomes for students, a shifted emphasis on the embedded ideologies of the administrators who create them will better allow the higher education community to hold them accountable. In this study, we attempt to address this missing piece: the language and explicit and implicit messages institutional leaders use in an attempt to speed time to graduation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) serves as a framework in thinking more critically about implications of university policies that influence a variety of student populations. An examination of Discourse (capitalized to represent the privileging of some social practices over others; Gee, 1999; Gee, 2011) reveals how policy language creates consequences based on the realities of different students. Many graduation pledges require students to agree to certain conditions; they may logically perceive such documents as reflecting an institution's goals and consequently their belonging within the institution. As university leaders construct such messages about institutional values, they convey a message of the commitments that either match or conflict with students' realities. Gee discussed the ways that the political nature of discourse (in lowercase form related to the grammatical features of text) requires scholars to go beyond a surface level analysis:

Critical discourse analysis argues that language-in-use is always part and parcel of, and partially constitutive of, specific social practices, and that social practices always have implications for inherently political things like status, solidarity, the distribution of social goods, and power (Gee, 2011, p. 28).

Gee's affirmation of the political nature of text connects to the power dynamics behind institutional policy.

Through a critical approach to analyzing text, scholars can explore language to reveal how power impacts various groups and how articulated institutional ideologies project a certain identity and agenda (Gee, 2014; Woodside-Jiron, 2011). Discourse creates various realities or social positions based on one's reality; individuals use discourse to interpret how they are positioned in the social world (Allan, 2012). We connect these social positions to Gee's (2011) approach to CDA through which he explained how language forms have certain meanings in particular contexts. Gee's seven building tasks serve as our framework to interpret how four-year graduation texts have underlying social implications for marginalized communities. Gee proposed seven ideals individuals utilize to construct "reality," including: (1) significance, (2) activities (practices), (3) identities, (4) relationships, (5) politics (distribution of social goods), (6) connections, and (7) sign systems and knowledge. Table 1 provides the descriptions for each task and guiding questions to explore the meanings behind the text within four-year graduation plans.

Table 1. CDA framework based on Gee's (2011) seven building tasks

Task	Description	Guiding questions and examples for coding
Significance	What ideals are made significant through the language utilized by institutions?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What ideals are portrayed as trivial & which are portrayed as significant? • Implications for treating all students the same on minoritized students (colorblind/neutral approaches) • Acknowledgment of barriers affecting graduation; downplay of consequences (i.e. implicit penalty of tuition rate changes)
Activities (Practices)	What activities are being socially recognized and institutionally supported?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutionally supported practices • Beyond rhetoric of support/encouragement to actual strategies outlined by the institution • Specific commitments of assistance to aide students (i.e. added courses sections, scholarships, advising)
Identities	What type of identity is being built by institutions through the use of language?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How the college takes on a certain role/image of what is stands for (Who are we?) • How is that image consistent or contrasts in different contexts (i.e. business model, recruitment, authoritative, student-centered support system)

Task	Description	Guiding questions and examples for coding
Relationships	What types of relationships are being implied between the institutions and the various groups and individuals involved?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What relationships the institution builds with various people and groups (i.e. students, parents, policy-makers/legislators) • What multiple messaging is transmitted to constituents
Politics (Distribution of Social Goods)	What claims are being made about the distribution of goods and who holds power within the institutions?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implications for who holds responsibility for degree completion • Indications of ways that institution holds power or asserts its privilege • Implications for framing of the plan; assertion of who controls the narrative of timely graduation
Connections	What connections are being made about how the various individuals and ideals are relevant to each other?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What connections are made explicitly/implicitly about the ideal of timely graduation • What images are associated with the “ideal” student as graduating on time; • Categorizing students and their position in higher education based on their behaviors
Sign Systems & Knowledge	How is language being used to communicate ways of knowing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How the institution acknowledges/silences different viewpoints • Broader understandings of epistemological perspectives and ways of knowing • How some worldviews are privileged over others (i.e. students who persist vs. those who stop out)

These building tasks allow analysis of grammatical features through which individuals produce and interpret text (Fairclough, 2015) through various social positions. Because Gee and Fairclough both acknowledge how discourse can reproduce and transform social structures (Rogers, 2011), we utilize both CDA frames to make meaning of and draw conclusions about how four-year graduation messaging affects minoritized student populations.

METHODS

DATA SOURCES

Data for this study included graduation plans or pledges across the United States at four-year public colleges and universities, as public institutions are acutely influenced by increasing neoliberal education funding policies (e.g., state divestment from higher education; Webber, 2017). We conducted an internet search, looking for keywords such as “four year graduation plan,” “four year pledge,” and “timely graduation” to narrow down prospective institutions with multiple documents outlining a specific course of action. We classified these initiatives into five types: fixed rate tuition, optional pledge, mandatory time limit, student support services, or a combination of these initiatives. Our initial review of plans and associated texts revealed highly similar messaging at many institutions; therefore, we narrowed the number of institutional plans to review by using the following inclusion criteria designed to yield a sample with a variety of institutional and student characteristics:

- 1) Bachelor’s degree-granting public colleges and universities within the United States, given political pressure from state legislatures on public institutions.
- 2) Institutions with a range of four-year graduation rates, as recorded in IPEDS. Four-year graduation rates in the final sample ranged from 9% to 84%.

