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Planning for diversity: The inclusion of diversity goals in postsecondary statewide strategic plan

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Contextualizing the recent *Fisher v. University of Texas* ruling and how state institutions address diversity and affirmative action, the authors sought to determine how explicit institutions are being with regards to diversity strategic planning. The findings from a qualitative policy analysis determined that while 70% of State Higher Education Executive Offices explicitly mentioned diversity in their strategic plan, most did not reference the difference that differences make, or the equity of diversity on campus.

Keywords: SHEEO, Diversity, Strategic Planning, Affirmative Action

Higher education studies continue to demonstrate that significant demographic changes are reshaping the postsecondary education landscape. For example, between Fall 2000 and Fall 2014, the proportion of White students enrolled at public and private, non-profit less than two-, two-, and four-year institutions fell from 70% to 58% (IPEDS, 2015). The National Center for Education Statistics projected an 11% increase, between the years 2010 and 2020, in the enrollment of students under 25 compared to a 20% increase in the enrollment of students over 25 (NCES, 2012). Also, since 1988, the number of females in baccalaureate degree programs has exceeded the number of males. These shifts have subsequently challenged postsecondary institutions to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body (Colton, Connor, Shultz, & Easter, 1999; Gordon & Grites, 1984; Maldonado, Rhoads, & Buenavista, 2005; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003; Vaquera & Maestas, 2009).

Concurrently, states' role in education policy has shifted and strengthened over the past several decades (Herrington & Fowler, 2003). This is evident in postsecondary education policy, particularly as it pertains to diversity. For example, the U.S. Department of Education encourages governors to champion college completion by

adopting specific policies, such as performance-funding, which may tie state funding to outcomes such as graduating more non-traditional students (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Perhaps more so than any other policy area, states have been the focal sphere for debate, discourse, and discord over the role of affirmative action with significant consequences for higher education. States like California, Washington, and Michigan have passed constitutional bans on the use of preferential treatment based on race or gender in public education, contracting, or employment. In the years that followed, California institutions, such as UC Berkeley, experienced precipitous declines in the number of students of color admitted (Hart, 2009). Significant higher education funding and policy decisions generally occur at the state level (Shakespeare, 2008); therefore, we focused on State Higher Education Executive Officer (SHEEO) agency strategic plans, which serves as a vehicle through which state policy surrounding diversity is crafted and communicated to public institutions of higher education and to constituencies of these institutions.

Specifically, the purpose of this study was to examine the degree and manner in which states address issues of diversity through their SHEEO agency, how messages and initiatives related to diversity are directed toward public higher education, and what, if any, goals related to diversity are set forth in these plans. We conducted a qualitative policy analysis guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent do state's SHEEO strategic plans contain explicit diversity references (e.g., contain the word *diversity*)?
2. What types of diversity-related messages are present in state strategic plans and how are they or are they not related to explicit diversity messages?
3. Do any themes or patterns emerge regarding the ways in which SHEEO agencies do or do not address issues of diversity?

State Higher Education Executive Agencies

American colleges and universities enjoyed a long tenure of operation nearly free from state interference (Bumba, 2002). However, this autonomy dwindled near the end of the nineteenth century as states began to exercise their authority over postsecondary institutions within their borders. The authority to establish and control educational institutions at all levels was retained by the states under the Constitution of the United States (Glenny & Schmidtlein, 1983) and, therefore, the power to establish colleges and universities rested within the states. Acting upon this authority, many state constitutions have included language that allows or even calls specifically for the establishment of postsecondary educational institutions. These declarations delegate to state legislatures the authority to define the duties and powers held by college and university boards of trustees and other institutional governing bodies. Under this governance structure, legislatively-mandated board of trustee functions are able to be changed by statute only, thereby placing postsecondary institutions largely under the control of the state (Glenny & Schmidtlein, 1983). In the vast majority of the United States, states are able to exert nearly unlimited influence over public higher education within their borders. Despite the

constitutional power granted to states, colleges and universities in America operated for much of their history with little oversight or imposition by state governments (Bumba, 2002; Thelin, 2011).

1900–1950

As states became more involved in the oversight of their systems of higher education in the early part of the twentieth century, consolidated boards for governing and coordinating postsecondary education were formed. By the early part of the twentieth century, states such as South Dakota, Florida, and Iowa had established centralized boards of governance. These early boards focused primarily on the elimination of redundant services among public institutions. In the 1940s, Oklahoma led the trend of establishing boards that moved beyond efficiency efforts and dealt with program oversight and review.

