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Living Without My Foods: African Students' Eating Habits Compared to All in the United States of America

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ABSTRACT

The current project measures international students' dietary acculturation challenges focusing on sub-Saharan Africans in the U.S. The analysis examines responses from 142 questionnaire respondents. Respondents filled out a self-administered survey that inquired about their eating practices in their country and since they moved to the U.S. Findings include the fact students choose their foods based on whenever and wherever they are available in markets near their locations and on time spent in the U.S. Newly arrived participants searched for already known produce. Meanwhile, those living in the U.S. for more than twenty-five months started the adaptation process through self-preparation-meals or reliance on the recommendations of others. Students from Africa increased their intake of standard American foods unlike those from their homeland, such as pre-made meals and sweets as well as caffeine containing products but reduced the foods they grew up eating. Sub-Saharan students tended to shift their eating patterns even when foods from their home countries could be purchased in groceries near them. The analyses demonstrate eating adjustment as a consequence of the period lived in the USA, personal relationships, and food preferences from their country of origin.
Keywords: international students, dietary acculturation, migration, Africa, eating habits

The count of international students traveling to the United States for school at a college or university over time is going up (Institute for International Education [IIE]., 2023). However, between 2018-2019 and 2019-2020, a decrease of approximately 1.8% of enrollment of international students in U.S. colleges and universities was observed compared to the previous time period (I.I.E., 2023). Although smaller in percentage compared to all international students in the U.S., the count of African students is increasing. A comparison shows the number of sub-

Saharan students who registered at academic institutions in 2021-2022; there were 42,518 students (4.5%) international students in the U.S. from sub-Saharan Africa) – the highest percentage in history in comparison to 39,061 in 2020-21.

In the literature some researchers, like Alakaam et al. (2015), and Mustafa et al. (2020) have reported cultural challenges resulting from changing from one milieu to another that could impact schoolwork and general health of international students. The steadfast increase of diverse expansion of international students at U.S. educational settings calls for investigation given the limited amount of resources about their lifestyles and perspectives. Some researchers specifically examined food consumption of African students in U.S. educational institutions. Gilbert and Khokhar (2008) discussed their experiences as part of the subgroup of Caribbean from Africa and West Indians. Landman and Cruickshank (2001) called participants "Black" (versus African and West Indian) in a study conducted in the U.K. while Perez-Cueto et al. (2009) explicitly examined geographical ancestry and birthplace when examining change of eating practices in Belgium. Renzaho and Burns (2006) examined students from sub-Saharan Africa living in Victoria, Australia.

More generally, fewer social scientists have studied the dietary intake of international students as part of cultural discovery and adaptation. Most work on students away from home is concentrated on *adaptational processes* that undoubtfully go hand in hand with experiences from different cultures because students learn to live in their new educational and residential environments (Alakaam et al., 2015; Barer-Stein, 1979; Berry, 2003; Cemalcilar & Falbo, 2008; Chiu, 1995; Church, 1982; Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Mustafa et al., 2020; Sam & Berry, 2010; Shepherd, 2002; Smith, 2006; Wu et al., 2015; Ybema et al., 2009). By adaptational processes it is meant psychological challenges (stress plus coping) following arrival in a different society (Ryan & Twibell, 2000; Singh et al., 2022; Ward et al., 2001; Zaharna, 1989). Kim (1988) described intercultural change through which an individual goes in life that occur after first years of adaptation in a specific society and has to adapt into a new unknown cultural environment.

More broadly, this article examines international students' food consumption, focusing more on students from Africa as they culturally adjust (Kagan & Cohen, 1990), keeping in mind that they will move away from their culture of origin while getting closer to the new one, consistent with their previous socialization. It also examines the following questions: Are there any modifications in eating patterns and individualities that can be uncovered? Could transformations be similar for all international students or vary based on characteristics such as level of education, sex, and age? Are changes in food habits of students from Africa comparable to students coming from other countries or continents?

Background

There are many terms for food consumption that express objects eaten, the intake amount, the grade of the produce, its origin, processes of obtention, and preparation. Thus, diet is related to the socio-cultural environment in which it originated as well as the individual's religion, buying power, mental state, geo-political region, and

broader elements of society. The intersection of demographic characteristics of a person provides his or her social status and food practices.

Caballero et al. (2003, 1963) and Sanou et al. (2014) argue dietary patterns as standpoints and actions correlated to dietary practices. Food habits are the ways in which members of the society use the food supply in their environment (Lăcătuşu et al. 2019). de Garine (1987) thinks they provide unity to a society. Jastran et al. (2009) add that there are daily actions that are repetitive regarding liquids and solids as well as intake settings. Food habits and ordinary diet practices change across societies (Monterrosa et al. 2020). For example, in many parts of Europe, it is more common to eat at specific times daily with in-between-meal snacks. As a result, dietary patterns can open a path in understanding a society (Cleveland et al., 2009).

Health has been the main interest of much previous research in correlation to relocation and dietary patterns (Alakaam et al., 2015; Gil et al., 2005; Gilbert & Khokhar, 2008; Landman & Cruickshank, 2001; Leong 2015; Monterrosa et al. 2020; Mustafa et al., 2020; Papadaki et al., 2007; Renzaho & Burns, 2006; Sanou et al., 2014; Yan & FitzPatrick 2016;). Cortez and Senauer (1996), for example, reported a shift in preference after migration, income, and produce displayed in stores (people shopped for affordable instead of salutary foods). Perez-Cueto et al. (2009) found that 85% of foreign students in Belgium changed their diet. Raj et al. (1999), Leong (2015), and Uyen and Chambers IV (2020) corroborated the length of related change in dietary habits in the U.S.

Jastran et al. (2009) and Alakaam et al. (2015) discussed how transformations in diet are correlated to individuals' ideals driven by professional status and marital status. Those habits fluctuate based on life events. Food choices are a function of where they are available: campus restaurants offer options that may not be found in food places around town, even disregarding the moment at which food is served. Some cultures have specific meal components based on hours of the day. Adjustments throughout walks of life are arranged and designed based on individual objectives and standards (Alakaam et al., 2015; Nestle et al., 1998).

Researchers also reported that following immigration, Asian Indians in the U.S. had reduced intake of native meals composed of grains, greens and raised legumes, sweet drinks, cheeses, and American-like foods and beverages as well as Africans living in France (Almohanna et al. 2015; Calandre et al. 2019; Su 2003,).

Dietary Patterns and Social Status

Rasmussen (1996) demonstrated that it is possible to see unique particularities of a stratum in dietary intake among the Tuaregs in Saharan and sub-Saharan regions of Africa. Forka (2008) showed that eating is a bonding experience for the Guidars in northern Cameroon. Sobal (1998, 2005) underlined the magnitude of ways of life in determining food patterns and asserts that for individuals who share a meal, personalities are at play. de Garine (1987) remarked that individuals would choose less nutritious and healthy eats to display class.

Brown et al. (2010) claimed that food and food staples are a way through which international students have learned social practices and part of their origins making

dieting communal and personal. Along the line of the last point, Perez-Cueto et al. (2008) emphasized the meaningfulness of uncovering all aspects surrounding the sharing of a meal at any time and the social importance.

Food Patterns of Students from Sub-Saharan Africa

Although Sub-Saharan African international students originate from multiple countries, their food practices overlap more than one would think. Many countries within the region have common staples. Examples of foods before contact with colonizers included yams, cassava, sorghum, rice, millet, banana-plantain, and teff (Noyongoyo, 2011). People would hunt, fish, and eat farm animals and chickens to add amino acids in their diet. African agriculture produces many types of products like sugarcane, dates, cotton, coffee, cocoa, vegetables of various kinds, sesame, coconuts, cashew, and potatoes (Noyongoyo, 2011). All of those products are directly consumed without processes that alter their nutrient content. Barer-Stein (1979) argued that despite the diversity of tribes on the African continent, there are similar patterns that can be observed beyond the multiplicity of traditions (Calandre & Ribert, 2019).

Eating patterns below the Sahara Desert consist of multiple grains-like products (Flynn, 2005). In many parts of Tanzania, meals, for example, include something starchy, a dish of greens on the side that is more likely a type of "gravy/sauce." Validators, the starchy foods, are "ingredients that are so central to the composition of a meal that their presence defines the meal" (Flynn, 2005, p. 53).

In contrast, it has been argued that eating patterns in America share a lot of similarities with the expansion of identically ready-to-eat foods and places (Gabaccia, 1998; Ritzer, 2004). As per Gabaccia (1998), there is no food that could be tagged American statewide because ethnic foods such as bagel and pizza are now iconic, and ready-to-order foods as well as different types of Mexican-like dishes are cooked and served everywhere in the country although originating from a specific locality like New York or Florida.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As with empirical studies, theoretical accounts of transnational acculturation have been mostly psychological in nature (see Figure 1; Berry, 2003; Sam & Berry, 2010; Shepherd, 2002; Smith, 2006; Ybema et al., 2009). The two structural designs of adaptation in a culture, for instance, proposes multiple approaches depending on how one remains attached to country of origin and country of residence. Multiculturals using a *bicultural strategy* exhibited an elevated degree of connection with both localities; little determination with host and country of origin employed a *marginalized* approach; *integrated* individuals are those who identity with their current country with decreased country-of-origin and preferring country of origin to residential local is a *separated* stratagem (Berry, 2003). Each tactic improves the acculturation process by attenuating mental challenges that arise from migrating to a different society.

Issue 1: maintenance of heritage culture and identity

+	-	+	-
Integration	Assimilation	Multiculturalism	Melting Pot

Issue 2: Relationships sought among groups

Separation	Marginalization	Segregation	Exclusion

Attitudes of Immigrants groups   Attitude of larger society
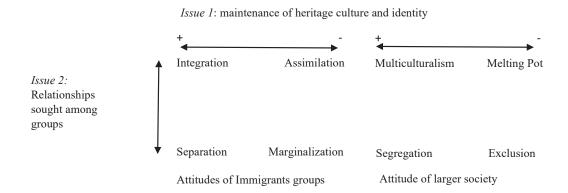
Figure 1: Acculturation Strategies in Ethnocultural Groups and the Larger Society (from Noyongoyo, 2011)

Reviewing Berry's models (2003) shows first, people who manifest a large degree of connection with both countries (where they are from and where they are living) go through less adaptational strain. In opposition, those displaying a loose connection with residence and place of origin present the top of adaptational strain. At the end, people with combined habits (i.e., those expressing a large place-of-residence, moving-away-from-place-of-origin personality or elevated-origin, small-current-locale individuality) present a middle-of-the-road adaptation strain.

More generally, *sojourners* on average feature multiple non-mental aspects connected to passage from one culture to another (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994; Hayes & Lin, 1994). Hechanova-Alampay et al. (2002) and Prieto-Welch (2016) affirm that sojourners go through a rollercoaster of emotions ranging from profoundly lost, intensely anxious and confused, through disappointed that preconceived realities about the current country are not confirmed, to feeling deeply isolated away from siblings, parents, and companions.

A similar range appears reflected in food choices. Shepherd's (2002) *food choice* scheme points out a few of the aspects, including price and availability, that may impact eating selection and intake. Meanwhile, Sobal's (1998) model comparing cultures, which places individuality at the center of the discourse for oneself, claims and presents different facets during multiple settings as corroborated by Ybema et al. (2009). Eating patterns are correlated to individuals' views and their upbringing (Almohanna et al., 2015; Mustafa et al., 2020; Sanou et al., 2014; Smith, 2006).

For Jastran et al. (2009), food practices are similar to daily habits in individuals' activities. Food patterns encompass what is eaten (legumes or protein), moment of the day (earlier or later in the day), geographical (on or off campus, restaurant, or home), tangible situation (sick or not, young or adult) and social settings (wedding, baptism, or funerals; Noyongoyo, 2011). Such practices are intertwined with individuals' lives for they reflect individual choices supported by what is known, penchant, and under consideration for food.

Thus, dietary patterns are mental depictions that allow people in their habitat to select and build their food habits (Jastran et al., 2009; Leong 2015; Mustafa et al., 2020). Bisogni et al. (2002) utilized constructionism coupled with grounded theory to elaborate a theoretical approach to personality regarding food. Theoretically speaking, eating patterns are tangible elements of a society that are as concrete and verifiable as other realities such as buildings, and they have information in their representation (Bisogni et al., 2002).

The Present Project

The goals of the current project were to examine insight about international students' food practices in the U.S. Food adaptation is part of cultural adjustment. Connecting dietary patterns to society and personality allows one to understand what reasons individuals use to shift their food practices thereby impacting their specific society in ways that, in the long run, could influence international eating habits. The specific community observed here is universities, colleges, and their surroundings.

Eating habits are connected to everyday events that follow each one that happened to be created by general society. Food habits are, spreading more through inevitable global exchanges that leads to a discovery of a multitude of edible products for people (Mennell et al., 1992). In the opinion of Caballero et al. (2003), the percentage of Americans who eat snacks has been steadfastly growing in the last quarter century (from 77 to 84%). People migrating to the U.S. are consequently more likely to transform their eating patterns by adopting local practices such as snacking and eating multiple un/healthy meals. How fast and how much transformation occurs could depend on and differ by where the person came from before living in the U.S.

More specifically, this project focused on the eating adaptation of international students, particularly African students. The connections created over a meal by individuals, the venues where they eat, and the motives of their actions constitute the goals of this research because they map out elements that influence the shift in dietary patterns.

To that end, the review of literature suggests multiple important points that are good forecasters of changing food patterns and how those patterns transform while individuals move from one society to the next. Lifespan, biological features, class, duration in current milieu, residence, and presence of home foods are key variables. It is important to study all actors, the place, the moment, the seriousness of the event and the patrons (Perez-Cueto et al., 2008).

Food adjustments are better understood through a comprehensive approach that uses interviews and surveys, which is the approach taken in this study, based on Berry's (2003) adaptation techniques and Jastran et al. (2009) who theorized an eating selection framework that can be used to capture the eating patterns of international graduate and undergraduates after their arrival in the U.S. and prior to their departure from their home countries, as well as their attitudes regarding foreign and locally produced goods.

Hypotheses

Several hypotheses can be drawn from the foregoing discussion. The following three research hypotheses were tested:

Hypothesis 1. There is a difference of eating patterns among students before coming to the U.S. based on their home country.

Hypothesis 2. Eating habits shift in connection to demographic characteristics, residency situation, duration in the current milieu, and accessibility to home foods.

Hypothesis 3. There is a correlation between continental origin and transformation of food patterns mediated by accessibility and dining options.

DATA AND METHODS

Data from a survey of international scholars in over two dozen of U.S. academic settings were used to test the hypotheses noted above.

Respondents

All students registered at educational settings in U.S. were allowed to answer the surveys. Partners who supported the recruitment were people in charge of departments managing international students and oral volunteers. International student organizations online and on campus helped in the recruiting process. A link to the questionnaire was included in the e-mail and an opportunity was given to participants who preferred a printed version to complete the questionnaire. Given expectations of a limited number of participants, effort was put in directly finding appropriate respondents due to the goals of the project (using a convenience screening approach).

The Survey

Questions on the survey asked about respondents' social traits and eating patterns beside adaptational path such as sex/gender, level of education, duration in the country, place of origin, faith, educational specialization.

Some questions asked respondents to express their pattern of choosing food and dietary patterns prior to living in the U.S. to report eating locations and shifts since arrival. Another section of the questionnaire focused on social personality and adjustment in the respondents' present environment. Finally, there were inquiries about the consequences of lack of accessibility to home foods on dietary patterns and relationships.

Variables

Personal traits encompassed the statistics such as sex (female or male), year of birth, year in school, place of birth in relation to continents. For the purpose of analysis,

"Mixcont" groups North and South American, European, and Australian were used as dichotomous measures.

Dietary habits were captured by asking respondents the number of times they consumed some foods prior to coming to the U.S. Another inquiry polled respondents about current consumption of different food types. The Likert-type scale coding gradually went from "Eat much less" to "Eat much more".

Food adjustment was measured through a variable built after running a factor analysis to measure a shift towards eating American foods. The foods that show adaptation to American eating habits are the foods that have a lot of sugar, are frozen, are sold in cans, went through oil, and between-meal snacks. Some items that are more likely to be found in Africa were coded to match other variables and they include yam and cassava. In the survey, yam referred to the true tuber as opposed to colloquial American use of "yam" to indicate sweet potatoes.

To check the shifts in accessibility of home foods, ability to buy home foods locally, and consumption-outside-of-residency foods, a few questions asked respondents about their habits. Accessibility of non-American foods was captured by inquiring if respondents could find their native foods in grocery stores around the current living area. Answers ranged from "never" to "always" in a Likert-type scale. The ability to regularly procure foreign foods was measured by asking how many times respondents purchased those foods in a thirty-day period. Multiple variables were created to measure how many times per month someone consumed some foods. Eating-out-of-one's-home compilation was created by asking how many times participants ate at specific locations (at home or at a dining spot) and by choosing in the range "never" to "every day" (Noyongoyo, 2011).

Many measures, such as duration in current location, captured from "as low as six months" to "over twenty-five months" among students. Questions about the influence of friends on dietary patterns collected information about relationships with other international students and people from the current country. Participants indicated who they spent a lot of time with on the range from 1 to 7 ("never" to "every day"). This question tracked the influence of other international students in their adjustment process. Participants also picked from a list of what influences them, with a selection among the knowledge about food procured, influence of friends or acquaintances, cost of nutritious foodstuff, and conditions in their personal ancestry related to diseases. Respondents decided which element was motivating or not. Analyses were conducted with all of those points.

RESULTS

The 142 students who completed the entire survey constitute the total *n* in the analyses although additional participants answered at least part of the questionnaire, yielding a 65% level of participation.

Characteristics of the Sample

Demographics show that most respondents were female (66% female compared to 34% male). Respondents aged between eighteen and forty-eight are grouped for the analyses into four categories with the first group aged 18 to 22 (34%), the second group aged 23 to 27 (41%), the third aged 28 to 32 (17%), and aged 33 and over (8%). Asian students made up almost 49% of the respondents while Africans were 16%, Europeans 15%, and Australians 2.8%. More than half of the participants (52.2%) were pursuing a degree beyond a bachelors. Fifty-eight of respondents lived in the U.S. for at least a quarter century compared to the newly arrived (under 7 months) who constituted 9% of the sample, while 13% lived in the U.S. between 7-12 months, 7% lived in the U.S. between 13-18 months, and 13% lived in the U.S. between 19-24 months.

Pre-U.S. Dietary Patterns

Diet prior to living in the U.S. was measured by asking participants the number of times they consumed foods on the list provided.

   Central are the products eaten every week prior to the U.S. The other ones were *once a month* and *not once*, which represented peripheral eating items. Based on the second table, some items were part of every week's meals for all individuals in the sample such as juices, dairy products, rice, tea and/or coffee, sweets, red meat, chicken, potatoes, and fish.

   As stated prior, there are items unique to particular categories. For instance, yam and cassava are weekly items for students from Africa compared to other students ($p < .01$). Other products ingested once or so per month by African students before moving to the U.S. includes juices and canned items ($p \leq .05$). Drinking alcohol for students from Africa and Asia was found to be significant ($p \leq .001$), a distinct difference when compared with other groups. Coming from Asia was correlated with a decreased amount of red meat compared to students from Africa and other regions of the world ($p \leq .01$).