- 3) Institutions with varying levels of student racial/ethnic diversity, as recorded in IPEDS. Institutions in the final sample ranged from 12% to 75% white only.
- 4) Multiple institutions with each of the five types of four-year graduation initiatives, as different initiatives may be associated with unique messaging.
- 5) Multiple institutions in each major geographic region of the United States, given political discourse and funding models may vary across states and regions.
- 6) Multiple institutions from each of three Carnegie classifications represented among the institutions we examined (doctoral - higher research, doctoral - highest research, master's - larger programs).
- 7) Institutions with multiple publicly available documents related to the four-year graduation initiative (these were typically the actual graduation plans or pledges located on university websites that provided detail of requirements/eligibility).
- 8) Institutions with documents authored by multiple independent sources (e.g., institutional websites, local news coverage, student-produced media/websites).

In selecting the external documents, we recognized these as distinct from official university documents; they allowed a different viewpoint in the ways that plans/pledges were perceived. These documents often were media accounts including quotes from university administrators or students affected by the plans, thus allowing us to make comparisons between official institutional representations and interpretations of the discourse from multiple social realities. Using the inclusion criteria above, we narrowed our final analytic sample to 19 institutions (Table 2) and we reviewed 148 documents from these institutions. We did not intend for this process to be exhaustive but more so indicative of the primary approaches across institutions.

Table 2. Institutions and categories of four-year graduation initiatives

Type of four-year graduation initiative examined	University	Region	Carnegie classification	4-year graduation rate*	Race/ethnicity: % White only**
Fixed rate tuition	Eastern Illinois University	Midwest	Master's: Larger programs	33%	63%
	University of Colorado-Boulder	West	Doctoral: Highest research	45%	68%
	University of North Texas	Southwest	Doctoral: Highest research	29%	45%
Optional pledge	California State University, San Bernardino	West	Master's: Larger programs	12%	12%
	Iowa State University	Midwest	Doctoral: Highest research	45%	74%
	Portland State University	West	Doctoral: Higher research	21%	54%
	Sacramento State University	West	Master's: Larger programs	9%	26%
	Temple University	Northeast	Doctoral: Highest research	45%	55%
	University at Buffalo	Northeast	Doctoral: Highest research	57%	47%
	University of Iowa	Midwest	Doctoral: Highest research	54%	71%
	University of Nebraska-Lincoln	Midwest	Doctoral: Highest research	39%	75%
University of Wisconsin-Madison	Midwest	Doctoral: Highest research	60%	72%	

Type of four-year graduation initiative examined	University	Region	Carnegie classification	4-year graduation rate*	Race/ethnicity: % White only**
Mandatory time limit	Florida Atlantic University	Southeast	Doctoral: Higher research	24%	41%
	University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill	Southeast	Doctoral: Highest research	84%	62%
	University of Minnesota-Twin Cities	Midwest	Doctoral: Highest research	64%	66%
Student support services	University of Hawaii-Manoa	West	Doctoral: Highest research	28%	17%
	University of Texas-Austin	Southwest	Doctoral: Highest research	58%	42%
Combination (fixed rate tuition and optional pledge)	Southeastern Louisiana University	Southeast	Master's: Larger programs	18%	61%
	University of Houston	Southwest	Doctoral: Highest research	25%	24%

*Percentage of full-time, first-time students who began in fall 2011 and graduated in four years

**The percentage of White only students conveys whether White students are in the minority or majority of the student body, as four-year graduation initiatives may reflect dominant norms related to race/ethnicity

Data source: National Center for Education Statistics, <https://nces.ed.gov/globallocator/>

DATA ANALYSIS

We analyzed the graduation plans across institutions through CDA based on three analytical lenses: description, interpretation, and evaluation (Gee, 1999; Rogers & Mosley, 2006). Through description, we explored formal properties of text (i.e., areas of vocabulary, grammar, and textual structures. Fairclough (2015) emphasized that textual features are experiential, relational, and expressive. These areas lend themselves to analytical questions regarding features such as the grammatical use of pronouns such as *we* and *you*. For example, we deconstructed how *we* can take on collective features of responsibility (e.g., the university and student in partnership to achieve graduation) versus *you* as denoting individual obligation.

In the interpretation phase, we analyzed the relationship between text and social interaction. Fairclough (2015) explicated the process of interpretation as the interpretive procedures (i.e., resources and background knowledge) that make sense of contexts and texts. Interpretation involves four levels: surface utterance, meaning of utterance, local coherence, and text structure and 'point.' Certain mental representations about the way the world works (e.g., schema, frames, and scripts) allow individuals to make predictive judgements about the types of activities, topics, and individuals connected to text. Finally, in the explanation phase, societal, institutional, and situational relations when filtered through certain ideologies have societal, institutional, and situational effects that either preserve or transform those ideals. We can view power relationships as a determinant of discourse as well as discourse as a determinant of power relationships; ultimately, "these relationships are themselves the outcome of struggles, and are established (and ideally, naturalized) by those with power" (Fairclough, 2015, p. 173). By performing this multidimensional process, we sought to deconstruct the ways that universities present the social ideal of four-year graduation within institutional policy.

