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"Is It Bad I Don't Know This Yet?": At-Promise College Students, Financial Aid Knowledge, and Retention

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ABSTRACT

Extant literature about the history and impact of federal financial aid is robust, however, financial aid eligibility and its connection to persistence for continuing students is an area less understood. As a result, this study describes how at-promise students articulate their knowledge of federal financial aid policy during COVID-19. We interviewed 14 students who were on financial aid warning, a status defined by federal financial aid policy regulations, to examine what students understand about their financial aid standing and the criteria to keep their funding. Findings suggest students were often confused about financial aid eligibility criteria, even though they confidently expressed incorrect information about financial aid policies. Moreover, students were uncertain about how to connect with institutional financial aid resources and did not understand that financial aid advising extended beyond their first semester. This study fills multiple gaps in the literature and articulates how institutions can improve students' understanding of financial aid policy through multiple modes of communication, intentional interventions, and clearer policies. Implications such as the inclusion of Financial Aid counselors and departments in retention support are discussed.

Keywords: college students, financial aid, at-promise students, technology, COVID-19, policy

Empirical research has thoroughly documented how access to federal financial aid creates access to higher education in the United States (Asher, 2007; Feeney & Heroff, 2013; McKinney & Novak, 2015; McKinnon-Crowley, 2022a; Rosinger, 2019; Taylor & Bicak, 2019). In fact, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 87% of undergraduate students enrolled in college in 2019-2020 received some form of federal financial aid, totaling billions of dollars (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). However, once students overcome the hurdle of successfully applying for and receiving federal student aid, students are required–by federal law–to maintain satisfactory academic progress, commonly referred to by practitioners as *making SAP* (Federal Student Aid, 2022a). Here, students must maintain at least a cumulative 2.0 grade-point average and earn credit for 67% or more of their total attempted credit hours to maintain financial aid eligibility. In short, *making SAP* is critical for student retention, as receiving federal student aid has been tied to student retention time and time again (Desjardin et al., 2001; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016; Hossler et al., 2009; Mayhew et al., 2016; Scott-Clayton, 2015).

Yet, very little is known about how many college students leave higher education due to not making SAP, with limited research suggesting that SAP struggles may be widespread. In 2021, John Burton Advocates for Youth, a foster youth advocacy organization in California, made a data request from the CAL-PASS Plus data system (CAL-PASS, 2024) to gather information on the academic outcomes of foster youth in California, dating back to 2017. Their research found that nearly one in four Pell Grant recipients attending an institution within the California Community College system in the Fall 2017 semester did not make SAP in either of the previous two terms, disqualifying them from continued access to Pell Grants (John Burton Advocates for Youth, 2021). Moreover, data suggested that "the rate of disenrollment for students who did not make SAP was triple that of those who did achieve SAP" (John Burton Advocates for Youth, 2021, p. 5). In all, the organization estimated that tens of thousands of college students in California may leave higher education due to SAP struggles, emphasizing that no national database or publicly available data system tracks and monitors college students' SAP outcomes at a state or national level (John Burton Advocates for Youth, 2021).

However, SAP as a policy and process changed as a result of COVID-19. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many institutions of higher education transitioned to a pass/fail or credit/no-credit grading system, given the challenges of emergency remote learning for students, faculty, staff, and institutions of higher education (Krupnick, 2022; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). As a result, many students who may have received borderline pass grades during the 2020-2021 academic year and 2021-2022 academic year may switch back to a letter grade scale that will have ramifications on whether a student is making SAP. Therefore, after roughly two years of SAP being paused at many institutions of higher education, students will likely be faced with more stringent financial aid eligibility policies, endangering students' ability to be retained by their institution.