Patterns of Foods Intake After Arrival in the United States

Five options on the initial survey were transformed into three to understand whether respondents ate less, as much as before coming to the U.S. or more. The results are presented in Table Two (Noyongoyo, 2011).

   Table Two shows that coming to the U.S. led to changes that differed by continent of origin. The percentage of students from Africa eating cassava after coming to the country was 0%, the same percentage as those who ate yams. It also can be seen that intake of snack-like items between regular mealtimes went up as did fishy products, confections, in-can-ready foods, and convenience dinners. Respondents from the Africa and Asia consumed more poultry-related meals ($p \leq .01$). A remark can be made that the students from Africa had more alcoholic beverages and rice than other students in the survey ($p \leq .05$). There is also, as marked by many participants, a rise in intake of ready-made meals, tea, and coffee ($p \leq .01$).

Table 1: Eating Patterns Pre-U.S. (Contingency Tables[a])

Food Type	Africa			Asia			Mixcont*			Sig[b]
	Never	Monthly	Weekly	Never	Monthly	Weekly	Never	Monthly	Weekly	
Fruits and juices	.0	9	91	3	4	93	.0	5	96	NS
Fish	9	26	65	25	24	51	13	23	64	NS
Red meat	4	26	70	32	16	52	6	26	68	.003
Chicken	4	13	83	1	15	84	4	4	92	NS
Milk and dairy products	9	9	82	1	15	84	4	4	92	NS
Rice	.0	9	91	1	3	96	2	15	83	NS
Cassava	26	30	44	78	6	16	74	13	13	.000
Potato	13	35	52	9	26	65	.0	21	79	0.95
Yam	30	26	44	70	20	10	57	30	13	.001
Corn	9	41	50	28	46	26	28	26	46	.039
Soft drinks/ sodas	13	57	30	35	32	33	47	21	32	.027
Tea/Coffee	17	13	70	13	15	72	26	4	70	NS
Wine/Alcohol	65	17	18	78	10	12	30	15	55	.000
Snack foods	43	35	22	32	44	24	35	35	30	NS
Sugar and confectionary	4	30	62	15	17	68	15	33	52	NS
Packaged cakes and cookies	30	52	18	29	38	33	23	49	28	NS
Canned foods	61	26	13	68	20	12	38	30	32	0.16
TV (frozen dinners)	91	9	.0	86	11	3	79	13	8	NS

Note: Mixcont* designates the Americas, Australian, and European continent. [a] Those represent percentages (%). [b] Sig. (significance) was tested with Chi Square (Noyongoyo 2011).

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Table 2: Eating Patterns in the U.S. (Contingency Tables[a])

Food Type	Africa			Asia			Mixcont*			Sig[b]
	Eat less	Same as home	Eat more	Eat less	Same as home	Eat more	Eat less	Same as home	Eat more	
Fruits and juices	56	9	35	48	25	27	64	15	21	NS
Fish	30	9	61	16	29	55	17	34	49	NS
Red meat	52	22	26	70	17	13	55	26	19	NS
Chicken	18	23	59	24	32	44	17	53	30	.059
Milk and dairy products	26	30	44	17	48	35	28	49	23	NS
Rice	13	43	44	51	33	16	40	34	26	.017
Cassava	78	22	.0	35	58	7	30	66	4	.001
Potato	35	35	30	12	40	48	45	32	23	.001
Yam	74	26	.0	39	54	7	30	45	25	.000
Corn	61	22	17	28	50	22	26	30	44	.002
Soft drinks/ sodas	57	8	35	48	24	28	64	15	21	NS
Tea/Coffee	30	26	44	25	26	49	15	57	28	.009
Wine/Alcohol	23	13	64	30	45	25	32	47	22	.004
Snack foods	9	17	74	16	26	58	11	23	66	NS
Sugar and confectionary	22	4	74	23	15	62	15	11	74	NS
Packaged cakes and cookies	30	26	44	39	36	25	36	32	32	NS
Canned foods	9	17	74	16	26	58	11	23	66	NS
TV (frozen dinners)	30	5	65	16	24	59	11	36	53	.035

Note: Mixcont* designates the Americas, Australian, and European continent. [a] Those represent percentages (%). [b] Sig. (significance) was tested with Chi Square (Noyongoyo 2011).

Factors Affecting Dietary Patterns After Coming to the U.S.

Accessibility, flavor of nutritional items, and procurement affects dietary habits. The first hint that predicts quality of diet was access to the items ($p \leq .01$). Accessibility to nutritional foods is a main concern for students from Africa (44%) and Asia (50%) in comparison to individuals from other parts of the world (29%) ($p \leq .001$). Knowing about the quality of foods was important to Africans (61%), Asians (42%) and 54% other students not from those two continents.

Things that discouraged almost all Africans was the costs of nutritional foods. Other respondents picked that the cost of items in stores highly influenced their buying selections. No category of international students stood out as influenced by friends or people they know. It seems though they were not willing to report friends' influence (48% for African students, 57% for Asian students, and 55% for other students). Influence of friends and other people did not qualify as key point impacting dietary patterns.

When it comes to purchasing home country produce, ranges were 1-4 with 4 representing "buying more than five times in a thirty-day period" and 1 representing "not at all". Sixty nine percent of respondents from Africa and 65% from Asia shopped more than twice a month compared to North and South Americans, Europeans, and Australians (43%).

The correlation analysis showed relationships between the discussed findings. The interrelationships are notable for multiple cases. The connection that eating adaptation has with home country is remarkable ($p \leq .05$). African students are more likely, and more quickly, than others to shift their eating patterns. Time lived in the U.S. is considerably intertwined with purchasing non-local produce. Participants who recently arrived are less likely to buy foreign items compared to those who spent more time in the country ($p \leq .05$). There were a lot of respondents from Africa residing in the U.S. for two or more years ($p \leq .01$). Analyses revealed that local products were cheaper than foreign items when they were found in shops ($p \leq .01$). Hence, the propensity to purchase and consume available imported food is significantly related with the price of these foods: the higher the price, the less likely students will purchase such foods. Despite all, more students from Asia bought foreign foods available in groceries stores compared to the rest of respondents in the study ($p \leq .05$). A greater proportion of participants aged 25 and more lived away from university residence halls compared to those who were younger ($p \leq .01$). Also, the former students were more likely to be graduate students ($p \leq .01$), have a greater likelihood to buy imported foods ($p \leq .05$) and a greater probability of having lived longer in the United States. ($p \leq .05$). Being Asian and educated had a remarkable connection which resulted in a higher proportion of students being from Asia and in higher educational settings in comparison to other international students ($p \leq .01$). Residing either on or off campus had a negative connection that could suggest that more non-male students lived in university residence halls ($p \leq .01$). The sample had a greater number of older (over 25) and in higher level of education respondents ($p \leq .01$), suggesting a positive correlation between age and level of education. The correlation between education

and sex suggests that, while there were more females in the sample (66.2%), a lower number of females were graduate students ($p \leq .01$).

Multivariate Analysis

There are six models in Table 3 that predict a shift in students' dietary practices. The first pattern considers ancestry in Africa and Asia—with the category Mixcont (Australia, Europe, and North/South America) as the reference category) – and the variable, access to foreign produce in groceries (available foods). The second simulation includes students' tendency to look for/buy imported native foods (purchasing foreign foods), while the third tabulation reveals the impacts of how long they have resided within the country (duration in the U.S.). Pattern four includes whether living on institutional facility or not (off/on campus), impacts dining. Pattern five omits length and place of residency variables. The model also controlled for the co-variables of access to imported foods in stores and African continent (Afrifoods) and the co-variables Asian and accessibility of imported foods (Asifoods). The last pattern checks for relationships between interaction terms and autonomous terms.

Table 3: OLS Regressions of Shift of Dietary Patterns retrogressed on Ancestry, Available Foods, Purchasing Foreign Foods, Duration in the U.S., On/Off Campus, Eat Out, and Co-variables (Noyongoyo, 2011).

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Africa	.329*	.344**	.324*	.329*	-.478	-.493
	(.155)	(.155)	(.160)	(.162)	(.385)	(.389)
Asia	.049	.078	.073	.071	.153	.138
	(.117)	(.118)	(.119)	(.120)	(.249)	(.252)
Available	-.117	-.117**	-.119**	-.120*	-.125	-.130
Foods	*	(.059)	(.059)	(.059)	(.089)	(.090)
	(.059)					
Purchasing		-.031	-.032	-.033	-.033	-.035+
Foreign Foods		(.022)	(.022)	(.022)	(.020)	(.020)
Duration in the			.018	.014	---	.011
States			(.038)	(.040)		(.036)
On/Off Campus				.043	---	.046
				(.132)		(.122)
DineOut					.073***	.073***
					(.018)	(.018)
Afrifoods					.397**	.400*
					(.171)	(.173)
Asifoods					-.022	-.018
					(.117)	(.118)
Intercept	3.675	3.713	3.655	3.640	3.065	3.002
Adjusted R^2	.035	.043	.037	.030	.186	.175

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses. * p<.05, **p.01, ***p.001, +.10

The results, from Noyongoyo (2011), reveal continent of origin to be a statistically significant predictor of changes in eating habits with respect to students from Africa. Except for results for Models 5 and 6, African origin has a positive and statistically significant effect on change in eating habits ($p = .05$ for Model 1, $p = .01$ for Model 2, $p = .05$ for Models 3 and 4). There is statistically significant proof that African students tend to change their eating habits to the standard American diet compared to those from Australia, Europe, and North/South America.

By contrast, being from Asia had no statistically significant effect on change in eating habits. Students from Asia are no more likely than students from Australia, Europe, and North/South America to change their eating habits to standard American diets. This finding was consistent across all six models.

Table 3 also shows that availability of imported native foods is a significant predictor of changes in eating habits. Apart from estimates for Models 5 and 6, estimates for that variable were all statistically significant ($p = .05$ for Model 1, $p = .01$ for Models 2 & 3, and $p = .05$ for Model 4). Unlike African origin, however, this relationship is negative: students are less likely to change their eating habits to the standard American diet whenever they can find products from their home countries on the shelves near wherever they live and shop.

Notably, both African origin and presence of imported home country foods in grocery stores near them became insignificant once the interaction terms are included in Models 5 and 6, suggesting that each of these two variables have statistically significant independent effects on change in eating habits. But, once interaction effects are controlled (Africa-food availability is the statistically significant estimate), the independent effects disappear. The interaction effect is capturing the independent effect of each of these variables.

Yet, the interaction estimates should not be dismissed offhand. They clearly indicate that dietary acculturation is greater among students from Africa than among all other students, which remains the case even when imported native foods are available in local stores. While the interaction between Africa and availability of African foods is significant, it is not between Asia and availability of Asian foods.

Taken together, results in Table 3 propose three key findings. First, African students have a greater tendency to change their eating habits to the standard American diet than other students. Second, the change in eating habits is influenced by the availability of imported native foods in stores. And third, African participants were quicker compared to the rest of respondents to transform their eating habits to the standard American diet holds even when imported native foods are available.

DISCUSSION

The goal of the current research was to measure dietary adjustment of international students in U.S. educational settings focusing on those from Africa now residing in the U.S., as compared with students from around the world. The answers collected from 142 respondents were scrutinized after the questionnaires were collected.

Three research questions were investigated. The first asked whether participants' dietary patterns (before coming to the United States) could be different based on their

continental root. The second examined whether changes in students' eating habits (after migration) depend on variables like ancestry, biological features, age, schooling, extent of U.S. residency, and foreign foods availability inside groceries. The third question explored ancestry role and dietary patterns as mediated through produce accessibility and going to eat at a restaurant or fast-food joints.

Results of the study indicate a complex pattern of relationships between eating habits and many of the selected demographics. Findings indicate that dietary practices before immigration to the United States did indeed vary because of ancestry, showcasing continental differences. Being a student from Africa was found to be a significant and consistent predictor of changes in dietary habits to a more standard American diet: increased intake of sweets, tea and or coffee, packaged meals, foods in can, and baked pastries.

As a result, multiple policies can spring from the current project. To start, findings of this study show how non-American, sub-Saharan scholars at diverse academic institutions throughout the country may be having adaptational challenges. These challenges may especially be due to the price of imported foods in local stores; but it may also be due to the absence of native foods in college/university cafeteria. Also, the rise in number of international students in educational settings call for the implementation of several practices that are not limited to (1) increasing business opportunities in the surroundings of the campus by having a grocery store that is willing to carry native foods from around the world that reflect the international students body on campus, (2) training campus advisors who are capable of understanding and discussing academics (perceptions of grade and relationships with teachers, for instance) and the mental and physical health of international students, in order to help the students perform better and be healthier. Given that although participating grocers may be able to offer native foods in groceries, there may be less chance for students to purchase them due to elevated costs, it may be helpful for the stores carrying those foods to be subsidized by the universities and colleges or the local city government. Consequently, to be an attractive institution for foreign students, educational settings can improve offered options of meals in college and university dining halls. In other words, foods could match the diverse population of people in educational settings. An option could be to have daily and or weekly dishes for specific regions, another could be a restaurant with diverse international menus, and lastly could be to have a chef dedicated to non-U.S. students. Another finding showed that students can cook, and they could therefore be involved in the menu planning and other changes that a university or college would like to make to show that the international students are welcome in their midst. All those processes could change the cultural diversity in the area, as well as academic diversity on campus, and provide an economic boost in the region given that international students pay higher fees.

More research can delve deeper in specific parts of international student life, like the influence of foreign foodstuff on students' educational performance. A question that could be answered is the importance that food plays in their abilities to do schoolwork. Those projects may sample a bigger population for a better understanding and comparison of participants from sub-Saharan Africa and other

international students in colleges and universities. Coping mechanisms (connection to locals and other students) that different student groups adopt on campuses may also be fruitful directions for future research.

Limitations and Consequences

There are limitations that prevent generalizing the findings of this project. Most respondents were from Asia with a small number of sub-Saharan African respondents. Moreover, data were based on convenience and snowball sampling, not random sampling, and thus may not be as generalizable as one might like. Finally, underestimation due to self-reporting by respondents is an important limitation.

Yet, results of the current study match previous findings that reported shifts of eating habits among immigrants (Alakaam et al., 2015; Almohanna et al. 2015; Cemalcilar & Falbo, 2009, Papadaki et al., 2007; Perez-Cueto et al., 2009; Sanou et al. 2014.) Su (2003) and Almohanna et al. (2015) observed similar patterns among Asian Indians in the U.S. that are very similar to what we found to be true for African students.

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Shared Governance and Systems Theory: A Mixed Methods Study of Faculty Perceptions and Ideas

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ABSTRACT

At a time when higher education faces serious existential challenges, it is important for stakeholders in higher education to come together to make important decisions that are thoughtful and internally legitimate. Shared governance, a concept that is widely touted yet wildly varied in implementation, is the best path forward for decision makers. In an effort to better understand shared governance and how it might best be practiced, this mixed-methods study uses data from faculty at one university to develop a model and a specific set of recommendations for shared governance reform. Viewed through the lens of systems theory, data analysis leads to a model that considers cultural and structural changes for shared governance that are cyclical and systemic.
Keywords: shared governance, faculty governance, structure, communication, recognition, trust, transparency

Leaders of institutions of higher education have a lot to consider when making decisions that impact operations and the institutional environment. Along the way, they must reflect on and consider who should be involved in the decision-making

process and if the balance of power proportionately reflects the investment of the stakeholders and their responsibility to implement change. That is the essence of shared governance. More formally, shared governance can be defined as the collective and mutual oversight of university operations partaken equally by faculty and administrators (Bahls 2014; Cramer 2017; Gerber 2014; Johnston, 2003; LaForge 2020).

That definition notwithstanding, the concept of shared governance and all it encompasses remains fuzzy. Despite much research and writing about best practices in shared governance, the specific ways that university personnel define, interpret, and enact shared governance are often highly individualized and contextualized. And, arguably, shared governance has become more scrutinized amidst high profile events in recent years. For example, emergency operational and financial changes, such as those in response to COVID-19, serve as an example where shared governance is challenged. Institutions quickly convened health and safety experts to determine operating protocols, quotas for gatherings and communal spaces, and policies for campus interactions (Crapo, 2021; Ramlo, 2021). However, the speed with which the administration maneuvered to redefine the higher education experience out of necessity raised new questions hitting at the most core concerns of the shared governance argument: who is charged with oversight for the college environment? When decisions need to be made in haste, especially in times of crisis, should the balance of power be altered, and if so, when is the chance to revisit the decision made urgently to ensure balance over time?

The ways in which different institutional stakeholders are engaged in the various decision-making processes can be examined through many relevant topics, including but not limited to: academic freedom, free speech, tenure and promotion, and classroom and curriculum content (Garcia, 2020; Muhsin et al., 2019). The involvement of faculty and the representation of faculty voice in decisions such as these represents a critical institutional stake within the shared governance construct. It is, therefore, important to have a comprehensive understanding of the role of shared governance to influence policies, procedures, and the process of institutional decision making to ensure equal balance of power and stakeholder engagement over periods of time. In an effort to better understand shared governance and how it might best be practiced, this study uses data from faculty to develop a specific set of recommendations for shared governance reform.

The research questions guiding this study are:
1. What is shared governance as understood through relevant literature and practice?
2. What are current faculty perceptions of shared governance?
3. What are current faculty ideas for improved shared governance?

This article is organized into five sections. First, a review of the literature takes the reader through a summary of the history of shared governance to current and future topics related to shared governance. Then, the theoretical framework and the design of the study are explained. After that, the findings are presented in three parts: faculty perceptions, faculty ideas, and specific recommendations for improved shared governance. Finally, the discussion section relates the findings back to systems

theory, the theoretical framework, and makes clear that improving shared governance is about improving the culture and structures of an institution.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

When distilled down to its simplest form, shared governance is the balance of power between university faculty and university administration (American Association of University Professors [AAUP], 2015; Bahls, 2014; Cramer, 2017; DeCesare, 2020; Eckel, 2000; Gerber, 2014; Honu, 2018). At the core of shared governance, the distinction between faculty and administration is as rudimentary as *education* and *operations*. Faculty are charged with bearing the expertise in their disciplines, creating new knowledge in their fields, and discerning what knowledge students need to successfully acquire and apply the curriculum beyond the classroom. In many cases, faculty are considered the responsible party for education inside classrooms, labs, and other inquiry-based experiences while administrators oversee many of the components to support functions outside of the classroom setting: maintenance of the physical spaces, programs, and offerings that contribute to the general preparedness of the student body (Garcia, 2020; Muhsin et al., 2019). In comparison, administrators are responsible for overall institutional management: ensuring financial solvency, institutional advancement, stewarding the institution's physical and human resources, and ensuring the institutional mission is carried out (Birnbuam, 1988). Yet, these responsibilities are not exclusive; shared governance is a sort of checks and balances approach to decision making in higher education.