In the first phase of analysis, we explored the descriptive features across the graduation documents. Through line-by-line readings, we looked for experiential, expressive, and relational values (Fairclough, 2015) and then categorized them by type (i.e. fixed tuition rates versus voluntary pledges). During the second phase of discursive analysis, we utilized Gee's (2011) seven building tasks (see Table 1 for analytical questions) to evaluate and interpret the texts. The building tasks served as broad

categories through which we further interrogated the messaging of power regarding who controls the narrative of four-year graduation and how such messaging impacts various student groups. Through this “demystification” (Fairclough, 2015) process of unveiling underlying ideologies of institutional leaders, we were able to answer our research questions by generating meaning regarding larger higher education Discourse on the value of graduation within the institutional power of those who set the narrative.

FINDINGS

We address the first research question by outlining the five predominant types of four-year graduation plans implemented by public four-year universities in our sample. Then, we use Gee’s (2011) seven building tasks to address the second and third research questions concerning messages institutional leaders convey in constructing four-year graduation policies and plans, as well as the messages these plans potentially send to minoritized student populations. We share results organized by the building tasks of identities and relationships; politics and connections; and significance and activities. (We demarcate the text analyzed within the tasks with italics and/or indented format.) The building task of sign systems and knowledge represents an epistemological understanding of how ways of knowing are evident in language (Gee, 2011). Because the ways that some worldviews are privileged over others was embedded into the overall analysis of four-year graduation plans, we intentionally did not separate this task in the findings but acknowledge the power of those who create the plans throughout. Through the following findings, we investigated graduation plans in terms of policy as discourse to explore tensions created as institutions establish a four-year graduation as a goal for various groups.

DESCRIPTION OF PLANS/POLICIES

To address the first question, we categorized the types of four-year graduation initiatives (see Table 2) to include: fixed rate tuition; graduation contract/pledge (optional); graduation time limit policy (mandatory); student support services; or a combination of multiple approaches. Institutions offering fixed rate tuition provide students a guaranteed tuition rate for four years. In most plans, if a student is still enrolled after four years, the student must begin paying the escalated tuition rate. Students do not have to pay back the difference in tuition rates if they do not graduate in four years. In graduation contracts/pledges, institutions give students the option to sign a four-year graduation contract or pledge, with most plans outlining responsibilities of both the student and the institution. Most institutions offer specific benefits to students signing the pledge, such as priority course registration. In setting a graduation time limit policy, institutions impose an eight-semester or four-year time limit for students to graduate. Students who do not meet this time limit must seek an exception from the institution to enroll for additional semesters (this plan was inclusive of the doctoral: higher/highest research institutions in Carnegie classification). In the student support services approach, institutions provide new and/or enhanced student support services and programs specifically designed to facilitate four-year graduation. Services include course registration assistance, learning communities, first-year experience programs, and/or TRIO programs. Lastly, some institutions combined two or more of the four previously discussed plans/approaches. Most frequently, institutions combine approaches such as student support services with a four-year graduation contract. In addition to these categories, we also noted that all institutions publicly brand the goal of four-year graduation for incoming students. Examples include “15 to Finish” at the University of Hawaii (2016) (i.e. take 15 credit hours every semester) and “UHin4” at the University of Houston (2019).

IDENTITIES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Price conscious and consumer friendly institutional messaging

Through four-year graduation messaging and tangible supports (or lack thereof), institutions attempted to create and project desired identities, or social positions that the institutions and students could occupy. For the institution, these identities mainly focused on being consumer friendly, competitively priced, and projecting a neoliberal image. To the student audience, institutions often touted the individual economic benefits that accompany four-year graduation: earlier entry into the workforce, leading to more money earned over a lifetime. An example of neoliberal imaging is the president's inaugural address at Temple University: "*Temple students must not keep their futures waiting ... students will be able to limit their debt and advance more quickly into careers that will allow them to pay off the debt they do acquire.*" These economic arguments construct students primarily as employable neoliberal subjects and assume that stable, high-paying jobs will be available to students after graduation. Similarly, the University at Buffalo's online description of the Finish in 4 plan declared, "*Together we can help UB lead the national charge to improve graduation rates, reduce the burden of debt, and move graduates efficiently into the workforce or graduate study programs.*" This statement encapsulated price conscious identity projections, emphasizing the need to move students out of the university and asserting the university's place as part of the "national charge" to decrease the time to degree.