Yet, the effects of COVID-19 on college enrollment are already being felt. Roughly 2.6 million first-time students started college in fall 2019 and over 25% of them—roughly 679,000—did not re-enroll in fall 2020 (Krupnick, 2022), higher than historical rates of between 23% and 24% in the five years prior to COVID-19

(Hanson, 2023). A disproportionate number of those students who dropped out between Fall 2019 and Fall 2020 were low-income students of Color who were already minoritized by the higher education system before the pandemic took place, increasing socioeconomic and racial inequities within higher education (Krupnick, 2022). However, tying back to SAP, McKinnon-Crowley's (2022a, 2022b) work studying financial aid practices during the pandemic explored how institutions connected with students to use financial aid as a retention mechanism. McKinnon-Crowley (2022a, 2022b) found that financial aid offices that were able to connect with students and provide timely financial aid and other forms of financial support were better able to retain their students. Although not focused on SAP particularly, this work began to explore the importance of continuously receiving federal student aid on promise student retention during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ultimately, few studies have focused on students who successfully receive aid but struggle to remain eligible for aid due to inadequate satisfactory academic progress (SAP), and no studies have emerged from the COVID-19 era that explores how students at risk of losing their financial aid understand policies and work to maintain aid eligibility and persist. For this study, at-promise students have a cumulative GPA below 2.0 or who were below the 67% threshold for completed over attempted hours. These criteria are considered "at-promise" at the institution because the students are on federal financial aid warning. Often, students are also on academic probation, too. We describe our student population "at-promise" because of the potential challenges they face in losing financial aid resources because of their grades or unearned hours, while acknowledging an anti-deficit point of view (Hypolite et al., 2022; Whiting, 2006). This study seeks to build upon McKinnon-Crowley's (2022a, 2022b) work, investigating what at-promise students understand SAP and related policies and how at-promise students describe their experiences seeking financial aid resources to remedy their at-promise financial aid eligibility status. Filling multiple gaps in the literature, this study will answer two questions. While on financial aid warning status:

RQ 1: How do at-promise college students articulate their knowledge of financial aid eligibility criteria?

RQ 2: How do at-promise college students describe their experiences with seeking financial aid resources to remedy their warning status?

By answering these questions, institutions will be better able to support at-promise students who are in jeopardy of losing potential ineligibility for federal financial aid and may subsequently drop out from the institution, a common phenomenon in the COVID-19 era (Krupnick, 2022). Moreover, this work will inform how institutions can develop inclusive policies to ensure that students have access to the type of education environment they need to be successful and earn their degrees.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As this study addresses several topics relevant to college students including financial aid information and student retention strategies, this literature review will cover multiple areas to ensure the reader has an appropriate foundation and knowledge base.

First, we will briefly define federal sap policies and implications for federal student aid eligibility. Next, we will review empirical work that investigates gaps in student financial aid knowledge held by college students. Lastly, we will conclude with a brief section about the importance of financial aid as a retention mechanism in higher education.

What is SAP?

Satisfactory academic progress (SAP) is a term that first appeared in 1976 as an amendment to the Higher Education Act of 1965, and its guidelines are in Section 34 of the Code of Federal Regulations (Higher Education Act, 1965). The regulations require postsecondary institutions to establish and follow a policy of progress in an educational program, including GPA minimums and course completion minimums. *Academic probation* is a near-universal higher education policy that tracks good academic standing by a numerical GPA, usually a 2.0 GPA out of a 4.0 scale. Failure to meet these criteria can lead to a suspension or dismissal if grades do not improve (Satisfactory Academic Progress, 2013). SAP policy must be "at least as strict or stricter" than the institution's policy for non-federal financial aid recipients, which includes academic probation policies (Federal Student Aid, 2022, para. 14).

Students who fail to meet institutional SAP criteria are first placed into a *financial aid warning status*. Financial aid officers who review SAP every payment period (usually semesterly) place a student in a financial aid warning status when their grades or earned hours fall below the required threshold. If a student's grades or credit completion criteria do not improve and they are deemed ineligible for federal student aid, the student can file a *financial aid appeal*. A successful appeal yields the label of *financial aid probation*, with students needing to maintain satisfactory academic progress to maintain eligibility for federal financial aid (Federal Student Aid, 2022). However, a student can reach *financial aid ineligible* status if a student does not meet federal financial aid requirements, rendering it extremely difficult for students to remediate their status and regain eligibility for aid.