While conceptually simple, the practice of shared governance is incredibly more granular and complex. Shared governance often is considered only in relation to the decision-making process when dealing with a large university issue. However, the specific steps include many varied and specific components, are vested with different stakeholders, and would have significant impact on specific university operations. To exemplify this complexity, imagine that student retention is the large university issue; a vast, overarching concern that matters to all professionals at an institution. However, some of the possible outcomes of a shared governance process might consider highly specific and individualized responses and only have direct importance to certain professionals at the institution.

To best understand the practice of shared governance, this review of relevant literature begins by looking at the history of shared governance followed by the why and how of shared governance before concluding with a look at future issues.

A History of Shared Governance

With the founding of Harvard in 1636, the nation embarked upon its efforts to educate its citizenry beyond secondary education. American postsecondary institutions during the colonial era were the poor distant cousins of those in England who drew upon both the German research and Oxbridge residential models to influence their own structures at the time of their founding (Bess & Webster, 1999; Dorn, 2017 Gerber, 2014; Lucas, 2006; Thelin, 2011). Similarly, many early American institutions began with very few faculty who held higher degrees until early in the 19th century where

there was a growing number of faculty with specialty areas and doctoral degrees (Gerber, 2014). Conversely, Dorn (2017) noted that some institutions, like Bowdoin University in Maine, were founded with less focus on a particular degree or field but rather a "peculiar obligation to promote the common good" (p. 17). By the early 1900s, six universities enrolled more than 5,000 students, and three employed more than 500 instructional staff (Dorn, 2017).

As the number of American postsecondary institutions increased, so did the desire for faculty with specialized credentials. The Ph.D. was becoming an increasingly popular attainment for both students and professors. One's status in the academic community was measured by the type of degree held. With each additional degree, the faculty further proved their expertise in their field and in the classroom. While the number of Ph.D.'s grew and as the academy became more professionalized, the battle cry for academic freedom rang out loud in colleges and universities from coast to coast. "A growing determination among leading academics to define and defend the principle of academic freedom for all faculty in a way that would cross disciplinary boundaries led to the formation of the AAUP in 1915" (Gerber, 2014, p. 6). The call for academic freedom only intensified, and with the founding of AAUP, faculty believed that there was now a defender in their corner.

In the foundational years of governance in higher education, faculty were responsible for matters that dealt with curriculum development and classroom issues. Honu (2018) posited that this role would eventually expand to include working to make decisions on policy development, planning events for the institution, budgeting, and hiring and evaluating administrators. Gerber (2014) noted a push for more faculty governance in the 1920s. However, governing boards were reluctant to allow faculty members a larger stake in governing. Boards feared that increased faculty governance would detract from their main roles in teaching and research. This dynamic continued with very few changes for 40 more years until the 1960s.

In 1966, a joint statement was released by the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB), the American Council on Education (ACE), and the AAUP to "officially welcome the faculty's role in shared governance beyond teaching and the curriculum" (Honu, 2018, p. 3). According to the AAUP, the joint statement was created and shared as an ethos statement for administrators, faculty, and governing boards to guide their respective institutions (2015). The AAUP designed the statement to offer overarching guidance related to the importance of shared governance and specific considerations for implementation at individual institutions (Morphew, 1999).

Through the AAUP statement, shared governance is named as an important issue for academia that requires collective understanding. Furthermore, per the statement, shared governance is necessary to respond to changing funding models, to ensure institutional welfare particularly in times of personnel changes, and an overarching desire for collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches to solve educational problems.

Moving into the latter half of the twentieth century, institutions of higher education drifted towards a more corporate-like model in the running of the university (Gerber, 2014). Even the AGB, one of the organizations that coauthored the landmark AAUP statement on shared governance, made a call for "a more corporate model of

management in which a college or university's chief executive officer must resist academia's insatiable appetite for the kind of excessive consultation that can bring an institution to a standstill" (Gerber, 2014, p. 22). This corporatization is referenced and theorized in a number of different ways, including *academic capitalism* (Slaughter & Rhodes, 2009) and the neoliberalization of higher education (Giroux, 2014; Winslow, 2015). Rhoades (2003) argued that academic capitalism has completely changed how institutions operate by changing their management, production, and cultural system. These three areas of change have also caused increased demand for *managerial professionals* within the institution, causing faculty roles to shift in nature and in many cases further dividing the power of shared governance from faculty positions charged with education and management to dividing the professional roles all together: faculty and management.

Why Shared Governance?

Universities benefit when engaging in practices of governance with equitable responsibility and distribution of decision-making power among individuals and groups who have an invested *stake* in the success of the institution of higher education (Laforge, 2020). When universities engage faculty in regular and well-maintained governance practices, institutional decisions can move more rapidly, allow for many voices to be heard when making decisions, ensure the nuances of how implementation may vary across units and levels are considered, and generally feel more equitable (Cramer, 2017).

While there are clear benefits for university operations when shared governance occurs, there are also benefits for faculty members who choose to take part in the process. Birnbaum (1991) highlighted four ways a faculty member may benefit as a result of participating in faculty governance: 1) contributing to the management to their college, 2) providing a forum and a safe space for debating and finding solutions on institution policies, 3) gaining enlightenment on shared understandings of the goals among faculty as they relate to education values and beliefs, and 4) opportunities to demonstrate commitment to professional authority and values of the institution. Jones (2011) argued that while faculty benefit from these lofty university functions over time, there is little immediate reward or gratification for their service and expertise in the governance process. While faculty input is necessary for university decision making, it is often seen as an additional expectation or reserved only for more senior faculty members who are more invested in their institutional operations. To this end, faculty engagement in governance appears to be accepted as an essential part of higher education institutions; however, there is little incentive or rewards offered to balance these competing obligations (Flaherty, 2021a; Gardner, 2019; Jones, 2011).

Additionally, shared governance is an important part of the sustainability and growth of institutions of higher education. When enacted, shared governance protects faculty rights, academic freedom, and expression thereby allowing faculty to completely engage in their areas of expertise and focus on the creation of a robust educational experience (Flaherty, 2021a; Eastman & Boyles, 2015; Gerber 2010; Gitenstein, 2017). Shared governance allows faculty to apply their rich content

knowledge and traditional power over the classroom and curriculum to preserve the institution's culture, academic values, and mission (Brown, 2017). Ultimately, in matters of larger university operations, shared governance extends voice, input, and authority to teaching and research faculty (AAUP, 1994). To this end, a governance system founded on trust and transparency is critical for faculty and staff when making decisions regarding the university while enduring the pressures from external constituents (H. Brown, 2017; Johnston, 2003).

Best Practices in Shared Governance

Scholars have suggested several best practices that have been shown to have an impact on the successful implementation of shared governance practices across institutions of higher education (Bahls, 2014; Gittenstein, 2017; Honu, 2018; LaForge, 2020; Quarless & Barrett, 2017). Across the literature, there are some common recommended practices categorized as: developing a common definition; setting common expectations for engagement; creating a climate of trust; reviewing processes regularly; rewarding and recognizing participation; developing personal and working relationships; and ensuring work is action focused.

Bahls (2014) offers five best practices for shared governance that cut across all types of institutions of higher education (IHEs). These practices create the alignment necessary to allow all stakeholders to be integral leaders.

1. Actively engage board members, administrators, and faculty leaders in a serious discussion of what shared governance is (and isn't).
2. Periodically assess the state of shared governance and develop an action plan to improve it.
3. Expressly support strong faculty governance of the academic program.
4. Maintain a steadfast commitment to three-way transparency and frequent communication.
5. Develop deliberate ways to increase social capital between board members and members of the faculty.

Cramer and Kneupfer (2020) published a three-volume set on shared governance in higher education. In the first chapter of the third volume, Bliss et al. (2020) articulate key elements that should be present in any system of shared governance. Similar to Bahls (2014), they argue that:

- A governance system has bylaws and/or a constitution that specify the specific structures and processes that must be in place.
- Governance bodies have a formal process by which they conduct their meetings, generally parliamentary procedure.
- A governance system has clearly defined lines of communication that are codified in advance of any decision or announcement.
- A governing body should have groups of people who have been given responsibility to make decisions/recommendations.
- Shared governance must specify the means by which representatives communicate with and hear the ideas of those they represent. (pp. 6-9)

There is considerably more literature on shared governance best practices, and some of that will be visited in the discussion section below.

The Near- and Long-term Future of Shared Governance

Communication is one frequent and timeless challenge in the shared governance model between faculty and administration. Divergence between the administration and faculty has been noted as a key reason for communication troubles within a governance structure (Quarless & Barrett, 2017). Arguably, the most often noted difference in communication is based in the opposing concerns of these groups. Administrators are noted with prioritizing the operations of the institution, fiduciary responsibilities, and legal constraints. A new media ecosystem makes communication both simpler and more diffuse, changing our expectations of how we communicate with each other. And, without regular communication, important topics are not openly discussed and agreed upon by faculty and administration alike (Honu, 2018). Tiede et al. (2014) proposed

> the variety and complexity of the tasks performed by institutions of higher education produce an inescapable interdependence among governing board, administration, faculty, students, and others. The relationship calls for adequate communication among these components, and full opportunity for appropriate joint planning and effort. (p. 59)

In agreement, DeCesare (2020) offered that there is a distinct difference between monologue and dialogue.

Distance education, or online learning, has been a growing part of higher education for a while, and some institutions of higher education are pushing the envelope in their mode of growing this enterprise, raising serious shared governance issues. In 2017, Purdue University acquired Kaplan University, a for-profit and largely distance education entity. Faculty engaged the University Senate for a special session to discuss the deal that was announced to the university hours before it was made public (Fain & Seltzer, 2017; Seltzer, 2017). Faculty expressed concerns about lack of information and participation in the decision-making process related to significant university operations such as credentialing, academic program modifications, and curriculum. Similarly, the University of Arizona announced they would be acquiring Ashford University from an educational technology company, Zovio. There, faculty responded with concern and outrage for their lack of awareness and involvement in the considerations. In this instance, some faculty were invited to review the agreements and proposals but were required to sign non-disclosure agreements, reinforcing the sentiment shared by the faculty at large that they were not openly engaged in the decision-making process (Leingang, 2020).

Chaddock and Hinderliter (2017) raised the issue of diversity and the role it plays in shared governance. The necessity for diverse faculty is imperative to the growth and cultural competence of institutions of higher education. Chaddock and Hinderliter (2017) argued three key concerns to diversification attempts: recruitment and retention, tokenization, and speed. One detriment of tokenization is that simply because a candidate is viewed to hold marginalized identities, they may not necessarily be taking up the cause of diversity if they were appointed to the shared governance board. They may, in fact, be against diversity for the topic at hand. A related concern lies within the engagement of faculty who hold marginalized identities within shared governance. Kater (2017) offered that often many of the

systems in place at institutions of higher education mirror the systems of oppression across American society. The systemic power differential creates significant concern that faculty who hold minoritized identities are not free to fully engage in governance and must stifle their opinions. C. Brown and Miller (1998) along with Tierney and Minor (2003) discussed how minoritized faculty begin to feel apathetic towards shared governance after seeing the cycle of tokenization play out: hire a minoritized faculty member to share a *different opinion*, and then make the same decision that would have been made without their identity or expertise present.

The adjunctification of the faculty labor force is another threat to shared governance and problematic in a number of ways. Giroux (2014) argued it is inherent to the corporate model, or what he refers to as *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education*. An increasing number of faculty members operate without the benefits relegated to full time tenured and they are charged to meet the same educational outcomes, research and service as their benefited counterparts (Giroux, 2014). And, for any number of reasons, adjunct faculty have little participation in the shared governance at their particular institutions (Gerber, 2014).

The AAUP maintains that shared governance is a crucial underpinning of a well-functioning (AAUP, 1994). Yet, IHEs struggle to implement shared governance in an effective and efficient manner. Thinking of shared governance systematically and as part of the whole system of an institution is critical and explored via the theoretical framework of this study.

Theoretical Framework

There are many ways systems theory can be used to understand organizational structures and cultures (Edwards, 2019; Gordon, 2021; McLinden, 2016; Wilkinson, 2011). Wilkinson (2011) defined systems theory as "a conceptual framework based on the principle that the component parts of a system can best be understood in the context of the relationships with each other and with other systems, rather than in isolation" (p. 1).

Figure 1, modified from Luhman and Cunliffe (2013), visually represents the core components and relationships espoused in systems theory. An effective system consists of many inputs derived from its stakeholders. The transformation process (or deliberation) takes into consideration the inputs from the stakeholders and yields outputs (the decisions). Throughout the system, there is a continual feedback loop to engage stakeholders in the transformation process while it is under review and once concluded. The output is then discussed and may yield further changes, thereby starting the process again. Of note, systems theory acknowledges the importance of a process that is inclusive of many stakeholders within the system and allows for frequent feedback.

The shared governance process in higher education is an example of systems theory whereby the institution is the system, and shared governance is the transformation process. Ideally, and in an effective shared governance model, Figure 1 visually represents the steps in how shared governance would occur within the institution's system. Feedback from stakeholders would generate new input for consideration in a transformation process. This may be representative of a need

acknowledged by any one stakeholder group or across many. Regardless of who initiated the call for consideration, all stakeholders should be represented throughout the process. It is important to note that in systems theory, feedback should flow both into and out of the transformation process before a final output is delivered to all stakeholders. In a similar vein, shared governance should be a multi-staged process with communication and engagement opportunities throughout the decision-making process.
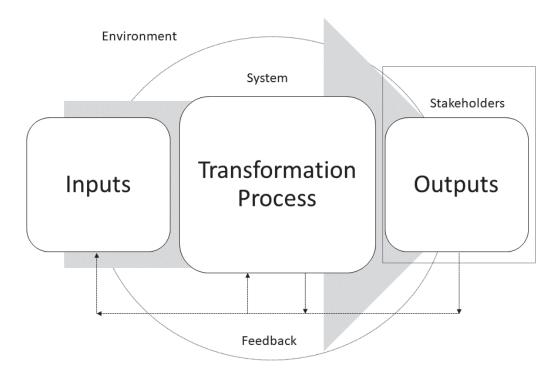

Figure 1: Systems Theory Representation (modified from Luhman & Cunliffe, 2013, p. 169)

One advantage of utilizing a systems approach is that it aids in examining the functions of complex organizations (Gordon, 2021). Faculty members, staff members, students, and administration are groups who intermingle with one another. They coexist at IHEs through a series of structures and systems including classrooms, laboratories, organizations and governing bodies, such as faculty senate and AAUP. This study examined how all of these entities, or systems, work together currently and how they might work better, together, to create a better-defined, and agreed upon, shared governance system.

RESEARCH METHODS

Setting

The setting for this study was a large urban-serving research-intensive university in the southern part of the United States. The institution comprises two campuses, one

of which is largely dedicated to health sciences. The university has roughly 29,000 students and over 23,000 employees. Those employees include nearly 2,500 full-time faculty and nearly 700 part-time adjunct faculty members. The university is relatively young as the current institution is the result of the combination of two institutions that occurred just over 50 years ago. Compared to similarly situated institutions, the size and age of the institution is relevant for the purposes of this study since governance structures and processes are still developing.

Research Design

A naturalistic, mixed methods narrative approach was used to yield rich information on the faculty's perceptions of and ideas for shared governance. A naturalistic research approach allowed the research team to collect qualitative data and analyze those data using inductive and deductive approaches to understand the problem of practice. Creswell and Poth (2018) wrote that naturalistic research is

> …the use of interpretive theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Moreover, an emerging (qualitative approach) inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns of themes. (p. 8)

Narrative research is increasingly used in studies of educational practice and experience, chiefly because teachers, like other human beings, are storytellers who individually and collectively lead storied lives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Moreover, narrative research is the study of how human beings experience the world, and narrative researchers collect these stories to understand and write narratives of experiences (Moen, 2006). To collect those stories and the data, focus groups and individual interviews were conducted. Additionally, a modified charrette-style workshop was employed to gather ideas and recommendations for implementing shared governance practices.

Focus Groups

Van Bezouw et al. (2019) defined focus groups as "multiple individuals engage[d] in a dialogue focused on the research theme which is guided by a moderator" (p. 2721). Multiple means were used to recruit participants. The original intention was to invite all members of the faculty to participate in a focus group via an email invitation to the faculty. However, there was no official faculty listserv, or email list, available to the researchers to disseminate across all faculty. Additionally, when the research team tried to use an external listserv created via the Action Network populated with public information posted about faculty contact information, they were informed that the university's network had blocked emails from Action Network. Efforts were made to invite faculty through the Faculty Affairs and Provost Office and the Faculty Senate, but the researchers were rebuffed there as well.

Ultimately, the researchers compiled a list of leadership of each academic college or school at the university from the individual school websites. The deans of these

units were emailed and asked to share information about the study, recruitment of participants, and requested it be disseminated to their respective faculty members. Additionally, the email invitation was shared with the membership of the university's chapter of AAUP in email and announced at a chapter meeting. Also, the researchers posted the invitation for participation via a faculty event notification email sent daily to faculty, staff, and students. Also, a request was sent via the Facebook group run by the university's teaching and learning center. After the other invitation methods were complete, the Action Network access was restored and an email was also sent to faculty via the Action Network. Lastly, the researchers also engaged personal connections with individual faculty and asked them to share the information with their peers and departments. Faculty were invited to share their interest in focus group participation by completing a brief survey. In the survey, faculty were able to disclose demographic information and self-select their preferred modality, location, and times.

The focus group protocol consisted of 6 open-ended questions and prompts designed to gain in-depth responses (Billups, 2021). The specific questions were based on the literature review gathered on common concerns and recommendations for best practices, predominantly influenced by Bahls' 2014 framework. After the protocol was developed, cognitive interviewing was used to solicit feedback on the focus group questions by conducting a pilot focus group with five faculty members. Cognitive interviewing aims to understand shortcomings and adapt the research instrument, or focus group protocol in this instance, thereby enhancing the quality of feedback garnered (Ryan et al., 2012). The cognitive interviewing process was used to refine the research approach by identifying problems embedded in the cognitive process by which participants engage.

Based on the number of responses received for focus groups, the researchers hosted eight focus groups: six were hosted virtually and two were held in-person. Each focus group consisted of 2-6 participants. Two members of the research team served as moderators for each focus group. The decision to allow for dual moderators allowed the research team to ensure equal focus to the content and the procedures (Billups, 2021). The virtual focus groups were facilitated on the Zoom video conferencing platform and video recorded. In person focus groups were recorded with an audio recorder.

Individual Interviews

Due to concerns for power dynamics, individuals who might skew focus group responses because of the depth of their involvement in faculty governance were asked to participate in the study through individual interviews. Additionally, the research team specifically included outreach to faculty of color and faculty on the tenure track to participate in the interviews.

Using a snowball sampling method, interview participants were asked to identify additional faculty members who would be helpful to interview as well. Ultimately, 21 faculty members were identified and invited to participate. The research team sent individual invitations to the faculty members soliciting participation consent. The invitation included the purpose of the study and requested faculty consent to

participate in the study. In the end, the research team received 11 responses representing university faculty from multiple units and faculty ranks. The interviews were conducted utilizing Zoom for video conference as the means of data collection.