Situated in the context of student debt and economic instability, the promotion of eventual financial gains is seemingly constructive, yet fails to recognize students' immediate realities that confine students to prioritizing short-term sacrifices. In an academic catalog explaining "Soar in 4," Iowa State University emphasized the long-term investment of timely graduation: "*By graduating in four years, students can reduce their tuition costs and accelerate their entry into the job market or advanced education compared to students who take more than eight semesters to graduate.*" Sacramento State's Finish in Four plan also exhibits this pattern of exclusion, as articulated in an article in the Sacramento State News:

Students graduating in four years instead of six save up to \$13,800 in fees and have up to \$11,000 less debt. Because they start their careers sooner, they earn an average of \$100,000 more in their lifetimes. (Sacramento State)

These two examples exhibit grammatical features that place students as the actor (i.e., "students can," "they start," "they earn"); with that emphasis universities position students as resisting the logic underlying four-year graduation. Our analysis again underscores the need to pair significant university priorities outlined in policy with corresponding actions. This was evident in Portland State University's online depiction of Four Years Free, targeted towards prospective students:

We want you to graduate on time and with as little debt as possible. Allow us to introduce two programs for first-time freshmen: Four Years Free. If you qualify for need-based federal grants and maintain at least a 3.4 GPA at an Oregon high school, your tuition and mandatory fees could be covered. (Portland State University)

Through language that recognizes the larger social burden of debt coupled with subsequent action, Portland is a noteworthy example of colleges' role in prioritizing student needs.

In another example, Eastern Illinois University's document outlining frequently asked questions about the guaranteed tuition rate plan states, "*The length of a student's guaranteed tuition rate plan is not affected by the number of credits taken in a given semester or whether the student registers and enrolls at all.*" Noticeable in fixed-tuition rate plans was the apparent focus on fiscal responsibilities void of any structural support (i.e. increased availability of courses and invested money in advisors). The language within these plans ultimately has influence on the type of college identity and trajectory students are able to enact, which underscores the need to hold schools accountable for structurally supporting the values they transmit.

Economic appeals: Fiscal responsibility and stewardship of state resources

While ostensibly designed primarily with students in mind, four-year graduation initiatives target other audiences external to the university – including state legislators, taxpayers, and parents – with explicit and implicit messages. Institutions' attempts to project an identity situated in marketplace discourse provide an understanding of the ways that they sought to normalize four-year graduation plans. Through discourse, institutions sought to position themselves as fiscally responsible users of limited (and often declining) state resources. While a focus on fiscal responsibility is not necessarily negative, we note that universities are not only attempting to satisfy or provide benefits to students, who are often named as the primary or only audience of four-year graduation initiatives within the texts.

State legislators, who might pressure institutions to graduate students within four years, formed one key audience. For example, a University of Minnesota policy document notes, "*the University works to meet and exceed performance goals set by the Minnesota Legislature.*" At the University of North Texas, a news article explains, "*university officials think that this [plan] will encourage more students to be full-time and graduate on time, meaning state funding would increase.*" This example goes beyond simply noting the relationship between the university and the state legislature to make an explicit appeal for increased funding. It is unclear why North Texas officials believed state funding might increase if additional students graduate on time.

Additionally, many plans make pitches to parents of current or prospective students, implying that they will save money (assuming that parents have such resources). A local television story about the UNC Chapel Hill eight-semester rule quoted a UNC spokesperson who claimed: "*The policy change saves students, their families and North Carolina taxpayers money and opens classroom spaces for incoming students.*" In this case, the appeal explicitly includes state taxpayers and future students who will occupy the seats of students who graduate in four years. Within a document outlining a resident tuition guarantee, the University of Colorado Boulder noted the guarantee was designed "*to provide financial predictability for students and families . . . We're taking care of Colorado residents by doing everything we can to eliminate the financial uncertainty of paying for a CU Boulder degree.*" However, a local news article written before the tuition guarantee was finalized reveals the context that the university was facing: "*state funding for higher education is expected to decline by 4 percent . . . CU is framing that reduction in terms of lost opportunities, or areas where the campus can't invest extra money next year.*" Taken together, these statements suggest that the university is appealing to the state legislature to keep costs predictable (if not lower) for families within the state and recognizing its inability to innovate and promote excellence without additional funding from the state.

POLITICS AND CONNECTIONS

Expectations as a foundation of outcomes

University leaders positioned themselves as controlling the narrative of who sets a graduation agenda for students, particularly through the ideal of establishing expectations through policy discourse. President Robert Nelson of Sacramento State utilized such language in his address encouraging commitment to the school's Finish in Four campaign, by asserting, "*Students will be challenged in a way I think they are capable of being challenged.*" During another speech, Nelson stated, "*some students can't graduate in four years, but many, many can – and we must set that as the expectation as a university.*" The oppositional tone between *some* and *many* again reinforces a differential approach to student groups and administrators' preferred way of knowing to privilege some realities over others. While high expectations associated with four-year graduation appeared across institutions, evidence of accompanying resources to support such goals within policy documents was not clear. While some initiatives include new or expanded student support services, several initiatives do not mention this component. Without support for students, it is unclear how universities are assisting students with time-to-degree beyond raising their expectations. Several initiatives have touted significant financial investments in advising and

academic support services, such as UT-Austin and the University of Hawaii. At the University of Hawaii, initiatives have included creation of a student success council across the system, a course scheduling analysis dashboard, and a guided pathways system tied to course registration to prevent credit loss. At UT-Austin, Student Success Initiatives, a new unit within the provost's office, included services such as a graduation helpdesk, interactive degree audit, senior countdown, and coordination of learning communities across the institution. Ideals of expectation divorced from accountability for those who create policy for structural barriers can mask a dichotomy of success or failure placed upon the individual student.