1950–Present

As the century progressed, a growing number of states became involved in the governance of postsecondary education. By 1960, a total of 24 states had established boards with some type of oversight authority with this growth continuing through the 1970s and 1980s (Barak, 2007). In particular, the 1980s saw an increased interest in understanding the impact states' centralization of higher education governance could have on public education. Between the mid–1980s and the mid–1990s, 33 states conducted studies examining possible changes in governance structures (Knott & Payne, 2004). By 1997, all 50 states had established a board or agency that exercised statewide postsecondary functions (Bumba, 2002), a number which fell to 48 in 2013 when California and Michigan revised their policies to allow for independent operation of colleges and universities. As state governance activities expanded during the past century to the point of ubiquity, centralized state agencies have become critical players in public higher education.

The Role of Agencies and Boards

Governance boards and agencies vary across states in their missions, structure, and oversight authority, but share in the impact they have on postsecondary education within their states (Knott & Payne, 2004). McGuinness (1997) used the phrase *statewide coordination* to detail the undertakings of these boards and described their activities as "the formal mechanisms employed by states to ensure that their colleges and universities are aligned with state priorities and serve the public's interests" (p. 3). Within this context, statewide coordinating bodies charged with the oversight of state systems of higher education most often fall into one of two broad categories. Though each state is unique, bodies are commonly classified as either governing or coordinating boards based largely upon their structure and activities.

Governing boards. Governing boards are the most centrally structured and are charged with the management of all colleges and universities in their state. Oversight activities of governing boards include the creation of institutional policies, appointment

of presidents, allocation of financial resources, as well as setting policies for tuition and fees (Bumba, 2002). Governing boards are also able to set presidential salaries and establish faculty personnel policies (Knott & Payne, 2004).

    Coordinating boards. Coordinating boards on the other hand, operate under a less centralized governance structure. Coordinating boards act as a voice for the needs of postsecondary institutions within their states and primarily organize the activities of individual campuses' governing bodies (Bumba, 2002). This type of board may have regulatory or advisory authority over institutional academic programs and budgets. Notably, coordinating boards, unlike their counterparts, do not hold legal authority over individual institutions (Bracco, Richardson, Callan, & Finney, 1999; Knott & Payne, 2004).

National Organization and Key Responsibilities

    Statewide higher education governing and coordinating boards are further organized nationally by the State Higher Education Executive Officer Association (SHEEO). SHEEO primarily acts as a type of coordinating organization for state boards, though the organization also serves state agencies through policy advocacy and as a liaison between individual states and the federal government, as well as serving as a source of analysis for issues related to educational policy. The SHEEO (2012) Association "seeks to advance public policies and educational practices to achieve more widespread access and completion of higher education, more discoveries through research, and more applications of knowledge that improve the quality of human lives and enhance the public good" (para. 1). There are currently 57 SHEEO agencies representing 48 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. These SHEEO agencies encompass both coordinating and governing boards and are intimately involved in work related to the SHEEO mission of increased access, success, and research (Epper, 1997).

    SHEEO agencies have an impact on nearly every key higher education issue (Epper, 1997). Several coordinating functions tend to be spread across coordinating and governing boards including: planning, setting state policy agenda, serving as a change agent, problem resolution, mission definition, academic program review, resource allocation, student financial assistance and administration of other programs, assessment and accountability, and institutional licensure and authorization (McGuiness, 1997). Policy issues ranging from faculty governance to student admission are impacted by SHEEO activity as well (Bumba, 2002; Hearn & Griswold, 1994; Knott & Payne, 2004). Other key SHEEO responsibilities include ensuring that public institutions remain focused on their espoused missions, academic programs are routinely evaluated, and key student outcomes are regularly measured and reported to the public (Ewell, 2005).

    Today's SHEEO agencies impact a wide array of higher education issues, but statewide coordinating boards are most deeply rooted in planning. According to Glenny and Schmidtlein (1983), "a primary function of nearly every coordinating agency established after 1955 was to conduct continuous or periodic long term planning for education" (p. 138). During the 1950s and 1960s planning documents were used

primarily to stem program duplication. Strategic plans of this era were also produced to promote effectiveness of institutional missions and efficiency in public resource expenditures (Epper, 1997). However, as the prevalence of SHEEO agencies grew, so too did the scope of their strategic planning efforts. Though early statutes required plans only for public institutions, changes to state laws have added most of postsecondary education to the planning duties of SHEEO agencies (Glenny & Schmidtlein, 1983), maintained by SHEEO' (2015) bylaws. The purposes of strategic planning efforts have been similarly expanded. Whereas early boards were more managerially focused, modern SHEEO agencies enact the roles of *convener*, *issue champion*, and *change agent* through their strategic planning efforts (Epper, 1997). Among the most influential activities undertaken by SHEEO agencies is the production of strategic plans for state systems of higher education.