Modified Charrette

The National Charrette Institute defines the charrette as "a collaborative design and planning workshop that occurs over four to seven consecutive days, is held on-site and includes all affected stakeholders at critical decision-making points" (Lennertz et al., 2006, p. v). The design of a modified charrette is different from a normal work meeting, it creates an atmosphere that allows stakeholders to think differently, broadly where unique ideas and values are welcome (Roggeman, 2013).

For the final part of the study, faculty members were engaged in a modified charrette session designed to better understand actionable methods to increase the awareness of shared governance and generate possible recommendations for enacting shared governance institutionally. Members of the university's AAUP chapter were invited to participate in the charrette through multiple mediums of communication. Based on the number of responses received for the charrette focus group, one, three-hour charrette session on campus with two 15-minute breaks was conducted. Seven AAUP members responded with interest, six indicated they would participate in either format and one indicated they would only participate if it was virtual. Given the nature of the workshop design being highly collaborative, the team decided to host the modified charrette in person with the six participants, five of whom attended and participated. While the group was small, three different units were represented and faculty members represented different appointment types, and years of experience. Four of the five participants were male and one was female.

Data Analysis

The recordings of all eight focus groups, all of the individual interviews, and the modified charrette were meticulously transcribed by the capstone team utilizing the Otter.Ai software platform. Once the transcription was complete, participant information was de-identified and the transcripts were coded accordingly with participants 1-29. Given the sensitive nature of the topic and highly specific answers and examples, coding participants was critical to ensure confidentiality of the participants' respective responses. The research team retained a list of the participant codes that was matched to respective participant demographic data (gender, race, tenure status, etc.) for thematic analysis.

FINDINGS

Across each data collection method utilized, several themes emerged. The first set of themes are related to faculty perceptions of shared governance and the second set of themes are around faculty ideas for improving shared governance.

Faculty Perceptions of Shared Governance

Three major themes emerged from the data about faculty perceptions of shared governance: (1) Too much administrative power, (2) Devalued faculty engagement, and (3) Desire for change. Table 1 visually exhibits the overarching themes and subthemes that came directly from the data collection.

Table 1: Emergent Themes and Subthemes of Faculty Perceptions

Themes	Subthemes
Too Much Administrative Power	Top-down decisions
	Futile governance structures
	Bylaws and constitutions not followed
Devalued Faculty Engagement	Being valued
	High risk, low reward (fear of retribution, apathy from lack of trust, lack of reward)
	Being engaged effectively
A Desire for Change	

Too Much Administrative Power

Several participants perceived that administration wielded far too much power, resulting in faculty feeling frustrated and not included in the decision-making process. Three secondary themes emerged: top-down decisions; decision-making structures, and bylaws and constitutions that were not followed. The participant's disillusionment seemed to stem from an acknowledgement that there are many layers to making decisions at the university that lay outside of curriculum decisions. Once those layers are peeled back, it becomes visible that there is a hierarchical system that does not appear to support all members of faculty and staff alike.

Participants perceived that decisions were often private and relegated only to the purview of upper administration. Instead, they felt that decisions should be more largely discussed and open for public comment. One participant expressed concerns for the administration making decisions in secret by stating:

my observation [...] [is it has] gotten more so over the past few years. And what it used to be there seemed to be more: more of a communication back, and more engagement. But now there's a lot more secrecy and some of the bigger decisions that are being made at the higher level in terms of hiring of Deans, or hiring of the Provost, and things like that.

Participants also articulated strong opinions and emotions when speaking about decision making structures. Specifically, they indicated that the current structures of governance do not produce decisions that are widely representative of the faculty.

Some faculty articulated that they felt there was too much administrative power by using examples of when they felt bylaws were in place but not followed. These regulatory documents are designed with the intent of providing standard processes and clarity by outlining the rules of engagement. Additionally, participants spoke to the idea that sometimes regulatory documents were intentionally vague when outlining procedures for conflict resolution or final decision-making power if there is not a unified recommendation. One participant shared how they perceived their unit's internal bylaws as a mechanism to support administrative power in instances such as these. "*We have like our faculty bylaws and our committee structure and things like that. But they're vague enough that it's very possible for decisions to be made at a higher level and not to actually reflect the faculty voice, in my opinion.*"

Devalued Faculty Engagement

Generally, participants indicated that they did not feel that faculty were adequately valued or engaged in shared governance. Similar to the instances above that recounted frustration and mistrust of top-down decision making, some participants articulated their experience was more accurately encapsulated by a feeling of being devalued. One participant said:

> *I think we are invited to express our opinion, you know, and these are troubling questions, right? Because I think there is the veneer of our opinions being valued. And I think the current administration has invited a lot of input. And then that's completely disregarded. You know, and there have been really specific instances of that. So, I think they'll say, "Yeah, we really want to hear your voice." But our voices really aren't heard.*

As exemplified through this participant's experience, faculty have a perception that their opinion is invited but ultimately not utilized in the final decision-making process.

In order to feel valued within the shared governance process, several participants mentioned the concept of respect. They voiced concern that their voices and ideas would not be respected by the administration. One participant said:

> *The faculty and the staff, we need to feel like our opinion is going to be respected and actually used because if we don't feel that, then many of us are going to be less likely to attend something, whereas a decision has already been made, we're in the same position on that one, the example. So if we feel comfortable that our opinion is going to be listened to and considered, then you're going to get more engagement.*

Furthermore, participants ultimately articulated three common feelings related to the sub-theme of high risk, low reward: fear of retribution, apathetic views towards future engagement, and lack of reward. Concern for retribution was not only apparent in participants' specific narratives but also evident in how they spoke about the act of engaging in the focus groups and interviews. This unease and distrust was further

exemplified in how two participants responded to one another in a focus group. When asked how freely faculty can express their opinions one participant stated *"[They're] afraid to speak up, especially non tenure [and] tenure track. [They're] afraid to speak up for fear. Even tenure, if it's too controversial there are repercussions. At minimum you're seen as an outsider*." The expressed concerns demonstrated how concerning the topic of trust is for faculty even when only engaging in a conversation about shared governance.

A Desire for Change

Concerns about too much administrative power and a devaluation of shared governance notwithstanding, participants still expressed a desire to contribute to change through shared governance. Several participants mentioned that despite the top-down management style and lack of perceived shared governance, they still felt hopeful about shared governance. They also declared their commitment and ambition to bring about change. One participant said this in regard to being hopeful around the prospect for creating true shared governance: "*I mean, our goal continues to be a goal almost every pretty much every year for [a] number, [the] last number of years: to work towards shared governance, true shared governance. And, and so I mean, I try to remain hopeful*."

Another trend that emerged during the interviews and focus groups was that the expressed hopefulness often appeared as a byproduct of loyalty. There were several participants who felt that their loyalty and dedication to the university seem to spear on hopefulness of finding a shared definition of shared governance. Similarly, another participant noted, *"[a] sense of trust, and, and collegiality and collaboration, and makes you feel more positive about, about your work*." Another shared they felt participation "*doesn't have to be rewarded: the outcome can be the reward*." Participants such as these engage in governance to connect with the university, influence decisions, and leave their mark upon the institution. Overall, participants placed value in shared governance and the hope they have to engage meaningfully with the process.

Faculty Ideas for Shared Governance

The data showed that shared governance can be increased through two overarching themes: creating collective understanding and increasing engagement. Study participants spoke about the need for a common definition, common structures, and common engagement opportunities to create a collective understanding. To increase engagement, participants noted the need to build trust, increase engagement, and increase transparency through involvement, processes, and rationale.

Table 2: *Emergent Themes and Subthemes of Faculty Ideas*

Themes	Subthemes
Create a Collective Understanding	Common definition
	Common engagement structure
	Common engagement expectations
	University structure and engagement
Increasing Engagement	Building trust
	Increasing communication
	Increasing transparency

Creating a Collective Understanding

We might think of institutional knowledge as the result of collectively created construction that is negotiated in the context of that institution. Another way to think about this is as collective understanding. One of the participants explained how they feel shared governance needs to be better understood collectively:

> *I think clear institutional guidelines for what shared governance looks like, at the different stages within the university at the college school department level, could be helpful. Because what I see happening sometimes is that without those institutional guardrails, individual units are able to use shared governance to create systems that exclude certain types of faculty from the process.*

As noted, shared governance needs to be made clearer before it can be effectively enacted. One way to ensure the *guardrails* are in place, to codify the collective understanding, is to ensure a common definition of shared governance.

Creating a collective understanding also requires common engagement structures and expectations. Participants of the modified charrette identified that inconsistent structures created silos and created unnecessary hurdles to engage faculty across units. Furthermore, varied structures lead to inconsistent experiences with shared governance, ambiguity, and contributed to frustration that was voiced by many participants. Charrette participants also noted similar concerns related to differences in the formal structures across the academic units. However, charrette participants expanded upon this idea to include conversation about the varied expectations and rules for faculty to become engaged. Specifically, one participant noted that their school (an academic unit within the university) does not allow faculty not on the tenure track to participate in certain forms of governance. The modified charrette participants discussed the desire to not only standardize the structures across units but also to create more consistent expectations and avenues for faculty to engage.

Increasing Engagement

Participants articulated experiences about their engagement with shared governance and their perceptions of why others engage or do not engage in governance. Some of the key categories that emerged related to increasing engagement were increasing: trust, communication, and transparency.

Generally, participants recounted a general lack of trust, their expectations for trust, desire for increased trust, concern that administration did not trust faculty, and an overarching distrust for administration. One participant said "There needs to be a sense of trust built and one of the ways that that happens is to let voices be heard, you know, and, and I mean for when our voices are being heard to feel like, that they are really [being] listened to."

Faculty in the study broadly discussed a culture of trust as critical to shared governance. Some spoke to the idea that adjusting institutional culture occurs over a great deal of time, particularly to establish and build trust among faculty. Additionally, many participants spoke to the need to build trust among faculty as a necessary step to improve shared governance.

In addition to building trust, shared governance requires regular and clear communication channels between all university stakeholders. As such, communication was one of the most consistent and pervasive themes in the study as both a primary concern for faculty, second only to the concept of *top-down decisions*. One participant noted the absence of communication as the central cause for concern related to shared governance by stating that *"...the communication always doesn't happen. Which is bad because that's where everything should begin. [...] it'd be reflected in the outcome. And that's, I think, often where things fall apart.*"

Participants spoke about regular communication, opinion seeking, and transparent communication as methods to ensure faculty voice is represented and considered in decision making. In the examples, faculty wanted to see more communication as a verb, indicating dialogue and invitation for active engagement, rather than a noun that passively states the outcome or decision. One participant emphatically said this by stating "*We need more information about how decisions are being made, rather than the decision being made and informed after the fact that a decision has been made. And I think that's the key.*"

According to participants, one way to build trust and to be more communicative is to increase transparency. One participant exemplified the connection between clear and detailed communication and faculty engagement by sharing:

There needs to be very transparent communication for shared governance. I mean, I think if faculty don't know what's happening, or if administration didn't know what was happening, for that matter, but I think it tends to go the other way. But, you know, I think that faculty needs to be made aware of things.

This participant's example demonstrates their experience of doubting the shared governance process by not receiving transparent communication related to feedback and decision-making. In another similar example, one participant spoke about the lack of transparency as feeling secretive. "*And when they aren't able to recognize when being secretive about decision-making could actually be harmful to the process of*

shared governance. That's when that tendency towards secrecy could become problematic."

Communication at the end of a shared governance process was particularly important to participants. Concern for lack of communication at the end of a process was evidenced by one faculty member who shared "*once that decision is made, there really isn't any explanation that goes down to faculty*." Participants focused not only on the need for communication to occur at the end of a process, but also, what should be included. "*Usually [we get] some communication [at the end of a shared governance process] but it's not effective. No 'why' is shared*." This request was increasingly vocalized when the decision seemed different from the perceived faculty opinion. One participant offered:

> *oftentimes with the decision making, there's not a lot of feedback. If a decision is made, contrary to the faculty recommendation, there's also not a tremendous amount of transparency about information that went into that decision making. The faculty involved in it, you know, the task forces, the working groups, those faculty have the information. But it does not trickle down, out of those committees.*

The practice of shared governance at the institution requires regular, open, and transparent communication between all university stakeholders.

DISCUSSION

In 1971, Kessel and Mink wrote a position paper titled, "The Application of Open Systems Theory and Organization Development to Higher Education." Their central thesis is "...that it is no longer possible for the university to function as a closed system, unresponsive to pressures and needs of the larger society around it" (p. 6).They go on to write about how universities must adopt new governance arrangements that include better communication and constituent groups that have increased senses of personal engagement with the university as a system. Over 50 years later, the findings from this study suggest that this is either still true or true again.

Though still fighting the *ivory tower* image, higher education is a much more diverse enterprise than it was in 1971 and has, in many ways, become more responsive to external demands. But the demands are also more diverse and, perhaps, heavier. Technological developments afford new and unique ways for people to learn, and, currently, there are serious questions about the value of credentials from post-secondary institutions.

Given this existential urgency, we can, again, look to systems theory to understand how to respond to the situation. This theoretical framework is what makes this particular study a valuable contribution to the literature. That is, if higher education is going to thrive in these challenging and uncertain times, all stakeholders must work together, systematically, to make decisions that are the best for the institution and that have the most internal legitimacy as possible. It is systems theory, in fact, that helps us see that transformation occurs when all parts work together, with information flowing between all parts to ensure the relationships between areas support and reinforce one another.

Therefore, based on the literature review, as well as data collected through focus groups, interviews, and a modified charrette, the answer to all research questions come down to two overarching categories to consider improving the practice of shared governance: structure and culture. Cultural components suggest a need to increase trust, engagement, and the value of engaging in shared governance. Structural components speak to the need to standardize systems, workflow, and communication methods between university stakeholders. Figure 2 depicts a model, a system, for shared governance reform with the specific recommendations that flowed from the data from faculty research participants. The arrows in the model indicate that culture informs structure and vice versa; shared governance reform is a cyclical and systematic process.
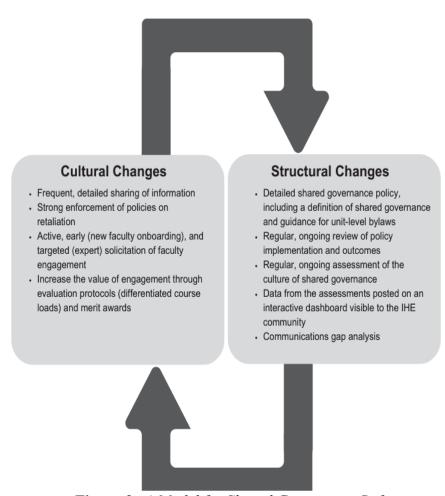
Cultural Changes
- Frequent, detailed sharing of information
- Strong enforcement of policies on retaliation
- Active, early (new faculty onboarding), and targeted (expert) solicitation of faculty engagement
- Increase the value of engagement through evaluation protocols (differentiated course loads) and merit awards

Structural Changes
- Detailed shared governance policy, including a definition of shared governance and guidance for unit-level bylaws
- Regular, ongoing review of policy implementation and outcomes
- Regular, ongoing assessment of the culture of shared governance
- Data from the assessments posted on an interactive dashboard visible to the IHE community
- Communications gap analysis

Figure 2: *A Model for Shared Governance Reform*

Improving shared governance practice means, first, improving the culture around governance. That means increasing trust, engagement, and the value of shared governance.

Increasing trust means increasing opportunities for stakeholders to interact, share information, and communicate. It also means increased transparency through more frequent and detailed sharing of information. Finally, to increase trust, policies about

retaliation need to be emphasized and enforced so that faculty can feel like they are safe to use their voice in the governance process.

To increase engagement, faculty involvement in governance should be actively solicited. This can and should start as soon as faculty join the institution. Including shared governance as part of the on-boarding process would ensure new faculty members are aware of the defined structures and become aware of how to engage in shared governance processes. Also, active solicitation should involve targeting those with specialized expertise, knowledge and experience, and diversity of ideas and experience should be prioritized.

Finally, participation in governance needs to be valued. This could be achieved through several formal options: a differentiated course load for faculty who participate, additional value placed on participation in the annual evaluation processes, value within the promotion and tenure process, or a monetary bonus for engagement. And institutions should consider ways to highlight and recognize contributions institutionally as well as within individual colleges and schools through communications, announcements, or recognition events for those who are involved in governance processes.

Structural recommendations are built from the findings related to systems, workflows, and communication methods between university stakeholders. First, tied to the cultural changes, assessment of the shared governance culture should be conducted on a regular basis to understand how the proposed environment and institutional values are evidenced in lived experiences of faculty and staff. These assessments would generate data that can be displayed in a dashboard visible to all members of the IHE's community. These data can be disaggregated by unit and in other meaningful ways.

Additionally, all IHEs should have an institutional shared governance policy with a clear definition of what is meant by shared governance and a well-articulated governance structure with coherent rules and expectations. This policy document should, naturally, be developed through a shared governance process and should be visible to all in the community via the institution's website.

The policy document should articulate a regular review of governance processes and structures described in the policy. That review might happen more frequently than the typical policy review process because IHEs are dynamic and policy contexts change quickly.

The IHE-level policy document should also include guidelines for bylaws for shared governance structures and processes at individual units within the institution. Expectations for engagement should be standardized to ensure equitable experiences and accessibility. The regulatory documents from each unit such as constitutions and bylaws should be reviewed and standardized to ensure more efficient and consistent operations.

Finally, IHEs should conduct a gap analysis to understand the best channels of communication for specific audiences or message types. Communication channels should allow for faculty connections across the institution so that faculty do not get stuck in their silos and have awareness of what is happening across the institution.

As articulated by Wilkinson (2011), systems theory framework allows one to understand and change the overarching system by discerning the context of the individual parts of the system based on their relationships to one another. Understanding the findings of study through this framework allowed for the creation of recommendations to address the overall system by influencing the structures and cultures. Furthermore, those recommendations have been pieced together as a model for shared governance reform (as depicted in Figure 2) that reflects the ideas of system theory. Cultural changes and structural changes inform each other in a cyclical and systemic way. And these changes happen at different levels of an institution that each, in turn, inform each other. If shared governance is to work, attention must be given to the whole system simultaneously and the impact on the whole system of any one seemingly minor change must be considered.

Institutions of higher education are complex systems. Therefore, when all parts of the institution work together, with information flowing between all parts to ensure the relationships between areas support and reinforce one another, progress ensues. And this is exactly what shared governance is: balancing power between university faculty and university administration such that all parts of the system work together, with information flowing between all parts to ensure the relationships between areas support and reinforce one another to make the best policies, practices, and operations for all. In this transitional time, postsecondary institutions need faculty and administration to work together to ensure the path forward allows higher education to thrive. Harvard University's Henry Rosovsky was noted in a January 2017 interview as stating "equally important for the promotion of excellence in the university is an emphasis on shared governance. The faculty needs to be involved directly in the process of running the university and in the setting of priorities." The sense of urgency for faculty to be involved in the governance of the institution has only increased. Battles over power will only cause institutions of higher education to fracture at a time when they need to be strong. In other words, in these times of political polarization and technological change, shared governance is more imperative than ever. Institutions of higher education must attend to their culture and structures around governance to ensure that decision-making is a shared endeavor.