Some institutions imposed institutional expectations by operationalizing success through automatic procedures that were involuntary for students. Automatic enrollment into four-year graduation plans serves as an example: *Instead of asking students to sign a four-year contract when they enter school ... the UI automatically puts most students in the program. Students have to opt out of the four-year plan if they don't want to be in it*" (University of Iowa news article on increased four-year graduation rates). Although automatically enrolling students in a four-year plan might be outwardly encouraging, such a practice has potential effects on students who fall short of that standard. The ideal of "failure" in not meeting an institutional goal potentially creates certain meanings for marginalized students who might question their fit in higher education. Essentially, the institutions created two classes of students: those who succeed (defined as able to meet institutional standards, with or without institutional supports) and those who fail to do so. Another automatic procedure was an institutional policy by the University of Minnesota in requiring a flat tuition rate based on 13 credit hours:

Any credits beyond 13 are available at no additional charge. Even when you take 12 or fewer credits, you will pay the 13-credit tuition rate...It is a choice that can save you both time and money. For example, you could save around \$12,000 by graduating in four years, rather than five. Simply put, your education will cost you less as you are able to increase your credit load. (University of Minnesota 13-credit policy document)

In constructing credits over 13 as "free," the university reinforces a political assertion that champions the economic logic behind four-year graduation and positions students as resistant to such reasoning. Officials also determined situations through which students could be exempt, such as child-care responsibilities and medical conditions. The documents illuminated the tensions created by the institution in holding power to determine the framing of which concepts are supported and specific scripts that students must follow to be considered as part of a norm.

Assigning accountability through constructed imaging

Discourse in graduation plans presented four-year graduation as ideal. Across the plans, this ideal of being hard-working as connected to four-year graduation performed the act of depicting a positive image of students dedicated to that goal: *With careful planning and a commitment to work diligently, many students have been able to graduate in four years* (California State University San Bernardino four-year graduation pledge document). Universities that cited acts such as being involved on campus, building relationships, and attending school on a full-time basis formulated an expressive stance aligned with behaviors positively correlated with retention and graduation (Carter, 2006; Letkiewicz et al., 2014). Moreover, we found contrasts in the ways that leaders sought to "sell" the ideal of four-year graduation (presented as a subjective value of success) or utilized such language to hold themselves accountable for institutional structures that complicate graduation.

Text features revealed political undertones related to who universities hold accountable for time to completion. Although institutions should construct graduation as a partnership between the institution and its students to hold responsibility for particular structural realities, consider the connections made visible through this utterance:

The reasons students don't graduate in four years include inadequate planning, not registering for the right classes on time or in sequence, not attempting and earning enough credits each term, not utilizing campus resources to their benefit, and not exploring major and career interests early in their academic experience. (University at Buffalo frequently asked questions document about Finish in 4 pledge)

Each of these speech acts directly place responsibility on the student and their inability to perform in a particular manner, although also a consequence of a corresponding fault of the university. In a "Pledge to Finish in 4" document, the university outlines a list of preventative actions pledged to its students:

Provide academic advisement each term appropriate to my major; including help with developing a four-year curricular plan; offer needed sections and seat capacity in required courses as per curricular plan; monitor my academic progress every term and conduct outreach (via email) regarding my progress, suggested interventions and any non-compliance with pledge requirements. (University at Buffalo)

In this example, the University at Buffalo demonstrates specific commitments to addressing some of the obstacles students might encounter on the path to graduating in four years. Although institutional decision-makers hold students accountable for the behaviors that lead to degree completion, through specific language they must equally account for the power they hold in prioritizing student needs. Devoid of dedication to resolve structural barriers that affect an institution-wide goal, organizational leaders can essentially maintain their position as determiners of the hierarchy of priorities that affect all students.

SIGNIFICANCE AND ACTIVITIES

Setting the narrative of institutional priorities for all

Language within four-year graduation plans might be facially neutral; however, concealed within the text was evidence of the power struggle of acknowledging barriers for minoritized student populations. Examples of seemingly neutral criteria include minimum credit hours that assume students do not have substantial outside obligations; remedial courses not counting toward a minimum number of semester credit hours; and plans that cancel the eligibility of students who stop out for a semester. Summer courses serves as an example of controlling the narrative of non-negotiable behaviors. University of North Texas, following a fixed tuition plan, centered financial incentives as a reason for excluding summer courses from the plan its frequently asked questions document:

In the shorter summer sessions, fewer hours are taken so there is no price break ... Taking a few summer courses to graduate a semester early is a smart move, but Eagle Express students who regularly take 12 hours in the fall, 12 hours in the spring and 6 in the summer may find that the higher total cost offsets their graduation incentive.