Strategic Planning

Strategic planning has historically been viewed as either an informal, intuitive process or as a formalized, ongoing organizational tool. Those who believe that strategic planning is informal suggest that organizations do not plan in any systematic way, but instead rely on intuition and past experiences to guide them when confronted with strategic decision-making points. Alternatively, strategic planning is thought by others to be an iterative and systematic approach to addressing organizational issues and determining future directions. In this model of strategic planning, leaders systematically gather and analyze information before determining the direction of the organization. Despite this philosophical divide, most organizations rely on formal processes (Galbreath, 2010); therefore, we focus this paper on formalized organizational strategic planning.

Bryson (2011) defined strategic planning as "a deliberative disciplined approach to producing fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization (or other entity) is, what it does and why" (pp. 7–8). Strategic planning, in this model, is considered an ongoing, permanent process and not a product itself (Rezvani, Gilaninia, & Mousavian, 2011), assisting organizations in gathering, analyzing, and synthesizing information. Strategic planning is often used in order to produce defensible missions, goals, and strategies and to address organizational challenges and issues. However, the strategic planning process does more than create a plan for an organization; it is used to promote strategic thinking, acting, and learning within an organization. Strategic planning can also enhance organizational effectiveness, responsiveness, and resistance as well as bolster organizational legitimacy. At its best, strategic planning is an in-depth process whereby information is: gathered, analyzed, and synthesized; the mission and goals of an organization are evaluated; new strategies are created; and future implications of present decisions are weighed. In short, strategic planning is an ongoing process whereby organizations evaluate where they are, where they want to be, and decide how they will get there (Bryson, 2011).

There is little clarity surrounding the exact point of origin of the process now known as strategic planning, though its roots are firmly planted in the business world

(Choban, Choban, & Choban, 2008). Long-term planning was an early predecessor of strategic planning that was widely practiced at large companies and conglomerates during the mid-1950s. In the 1960s, the process of strategic planning began to gain wide acceptance by corporate leaders as their best tool to enhance the competitiveness of each business unit. Strategic planning gained momentum as a tool to combat the turbulent business environment of the 1970s (Dooris, Kelley, & Trainer, 2004), but as time progressed, strategic planning went under some scrutiny and began to fall out of favor as an organizational management tool (Rezvani et al., 2011). Mintzberg (1994) described the process of strategic planning as having fallen from its *pedestal* and detailed a divide between strategic planning and strategic thinking with the former posed as a barrier to the latter. Despite this criticism, the past decade has brought about a resurgence in the popularity of strategic planning. This comeback has been largely in response to increased globalization, the increasing uncertainty of markets, and a diversifying consumer class. Economic, social, political, technological, environmental, and organizational changes are magnified by the growing interconnectedness of a global society. Bryson (2011) argued that in an ever-changing world, organizations that wish to survive and do good and important work must respond to these new challenges, and that public and nonprofit organizations must develop and adjust their strategies as they never have before.

Higher education has not been immune to the changes that Bryson (2011) described. The need for strategic planning in higher education has intensified in recent years due to increasing resource constraints and expectations from external constituents such as state governments for greater accountability (Welsh, Nunez, & Petrosko, 2006). Strategic planning documents have often been the tools with which states and institutions have addressed their new realities. The history of strategic planning in higher education has followed a similar arc to that of the business environment established in the 1950s with a focus on campus facilities. The 1960s were a time of expansion and greater organization in planning efforts and the 1970s, also a time of uncertainty for education, assumed strategic planning take hold as colleges and universities tried to change with their environment. In the 1980s, strategic planning was understood as a stabilizing force and by the 1990s it was seen as essential to the effectiveness of higher education (Dooris et al., 2004).