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An Exploration of Using Solar Photovoltaic Cells as a Sustainable Solution in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this convergent parallel mixed-methods instrumental case study was to examine the feasibility of Solar Photovoltaics (PV) as an economic and environmental sustainability tool for higher education while, at the same time, gauging essential university stakeholder knowledge, opinions and beliefs regarding sustainable development, sustainable universities, and support for sustainable initiatives on campus. The findings from this study at a Midwestern university indicated that the solar power system generated electricity at a lower cost than the local electric utility was charging and a varied understanding of sustainable development by participants. Implications for provide insight into establishing stakeholder support and a cost/benefit model for sustainable development for institutions of higher learning.
Keywords: sustainable development, sustainable university, higher education, solar PV, renewable energy

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) face lower revenue from reduced enrollment and incurred costs for online teaching and pandemic protocols, which have placed new financial burdens on them (Eide, 2018). All these factors threaten the sustainability of higher education (Carlson & Gardner, 2021; Collins et al., 2021; Whitford, 2021). Furthermore, changes in enrollment caused by the pandemic could significantly impact institutions of higher learning, primarily private, four-year universities and colleges that receive very little public funding (Carlson & Gardner,

2021). For example, Collins et al. (2021) reported that enrollment, a critical factor in HEI revenue, declined (-10.5%) at private US colleges and universities from fall 2019 to fall 2020. However, public institutions, both two- and four-year, are not exempt from financial deficits with significant losses in revenue reported at many IHEs as state and local budgets experienced shortfalls (Collins et al., 2021).

Carlson and Gardner (2021) posited institutions of higher learning faced problems on multiple fronts even before the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. Maintaining that higher education had not fully recovered from the 2008-2009 recession, the authors also contended that further problems were related to changing demographics, increasing tuition rates, and a shift in the value proposition for higher education (Carlson & Gardner, 2021). The recession compounded a deepening demographic shift which changed the number of potential students planning on attending college in many regions of the U.S. Colleges and universities have engaged in intense competition to attract from this shrinking pool of candidates. State support for public colleges has increased to some extent, but not reached pre-recession levels, leaving the burden of cost of attendance on students and their families. HEIs had already been trimming expenses where possible before the pandemic started. Some colleges and universities had to resort to staff reductions which typically affected the lower-income positions (Carlson & Gardner, 2021). An estimated 10 percent of college staff have been lost since the pandemic's beginning (Carlson & Gardner, 2021).

Staisloff (2020) suggested that higher education institutions must become more sustainable as soon as possible. The author has labeled the pandemic as a dislodging event that will force colleges and universities to re-evaluate their current cost structures. Staisloff surmised that "endowments will be decimated, enrollments will decline, and both public and private funds will be hard to acquire" due to the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on higher education (Staisloff, 2020, p. 1).

A focus on sustainability and implementing sustainable initiatives on the campuses of higher education institutions (HEI) may provide some relief for universities and colleges facing some of these challenges. The United Nations Brundtland Commission, in 1987, defined sustainability as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Hooey et al., 2017). Sustainability requires decisions that balance how we use the environment, social equity, and the ongoing need for economic growth. The environmental aspect of sustainability means using resources wisely and respecting the environment (Hooey et al., 2017).

The Stockholm Declaration of 1972 included the first direct reference to "sustainability in higher education" (Mohammadalizadehkorde & Weaver, 2018, p. 2). Amaral et al. (2015) presented the idea of a "sustainable university" as one that leads by example in minimizing the negative impacts of its resource use on the environment, the economy, and society (Amaral et al., 2015, p. 157). Among the higher operational costs of a university are its utilities, especially electric power (National Grid, 2003). In addition, university infrastructures usually are large systems of several energy-consuming buildings and facilities (Amaral et al., 2015). According to Hanus et al. (2019), educational institutions represent 11% of electricity consumed by buildings in the US and 4% of the total US carbon emissions.

Renewable energy resources can provide cost-savings and reduced greenhouse gases (GHG) along with intangible benefits such as achieving Environmental, Social & Governance (ESG) goals and the development of a "sustainable university" (Amaral et al., 2015, p. 157). Solar photovoltaic (PV) energy applications are the dominant form of renewable energy used at HEIs (Filho et al., 2018). And an increase in the use of rooftop solar PV on college campuses could reduce the costs related to the health, environmental, and climate change damage caused by fossil fuel consumption. Several studies (Filho et al., 2018; Hahn, 2017; Hanus et al., 2019; Herrmann, 2008; Jo et al., 2017) have evaluated the cost/benefits of installing solar PV infrastructure at campuses. Other studies (Dahle & Neumayer, 2001; Djordjevic & Cotton, 2011; Mascarenhas et al., 2020; Murray, 2018; Speer et al., 2020; Wright & Horst, 2013) have attempted to gauge support for sustainability and renewable energy initiatives in areas such as waste management, energy management and water consumption as well as, the use of solar energy on campus.

This convergent parallel mixed-methods approach instrumental case study explored the attitudes and opinions of a university's stakeholders regarding sustainability and renewable energy use while providing a feasibility study for the benefit of solar PV infrastructure at a specified campus building, combining both prior approaches in a mixed-methods case study. Specifically, this study also explored the financial and environmental sustainability benefits of installing a solar PV power system at a university campus building. For institutions of higher learning that contemplate utilizing solar PV, this work potentially provides a method of establishing stakeholder support (qualitative) and a cost/benefit model for the system itself (quantitative) in consideration of institutional sustainability initiatives.

Context and Setting

The host institution of this convergent parallel mixed methods instrumental case study was a private, Midwestern liberal arts university in the United States. The institution is situated within a large urban area and has an enrollment of fewer than 4,000 students. Faculty and staff represent an additional 800 members of the proposed research population. The state where the institution is situated is a significant producer of fossil fuels. This case study situates a selected campus facility which was a three-story, 21,000 ft. sq. administrative building containing standard office spaces, a small auditorium, and a few computer labs. This campus building was selected because of: (1) roof position relative to the daily movement of the sun in which a south-facing roof is preferable; (2) age of the building in which older buildings are less efficient and could benefit from solar power generation; and (3) a separate electric utility meter to establish power consumption for this facility alone because some university building share a common meter.

METHODS

Prior research into sustainability in higher education (SHE) has sought to either establish beliefs, opinions, and support for SHE with university stakeholders or to study the feasibility and effectiveness of using solar PV as an aid in SHE (Dahle &

Neumayer, 2001; Djordjevic & Cotton, 2011; Filho et al., 2018; Hahn, 2017; Hanus et al., 2019; Herrmann, 2008; Jo et al., 2017; Mascarenhas et al., 2020; Murray, 2018; Speer et al., 2020; Wright & Horst, 2013). This study utilized a non-experimental, convergent parallel mixed method instrumental case design with a concurrent approach which allowed for simultaneous data collection and interpretation of two or more data sources (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). This research design is described as a "mixed research method with an emphasis on quantitative data to research both the qualitative and quantitative aspects" of the proposed sustainability initiative (Johnson & Christensen, 2019, p. 32). Mixed methods research has emerged in response to the perceived limitations of both qualitative and quantitative designs and itself is more complex since it combines elements of both and can offer more insight into the phenomenon being studied (Caruth, 2013). The philosophical tenets of pragmatism both allow and guide mixed-methods researchers to utilize a variety of approaches to address research questions that cannot be answered using a single methodology (Doyle et al., 2009).

The mixed-methods approach employed here is an instrumental case study with a positivist epistemological approach (Crowe et al., 2011). This case study can be categorized as "instrumental" because the objective is to observe a particular issue (the sustainability solution) and gain a better understanding of the level of support and practical feasibility (Crowe et al., 2011, p. 2). The researcher undertook a positivist epistemological approach, tested defined phenomena, and drew conclusions from the findings related to the theory of SHE (Crowe et al., 2011).

Quantitative data was gathered via a cost/benefit analysis of the sustainability initiative to assess its feasibility for a specific campus building. An established solar PV installation company designed the solar PV system and calculated the cost per kWh to be generated using a National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) approved model (Aurora Solar, 2022). Qualitative data was gathered using a researcher-designed structured interview guide for individual face-to-face interviews with key university stakeholders representing the administration, faculty, staff, and students. Some interviewees are the ultimate decision-makers for any capital expenditure or long-term contractual commitments. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1) What is the feasibility of implementing a specific sustainable initiative for a designated building at a private, Midwestern university?
2) What are the stakeholders' perceptions of a specific sustainable initiative for a designated building at a private, Midwestern university?

Positionality

The primary researcher is a White, middle-class male in his 60s with an extensive background in the energy industry in the USA. While conducting this study, the researcher was employed by the subject institution as a faculty member and administrative department chairman responsible for the evolution of its energy business curriculum to include more varied forms of energy. Despite many years of experience in the oil and gas industry, the primary researcher has always supported the efficient use of energy and has been interested in and taught about alternative and

renewable energy. He also has experience installing small-scale solar PV modules and is the owner of a residential solar PV system which has shown to be cost-effective relative to the cost of power provided by the same local electric utility that serves the subject university. The second author is a mixed-heritage Latino male and supported the research design and has previously worked with student unions as a student affairs professional. The researchers hold assumptions about the feasibility study to indicate a financial benefit to the test institution which were bracketed during the data analysis process.

Participants

Seven stakeholders representing the administration, board of trustees, faculty, staff, and students were recruited as participants using a purposive sampling procedure. This sampling approach is described as "judgmental" since the researcher specified the characteristics of the population of interest (Johnson & Christensen, 2019, p. 254). Inclusion criteria included that participants had to be full-time employees or university students identified as either key decision-makers or as those elected to represent the entirety of the faculty, staff, or students. Each was assigned a pseudonym to protect confidentiality based on their positionality at the host institution of the study.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Participant Role	Race	Gender	Age Group	Education
University President (UP)	White	Male	50-55	J.D.
University Provost (PR)	White	Male	50-55	Ph.D.
University CFO (CFO)	White	Male	50-55	M.B.A.
University Trustee (UT)	White	Male	45-50	B.S.
Faculty Senate President (FS)	Asian	Male	50-55	Ph.D.
Staff Council Chairman (SC)	White	Male	40-45	M.B.A.
Student Association President (SA)	Asian	Male	20-25	B.A.

Data Analysis

Qualitative coding included thematic analysis, which was conducted using several phases (Nowell et al., 2017). First, a list of *a priori* codes was created, and then iterative coding of the transcripts resulted in the development of new inductive codes and changes. Next, through a comprehensive review of the data, *a priori codes* were added as a deeper conceptualization as the data became apparent. Finally, inductive and deductive coding were applied to capture the experiences of individuals who were not correctly reflected in *a priori* codes (Johnson & Christenson, 2019).

Thematic analysis was done using higher-level descriptive codes, and individual transcript codes were categorized into themes based on the link between the coded material and its higher level. To convey the depth of meaning in each theme, the

researcher combined a wide range of codes, resulting in the formation of subthemes (Johnson & Christenson 2019). The preliminary results of the thematic analysis yielded three topics. The researcher then examined the coded data inside each theme to ensure its consistency. Finally, an iterative approach resulted in code recoding and rearrangement to represent better the facts and themes' essential meanings (Nowell et al., 2017).

For the quantitative analysis, a feasibility study was undertaken for the proposed sustainable solution. An established solar PV installation company designed the solar PV system for a designated campus building. The cost per kWh to be generated by the system was calculated using a National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) approved model, Aurora Solar® (Aurora Solar, 2022).

FINDINGS

Qualitative Findings

Data analysis revealed three distinct themes. Participants generally felt that campus sustainability initiatives were a priority but questioned the feasibility of projects depending on the scale (complexity) and cost. Definitions of sustainable development varied among the respondents, with most associating SD with the responsible use of natural resources. When discussing the concept of a sustainable university, there was an even greater disparity among the descriptions given with some personnel viewing the ties with the local community as important while others pointed to the use of alternative or renewable energy as a necessary component. As to support for any sustainability project or initiative, the overriding determinant was the economic viability of the proposed undertaking.

A Need for Consensus on the Meaning of Sustainable Development

All participants were familiar with the term sustainable development but varied in their exact definitions. Some interviewees mentioned consideration of the environment or green construction while others emphasized the viable longevity of any undertaking. But there was no one universal understanding that developed. Considering the earth's resources emerged as a sub-theme of sustainable development, with only two respondents using the terms *environment* or *ESG*. The University President (UP) viewed SD as "development that can be… maintained over decades, if not centuries, that, does not deplete future resources" while the Provost (PR) believed that SD should be looked at "in the context of a kind of limited set of natural resources in which we live on this planet, and that we should think about sustainability even as we think about economic growth".

Beyond the environmental and earth resources concerns, a few respondents addressed the use of sustainable methods for any future campus buildings and structures. While consideration was given to retrofitting existing facilities, these participants placed an emphasis on SD going forward. The representative of the university staff council (SC) saw sustainable development as "new construction, new developments being built in sustainable manners…so green buildings if you want to

think of it that way". The Trustee (UT) interviewed saw SD as "the combination of a thoughtful process around new building or refurbishment".

Given the current economic struggles facing higher education, other participants highlighted financial sustainability. SC addressed total cost of ownership of any development, "And how do you make the life of that development be sustainable both financially and physically?" While UT saw that SD "takes into account, obviously, the costs in the overall financial viability of a project".

The conclusion derived from the responses was the need for more sustainable development education at this particular institution. A lack of agreement on exactly what constitutes sustainable development can thwart discussions surrounding both the subject and any SD initiatives this university may consider.

University as Role Model/Thought Leader

Participants felt that universities had a role to play in sustainable development and an obligation to do so. A frequent sentiment that emerged was supporting the local community in achieving sustainability through research and by being thought leaders. By utilizing a university's facilities and engaging faculty, staff, and students, HEIs can create "living labs" for sustainable development that incorporate its various stakeholders including, the greater community within which it resides. Participants provided examples of how they view this function of a university. PR stated, "We should think about our development as an institution in terms not only of environmental sustainability but community sustainability." while SC posited "I think the universities have a unique position to be think tank leaders in these types of initiatives."

None of the participants mentioned the establishment of a sustainable development curricula or educating students on sustainability principles. However, respondents did indicate that universities should conduct research and pursue sustainability-related topics. The UP gave specifics on how the institution could lead by "R&D into renewable energy or other sustainable technologies and then second as thought leaders."

When asked to address sustainable efforts by universities, several of the respondents specifically mentioned renewable energy or a reduction in the use of fossil fuels. Specifically, some interviewees specifically referenced solar power as part of their view of what constitutes a sustainable university. Further emphasis was on business continuity or the university as an ongoing concern. Other participants mentioned financial sustainability, while just one included monitoring water usage as part of a university's sustainable efforts, while some mentioned the concept of universities as leaders in sustainable initiatives. The Chief Financial Officer (CFO) reacted immediately to the perceived cost of becoming and maintaining a sustainable university. "Sounds expensive." While the Student Association President (SA) indicated support for university sustainability efforts. "The sustainable university is one that is proactive in its approach to switching to sustainable energy and sustainable projects and initiatives."

Others addressed some of the more traditional thinking on SD which surrounds a reduction in fossil fuel consumption, recycling, and the use of renewable energy.

The SC specifically mentioned some key areas to be considered, "How do we recycle more? How do we use less fossil fuels? How do we capture and reuse stormwater?" And, the UT, while specifically mentioning solar power, addressed the need to justify such projects based upon a return, "Are we doing the return on investments that would lead toward integration of new solar projects or different ways to heat?"

While numerous, the participants' thoughts on what constitutes a sustainable university actually reflect an all-encompassing definition. To be sustainable, a university must maintain financial viability while considering sustainable initiatives such as the use of sustainable energy resources. And to be truly recognized as a sustainable university, the greater community needs to be incorporated into the institution's efforts.

Cost and Politics as Barriers

One of the most common barriers to sustainability in higher education is a lack of agreement on the meaning of the term itself. As previously illustrated by participants in the first theme, definitions of sustainability in higher education continue to differ. The cost of implementing sustainable initiatives was an overriding concern of most respondents. Here again, sustainability was viewed as related to energy-efficient or "green" buildings. Increased costs are associated with retrofitting existing buildings to meet specific efficiency standards and constructing new facilities using best practices in energy usage. In addition, some interviewees addressed the issue of *Return on Investment* (ROI) as necessary to justify new efforts toward sustainability. The CFO specifically mentioned that support for a sustainable initiative would be "depending on what the ROI is, the return on investment". Following that concern, the UP asserted that "There's always a cost associated with sustainability". And, while not emphatically associating sustainability with cost, the SC observed "sustainability has always equated to cost, not revenue, not profit, but expense". The PR addressed the on-going financial issues facing HEIs today, "We also have economic constraints in terms of retrofitting existing buildings, building new buildings to more expensive standards."

Participants expressed their opinions about spending capital to install alternative or renewable energy infrastructure on campus, even if there was no positive return on this investment. The shared concern regarding expenditures was an underlying theme while there was no recognition of any non-financial benefit that could be derived from having such a sustainable energy source on campus. Most answers were direct and to-the-point with the UP simply responding with "No, I probably wouldn't." and the SC replying, "No would be the answer." A more definitive answer was given by the PR who recognized the fiduciary responsibility a university has in managing its funds, "We have to be good stewards of the students' tuition dollars and endowment funds, and that means probably not experimenting with technologies." Somewhat aligned with the costs to install alternative and renewable energy infrastructure on campus was the perspective that college enrollments are expected to decline in the coming years and adding expenses would not be fiscally prudent. The CFO pointed to this trend, "You know, in six years, they're projecting it to be the lowest number of students entering college."

One study participant who represented the study body (SA) believed that students would support an alternative/renewable energy project even if there were a loss stating, "I'm almost positive that a lot of students on campus would be OK with taking some kind of loss to pursue more, you know, a more sustainable university."

Solar PV systems can provide reduced energy costs and lower carbon footprints, represent new education and research opportunities, and improve the academic institution's reputation. Solar PV systems are a visible sign of an HEI's commitment to sustainability and are popular with students. In addition, they can aid in recruiting students seeking to study alternative/renewable energy as they represent a "working lab" on campus. Furthermore, the institution is sending a message to the larger community about its commitment to sustainability.

Participants mentioned political issues as a potential barrier to supporting sustainable projects because a university's location has a bearing on the political climate in wherein it must operate. "You know there are people who are skeptical of sustainable energy." "I think it's just finding the right fit." As a result, there could be a situation whereby philanthropists supporting the institution may not share the university's views on sustainability. This environment is especially true in states where the production of fossil fuels represents a large portion of the economy. Therefore, installing alternative and renewable energy sources on those campuses could be seen as a threat to the industries providing substantial financial support to the HEIs. The UP expressed concern that the image of alternative and renewable energy can be a political issue which could influence stakeholder support for any proposed sustainable energy initiative. "You know there are people who are skeptical of sustainable energy on the political front."