The university structured the ideal of summer courses as a "smart move" but yet potentially juxtaposed students' life responsibilities with its prioritized fixed fiscal planning. In contrast, some universities, such as Sacramento State, protected summer courses through pledge discourse, as seen in this excerpt of a university news release:

Because taking classes during the summer also can play a big role in helping students stay on track, Finish in Four pledgers have been given priority Summer Session registration and are eligible for the Provost Graduation Initiative Grant of \$1,000 toward their Summer Session tuition and fees.

Through this verbiage, Sacramento State recognized both fiscal and experiential realities to commit to a social practice of adaptability, an illustration of the indicative relationship between text and social outcomes.

The ideal of realities outside of the dominant norm as trivial permeated the ways universities constructed alternate outcomes. For example, "It really does pay to graduate on time, but you won't be penalized if

you don't. If you don't graduate within the allotted time, you will move to the traditional plan effective for the next semester" (University of North Texas, frequently asked questions about the Eagle Express Tuition Plan document). The term "penalized" is relative based on one's position and does not account for the financial instabilities that a student who commits to a four-year fixed tuition might encounter. Eastern Illinois University proclaims in its guaranteed tuition rate plan frequently asked questions document: *Upon re-enrollment as an undergraduate following the expiration of your guaranteed tuition rate plan, you will be placed on another guaranteed tuition rate plan but at a different rate.* Some consider a commitment to college under a fixed tuition that changes at year five as trivial, yet such a change could be both drastic and terminal for students who may not be able to afford the new rate, no matter how "insignificant" the difference may be.

In contrast, seven institutions (University of Iowa, University of Houston, Iowa State University, Southeastern Louisiana University, University at Buffalo, Portland State University, and University of Wisconsin-Madison) approached alternate outcomes with solution-based responsibility. Universities utilized words such as *guarantee*, *assurance*, and *exchange* to recognize four-year graduation as a contract requiring commitment from both the institution and the student. Leaders outlined actionable steps such as increased advising capacity, added courses, and early alert systems. Language specifically delineated what the department or college would do if course unavailability threatened graduation in four years:

1. Allow you to graduate in four years by substituting a different course or independent study assignment, as determined by the Department and College offering your major. 2. Allow you to graduate in four years by waiving the requirement, as determined by the Department and College offering your major. (University of Iowa document outlining student and institutional responsibilities of the four-year graduation plan)

Such language represents an awareness of accountability from an institution of systemic barriers beyond students' control:

If the Dean(s) determines that none of these adjustments is academically acceptable, the appropriate college(s) will pay the tuition for the student to take the course(s) required for degree completion within the next academic year. (University of Houston document outlining student and institutional responsibilities of the four-year graduation plan)

Such examples serve as a recognition of the impact of language as situated within power relations that ultimately reinforce or transform existing social practices.

Message of fit between university goals and student realities

Applying intertextual context as a tool of interpretation, we recognized students' ideas of how they "fit" at a particular college based on "assumptions about which previous discourses the current one is connected to" (Fairclough, 2015, p. 158). Moreover, based on historical contexts of the exclusion of particular social groups in higher education, students will decipher messaging about their ability to graduate based on previous discourses about who is included in the dominant-normed college experience (Gusa, 2010; Iverson, 2012). Consider the following example, a news article including interviews with Portland State University administrators:

The program isn't for everyone -- freshmen need to commit to a major, carry a full load of classes, meet regularly with academic advisors and maintain "good academic standing." Many students who are juggling jobs in addition to taking classes may not be able to meet those requirements ... PSU is looking into other initiatives for those who don't fit the four-year guarantee profile. (Portland State University)

Terminology such as "good academic standing" projects an ideal about predictable characteristics of certain types of students. Therefore, the language representing four-year graduation as a goal serves as schemata through which students recognize patterns about their belonging at a university and expectations about completion as an attainable goal. In the same news article, PSU's plan allowed us to

deconstruct the ways that students congruent to a four-year graduate ideal often receive advantages that reinforce that privilege: *Still ... the guarantee will benefit students who don't sign up as well as those who do because it will put more of the onus on PSU to offer students all the courses they need.* This utterance represents a positive recognition that all students need the benefits correlated with institutional goals. Yet the associated language of the intended outcome creates a divisional distinction of students: those with responsibilities outside of the traditional notion of the collegiate experience as excluded as opposed to the inclusion of those committed to the ideal of four-year graduation. While it is important for universities to recognize the realities of students that hinder progress toward goals, institutions can do so with language seeking to disrupt such divisive classification.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to problematize the general language in four-year graduation pledges and policies to explore the ways that various student realities might not be considered in policy creation. We applied a critical lens to the discourse to consider how the power dynamics of policy creation construct ideal behaviors and expectations for students. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) served as an analytical tool to view policy as discourse (Allan, 2012). CDA allowed us to critique how the framing of the problem – the need to increase four-year graduation rates as applied uniformly across all student demographics – does not account for various social positions and identities (Iverson, 2012) or for students who intentionally extend graduation to shield themselves from a bleak job market (Chen & Yur-Austin, 2016). We utilized Gee's (2011) seven building tasks as a framework to analyze the language within four-year graduation plans at public institutions to reveal their implications for minoritized students that might be positioned outside of the dominant norm. Overall, the findings reflect a broader understanding of the final task, sign systems and knowledge, at play within the creation of the plans, in that institutions treated graduation in four years privileged as a social good over other student realities (Gee, 2011). Our findings revealed several key discourses related to messaging in the policy documents analyzed. Institutions constructed a variety of arguments to appeal to several audiences, including students, parents and families (assumed to be paying tuition and expenses, at least in part), and state legislators and taxpayers more broadly. Most commonly, these arguments pitched toward students focused on finances at the individual level, reflective of a neoliberal and marketplace discourse (Giroux, 2014; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) aimed at persuading students that reduced time to graduation will mean lower debt and a faster entry into the workforce and broader economy. These arguments accompany increased shifting of college costs to students and their families as a private good and away from state investment in higher education as a public good (Giroux, 2014; Webber, 2017).