The structure, goals, and governance of higher education creates a unique environment for planning. Strategic planning in the business arena is often a much clearer process, given that for-profit organizations have clear goals of financial gain and the success of strategic planning is measured against the outcomes on this particular indicator. Educational systems often have multi-faceted goals which are difficult to operationalize, making evaluation of the success of planning efforts challenging (Choban et al., 2008). The governance structure of institutions can often be problematic as well; the loosely coupled power structure of colleges decentralizes power in these organizations (Birnbaum, 1988). Institutional planning necessitates that administrators and faculty from across the organization stay involved and engaged in the process, a role that faculty often resist. As such, successful strategic planning efforts in the realm of

higher education have been built upon a broad base of support from a diverse group of stakeholders (Welsh et al., 2006).

Diversity in Higher Education

The benefits of having students from a multitude of racial/ethnic backgrounds in educational settings are well-established in the empirical literature, provided they meaningfully engage in mutual contact. Meaningful contact is often the prerequisite for the term diversity in the higher education literature (Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011). Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin (2002) found that informal diversity interactions, inclusion of minority representation in curricula, and formal inclusionary programming had overall positive effects on learning and democracy outcomes for a national sample of college undergraduates, although outcomes can vary for students of color (e.g., Gurin, Peng, Lopez, & Nagda, 1999). Cumulatively, racial and ethnic diversity in the student body increases student understanding, decreases prejudice, enhances cognitive development, positively affects academic success and long-term attitudes and behaviors, and increases overall satisfaction within an institution (Pettigrew et al, 2011; Smith & Schonfeld, 2000). Despite the many positive benefits, diversity and the means by which to cultivate it in an educational setting remain contested, facing a number of challenges.

Among faculty and students, support for diversity within postsecondary education is nuanced, affected by a variety of variables. With faculty, support for diversity may vary by institution type, race/ethnicity, gender, and civic values (Park & Denson, 2009), although some research points toward faculty perceptions that diversity has a negative relationship with educational outcomes (Flores & Rodriguez, 2006). Similarly, student perceptions of and satisfaction with diversity vary by race/ethnicity, institutional context, student participation in institutional efforts around diversity, and the structural diversity present at the institution, such as diverse faculty, staff, and students (Park, 2009).

These nuances point to the need for diversity efforts to be planned and coordinated. Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez (2004) suggested that the mere presence of minority student populations at an institution is insufficient for realizing potential benefits of diversity. Rather, intentional efforts are necessary to cultivate the campus climate as well as the nature of diverse interactions. Smith and Schonfeld (2000) noted the need for institutions to strike a balance between a cohesive campus identity and acknowledgment of differences. Institutional efforts to promote a campus climate that is perceived as supportive of individual students is related to lower perceptions of racial tensions among all types of students (Hurtado, 1992). In sum, the presence of demographic diversity is a necessary but not sufficient condition to realize educational benefits.

Method

Data Analysis

To analyze diversity-related messages found in state strategic plans, coded as either explicitly or implicitly related to diversity, we employed a content analysis approach. Content analysis is a qualitative research method which, with a long history of

inclusion in similar studies, has been shown as a means to ensure reliable qualitative analysis. Primarily, content analysis is a method used to make valid inferences from text about the sender(s) of the message, the message itself, or the audience of the message. This method operates directly on text and can employ both qualitative and quantitative methods in analysis. A benefit of this technique, in addition to its mixed methodological capabilities, is its unobtrusive nature. In most content analyses, as in this study, the crafter and/or the audience of the message are unaware of analytic activities. Therefore, the act of analysis itself does not have an impact on the message and is unlikely to confound findings (Weber, 1990). As the population of interest for this study consists of publicly available strategic plans, content analysis is an appropriate choice for analysis of diversity messages within these state documents.

  We followed procedures outlined by Wilson, Meyer and McNeal (2012) in which Holsti (1969) is employed as a guide to the interpretation of both the weight placed on diversity messages and their possible impact. This method was chosen primarily because of its ability to provide meaningful interpretation of both explicit and implicit diversity messages. Through objective analysis, called manifest content techniques, descriptive statistics are the primary means of interpretive analysis—an appropriate level of analysis for explicit diversity references. For the more complicated and subjective implicit messages, content analysis provides latent content analysis in which coders' understandings of the messages' meanings influence interpretation (Wilson et al., 2012).

Population

  The purpose of this study was to analyze diversity references in SHEEO agency strategic plans. Therefore, the SHEEO website (see SHEEO.org) was used to obtain an inclusive listing of states and territories for which a coordinating or governing board currently exists. Because all data was available and between-state comparisons provided information crucial to our purpose, the entire population was used for analysis ($N = 60$), including the District of Columbia, the territory of Puerto Rico, and the Northern Mariana Islands. Michigan, at the time of data collection, did not have a SHEEO agency and, therefore, was not included in the sample used for this study.