For this particular institution, any alternative or renewable project proposed would have to stand on its own financially speaking, especially given that the participants are critical decision-makers for the university. Should the benefits outweigh the costs, the institutions current financial condition along with opportunities for capital deployment has to be considered. Further thought must be given to the political climate regarding the use of alternative & renewable energy along with the feasibility study which follows will aid in determining the financial viability of a specific sustainable solution.

Quantitative Results

The following section describes the results of the feasibility study or cost/benefit analysis of a specific sustainable solution utilizing a solar PV installation on a selected campus building. University personnel from facilities management as well as, an outside energy efficiency contractor, were involved in the choice of sites. Past electric consumption was provided, and a target power production level was set. Compiled data was analyzed in a proprietary model which designed a complete solar system along with associated costs, internal rate of return, payback period, etc.

Solar PV Infrastructure in Higher Education

There are many examples of higher education institutions pursuing solar energy infrastructure to enhance their environmental and financial sustainability. Jo et al. (2017) studied installations at several universities, including the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, Smith College (MA), and Agnes Scott College (GA), to determine both how the systems were designed and how they were financed. The goal was to decide on the best methods necessary to propose similar installations on the campus of Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois.

Having determined suitable sites for multiple solar PV installations, the Illinois State researchers used an energy performance modeling system known as "SAM," or System Advisory Model, developed by the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL). The model includes data such as weather from the National Solar Radiation Data Base (NSRDB) and information on the solar module and inverter performance data. Once the key inputs are submitted, the model can estimate the potential solar energy production on an annualized basis using the proposed system size. From there, the researchers calculated the cost of electricity per kWh generated by the solar PV design and compared that to the local electric utility's charge per kWh, which was adjusted by 2% per annum for inflation. Ultimately, it was determined that the university should not buy the system outright because, as a public institution, Illinois State cannot take advantage of the tax credits available since it pays no taxes (Jo et al., 2017).

Solar PV modeling tools have significantly improved in just the time since the Jo et al. (2017) study. They now incorporate the base NREL model but can also calculate the installation cost and the cost per kWh of generated electricity. Some tools even have GPS capabilities whereby the proposed solar solution can be shown on a map of the project site's rooftop. This function eliminates the need for a preliminary site visit before an estimate is produced (Aurora Solar, 2022).

Proposed Solar PV System Design

The model chosen for the feasibility study of this proposed solar PV solution was the Aurora Solar® design system. The company uses LiDAR technology, which stands for "light detection and ranging," to determine solar and shade exposure. Their computer-aided design or CAD system can simulate the essential components required on the roof of the proposed site using GPS maps. In addition, the company's proprietary AI software can generate a 3D version of the system design with just a location address and the corresponding electric utility bills (Aurora Solar, 2022).

The campus facility chosen for this study is a 3-story, 21,000 ft. sq. academic building. The selection was based upon certain factors such as: (1) Roof position relative to the daily movement of the sun (a south-facing roof is preferable); (2) Age of the building (older buildings are less efficient and could benefit from solar power generation); and (3) A separate electric utility meter (some university buildings share a common one, and determining split consumption would be hard).

The average power consumption for this facility in 2022 was approximately 10,200 kWh per month. The targeted electricity production of the solar PV system

for this building was 80% of current consumption, annualized. However, 100% power production is not possible with a solar PV system due to the limitations of sunlight. Furthermore, achieving total solar power usage coverage would be difficult even with battery backup, which was not planned. Therefore, the cost vs. benefits of installing this solar PV system was determined by comparing the cost of power per kWh generated by the installation vs. the current and projected cost of utility-provided power.

The Aurora Solar model's proposed design for this building would be a 63 kW (DC) system utilizing (140) solar panels with (36) power inverters spread across the south-facing roof. The initial installed cost would be approximately $185,850. In addition, the subject institution can avail itself of the 30% federal investment tax credit for solar energy, which was part of the Inflation Reduction Act passed in August 2022 (*Homeowner's Guide to the Federal Tax Credit for Solar Photovoltaics*, n.d.). Applying the credit reduces the initial outlay for the project to $130,095.

Thus, the resulting system would generate electric power at a rate of $0.052/kWh vs. the current utility rate of $0.072/kWh being charged. Beyond that, additional cost savings can be achieved by eliminating utility fuel surcharges. Regulated electric utilities can charge a fee for the fuel they use to generate power. The university's electricity provider has a combination of natural gas-fired power plants and wind farms. The resulting present fuel charge is $0.05/kWh. When added to the $0.072/kWh, the actual present-day per kWh cost of electricity from the local provider equates to $0.122, +$0.07/kWh higher than the solar-powered generation. For this specific application, the calculated payout period was 11.6 years, after which 100% savings would be recognized.

In addition, power prices do not remain constant, while the cost of electricity generated by solar PV systems does. Jo et al. (2017) used a 2% escalator to forecast the possible increases in the price of utility-provided power. But, according to the US Federal Reserve Bank, actual inflation over the past (10) years has averaged 2.5% and has risen to 3.7% over just the past (5) years (*Consumer Price Index, 1913- | Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis*, n.d.). Using either of these measures as an escalator for power prices indicates that they will increase. Furthermore, the price of fuel, such as natural gas, varies widely and could rise over time. Finally, no ongoing fees or improvements are necessary after the initial cost of the solar equipment.

This sustainable initiative, as modeled, represents cost savings to the university on its face. However, the multiple ancillary benefits mentioned earlier in this study add more value to this investment. The issue for decision-makers is deploying the initial capital while recouping savings over time. Again, the key stakeholders in the survey expressed concerns about new financial expenditures and may be reluctant to make the investment despite both tangible and intangible gains.

DISCUSSION

This study undertook an examination of the feasibility of the implementation of a sustainable energy initiative at a Midwestern university while ascertaining key stakeholder understanding of sustainable development and a sustainable university as well as, gauging support for the proposed sustainable initiative. There are three

key findings that were contextualized with this research. First, the quantitative economic modeling illustrated the potential savings for this institution that could result from the installation of a solar PV system on a specific campus building. Secondly, the analysis of the qualitative data indicated varied understanding of sustainable development and a sustainable university, Participants defined SD using terms associated with environmental conservation, financial stability, and green infrastructure. And a sustainable university was perceived as one that remains viable for decades to come, utilizes renewable energy, considers sustainability in future buildings, and includes the greater community in its sustainable efforts.

The first research question evaluated the cost/benefit of implementing a sustainable initiative at a private, Midwestern university. The modeled estimated cost per kWh of electricity to be generated by the proposed solar PV system was less than the current cost per kWh charged by the university's local electric utility. The power price and generation fuel escalator used indicated increased future savings as well. The second research question assessed the perceptions of key stakeholders regarding a specific sustainable initiative. While the definitions of sustainable development and a sustainable university varied among Participants, sustainable initiatives were viewed in the most basic economic terms, benefits must exceed costs.

Sustainability in higher education (SHE) has become more important in just the past few years. As universities seek to lower operating costs while improving their environmental footprint, sustainable energy resources have become an area of increased interest. Prior qualitative studies have focused on the belief systems held by university stakeholders regarding sustainable development and the concept of a sustainable university.

In 2010, Wright found that university presidents overwhelmingly associated sustainable development with protecting the environment (Wright, 2010). In a subsequent study of a wider group of university stakeholders in 2013, Wright & Horst found that 100% of interviewees associated sustainable development with environmental issues (Wright & Horst, 2013). The researchers also found that almost half of their respondents associated sustainability with the use of resources as well.

The findings gathered from this research study illustrated that little has changed in the perception of what constitutes sustainable development. For example, one interviewee's definition of sustainable development was along the lines of the meaning of sustainability as presented by the United Nations Brundtland Commission in 1987, which stated it as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Hooey et al., 2017, pp. 280-281).

As to the concept of a sustainable university, Djordjevic and Cotton (2011) found that one of the most common barriers to sustainability in higher education was a lack of agreement on the meaning of the term itself. Reviewing the answers to this same question posed in this study, differences in the definition remain. Helmer (2017) saw one of higher education's missions as contributing to society, and sustainable development requires a link between higher education and the community. Purcell et al. (2019) contended that universities could do more to

achieve sustainable development goals (SDG). They suggest HEIs can be "engines of societal transformation" because they significantly educate the larger community and deliver innovation (Purcell et al., 2019, p. 1343).

Participants echoed some of the same sentiments about assisting the local community in sustainable development and pursuing research in the field. Interestingly, however, not one person interviewed voiced the idea of sustainability as part of the curriculum. Hooey et al. (2017) advocated for creating integrated academic sustainability programs. Purcell et al. (2019) contended that universities could do more to achieve sustainable development goals (SDG). They suggested that HEIs can be "engines of societal transformation" because they significantly educate the larger community and deliver innovation (Purcell et al., 2019, p. 1343). And Filho et al. (2018) posited that HEIs can initiate sustainability concepts and put them into practice across different areas such as curricula, research, facilities & campus operations, and community outreach. Finally, Wright and Horst (2013) interviewees contended that educating students about sustainability would raise awareness while preparing future leaders to take on these issues.

Purcell et al. (2019) suggested that by utilizing a university's facilities and engaging faculty, staff, and students, HEIs can create "living labs" for sustainable development that incorporate the various stakeholders (Purcell et al., 2019, p. 1345). And many colleges and universities have responded by creating or initiating environmental research, integrating sustainability in curriculum and operations, and building green facilities (Mossman, 2018).

In explaining their views on what constitutes a sustainable university, none of the participants in this study emphasized the need to pursue green methods with new campus construction or modify existing structures to become more energy efficient. This concept was stated by 15 of 17 participants in the Wright (2010) study. However, in the follow-up 2013 study, none of the 32 interviewed mentioned green initiatives or the use of alternative/renewable energy as part of a sustainable university, aligning with the results presented herein (Wright & Horst, 2013).

As expressed by the stakeholder interviews, the barriers to implementing sustainable initiatives focused mainly on the costs, and those concerns are supported by previous studies. Chui (2020) emphasized financial sustainability as the underpinning for a sustainable campus. Mossman (2018), while asserting that higher education institutions should be at the center of research and education in sustainable initiatives, admitted that economic reasons may stand in the way. Filho et al. (2018) saw that the "most significant barrier was budget restrictions in part due to a lack of knowledge about how green initiatives can minimize costs, followed by institutional reluctance to change the barriers" (Filho et al., 2018, p. 1). Furthermore, those researchers found a desire for a quick return on capital expended as preferable to a long-term investment such as sustainable energy initiatives (Filho et al., 2018). In the Wright and Horst (2013) study, "the greatest perceived barrier…was the financial costs associated with new initiatives" (Wright & Horst, 2013, p. 220).

Previous quantitative studies have delved into the feasibility of alternative and renewable energy infrastructure additions to college campuses. In most cases, more complex evaluation tools and financial models were utilized (Jo et al., 2017).

However, the evolution of technology in analyzing the costs/benefits of solar PV systems now allows for a reduced timeframe in which to design and estimate project costs and comparative savings. One such model has been presented here, and its use resulted in a finding that the proposed renewable energy project would be cost-effective.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, the qualitative survey was conducted using a minimal sample size of seven key stakeholders who were only asked six questions. As a result, that may limit the transferability of the findings. However, this should not diminish the importance of the opinions expressed by the participants, as those were found to be relevant based on prior literature on the topics.

The feasibility study in the quantitative analysis was accurate for this university's specific building, which may not be valid for its other facilities. Additionally, the cost of electricity provided by a university's local utility will vary with location. The study institute is in a state with about the 10th-lowest commercial electricity rates in the country.

Implications for Practice

As higher education institutions (HEI) grapple with declining enrollments and the inflationary impacts on operations, there is a need to explore ways to achieve financial sustainability through cost-savings efforts. HEIs are also expected to be leaders in areas such as protecting the environment, sustainable development, and using sustainable resources, including energy. Solar PV infrastructure may provide an avenue to reduce a university's overall utility expenses while, at the same time, utilizing a sustainable energy resource. Additionally, the institution will lower its carbon footprint and provide working labs for the faculty and students.

The solar design model used in this study validated the benefits that renewable energy can provide on campuses of institutions of higher education. The tool utilized in this research can be applied to any setting and at any university. In addition, its simplistic process creates quick results from which to evaluate the cost/benefit of adding this form of renewable energy. Establishing the thoughts, opinions, and level of support for sustainable development in higher education is essential before proceeding with proposals for new expenditures involving sustainable energy sources. This study illustrated the diverse levels of understanding that can be present among key university stakeholders and decision-makers. A lack of knowledge regarding sustainable development, a sustainable university and sustainable energy sources could hamper efforts by HEIs to enhance their financial and environmental sustainability.

Despite the sample size, the qualitative approach used here provided additional context into this subject for this particular institution. That, in turn, allowed for conjecture as to whether or not crucial decision-makers would approve a proven-to-be feasible renewable energy project.

As evidenced by study findings, higher education institutions need to incorporate more sustainability learning into their curricula, mission, and day-to-day operations. For many of the interviewees, there was a lack of a consistent and detailed definition of sustainable development and a sustainable university, and no thoughts were expressed regarding sustainability education.

CONCLUSION

This mixed-methods case study approach combined elements of prior studies, namely, qualitative studies on sustainable development and sustainable universities, coupled with feasibility studies evaluating the cost/benefit of renewable energy projects on HEI campuses. The findings illustrate that solar PV systems can be readily assessed with current modeling software and can prove cost-effective depending on the university's electric utility charges. However, for proposed renewable energy projects that are not self-sustainable from a profit standpoint, key stakeholders need to evaluate the intangible benefits associated with green energy endeavors before arriving at a final decision as to whether or to approve these projects.

Based upon the results of this study alone, knowledge regarding sustainability and sustainable initiatives needs to be more prevalent at colleges and universities if financial and environmental sustainability is to be achieved. For institutions of higher learning that contemplate utilizing solar PV, this work will provide a method of establishing stakeholder support (qualitative) and a cost/benefit model for the system itself (quantitative).

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Student Loan Debt for Borrowers of Color: A Policy Afterthought?

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ABSTRACT

Levels of student loan debt in the United States are increasing exponentially every year, directly affecting the ability of millions to live a comfortable life. Student loan debt levels are an acute issue for borrowers of color, as they more often need federal loans to attend institutions of higher education in comparison to their White peers. This qualitative study focuses on this issue through the lens of critical whiteness studies, using a critical discourse analysis to better understand what messages policymakers create for borrowers of color. Discourse studied in this analysis includes the text of the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program and all proposed amendments, personal Senate websites of all committee members, and newsletters published by the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions committee in the 117th Congress. The findings of this study show uneven support for borrowers of color, largely divided under political party lines. Narrative devices were also used to create and reinforce ethical arguments regarding the desire of borrowers to repay their loans.
Keywords: loan forgiveness, critical whiteness studies, critical discourse analysis

In April of 2021, the total student loan debt of United States borrowers was $1.64 trillion USD (Rubin & Alexanyan, 2021). The average amount of student loan debt per borrower in 2022 is over $30,000, enough to purchase a new vehicle, make mortgage payments on the average U.S. home for more than a year, or make significant contributions towards a comfortable retirement at the end of their working years (Donnelly, 2020). Student loan debt is an especially salient issue for students of color, due to their relative lack of household wealth compared to White families, and the inability of their parents to contribute to their education at the same level as

White households (Carales et. al, 2020, Mustaffa & Dawson, 2021). Students of color, seeing a college education as a means to escape the cycle of poverty and gain social mobility, are increasingly forced to bear the burden of student loan debt for decades in the hopes of achieving a better future.

Recognizing the need for federal intervention in the student loan debt crisis, in 2007, the United States federal government established the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program as part of the College Cost Reduction and Access Act (Government Accountability Office, 2019). For borrowers that make 120 qualifying payments while employed in a federally recognized public service institution for ten years, the PSLF is designed to forgive all federal student loan debt in recognition of their efforts. Examples of organizations that qualify under this program include governmental agencies at any level (local, state, national), and those entities classified as non-profit (501(c)(3)) under the federal tax code (Government Accountability Office, 2019). Sadly, the vast majority of applicants who have applied for the program have had their claims rejected. According to the Government Accountability Office (2021), over 98% of all applications are rejected for reasons such as incompleteness, lack of or not enough qualifying payments, and employment with non-eligible organizations (Government Accountability Office, 2021).

For those that are rejected due to a lack of information or a dysfunctional bureaucracy, the loss of ten working years may be something they may never recover from, forever changing their future prospects due to their student debt load. Graduates of color are at particular risk for perpetual indebtedness due to their student loan debt, despite holding a college degree and overcoming the massive challenges posed to them in society (Mustaffa & Dawson, 2021). While only a part of the overall student debt load conversation, borrowers of color are at risk of losing the most due to the broken promises of the PSLF.

Purpose and Research Questions

This policy analysis seeks to gain greater understanding of the importance of student loan debt held by borrowers of color for elected federal legislators by addressing the following research questions:

1. To what extent are borrowers of color discussed in legislation directly relating to the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program?
2. What explicit and implicit messages are communicated by federal policymakers to borrowers of color?

Gaining a deeper understanding of how language and communication is used to shape policy problems and solutions provides insight into the nature of federal political power and the objectives of legislators in regard to those in non-societally dominant positions of power (Lakoff, 2016). In order to understand the essence of these research questions, this study relied on a research model shaped by critical discourse analysis and critical whiteness studies as a theoretical foundation, discussed in detail below.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conducting a comprehensive literature review regarding the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program is a difficult task since loan forgiveness provided by the policy has only been possible since 2017 (*College Cost Reduction and Access Act*, 2007). In this literature review, I focus on several key topics to provide a holistic picture of the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program. These topics include a policy overview, followed by an evaluation of policy goals and effectiveness, and concluded by a discussion of unintended consequences and other student loan debt forgiveness programs.

Policy Background

The United States federal government has authorized 50 loan forgiveness and loan repayment programs since passage of the National Defense Education Act of 1958, less than thirty of which were operational as of 2018 (Hegji et al., 2018). The Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program, established as part of the College Cost Reduction and Access Act of 2007, is one of the most prominent due to its stated promise of full student loan forgiveness if all stated criteria are met. When the PSLF was established in 2007, total student loan debt was already perceived as a serious issue at the national level, with collective outstanding debt totaling $600 million (Hanson, 2021). Levels of student loan debt have only increased since, with the same study estimating that borrowers owed $1.7 trillion in 2020, nearly three times as much as they did in 2007 (Hanson, 2021).

According to a 2019 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report, the central goal of the PSLF is to reduce or eliminate student loan debt for those individuals willing to serve their country through public service (GAO, 2019). Congressional supporters of the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program likely saw several benefits to this legislation: increased public interest in public sector employment, stringent requirements that set a very high bar for applicants to qualify, and as a governmental amelioration for a polis becoming increasingly aware of the severe impact of student loan debt on the lives of American citizens. At the signing of the College Cost Reduction and Access Act, President George W. Bush proudly announced: "Today is a reaffirmation of our commitment, our determination to help more Americans realize (their) dreams by getting a good education." (Drawbaugh, 2007, p.1). The College Cost Reduction and Access Act, and the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program, in particular, were important policy implementations that exist today as governmental policy interventions aimed at improving the lives of student loan debt holders.