While there are certainly financial consequences associated with increased time spent in college, and graduating within a reasonable timeframe may be especially appealing to students from minoritized groups who may have limited financial resources, the one-size-fits-all approach unnecessarily constructs those who fail to meet this goal as outsiders. Universities that tout flat-rate tuition plans (students can take as many credits per semester as they like and pay the same amount) neglect to mention that students taking fewer classes – those who may be working full-time or part-time (Letkiewicz et al., 2014) – are essentially subsidizing those with the ability to take more classes each semester. If the goal is that all students graduate within an acceptable time frame as defined by the institution, then that goal must be supported financially (i.e. through need-based grants) to open such possibilities to students who do not fit the norm of affording a fixed and predictable enrollment pattern. The message of graduating faster to enter the workforce also assumes that there are attainable, high-paying jobs in the economy (Chen & Yur-Austin, 2016). Prior literature refers to the “warehousing function” of higher education – when the economy is in a downturn, that students intentionally stay longer than four years (Chen & Yur-Austin, 2016) – and this function is ignored by four-year plans. Another overlooked influence in four-year graduation plans was the role of discipline-specific requirements; only a few institutions either mentioned that students could change majors as long as their graduation date did not change (Portland State) or explicitly stated some programs that lasted

longer than four years were excluded from eligibility (University at Buffalo and University of Wisconsin-Madison). Although complex factors such as accreditation and field expectations that influence required number of credit hours are beyond the scope of this study, we recognize that graduation plans are created at the university level, perhaps without a more in-depth understanding of the nuances involved at the discipline/program level.

In our description, interpretation, and explanation of discourse, as universities framed four-year graduation as an economic good, their narrative of associated student and institutional responsibilities varied significantly. At a few institutions, the graduation rate initiative appeared to be little more than a pledge students sign and a messaging campaign. Without sufficient supports, it is unclear how institutional leaders think students will graduate faster beyond simply changing their mindsets, which again places responsibility of graduation rates entirely on students and fails to hold the creators of policy accountable. In the language elicited by many, universities drew a contrast between the committed, hardworking student who will graduate in four years with grit and determination, and become a contributor to the economy, and the unfocused, underprepared student who will take extra courses, perhaps change majors, and fail to graduate in a “timely” manner. The ideal student enrolls full-time, does not work (or only works part-time), takes 15 credit hours each semester, has no significant outside or familial responsibilities, and will enroll continuously through graduation. Messaging around high expectations for four-year graduation – in other words, that institutions expect all students will graduate in four years – was nearly ubiquitous. This goal persists regardless of student ability or desire to do so. By connecting grammatical features to ideological assumptions that posit four-year graduation as common sense, through our study we evidenced ways that universities might position marginalized students as outsiders to a dominant norm. Institutions create a uniform goal to serve a diverse student population, ignoring that current and historical graduation rates are not equal for all demographic groups, particularly around race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. When students fail to meet the norm, and are already positioned on the periphery of many institutions, a messaging campaign of high expectations – divorced from tangible institutional interventions – is unlikely to surmount the systemic barriers that created the situation in the first place.

Fairclough (2015) names CDA as “not just critique, it is critique as a basis for changing reality for the better” (p. 48). We therefore connect the relationships evidenced in graduation plans to the existing power dynamics within university functions and public policy priorities to make several implications for future practice. In response to the critiques levied in this paper, institutions should tailor messaging and resources to their specific student populations; many institutions are imitating each other with regard to four-year graduation plans and it is unclear whether particularly student demographics and needs are taken into account as institutions nationwide adopt these plans in response to pressure. Legitimized outcomes such as four-year graduation are broadly based on norms constructed by predominantly White institutions (Garcia, 2017), and colleges that overwhelmingly serve marginalized communities such as Hispanic-serving institutions must ensure that they are contextualizing such normed goals as appropriate to the student demographics they serve. Institutional leaders need to evaluate the discourse within their mission, graduation and diversity plans, and other essential documents to ensure that they reflect culturally appropriate language indicative of students’ positioning within the institution and larger societal contexts. Colleges and universities should provide or enhance tangible, concrete resources and support services that will help students meet their academic goals; institutions with lower student-faculty ratios and a higher proportion of full-time rather than part-time faculty often have higher graduation rates (Anstine, 2013; Goenner & Snaith, 2003). We recognize that institutions do not function within a level playing field, as some are better resourced/positioned to offer such supports, further reiterating the need to move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach to policy. Institution-wide goals cannot be devoid of accountability in transforming systemic barriers that directly affect students; therefore, institutions should outline not just student responsibilities but also institutional responsibilities. Some exemplars in this study such as University of Iowa and University of Houston are doing just that, particularly through financial backing.