  State SHEEO Structures. When we completed data collection in Summer 2017, 49 states plus Puerto Rico, the Northern Mariana Islands, and the District of Columbia had a SHEEO Agency. Currently, Michigan stands as the only state without a centralized state agency charged with the coordination or governance of public higher education. Several states including Alaska, Connecticut, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New York, Pennsylvania, Vermont, and Wyoming, have two SHEEO agencies. Typically, states with these dual structures have both a coordinating and governing board. Therefore, although there are a total of 52 states, districts and territories that had a SHEEO, the total population of SHEEO agencies examined for this study was 60.

  Among the 60 SHEEOs examined for this study, our research team was unable to locate an up-to-date strategic plan for five states. States for which we did not obtain a current plan for analysis were Delaware, Mississippi, New Hampshire, New Jersey, and

Puerto Rico. For one state, we were able to gather information that made it clear why a strategic plan was not publicly available on the SHEEO website: New Jersey included documentation of a substantial structural change to its governance of public higher education. This change has consolidated the power of its former SHEEO agency into the Office of the New Jersey Secretary of Higher Education. Ostensibly, this shift and the subsequent disbanding of the former board of higher education have resulted in the lack of an updated strategic planning document.

For the remaining four agencies for which we were unable to find a strategic planning document, the reasons were unclear. In each case in which a plan was not readily accessible and a reason for its absence was not made clear, two members of our research team conducted thorough searches of SHEEO web sites for strategic plans. We also searched widely available online databases in this effort and were still ultimately unable to locate current strategic plans for these state agencies. The lack of accessibility to these states' planning efforts is significant in and of itself, as communicating the goals and directions of a state's system of higher education to the public is a key component in the effectiveness of statewide agencies (Ewell, 2005).

Data Collection

Data were collected directly from each state's SHEEO website. Two coders divided the population of state agencies and performed an electronic search of each state's official higher education coordinating board website, and identified the most current version of the state's strategic plan for its public system of postsecondary education. For states that did not make their plan readily available, or for which the location of the plan was not readily apparent, a more detailed electronic search was performed. This secondary search was performed primarily within the official state website. If strategic plans were still not obtained at this point, general web searches were conducted. The decision was made not to contact state agencies for plans we could not locate via our search process. We made this decision because our research questions focused on policy messages conveyed through state higher education planning documents. If no such document was readily available, we concluded that statewide planning was not intended for public communication.

Coding Procedures

In coding the strategic plans, we used a multi-step process with the intent of identifying and analyzing explicit diversity references as well as diversity-related references within SHEEO strategic planning documents. First, two coders independently scanned electronic copies of strategic plans for explicit references to diversity. To be considered an expressed reference, the full word *diversity* or some derivative thereof (e.g., diverse and diversify) must have been present. Sentences that included explicit references to diversity along with sentences around the reference were logged into a coding sheet. The location of the explicit references within the plans was coded as well. One member of the research team coded all plans in this initial step followed by a spot checking in which approximately half of the plans were selected for double-coding

to ensure inter-rater reliability. As part of our analytic plan, we agreed a priori to have a third coder review any disagreements between the two primary coders, however there was no disagreement.

The second step of the coding process involved the identification of diversity-related references. This was done in two steps. First, we developed a broad, working definition of diversity, mindful of the tension between developing an inclusive concept while remaining meaningful and limited in scope. We are cognizant of the potentially negative effects of what some (e.g., Andersen, 2003) have called the *whitewashing* of diversity—a rhetorical, political, and social process in which all forms (e.g., being left-handed) of difference are considered to have equal societal implications. We relied on Owen's (2009) distinction of diversity for difference and diversity for equity. Diversity for difference encompasses the rich and varied differences that we all have: physical characteristics, likes and dislikes, beliefs, ideology, political leanings, whether we were adopted, the part of the country in which we grew up, and so on. Diversity of equity refers to the 'differences that difference makes.' Owen wrote:

> some differences have a very real and material effect…while other differences have…little or no social meaning or material consequences. Thus, in higher education diversity for equity is concerned to mitigate the effects of the more salient social identities for educational effectiveness. (p. 187)

With this distinction in mind, our definition of diversity encompasses race/ethnicity, socioeconomic background, age, religion, sexual orientation, gender, nationality, veteran's status, and ability—all forms of diversity we believed might have a material effect on educational outcomes for students. Using this definition, the second step of the implicit coding process involved looking for references to the preceding forms of diversity following the same protocol described above.