What Don't Students Know About Financial Aid?

Perhaps the most important element of student access to financial aid is the application, and decades of research has shown that prospective students struggle with completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (Asher, 2007; Bettinger et al., 2009; Feeney & Heroff, 2013; McKinney & Novak, 2015; Rosinger, 2019; Taylor & Bicak, 2019) However, few studies have delved into the particular financial aid knowledge that college students do and do not have, especially after the first year when completing the FAFSA for the first time is a considerable hurdle to college access.

Regarding the FAFSA, Asher (2007) suggested that students and their support networks should be coached on certain financial aid terminology, such as adjusted gross income, automatic zero estimated family contribution (EFC), dependent student, estimated family contribution (EFC), FAFSA, and independent student. Similarly, Ardoin (2013) explored college student knowledge of college jargon,

suggesting that college jargon is "words and acronyms used in academic discourse, which is one aspect of college knowledge," (p. 13), with some examples including private institution, degree audit, and associate degree. Echoing Ardoin's (2013) work, Taylor and Bicak (2019) found that many students were confused by the terms unsubsidized loan, FAFSA, and tuition. In addition, Taylor and Bicak (2019) learned that many returning adult students were not familiar with the financial aid jargon terms master promissory note, FSA ID, 4506-T, IRS DRT, entrance counseling, and tax return transcript.

Beyond FAFSA difficulty, Burd et al. (2018) recently performed a textual analysis of institutional award letters, finding that many institutions used overly complex terminology to explain how a student could afford to attend the institution. In addition, Burd et al. (2018) explained that many institutions did not fully articulate the overall cost of attendance, did not differentiate between different types of aid, loans, and grants, and failed to provide students with clear steps on how to proceed with their award letter. Rosinger (2019) built upon Burd et al.'s (2018) study and investigated how information from the U.S Department of Education's Financial Aid Shopping Sheet (now referred to as the College Financing Plan) could be simplified to inform student decision making. Ultimately, Rosinger (2019) found that some information on the Financial Aid Shopping Sheet was confusing for students, arguing that institutions and the U.S. Government could provide further informational interventions to improve the financial aid application and award process for students and their support networks.

Related studies have also explored how college students, especially from low-income backgrounds, do not understand or grossly underestimate their cost of attendance, leading to financial struggles and confusion after a student's first year at the institution (Rosa, 2006; Tierney & Venegas, 2009). However, specifically related to at-promise student experiences related to SAP policies, few studies have explored what students do and do not know about SAP. First, Vaughn's (2020) dissertation explored the SAP knowledge held by community college students and whether students were aware that their academic progress was tied to their financial aid eligibility. After conducting focus groups with students on SAP, Vaughn (2020) found that not only were students aware of SAP policies at their institution, but students could also identify which academic habits they needed to improve to be removed from SAP status and persist at their institution. Cox (2019) also conducted semi-structured interviews with students who were asked to reflect on institutional SAP communication, and Cox found that students preferred simple SAP communication with easily-accessible institutional resources to help them persist through their SAP status. However, both studies were not clear whether student participants were actually on financial aid warning status or if these students received SAP-related communication prior to the study.