Borrowers who wish to take advantage of the loan forgiveness offered by the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program must adhere to two major stipulations: make ten years' worth of satisfactory student loan payments under an income driven repayment plan, and during these ten years, maintain employment with an eligible public-serving organization. (Donnelly, 2020).

Individuals who complete ten years of repayment while working in a public-serving organization should then, in theory, have their federal student loan debts,

including principal and interest, annulled. Key here are the loans that can be annulled, as only student loans offered by the federal government qualify under this program, not those issued and administered through private companies (Donnelly, 2020).

Policy Implementation and Measures of Success

In the *College Cost Reduction and Access Act of 2007*, the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program is only one of a litany of other clauses and programs contained in the original legislation (*College Cost Reduction and Access Act*, 2007). Some of the other programs of note in the act include deferrals of loan repayment for uniformed servicemembers, adjusting interest percentages for federal student loans, reduction of student loan servicing and lending fees, and increasing the amount of Pell Grant funds students may receive.

While it is difficult to accurately gauge the long-term effectiveness of the PSLF as of 2022, academic literature has already identified several serious problems with the program. The largest of these is the inability of borrowers to receive accurate and timely information from the Department of Education or the PSLF loan servicing agency. Studies routinely note the extremely low application acceptance rate of borrowers in the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program, with approximately 98% of PSLF applications denied due to poor administrative service (Crespi, 2021; Donnelly, 2020). Even the federal government noted the ineffectiveness of program administration, and in 2018, instituted the Temporary Expanded Public Service Loan Forgiveness (TEPSLF) program (GAO, 2019). The TEPSLF allows for applicants who have made 120 consecutive qualifying payments towards their student loan debt, even if they were enrolled in an ineligible repayment plan, to receive federal student loan forgiveness (GAO, 2019). Despite the improvements to the PSLF since 2017, studies still show that the overwhelming majority of applicants are unable to successfully apply for federal student loan forgiveness either through the PSLF or the TEPSLF (Hanson, 2021).

Policy Goals and Outcomes

The policy goals of the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program are seemingly simple, and can be encapsulated within its parent bill, the College Cost Reduction and Access Act (College Cost Reduction and Access Act, 2007). The PSLF was designed to lower the total cost of education for college students and to ensure that a steady stream of educated workers joined the labor force (College Cost Reduction and Access Act, 2007). These goals crossed partisan lines, as a Democratic-controlled Congress drafted the bill, and a Republican president ratified the program into law.

As noted in the previous section, the PSLF is problematic in that it does not deliver debt loan relief as intended for nearly all applicants. While the academic literature on the consequences of PSLF rejection is sparse, it is not difficult to imagine many of those in the public sector who began careers with the goal of student loan debt relief becoming disillusioned due to application rejection, resulting in a departure from their current roles for higher-paying positions in other organizations that allow them to pay their debts. Khoury (2021) discovered that approximately 20%

of all medical school applicants relied on the promise of debt relief under the PSLF as a deciding factor in their career choice. In a similar study, Friedman et al., (2016) found that over 40% of graduates at one medical school intended to pursue loan forgiveness.

Adding to the complexity of applying for debt relief under the PSLF and the TEPSLF is the change in the organization that manages federal loan servicing (Minsky, 2021). This organization, FedLoan, managed the vast majority of student loan debt accounts (8.5 million) prior to the change. FedLoan was the loan servicing wing of the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency (PHEAA), which had been contracted to process student loan repayments under the PSLF. In early 2022, the federal government was forced to find another governmental organization to manage these accounts, due to contract non-renewal with the PHEAA. Throughout 2022, the majority of individuals applying for debt relief under the two programs discussed in this piece had their accounts transferred to the Higher Education Loan Authority of the State of Missouri, or MOHELA. While initial reports of administrative process improvement are encouraging, long-term studies are required to accurately judge program effectiveness. Loan servicing organizations have historically had issues in providing sufficient service to borrowers, which have caused additional headaches to those whose applications are already in progress (Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, 2015).

Unintended Consequences

Due to the high numbers of PSLF and TEPSLF rejections, numerous federal investigations were conducted to determine the structural issues inherent in these programs. One 2021 report from the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau identified several administrative problems with loan generation and servicing, including customer service agents who routinely provided inaccurate information to borrowers that resulted in application rejection (Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, 2021). FedLoan, the organization that formerly serviced PSLF and TEPSLF loans and applications, frequently inaccurately entered information into their databases, improperly allocated monthly payments from borrowers, and engaged in other activities that caused borrowers to have their applications delayed or more often, denied (Minsky, 2021). Studies into the effect that this had on borrowers of color are difficult to find, indicating a possible gap in the literature to be investigated in subsequent studies.

As a result, the federal loan servicing system has been heavily scrutinized, resulting in numerous policy recommendations. The Student Borrower Protection Center and other similar organizations served as advocates in this process by petitioning the federal government for debt relief (Student Borrower Protection Center, 2021) and providing policymakers with key data and statistics, helping the issue of student loan debt remain salient for federal legislators (Wu, 2021).

Other Loan Forgiveness Programs

The Public Service Loan Forgiveness program is not the only repayment option for those who graduate with student loan debt. While traditionally not considered as an option for debt relief as such, participating in active-duty military service provides several benefits for debtors (Federal Student Aid, 2021). These benefits include a cap on student loan interest rates while in service, postponing loan repayment during and for one year after active-duty service, and simultaneously having time spent in the military qualify as public service under the PSLF. In times where the benefit is offered, as was the case for the Army during the Afghanistan War, several branches of the military offered federal loan forgiveness in exchange for uniformed service (U.S. Army, 2021). Federal uniformed service is not an option for many however due to a myriad of factors and should not be considered as an option to reduce or eliminate student loan debt for every individual (Nesbit & Reingold, 2011).

Akin to military service, several other federal organizations offer loan forgiveness in exchange for program participation. These organizations include AmeriCorps, the Peace Corps, and Volunteers in Service to America (Financial Aid, 2021). Much as uniformed service, opportunities to serve in these organizations are limited and are not an option for many student loan debt holders. Borrowers of color are often unable to participate in these programs as frequently as White college graduates, limiting their maximum effectiveness in addressing the root issue (Mustaffa & Dawson, 2021).

For those who desire a career in the K-12 classroom or in higher education, several federal and state programs exist to assist with student loan debt relief. The National Defense Education Act of 1958, mentioned at the beginning of this study, provides federal funds to subsidize Direct or PLUS loans for low-income families (Delisle & Holt, 2020; Financial Aid, 2021). Individuals willing to teach specific subjects in those areas identified as high-need are eligible to have their student loan debt forgiven under the Teacher Loan Forgiveness program after spending five consecutive academic years in an eligible educational service agency (Federal Student Aid, 2021). Several law schools forgive student loan debt for students who serve in public interest or non-profit positions (Equal Justice Works, 2021), as do medical practices that specialize in critical needs areas (Pfeifer, 2021).

At a state level, only North Dakota does not offer some form of state-supported student loan forgiveness for residents. In comparison, Minnesota offers 127 programs to relieve student loan debt holders of their financial burdens (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021). Many other states offer debt relief incentives for graduates of public schools of higher education, generating policies geared towards attracting individuals to critical public-service need areas. An excellent example of this can be found in Kentucky, where physicians, dentists, and pharmacists are offered up to $80,000 in loan repayments for serving at a designated *need* practice site (UK College of Medicine, 2021). The PSLF was based in part on successful state programs such as these successful governmental interventions, serving as another example of the federal government using states as *test-kitchens* in the policymaking realm.

Conceptual Framework

This study relies on critical whiteness studies (CWS) as the conceptual framework for a strong theoretical foundation. While perhaps not as well-known as critical race theory (Parker, 2002), CWS is an important tool for researchers in gaining a deeper understanding into the ways that racial appearance and identity interact with power and control in society (Gildersleeve et al., 2011). Critical Whiteness whiteness studies have many facets, but the most important precept for this study is a focus on how whiteness can be a skin color, but also a means of guiding discourse and driving the policymaking process (Tapia-Fuselier et al., 2021). The concept of whiteness is regarded as the prevailing societal normal in the United States, in which culture, language, identity, epistemology, and experiences possessed by White and White-presenting individuals is societally preeminent (Matias et al., 2014). Inherent power imbalances exist between Whites and People of Color, oftentimes invisible to the former but ever present to those in the latter (Gillborn, 2006). Critical whiteness studies also place a strong emphasis on the study of hegemonic whiteness by those in a societally dominant position and the effect of whiteness on the collective society (Matias et al., 2014).

Preeminent academic literature focuses on five central components of CWS: color evasiveness, epistemological ignorance, ontological expansiveness, property, and assumed racial comfort (Cabrera, 2016). For this project, I focus on color evasiveness (henceforth referred to as colorblindness) as the primary variable of study. Colorblindness is the practice of racism avoidance by those in the White, societally-dominant group, through various means with the ultimate goal of bypassing considerations of systemic racial issues (Tapia-Fuselier et al., 2021). Evidence of color blindness in this study would arise from a lack of intentional discussion either in legislation or other publicly available discourse of issues faced by student loan debt holders of color (Cabrera, 2016). By adhering to a policy of colorblindness, policymakers can claim that policy choices are free of bias and unfairness (Gillborn, 2006).

METHODS

This study uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) as the method of qualitative inquiry. CDA as a research method is relatively new in comparison to other long-established investigative approaches. At its core, CDA examines forms of human communication and related power dynamics to study practical and theoretical phenomena (Yu et al., 2022). Discourse as a concept is expansive and can encompass fields such as the written and spoken word, and often focuses on the structure of language as a means of one group exercising power over another (Sveinson, 2021). Discourse is often pragmatic and intentional in approach, and approach and has underlying contextual meanings that can be gleaned from what is omitted as much as what is said. For example, the choice of a news media outlet to focus on White student loan debt holders with over $250,000 in outstanding loans could be meant to evoke feelings of shock amongst readers who identify with those individuals due to shared experiences. Critical whiteness studies as a conceptual framework works well with critical

discourse studies as a method of analysis, as both inherently focus on power dynamics and relationships as essential for understanding how societies function (Cabrera, 2016).

Researchers have noted that official policy and professional documents often omit language that appear overtly racial (van Dijk, 1993). Studying several types of discourse is essential to synthesize findings and adequately address research questions. Where legislation may omit direct references to race, less formal sources of discourse such as constituent-focused communications and messaging tend to include more overt language that exposes a policymaker's personal values (Yu et al., 2022). This type of language is often referred to as elite discourse and can be identified through the triangulation of multiple sources to determine consensus. Elite discourse reinforces the existing societal political power structure by the dominant racial group, the strength of which often signals a willingness (or non-willingness) to engage with ideas and values of the non-dominant group (Schneider & Jacoby, 2005). This type of discourse will be discussed throughout the study as a special focus.

Stages of Critical Discourse Analysis

Using CDA as a qualitative methodology requires strong adherence to a specific analytic framework appropriate to the task. The framework most appropriate for this study is Mullet's (2018) seven stage process, which includes: (a) selection of specific discourse types, (b) capturing the essence of source data, (c) source background investigation, (d) theme identification and exploration, (e) discovery of external relationships, (f) determining the presence of internal text relationships, and (g) final data interpretation. These stages of discourse analysis are defined below and will also include discussion on how they will be used in this study.

Stage One: Selection of Discourse Types

The first, and possibly most critical, step of the discourse analysis process is the decision on which types of communication that will be used as part of the study. This decision is a deliberate one and will shape the study in ways that intimately affect each detail of the process (van Dijk, 1993).

The scope of this study was limited to the following types of discourse: the text of the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program and all pieces of legislation that modify it that originate in the 117th United States Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) committee, the public-facing Senate websites for all members of the United States Senate HELP committee, and the electronic "newsrooms" of the committee chair and ranking member. The choice of these types of discourse captures the broad, publicly stated goals of policymakers (Senate website information), specific and directed goals communicated to constituents (newsroom press releases), and the final product of policy work, a synthesis of the first two types of discourse modified and altered through the political process (Congressional legislation). The evolution of discourse through these three sources will illuminate how and when voices that represent people of color are supported, suppressed, or ignored. A detailed examination of these discourses is provided later in this section.

Stage Two: Capturing the Source Data

A benefit to the researcher using CDA is the ability to use publicly available discourse for analysis (Mullet, 2018). Researchers must also make choices as to how much or what parts of chosen discourse to study; casting too wide a net in this area can make the study overly onerous, while too small of a selection will miss key details that could affect findings in the project.

In this study, I chose to limit the amount of discourse within source areas to the 117th session of the U.S. Congress (2018-2022). While student loan debt has been a salient issue for several decades, discourse surrounding it has become particularly prevalent since 2018 due to that being the first year that PSLF applicants could apply for loan relief under the program (Government Accountability Office, 2019). While a separate study is warranted to determine the frequency and nuances of historical discourse of student loan debt for borrowers of color, it is beyond the scope of this project.

Stage Three: Source Background Investigation

An important component of CDA is an examination of where the selected discourse resides within the larger societal dynamic (van Dijk, 1993). Having an understanding of the factors at play that contributed to the rise of the discourse itself is similar to a farmer having a firm grasp on soil composition when planting their crops. Discourse does not arise without events and causal factors to precede it.

To gain this understanding, I focused carefully on the background of the producers of the selected discourse. Of special concern will be the political affiliation of Senate committee members. Since student loan debt relief is normally championed by the Democratic party in public discourse and through legislative initiative, it is likely that there is a correlation between party affiliation and categorically 'positive' discourse regarding student loan debt relief initiatives such as the PSLF. While anticipating that Republican-affiliated committee members are more likely to engage in colorblindness related behaviors, I acknowledge that this belief may be shaped by my personal political beliefs.

Stage Four: Identifying Major Themes and Subthemes

This stage of discourse analysis will be very familiar to those versed in qualitative research methods, as it involves coding, theme, and subtheme generation (Hatch, 2002). In a CDA, there can be infinite amounts of data to analyze which may tempt the researcher into either including too many or too few sources in their study (Mullet, 2018; Sveinsson, 2021). Executing Stage One of this model rigorously mitigates much of this risk.

In this research project, rather than using commercially available computer software, I manually coded all discourse data. This *hands-on* approach, while much more time consuming, permitted me to become intimately familiar with the discourse and allowed me to uncover additional themes and subthemes that may not have arisen

with use of computer software. All emergent themes were analyzed across discourse types, with subthemes created and examined as appropriate.

Stages Five and Six: Relationship Identification

The CDA model used in this study separates the discourse relationship identification process into external and internal elements (Mullet, 2018). There are benefits to this method, as the researcher can use what they discover in terms of types of discourse affecting each other (external) to help understand what meanings a piece of discourse has standing alone (internal). Components of discourse given special attention in these stages include expressions of power, presence and frequency of sensitizing language, and metaphor usage (Mullet, 2018).

In this project, both stages were performed concurrently. Much like semi-structured qualitative interviews are often utilized to allow for flexibility in the information gathering process, removing the rigid barrier between Stages Five and Six allowed for a more fluid examination of all discourse elements simultaneously. Understanding the meaning of and how discourse stands alone provided several clues as to the relationship between discourse sources, despite their intended audiences.

Stage Seven: Final Data Interpretation

The final stage of this CSA model called for a synthesis and thorough consideration of the previous two steps, providing a foundation for results, discussion, and suggestions for future research (Mullet, 2018). Again, this particular CDA seeks to provide insight into how discourse affects borrowers of color, either through peer-to-peer elite discourse between policymakers, or between policymakers and their constituents.

The interpretation of findings in this analysis was relatively straightforward, though a subsequent evaluation of overall implications was difficult, something I owe to my background as a cisgendered White male. While I viewed the data through my own intersectional lens, subsequent studies may benefit from a different methodological choice. Participatory action research (often referred to as PAR) would have been an excellent choice for this type of study, as it involves those intimately affected by variables of interest in each step of knowledge generation and interpretive processes. (Littman et al., 2021).

Data Sources

Stated above in Stage Two of the Methods section, I rely on three discourse sources for this study: the text of the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program and all pieces of legislation that modify the PSLF that originate in the 117th session of the United States Senate, the public-facing Senate websites for all members of the United States Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, and the electronic news releases of the committee chair and ranking member. These sources are deemed as essential in this study to adequately answer the two study research questions posed

earlier and to better understand the excise of political power towards borrowers of color through selected discourse.

The first discourse source, the original text and all proposed policy modifications of the PSLF in the 117th United States Congress, act as both a legislative artifact that captures the original intent of the policy initiative as well as the subsequent attempts of policymaking elites to change the program. Both the inclusion and exclusion of legislative discourse relating to the issues facing borrowers of color provides insight into how the perceived importance of these individuals have changed over time. Secondly, the public-facing HELP committee member websites allow each of the current committee members a public space to articulate their policy preferences and positions. Policymakers on the committee have full control of their websites and use them to communicate with both their constituents and the public at large. The committee itself consists of 22 senators, 11 from each political party, led by a chair from the Democratic party and a ranking chair from the Republican party.

Lastly, and likely the most consequential of the three discourse sources, are the public news releases from the U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions committee. The committee publishes news, policy advocacy positions, and other discourse they deem pertinent, both from the committee chair and the ranking chair. Committees are responsible for drafting and passing legislation for approval and passage into law, and this source of discourse was useful in answering posed research questions.

All of these sources were available electronically on public-facing federal internet domains and do not require any special access requirements. No Institutional Review Board review was required for this research due to the public availability of data.

Due to the gravity of this research, in keeping with qualitative best practices, a short acknowledgement on positionality is more than warranted here. No researcher is free from biases that affect their work, and my background as a White, cisgendered male raised in a middle-class household helped shape all aspects of this project. I held close to my research framework throughout this project to mitigate any unintentional negative biases affecting this work, but there will always be the possibility that these efforts may be insufficient.

RESULTS

After completion of research and a thorough examination of all selected discourse, several emergent themes were identified and will be described in detail below. These themes include ideological divisions, class focus, and partisan divide. Themes arose organically from a collective synthesis of all available discourse. Ultimately, while student loan debt holders of color are discussed by policymakers on occasion, their needs are often subsumed under concerns of economic class, often being merged for argumentative and persuasive purposes. Acknowledgment and discussion of racial issues differ greatly along party lines, as senators from the Democratic party engage in this type of discourse much more frequently than their Republican peers, though there are several notable counterfactuals in the data.

Ideological Divisions

In the original Public Service Loan Forgiveness legislation and all subsequent legislative amendments to the program, there were no specific mentions or considerations for borrowers of color. Since the PSLF was ratified into law through bipartisan agreement, there is a strong likelihood that a position of colorblindness was, consciously or unconsciously, chosen to maximize the likelihood of the measure passing through the executive and legislative branches of the federal government.