Findings

In order to contextualize our findings for proper implications, we coded each agency as either a coordinating or governing board based upon the classification available on the SHEEO association web site prior to completing any analysis. A total of 31 agencies had strategic plans that were labeled under a coordinating board and 29 agencies labeled under a governing board.

Explicit Diversity References

The first step in our analysis was a search of strategic plans for explicit references to diversity. Among the plans we analyzed, 39 had explicit references to diversity. The six SHEEO agencies that made no mention of diversity in their plans are the Kansas Board of Regents, New Mexico Higher Education Department, North Dakota University System, Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, South Dakota Board of Regents, and Vermont State Colleges. Of the 39 agencies that did mention diversity explicitly, there were seven that did so only once. These were Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Minnesota,

Montana, Virginia, and Wisconsin. Therefore, 13 strategic plans (28% of our sample) had either zero or one explicit mention of diversity. Alternatively, New York and Maryland had the greatest number of explicit references with 39 each. Among the remainder of the ten agencies with the most diversity references, there was a relatively wide range in the number of direct references to diversity. The rest of the top ten, were Nebraska (29), Wyoming Community College Commission (22), Ohio (17), University of Alaska (15), North Carolina (15), Maine (11), and Texas (11). Finally, in the overall sample we found an average of just over 7 explicit references to diversity in each plan. Given that strategic plans average just over 40 pages in length, this means that nearly one in every six pages of an average plan contains an explicit reference to diversity. Our analysis of references to diversity pointed to two major themes determined by consensus of the coders: (1) the recognition of changing demographics, and (2) a focus on the notion of diversity of difference.

Changing Demographics

The first theme of state references to diversity in strategic plans regarded the changing demographics of the student body in their respective state, as well as within the general population. Though these facts are undeniable, SHEEO strategic plans largely move beyond recognition of numerical trends in demographics and toward recognition of a new reality: demographic changes are discussed not as trends to be monitored but in terms of their permanence and their impact on the future of state systems of higher education.

More than a dozen SHEEO plans contained messages that contextualize the diversifying student body as both a reality and a call to action. Highlighting this outlook, Alabama states that "meeting the postsecondary educational attainment needs of the increasingly diverse citizenry of Alabama is critical to the continued social and economic development of the state" (Alabama Commission on Higher Education, 2009, p. 3). Similarly, *The Maryland State Plan for Postsecondary Education* contends that "Maryland's capacity to educate its increasingly diverse citizenry is one of the State's most pressing challenges to overcome as the 21st century progresses" (Maryland Higher Education Commission, 2009, p. 20). Although Maryland and Alabama pose demographic changes as both a reality and a challenge, Georgia's plan takes an opportunistic stance and positions these changes as corresponding to both enrollment growth and quality of educational environment. (Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia, 2013). Whether diversity is presented as a challenge, an opportunity, or both, several other state plans including Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Nebraska, North Carolina, and Washington reference growing diversity in higher education as the new normal. Colorado states this most succinctly by stating unequivocally "we will be more diverse" (Colorado Department of Higher Education, 2010, p. 8).

Diversity of Difference

The second theme to emerge from our analysis was that diversity was most commonly used to refer to diversity of difference, sometimes in conjunction with the

notion of diversity for equity. For example, Missouri's plan refers to learning opportunities for greater cultural understanding and appreciation for diversity (Missouri Department of Higher Education, 2016), while Nebraska promotes an awareness of racial diversity (Nebraska's Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education, 2016). New York refers extensively to services for students with disabilities (New York State Department of Education Office of Higher Education, 2004), and the University of Alaska speaks to the intellectual diversity of faculty, staff, and students (University of Alaska System, 2013). The Iowa Board of Regents perhaps best captured the breadth of SHEEOs' discussions of diversity in its characterization of its state system of higher education as striving to maintain "respectful interaction among members of diverse backgrounds, culture, and beliefs in nurturing environments which promote critical thinking, free inquiry, open communication, and broad participation" (Board of Regents State of Iowa, 2010, p. 5).