Finally, Talusan and Franke's (2019) stands alone as the only intentional study of student experiences with and reflections on SAP policies. The authors studied how first generation, low-income Asian American students' (n = 6) reflected on SAP policies through narrative inquiry, asking the students to share stories of their background and college experience as it relates to "navigating the college experience and the SAP process" (Talusan & Franke, 2019, p. 20). The authors found that several

students had made positive institutional connections and therefore knew who to contact when they were first notified of their SAP status. Additionally, students were seemingly unaware that SAP status can linger for multiple semesters. The authors wrote:

> [Students] were surprised that they had received SAP notification again despite having improved their grades. This response from participants meant that they did not understand that the SAP notification was triggered by a combination of GPA, completion rate, and attempted credits, rather than simply a GPA range. (Talusan & Franke, 2019, p. 24)

Students were also unaware of institutional SAP support systems, such as specific academic advising to help students develop an academic plan. Of the support offered, one student said, "Support is complicated. (The offices) don't really communicate well with each other. The whole [SAP] process involved multiple places, and they're not really communicating with you all together" (Talusan & Franke, 2019, p. 24). This finding echoed Cox's (2020) work, as students in Talusan and Franke's (2019) study also argued that communication was a barrier on their path toward remediating their SAP status.

How Does Financial Aid Retain College Students?

Decades of financial aid research has found that receiving federal student aid is a positive predictor of being retained at an institution of higher education (Dowd, 2004; Murdock, 1987; Perna, 1989). Broadly, studies have found that students must receive financial aid of some sort to persist at their institution (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016; Hossler et al., 2009; Mayhew et al., 2016), and students are much more likely to persist if they receive adequate and timely aid throughout their college career (Mendoza et al., 2009; Murdock, 1987; Perna, 1998).

Several studies have found that federal student aid is particularly important for low-income students (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016; Mendoza et al., 2009; Murdock, 1987) and students in their first year of college (Dowd, 2004). DesJardins et al. (2001) explored the role of loans and scholarships in persistence, finding that institutions were better able to retain students if they shifted from loan-based to scholarship-based funding sources, even though students needed to complete the FAFSA and other applications to continue receiving aid.

Echoing Perna's (1998) work, both Mendoza et al. (2009) and Goldrick-Rab et al. (2016) found that students receiving state-level grants and Pell grants are more likely to persist than peers. However, to receive state-level aid and federal grants, students must complete the FAFSA in the first year and every year after to remain eligible for aid, along with maintaining academic standards. Scott-Clayton (2015) also reasoned that financial aid is a critical retention tool for institutions of higher education, yet institutions must provide more proactive assistance for students to help them navigate the financial aid system, especially after their first year when students may be removed from assistance from their secondary school or family/support network. In all, it is exceedingly rare for a prospective college student to be able to pay their entire cost of college out of pocket, with 87% of postsecondary students receiving some form of federal student aid during the 2019-2020 academic year

(NCES, 2022). As a result, financial aid will remain an important tool for postsecondary access and student retention, requiring students to learn about the financial aid system and successfully navigate the system's many processes and procedures to persist and earn their credential.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this study needed to encompass two tenets related to college students and financial aid. The theoretical framework needed to embrace the notion that:

1) Successful college students develop a sense of financial aid knowledge to successfully navigate the higher education system (i.e., learning how to complete the FAFSA, understanding SAP policies, knowing how to appeal their financial aid warning status).
2) Successful college students seek financial aid information and resources to successfully complete processes (i.e., completing the FAFSA, remediating financial aid ineligibility issues).

As a result, Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy appropriately informs this study, its data, and our analysis of at-promise college student knowledge of and experiences with financial aid while on financial aid warning status. Bandura's (1977) theory asserts that individuals hold beliefs in their ability to exercise control over their own life, with individuals possessing a higher level of self-efficacy being better able to motivate themselves and achieve a sense of well-being and accomplishment. Related studies have found that individuals with a heightened sense of self-efficacy are better able to persist through adversity, achieve educational goals, and experience a sense of success (Pajares, 1997). In our study, we believed that at-promise students likely had gaps in their knowledge of financial aid, and that at-promise students who knew more about financial aid and had more in-depth experiences with financial aid processes may be better able to persist at their institution.

METHODS

The following sections describe the site of the research, how participants were recruited, how data was gathered and analyzed, and how the research team addressed limitations and established delimitations. The research team can provide additional information, including research protocols, upon request.