Additionally, CDA recognizes that individuals' positioning determines how they will interpret and ultimately be affected by discourse put in place by institutions (Rogers, 2011). Because of the underlying acceptance behind the problem that drives graduation policy (i.e., students should graduate in four years), a critical approach allows scholars to examine the text of policies in ways that might illuminate the viewpoints that leaders fail to consider (Iverson, 2012). Although institutions hold simultaneous relationships with multiple stakeholders, we found that policy documents evidenced the ways that institutions addressed external constituents by centering their identities around neoliberal and fiscal responsibilities (Giroux, 2014; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). These realities must be acknowledged in the current state of education; however, this study calls for institutions to center policy on the significance of its relationship with students, the ultimate bearers of the decisions of those in power. We advise practitioners, administrators, and other institutional decision-makers to include students in the creation of policies. The structures of student organizations historically position leaders of predominantly White student groups to sit on presidential advisory councils and other campus boards that provide opportunities for students to directly influence those in power. Such a structure does not guarantee that students from marginalized communities such as students of color will have access to such opportunities (Jones & Reddick, 2017). Institutions must therefore be intentional in generating new pathways to include students in policy creation. Because the discourse within policies holds such weight in setting the agenda for all student groups, advocates for those students often left within the margins must push to have all students group voices represented within the discourse.

This study has several limitations that provide opportunities for future research. We intentionally included a broad range of institutions, representing heterogeneity in student demographics, region, Carnegie classification, and graduation rates. Such variability did not allow for an in-depth study of particular institutional types. In addressing our research questions regarding messaging across a broad range of four-year institutions, our purpose was not to uncover patterns between regions or classifications. Future research could therefore provide a more nuanced study of how different patterns within specific institutional classifications or types of graduation plans have implications for the creation of policy. For example, the expectation of four-year graduation under the mandatory time limit graduation play type was present solely across institutions categorized as doctoral: higher or highest research. Because these institutions might function under increased research pressures, more extensive exploration about graduation plans within these research institutions could provide greater insight into the dissonance between completion goals and customized policies that recognize student realities. Finally, because we only used publicly available documents, we cannot ascertain the intent of administrators who created the policies but focus on an interpretation of the presented discourse. A qualitative study regarding the intentions of policy creator and reactions across student groups could provide a distinctive approach to making meaning of four-year graduation plans.

CONCLUSION

Using Gee's (2011) seven building tasks as a framework, we offer a critical analysis of 19 four-year graduation plans at public institutions, which have largely escaped scrutiny in the literature. Institutional leaders often attempted to create mutually responsible commitments with students, but our reading of four-year graduation plans suggests that the majority of leaders created a uniform narrative, failing to acknowledge and make provisions for disproportionate impacts on minoritized populations. We do not suggest that institutions accept dismal graduation rates; assisting all students to continue through to their desired degree goals – which may not include completing a degree in four years – in ways that minimize financial burdens should be the intention of all public institutions. However, initiatives should move beyond inspiring rhetoric to tackle the true structural barriers (i.e. unavailable courses, weak advising, and developmental courses as stumbling blocks; Complete College America, 2014) for which institutional leaders as the creators of policy should be held accountable.

Institutions do not create these plans with only students in mind. The arguments targeted at policy-makers and taxpayers emphasize fiscal responsibility and increased capacity at institutions to admit more (presumably in-state) students. This is a symptom of limited institutional resources: State support for higher education has declined in many places, and institutions seek to respond by either increasing enrollment and/or by moving students in and out of the institution more quickly to demonstrate to the state that they are efficient and thus deserving of continued and increased investment. This pressure reflects the overall national shift away from higher education being viewed as a public good that should be supported by taxpayers and the state toward a private good, positioning students as employable subjects who will contribute to the economy, pay taxes, and earn high enough wages to repay increasing debt. Such a shift also reflects increased emphasis on vocational and career-oriented education that leads immediately to an identifiable career ladder rather than liberal education that emphasizes critical thinking and lifelong learning. CDA serves as a valuable tool in critiquing the language through which higher education leaders conceptualize institutional values. These values, transmitted across student groups in formal and informal ways, ultimately relay which social practices and structural realities are selected and which are excluded (Fairclough, 2011). If the higher education community is truly dedicated to dismantling oppressive practices, this current study aims to reveal language centered on dominant ways of knowing. This is an imperative step in transforming divisive policies and practices to become inclusive of all students.

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