Discussions of structural diversity included issues related to the diversity of institutional structures, academic programming, content delivery, and the composition of faculty and staff. Maine's strategic plan refers to the recruitment and retention of a diverse faculty and staff as a principal means of ensuring the quality of higher education in its state (University of Maine System, 2004). In a similar vein, diversity was often discussed in terms of a changing American economy and increasingly global marketplace. Montana's plan places the improvement of the state economy side-by-side with the ability of the state's system of higher education to create high value jobs and diversify the economic base (Montana University System, 2012*)*. Nevada goes further in its statement that the purpose of its strategic plan is "to promote greater efficiencies and enhanced performance which translate into producing more graduates to further develop and diversify our economy" (Nevada System of Higher Education, 2010, p. 3). Oregon's plan is emblematic of the breadth of discussions surrounding economic diversity by asserting that in an evolving global environment the state system of higher education will serve people of all ages, races, ethnicities, and educational backgrounds (Oregon University System, 2016). It is Maryland, however, that captures the extensive range of diversity messages in its assertion that its postsecondary institutions "offer a diversity of mission, size, programs, faculty, location, delivery modalities, target populations, services, cultural offerings, and other characteristics" (Maryland Higher Education Commission, 2009, p. 8).

Contextual Factors

We were also interested in whether contextual factors played a role in the inclusion of both explicit and implicit diversity references in statewide strategic planning. Specifically, we analyzed governance structures as well as the history of desegregation efforts by state. Our analysis suggests that the presence of diversity references in statewide coordinating agencies is not impacted by the structure of the agency. Among the ten states with the highest number of explicit references to diversity in their SHEEO strategic plan, five boards are organized under the coordinating structure and five under governing. Similarly, for those states with no explicit references to diversity, a nearly

even split occurs with two falling under coordinating boards and four under governing boards.

Second, we were interested in the possible impact that court ordered desegregation actions may have had on the inclusion of diversity references. For this analysis, we coded states as either having historical ties to desegregation legislation, particularly *Adams v. Ferguson*. Nineteen states were labeled as having ties to desegregation policies. These states include Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). However, it is unclear whether ties to court ordered desegregation of educational institutions has a stronger impact on a SHEEO agency's inclusion of diversity references. For example, among the six states with no explicit references to diversity, only one has ties to desegregation policies. Further, in the 10 strategic plans with the greatest number of references, four have ties to desegregation policies.

Diversity Related Messages

Finally, we analyzed what types of diversity-related messages are present in state strategic plans and how they are or are not related to explicit diversity messages. This was completed in order to make a clear distinction between *explicit* diversity messages (i.e., using the word *diversity* in the terminology of the policy) and *diversity-related* messages (i.e., discussing concepts commonly aligned to diversity initiatives without explicitly indicating a diversity goal). Using the broad definition of diversity detailed above, we identified several themes related to broader issues of diversity. The most interesting finding may be the degree to which these implicit messages were related to the explicit references to diversity. Diversity-related themes found in strategic plans were related to new and permanent demographic realities, the needs of a 21st century economy, closing achievement gaps between student groups, increasing access, and increasing delivery models for academic content. The content and tone of these messages were very similar to text explicitly related to diversity and generally spoke to the same issues.

Several examples help illustrate the running themes. Colorado addresses its state population by simply stating "our demographics are shifting" (Colorado Department of Higher Education, 2010, p. 8). Kansas takes a more proactive approach by focusing on improved "levels of participation, within each higher education institution and across the system, that reflect the racial, ethnic, and economic demography of the state" (Kansas Board of Regents, 2010, p. 1), and Montana similarly wishes to increase participation among low income students from multiple races and ethnicities (Montana University System, 2012). Alabama's plan listed as one of its top planning priorities "the development of a flexible, unified workforce education and training system that addresses occupational skills in a range of industry sectors" (Alabama Commission on Higher Education, 2009, p. 5). Finally, Missouri highlights diversity of academic delivery in its goal to "reduce the achievement gap that persists in postsecondary education" (Missouri Department of Higher Education, 2016, p. 12).

Overall, there was great similarity between the explicit diversity references found in SHEEO strategic plans and their broader diversity-related messages. This speaks to both the consistency and the breadth of ways in which diversity was conceptualized in these plans. While SHEEO agencies portrayed a wide-ranging understanding of diversity and issues related to diversity in their planning documents, the documents were remarkably consistent in the themes they presented. The strategic plans that did include messages related to diversity, whether explicitly or implicitly, did so while connecting the concept to issues such as shifting national demographics, an increase in adult students, an increasingly global economy, as well as traditional notions of racial, ethnic, gender, and cultural diversity.

Discussion

The first question we set out to study in this analysis was to what extent state higher education plans included explicit references to diversity. About 70% of the SHEEO agencies in the United States have strategic plans that mention diversity. No apparent pattern emerged with respect to whether coordinating or governing boards were more likely to include diversity in planning. Perhaps not surprisingly, of the 19 states with court mandated desegregation of postsecondary education, strategic plans were more likely to include references to diversity and, to some extent, multiple mentions.