Site

The research site was Chicory College, a pseudonym for a private four-year postsecondary institution in the Gulf Coast region of the Southern United States, that enrolls about 3,200 undergraduates and 1,300 graduate students. The student population includes 66% women and 34% men, with more than half of all students being students of Color. About one-third of the undergraduate population is first in their families to attend college.

The IRB at Chicory College approved this study in December 2019 and an amendment in April 2020 to examine the impact of COVID-19 and adjust protocols. A second amendment was approved on December 16, 2020 to extend the length of the study until December 20, 2021 given the persistent nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the wealth of data gathered.

Recruiting Study Participants

The participants in this study were full-time undergraduate students enrolled at Chicory College with a cumulative GPA below 2.0 or who were below the 67% threshold for completed over attempted hours. These criteria are considered "at-promise" at the institution because the students are either on academic probation or federal financial aid warning, or both. To improve their grades and earned hours—therefore, to stay enrolled at Chicory—these at-promise students were enrolled in a credit-bearing student success course designed for students on probationary or financial aid warning status. Chicory College proactively enrolled at-promise students in this course because of their academic standing, but other students opted-into the class as well.

Participants were recruited from the success class in the course syllabus, a module and assignment on Canvas, and an announcement from the instructor. Completing the consent form on Qualtrics was a graded assignment, but students' responses were not known to their instructor until grades were final. The syllabus stated:

> This course is a part of a research study that will inform the way we support students at Chicory College. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and will not impact your grade. You are required, however, to review and complete the consent form here. When completing this form, please select whether you consent or do not consent to participate in the study.

The majority of the students volunteered to participate in the study, eager to share their experiences and to help other students. Students who volunteered to be part of the study then received email and text message follow up to sign up for an hour-long interview on Zoom. Four students in good academic standing were dropped from this study which left a total of 14 participants. We also explored persistence outcomes based on enrollment data from the institutional research office at Chicory College. We coded students as "retained" if they were enrolled in a full-time class schedule (12 or more credit hours) on the last day to add a class in the fall 2021 semester, the next academic year after the data collection. See Table 1 for demographic information.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Students Participating in this Study (*N* = 14)

Pseudonym	Class year	Gender	Race	Fall 2020 GPA	Fall 2021 Retention
Angela	First year	Woman	Hispanic or Latinx	3.4	Retained
Charlotte	First year	Woman	White or Caucasian	0.0	Not retained
Christina	First year	Woman	Hispanic or Latinx	3.5	Retained
Denise	First year	Woman	Hispanic or Latinx	0.0	Retained
Felicia	First year	Woman	White or Caucasian	3.1	Retained
Genesis	First year	Woman	White or Caucasian	0.0	Not retained
Holly	First year	Woman	White or Caucasian	2.4	Not retained
Immanuel	First year	Man	African American	2.9	Retained
Katrina	First year	Woman	White or Caucasian	0.0	Not retained
Mia	Sophomore	Woman	African American	2.2	Not retained
Michael	First year	Man	White or Caucasian	0.0	Retained
Olivia	First year	Woman	African American	0.0	Not retained
Scarlett	First year	Woman	Hispanic or Latinx	0.0	Not retained
Vivienne	Sophomore	Woman	African American	1.8	Retained

Note. Students with GPAs above 2.0 were considered in good academic standing but at-promise for this study because of their earned/attempted hours ratio (> 67%).