Of the 508 bills that originated in the U.S. Health, Education, Labor, and Pension Committee related to student loan debt relief after the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program was passed into law in 2007, 35 of these were modifications of the PSLF. Of these 35 bills, 19 were considered in the 117th U.S. Congress. In terms of bill origination in the HELP committee, 15 of the 19 legislative initiatives came from the Democratic party, while four of them originated from the ranking (Republican) party. Nearly all proposed policy amendments related to incremental changes such as changing loan repayment terms and durations, or COVID-19 related pauses in all repayments. Of all proposed legislation, the only bill that explicitly mentioned race or ethnicity was Senate Bill 4247, the Student Loan Repayment and FAFSA Simplification Act, which included a provision that barred institutions of higher education that received FAFSA funds from discriminating against borrowers in terms of race, and directed the Secretary of Education to prioritize higher education institutions that serve students of color in the establishment of service centers for student borrower support (Student Loan Repayment and FAFSA Simplification Act, 2021, p.2). Excepting this one example, all other legislation was colorblind.

Regarding the official Senate websites of HELP committee members, each was varied and contained several different elements. Most, but not all, committee members had a dedicated values or policy positions section of their website where they discussed what was most important to them in terms of values in their decision making. The largest divide between members of the HELP committee in terms of partisanship was the inclusion of a dedicated 'civil rights' policy position or a dedicated 'family values' policy position. Democratic members of the committee more commonly have a section related to civil rights on their official website, while Republican committee members have a family values issues page. Senator Patty Murray (D-WA), the committee chair, Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT), and Senator John Hickenlooper (D-CO), stand out in having well-articulated policy positions for people of color, focusing on systemic inequalities to include student loan debt.

Conversely, most Republican committee members do not mention racial issues, and instead focus on their religious or family backgrounds. There are several Republican counterexamples however, most notably Senator Tim Scott (R-SC) and Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK). Senator Scott is laser-focused on his background as a Black man, using first-person pronouns to describe his experiences "pulling himself up by his own bootstraps" as part of his set of policy positions that he deems the 'Opportunity Agenda' (Scott, 2022). Senator Murkowski features her record on native Alaskan issues prominently on her official website, citing several awards she has won for her efforts. However, despite these examples, Republican members of

the committee by and in large do not explicitly call for considerations of race as part of their deliberative processes.

News releases from the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions committee of the 117th U.S. Congress paint a very distinct picture of concern for people of color. From January of 2018 to June of 2022, the HELP committee released 28 news articles regarding the PSLF and student loan forgiveness as a whole. Of these releases, 18 were from the committee chair and 10 were from the ranking party. Senator Murray mentioned borrower of color issues and concerns six times in her news releases, while her counterpart, Senator Richard Burr (R-NC), did not mention them at all. Senator Murray often uses real world examples and stories of her Washington State constituents of color, using them to emphasize the importance borrowers of color have in her decision-making processes. Conversely, news releases from Senator Burr have never indicated race as a factor in his deliberations.

Class Focus

A common theme throughout much of the selected discourse is a focus on economic class as the variable of interest in terms of policy modification. In the original text of the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program and subsequent proposed revisions of the PSLF, legislation is largely value-free in terms of an economic class focus, though an argument could be made that verbiage was crafted specifically to benefit the lower and middle economic classes rather than people of color directly. In comparison, both the public-facing Senate committee member websites and the committee news releases frequently use discourse that champions considerations of economic classes as the *raison d'être* for policy change.

On committee member webpages, a common refrain from both the party of the committee chair and the ranking committee is a desire to provide economic "relief" to constituents. However, where, when, and to whom relief should be provided by the federal government differs greatly between the political parties. For those of the ranking (Republican) party on the committee, the most common group of individuals mentioned is the "taxpayer". Republican committee members often frame an argument of us (Republicans, Americans), versus them (federal government, Democrats) in terms of debt relief. While usually not explicit, this narrative device attempts to cast those interested in relief or expungement of student loan debt as being unethical, with many committee members stating that those seeking such relief are ones with high-paying jobs that could pay off their debt if they "worked hard" to do so. Phrases combining words such as "good" and "taxpayer" are prevalent though Republican website discourse, attaching negative connotations to those individuals seeking student loan debt relief. Conversely, Senator Murray and Democrats on the HELP committee often use words such as "worker" in combination with their own personal experiences to allude to values possessed by committee members as a signal of class-consciousness. On his Senate website, Senator Tim Kaine (D-VA) features a story where he traveled to Honduras and labored in a family-owned ironworking shop to connect with blue-collar workers in his state. Democratic party members have collectively constructed a counterargument by asserting that "goodness" does not necessarily relate to how hard someone works. Rather, student loan debt relief should

be offered by the federal government to the public as a way to assist those that are less fortunate in terms of income and economic class. Less prevalent amongst Democratic committee members are arguments and ideological constructs that recognize systematic inequalities faced by people of color. Often on committee member websites, such arguments combine economic class and race as reasons to why loan debt relief should be offered.

In terms of the news releases from the Senate HELP committee, economic class plays an equally important discursive role. In more than half of news releases published by Senator Patty Murray on the committee webpage, arguments for loan relief benefitting "low income" or "struggling" borrowers are regularly made, directly and indirectly asserting that such relief should be provided as an ethical action by the federal government. Narratives of struggling student loan debt holders are also presented frequently, bolstering this ethical argument. Conversely, Republican members of the HELP committee use divergent arguments of "fairness" in signaling their opposition towards student loan debt forgiveness. Senator Burr and his colleagues use examples of those who have paid off their debt as being disadvantaged by those who seek loan relief, again indirectly tying the concept of "hard work" to "goodness," implying that those that refuse to pay off their loans are not deserving of relief. Republicans on the committee also invoke the lower and middle economic classes within their committee news release discourse, arguing that providing loan debt relief to borrowers would incur a large cost to the federal government, which would result in higher taxes on "struggling families." Discourse related to race is absent from Republican committee news releases and indicates collective colorblindness in this regard.

Partisan Divide

Much like in other pluralistic governments found across the world, in the United States, elected political representatives that do not identify with the majoritarian party are often antagonistic towards policy positions and initiatives championed by the opposing party. Occurrences of cross-aisle agreement are rare, excepting times of acute national crises or emergencies. While those individuals who hold large amounts of student loan debt would likely disagree, this issue is often perceived as less critical than other concerns at the national level and can be placed on the proverbial back burner. Without an agreed-upon long term policy solution, space exists for a wide range of discourse that provides insight into how members agree and disagree with each other.

The original text of the Public Loan Service Forgiveness program and all proposed changes submitted for legislative consideration in the 117th Congress provide excellent insight into just how aligned members of both parties are in terms of policy revision. Of all bills submitted by the committee for Senate floor consideration, over 85% directly affected repayment terms and provisions. While over half of these bills were submitted on behalf of the majority (Democratic) party, many others were submitted by the minority (Republican) party with tacit majority approval. The most common policy goal of these bills was an attempt to make administrative loan servicing simpler, as well as providing alternate student loan debt

repayment tiers based on years of public service. Of the 19 bills brought to the Senate floor for consideration, none received a final vote and are by all intents and purposes abandoned. Again, none of these 19 bills directly referenced race or ethnicity as a central rationale for policy change.

On Senate committee member website pages, evidence of partisan agreement is rare. Much more common are partisan attacks by senators on opposing party platforms. A prime example of this can be found on the Senate webpage of Senator Tommy Tuberville (R-AL). On his education webpage, Senator Tuberville states that "Education is the key to opportunity and freedom…taxpayer dollars should not go toward funding divisive curriculum in the classrooms that teaches students to hate our country." (Tuberville, 2022). Regarding Title IX, he states: "Title IX is the single best contributor to the growth of women's' and girls' sports at every level, but it's under assault from progressive activists and government bureaucrats." Other Republican HELP committee members have similar policy positions posted on their official Senate website pages, but Senator Tuberville provides a unique example of discursive partisanship.

A second observation of note on committee Senate website pages is how developed, or underdeveloped, many of them are in terms of policy position discourse. On average, senators who have been re-elected at least once have much more developed websites than those that do not, with more detail and elucidation on their policy positions. Senator Ben Ray Lujan (D-NM) is a Hispanic-identifying policymaker whose election platform focuses heavily on educational affairs for people of color. However, on his official Senate website, there is no explicit policy position for student loan debt relief at all, let alone for borrowers of color. Several Republican senators do not include education as an issue at all, with Senators Roger Marshall, M.D. (R-KS), Mike Braun (R-IN) declining to do so.

A final observation in terms of partisanship is the verbiage and discourse used in news releases from the HELP committee. Regardless of political party, when discussing the Public Loan Service Forgiveness program, words with negative connotations far outweighed those with positive connotations. The most common word used by both parties to describe the program was broken, being used over 60 times in 28 news releases, followed by failure and trapped. Only Senator Murray used positive verbiage in news releases, with the most popular word being "relief", followed by "glad".

Words and phrases with positive and negative connotations were used extensively by parties to foreground policy proposals and to accuse the current presidential administration. While all articles published by Republican members of the HELP committee uniformly attacked the existing student loan debt relief program, over half of articles published by Senator Murray and committee Democrats also castigated the PSLF. This suggests that both parties recognize that student loan debt relief is both a salient issue, and the current policy prescription is insufficient. Again, race is often presented as a secondary issue for Democrats, and a non-issue for Republicans in most public-facing discourse by policymaking elites.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Race is inconsistently discussed as a critical focus for policymakers in modifying the PSLF. The findings above, considered holistically, provide clear answers into how the issue of race is considered as it relates to the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program, as well as what messages are conveyed to borrowers of color. While there are some similarities between the two political parties, by and in large, Democratic members of the Senate HELP committee inconsistently consider race as an important factor as to why the PSLF needs significant revision. The committee chair, Senator Patty Murray, often includes narratives from borrowers of color in Washington State in her news releases, while several other Democratic members of the committee explicitly mention people of color in their education sections as a particular policy focus. The choice to include race by Democratic policymaking elites signals to student loan debt holders of color, potential voters, political action committees, and other important political bodies their own beliefs and policymaking objectives. The omission of such language by most Republican members of the HELP committee in all studied avenues of public discourse signals a hesitancy at the very least to acknowledge the acuteness of the loan debt issues for borrowers of color, echoing existing academic literature regarding discourse in general (Cabrera, 2016). The choice to connect "goodness" with a desire to work and pay off debts is a deliberate one and reinforces the argument that paying off debts accumulated due to schooling is a choice, regardless of a person's personal situation that would affect their ability to do so.

It is important to acknowledge that political affiliation is not the sole determining factor in terms of their advocacy for student loan debt relief for borrowers of color. A prime example of this is Senator Tim Scott. Senator Scott has a unique positionality as both a person of color and a Republican. He is also a strong advocate for supporting students of color both in public universities and at historically Black colleges and universities. Senator Scott often works with Democratic committee members on educational policy initiatives and was included on occasion in Senator Murray's news releases. While Senator Scott is not perfectly representative of his colleagues, his intersectionalities help soften and temper the often-harsh Republican messages surrounding student loan debt relief. Senator Scott provides an excellent example of a type of elite discourse in the federal policymaking realm that can reassure borrowers of color that their needs are being heard (Schneider & Jacoby, 2005).

Ultimately, the implications of this research for student loan debt holders of color are uncertain. Party identity and platform play a significant role in policy generation at the federal level and Democratic party members are much more likely to consider issues of race in terms of student loan debt than are Republicans. The discourse analyzed in this study indicates that while policymakers come from different parties and have different public platforms, most of their proposed legislation is similar in nature, simplifying and streamlining the administrative process as well as proposing phased loan relief based on years of service. Proposed federal legislation is undoubtedly colorblind and the discourse surrounding it can be seen as window dressing for People of Color, findings that align with existing academic literature (Schneider & Jacoby, 2005, Yu et al., 2022). It is likely that borrowers of color will

not be particularly emphasized in future legislation, barring unforeseen political developments.

Conclusion and Future Research

Student loan indebtedness is a pandemic of growing proportions for a significant number of borrowers, but particularly for students of color (Carales et. al, 2020, Mustafa & Dawson, 2021, Rubin & Alexanyan, 2021). Traditional colleges and universities, along with job training programs, represent a way for borrowers of color to escape the cycle of poverty and attain a better life for themselves and their families. The Public Service Loan Forgiveness and the Temporarily Expanded Public Service Loan Forgiveness program, along with other developing policy initiatives, attempt to address this policy for all borrowers.

As this study has shown, race is an issue for policymakers, albeit inconsistently. More common concerns for elected representatives are those of economic class, as well as the ethical issue of loan forgiveness in general. For borrowers of color acutely affected by excessive levels of student loan debt, the lack of specific concern for them could be extremely disheartening and may affect their decisions at the polls (Mustaffa & Dawson, 2021). Elite discourse has done little to reassure these borrowers that their needs are being considered and increasing amounts of media attention given to this issue reaffirm the relative lack of power that student loan debt holders of color possess to affect positive change (Schneider & Jacoby, 2005). Change for borrowers of color will likely arise as part of a larger initiative to reduce student loan debt for all.

Future possible avenues of critical discourse analysis study of indebtedness for loan debt holders of color are numerous but investigating further types of elite discourse is particularly warranted. Of special note are monthly newsletters published by all senators, accessible by registering directly through their official website. These newsletters serve as a way for policymakers to speak with their constituents periodically and reinforce key personal messages and themes, sent directly to a potential voters' e-mail addresses. A second possible avenue for additional research is a historical discourse analysis of higher education funding. Such an analysis would provide foundational information to help understand the ontological evolution of education in both major U.S. political parties.

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Higher Education Quality Assurance in Thailand: A Help or Hindrance in Improving Quality?

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ABSTRACT

About 20 years ago, quality assurance (QA) was introduced in Thailand to improve educational management processes and raise standards. While many problems remain unsolved, concrete developments are being seen, with more students from rural schools accepted into leading universities and a reduction in educational inequality. QA uses systematic processes to bring continuous improvements and publicly discloses assessment results so that stakeholders may make wise educational choices. While some may view it as a time-consuming or burdensome, by utilizing technology and making QA part of routine work processes, such fears may be allayed. Quality assurance furnishes practical guidelines that – if embraced and consistently practiced – can improve the quality of higher education in Thailand so that it will become comparable to that of other leading countries.

Keywords: Quality assurance, higher education, Thailand, improving educational quality and competitiveness

Is it time for Thailand to take the quality of its education more seriously? Would doing so lead Thailand toward becoming a world leader in quality education at the international level? Studies show that education directly affects the population's

potential because human resources are a crucial factor—in fact, the most important factor—for developing a country and the world. How can a nation develop if education is not viewed as one of quality and the population lacks competitiveness? Providing high-quality education that meets international standards is essential to Thailand's short-term and long-term development. However, the problems with the quality of Thailand's higher education system have revealed some adversities (Chaemchoy et al., 2021).

Research shows that the knowledge levels of the Thai population are substandard since curricular programs have yet to be developed or kept up to date. Further assessment of the quality of education in Thailand has shown that it continually ranks in the lower percentile among the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member countries (Kaewvisit, 2021). It has been found that most Thai universities need to be more efficient, with clearer goals. According to the UK-based Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings (2022), rankings of the top public universities in Thailand have continued to decline between 2020 to 2022. The best Thai universities were ranked as numbers 208, 215, and 224, and some universities were ranked as low as 3,000 in the world, falling behind universities in some underdeveloped countries.

Part of the weakness of Thai education comes from its archaic education system (ASEAN Community, 2017 .(An important aspect that should be considered to improve this situation is educational quality assurance, which may become essential in driving the quality of Thai education to equal that of the world's leading nations (Kanjanapanyakom, 2011). For example, according to the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Report, Finland has one of the best levels of educational quality in the world (Leverage Edu, 2022). In Finland, efficiency and excellence are critical factors in the quality of education and training (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022).

In Thailand, Quality Assessment (QA) came into effect on November 4, 2000, following the passage of the 1999 National Education Act (Office for National Education Standards and Quality, 2017). The objective was to develop quality assessment criteria and methods for all educational institutions in Thailand to meet the required standards and to present the assessment results to relevant agencies and the public. Although up to now only a few problems have been solved, but concrete developments are starting to be seen. On one hand, more students studying in local educational establishments are being accepted into quality universities, representing a reduction in educational inequality between urban and rural societies. On the other hand, some universities in Thailand have had to close or improve study programs that failed quality assurance assessments (Thai PBS News, 2018). These issues are the positive effects of the quality assurance system. However, it is often argued that the educational quality assurance system does not reflect reality and leads to unnecessary additional work in Thai education. However, we do not believe this is true.

The first reason is that the educational quality assurance process is a management tool. Responsible persons within Thai education take the development of quality standards (Zaki, 2020) and modern management directions (Padubchiy, 2010) seriously, resulting in educators being empowered to make concrete and continuous quality improvements to meet international standards.

The second reason is that educational quality assurance is a systematic process to prevent poor educational management within Thailand. It protects consumers and creates equal opportunities for access to quality educational services (Lo, 2014). Educational quality assessment emphasizes practical ways to achieve comprehensive learning standards. It employs a transparent system that can be constantly monitored to develop Thai instructors and learners whom relevant parties will recognize. This procedure enhances quality in the work of a program, faculty, and university, as well as in teaching, learning, educational evaluation, and student outcomes.

The last reason is that higher education quality assessment results are publicly disclosed, helping stakeholders such as students and parents make educated choices based on the quality of educational programs (Beerkens & Udam, 2017). This transparency helps to ensure that educational institutions within Thailand meet required industrial and community standards. It helps to guarantee that the quality of graduates at all levels will bring maximum benefits, meeting the needs of society and the nation (Saenpakdee, 2016).

Nevertheless, some groups claim that educational quality assurance is a time-consuming process (Allais, 2009) that increases workload (Sathityaphong, 2018), stress, and anxiety while blocking creative thinking (BBC News, 2018). These issues are minor problems that can be resolved. If you think quality assurance in Thai education is a waste of time, and an extra workload that causes stress and anxiety, ask yourself about your planning process. Suppose QA work is conducted systematically; as part of your routine, you would keep reports updated all year without procrastinating until the last minute. In that case, the educational quality assurance process will be helpful to you. Moreover, technological tools can make these tasks even more effective, so the issue of blocking creativity is even more implausible, allowing you can add whatever you wish to convey that is beyond the scope)Ng, 2007(of the educational quality assurance requirements.

In conclusion, we believe that educational quality assurance furnishes guidelines to improve the quality of higher education in Thailand so that it may become comparable to that of the leading countries. It furnishes systems and mechanisms for controlling, monitoring, and evaluating the performance of each component according to specified indices. This process will help administrators take quality standards within Thai education seriously and prevent ineffective teaching and learning management. Emphasis on personnel development benefits students and parents, and the disclosure of quality assurance information inspires confidence that excellent services are being provided by Thai institutions that can effectively produce young graduates according to the needs of industries and communities. Therefore, higher education institutions within Thailand must develop knowledgeable personnel with positive attitudes to participate in implementing educational quality assurance regularly. Furthermore, these education organizations within Thailand should use information technology in the management system to make the quality assessment tasks more accessible and less time-consuming.

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นฐานด้านการบริหารและการจัดการศึกษาของสถานศึกษาสังกัดสำนักงานเขตพื้นที่การศึกษาตาก [Pathways to develop educational quality according to the primary education standard pertaining to administration and management for schools under the Tak Educational Area Office 20. *Journal of Education Khon Kaen University*, *4*(1), 86–93. https://so02.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/EDGKKUJ/article/view/50387/41669

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