Our next two research questions focused on the themes and messages regarding diversity embedded in the document text. We had two major findings here. First, borrowing from Owen's (2009) distinction of diversity for difference or equity as described above, we concluded that the majority of references were to the diversity of difference, such as culture, nationality, age, race and ethnicity, among others social identities or categories. Absent from strategic plans was mention of diversity for equity; that is, the ways in which certain forms of diversity (e.g., socioeconomic class or race/ethnicity) affect educational outcomes. Our second finding was that a common theme underlying discussion of diversity in strategic plans was of the demographic inevitability of diversity and diverse students. The juxtaposition of these findings depicts an interesting portrait of SHEEO agencies' stance toward diversity.

Diversity was viewed in many strategic planning documents as an inevitable aspect of the postsecondary landscape, yet almost no mention of the *difference that differences make* (i.e., diversity of equity) was found. This implies state policy makers may be adopting a laissez-faire stance toward diversity. As Horowitz (1987) noted, a laissez-faire approach to diversity is not uncommon in higher education. Historically, the belief has been that diversity is a worthy goal, but that close intervention should be avoided, leaving it to students and staff at individual institutions to work out the specifics. Our findings suggest that beyond acknowledging diversity as a fact of educational life in the United States (i.e., diversity of difference), SHEEO agencies do not consider the effects of diversity on educational outcomes (i.e., diversity of equity) in their planning efforts.

The implication for this is critical. Although states may impact postsecondary educational diversity through multiple policies, such as financial aid, developmental

education, and affirmative action, these are not ostensibly part of statewide planning efforts lead by SHEEO agencies. This prompts additional questions about the extent to which state efforts around diversity in postsecondary education are coordinated, as well as questions about the policy process for diversity in postsecondary education. Our findings hint at an incremental approach to strategic planning, which is not surprising given the complicated as well as controversial nature of diversity policy.

First articulated in 1959 by Yale economist Charles Lindblom, *incrementalism* is a process by which decisions are largely made via a kind of marginal analysis. Described by Lindblom as *successive-limited* comparisons, incrementalism acknowledges the limited resources (e.g., time, intellectual, factual, and otherwise) with which decision makers operate. In an incremental approach, policy makers engage in a process of considering a limited number of possible new policies or policy changes in relation to those policies already in place. Kingdon (2002) posited that in an environment where decisions are complex and the political fallout is uncertain, incrementalism is a pragmatic approach.

This is important because it suggests that absent the participation of SHEEO agencies in what Kingdon (2002) called *agenda change*, non-incremental changes in postsecondary diversity policy will be left to other policy actors. Evidence for this exists in the debate over the role of race-based affirmative action. Anti-affirmative action groups have been influential in passing state bans on the use of affirmative policies by postsecondary institutions (Hart, 2009). The State of Texas, which has been the target of high profile lawsuits (e.g., *Fisher v. University of Texas*, 2013; *Fisher v. University of Texas,* 2016; and *Hopwood v. State of Texas, 1996*) over the use of affirmative action in admissions, has in many ways been left to react in its policymaking capacity. Although outside the scope of this study, the issue of whether SHEEO agencies should play an agenda-setting role with respect to postsecondary diversity policy is intriguing and worthy of consideration.

Future Implications and Recommendations

Finally, returning to the idea that the presence of diversity is a necessary but not sufficient condition for deriving educational benefits, we wonder whether SHEEO agencies might better maximize mission attainment through adopting a diversity of equity approach in planning. Findings from extant research cited above point to the potential for diversity to enhance educational outcomes, including learning, critical thinking, engagement, and retention, if diversity is planned and systematic. These findings seem to be maintained from a legal standpoint at institutions across the country, despite President Trump and Education Secretary DeVos rolling back Title IX extensions (Office for Civil Rights, 2017). Concurrently, many states are focusing on college completion initiatives with the goal of increasing the number of citizens with postsecondary credentials. Prompted in part by the Obama administration's espousal of the 2020 goal (i.e., to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world), numerous advocacy, research, policy, and philanthropic organizations have launched broad initiatives focused on college completion, with policy at the state level a focal point in these initiatives.

Perhaps these completion initiatives would benefit from an incorporation into a statewide plan that recognizes the nuanced but important ways diversity impacts educational attainment.

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