Data Collection

Guided by Stake's (1995) approach that interviews are a way to capture "multiple realities" (p. 64), the research team conducted interviews with 18 students using open-ended questions to get students to describe their experiences, reactions, and ways of accessing information. Interviews took place by Zoom in April and May 2021 and lasted approximately one hour and were recorded and auto-transcribed. We tested our interview questions in a pilot study in spring 2020. Our interview protocol aligned with Saldaña and Omasta's (2022) recommendations for semi-structured interviews,

beginning with broad, rapport-building questions. The research team followed our interview protocol (see Appendix A). The research team gathered all auto-transcribed transcripts from Zoom and re-listened to the interviews for accuracy. All data were stored in password-protected files and students were assigned pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

The primary data analysis consisted of two rounds of coding, informed by Bandura's (1977) theory of *self-efficacy* and Saldaña's (2016) coding process. The research team deployed a mix of deductive and inductive approaches (Saldaña, 2016). Our deductive starting codes came from extant literature, our theoretical framework, and our experience with financial and college students. Our code list further evolved through inductive coding choices to capture "emergent, data-driven" codes (Saldaña, 2016, p. 75), including the role that the institution played in supporting students with financial aid, how students described their knowledge of and experiences with financial aid, and how students explored financial aid information. Consistent with Saldaña (2016), we completed a second round of coding to assess the quality of the codes we generated and drop less-used codes. The addition of child codes helped tease out the nuances, such as the addition of child codes for sources of financial aid information, gaps in financial aid knowledge, and how students held financial aid self-efficacy to explore resources and persist.

Finally, consistent with Saldaña (2016) and Saldaña and Omasta (2022), we performed a final round of comparative coding and collaborative analysis, where we shared themes that emerged from the data and contrasted them with our research questions. Ultimately, three major themes clearly emerged that spoke to Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy, responded to our pre-study hypotheses, and successfully answered this study's two research questions.

Limitations and Delimitations

As with any research study, there are several limitations and delimitation of the work. Of limitations, this study analyzed data from students experiencing one of the most unique periods in higher education history, the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, due to the institution's necessary pivot to emergency remote learning, the responses from students may not be consistent with other students at other institution types and under more normal learning circumstances. Moreover, the institution under study is a relatively small private institution in the U.S. South, and as a result, the study's findings may not be generalizable to students attending other institution types in different areas of the country, although qualitative research by nature is not meant to be entirely generalizable (Saldaña, 2016).

The research team also decided to delimit this study in several ways. First, we only recruited students who we knew were on financial aid warning status through a student success course specifically for at-promise students. Given this study's emphasis on Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory, we wanted to learn about how self-efficacious students viewed financial aid information and resources, particularly as these students persisted through the success course and possessed the self-efficacy

to remediate their financial aid status. From here, there were likely many students at the institution who were on financial aid warning status who were not enrolled in the success course. Moreover, we decided to conduct interviews specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic, as other threats to public health loom over higher education, including 2022's monkeypox outbreak. By investigating student perspectives during the pandemic, we feel that this study's findings may help future research, policy, and practice handle future pandemics and other mass emergencies facing the higher education system.

FINDINGS

Our findings successfully answered this study's two research questions. Three clear themes emerged from the data related to how at-promise students did or did not hold knowledge about financial aid policies and practices and how these students sought out information and resources to remedy their financial aid eligibility status. These three themes are 1.) (Confident) Confusion About Financial Aid Eligibility Criteria, 2.) Uncertainty (or Anxiety) About Communicating with Institutional Financial Aid, and 3.) Financial Aid Advising Extended Beyond the First Semester.

Theme 1: (Confident) Confusion About Financial Aid Eligibility Criteria

The most prominent theme of this study was student confusion surrounding their financial aid eligibility, even though students had received multiple communications over email from the institution explaining their eligibility status, what grades and credit completion they needed and how to remediate their status. To begin, nearly every student in the study could not identify the two elements of satisfactory academic progress. Moreover, if students did identify the GPA or course progress component of SAP, students gave incorrect or incomplete information, even though they confidently responded to the question.

For instance, many students did not understand the GPA scale well enough to know what constituted a 2.0 GPA. When asked what a 2.0 GPA meant, Scarlett said, "You just got to get good grades." When asked what grades specifically were needed, she did not know, expressing a level of embarrassment for not knowing more, stating, "I should really know this." Similarly, Katrina and Olivia knew their GPA and the GPA threshold but lacked knowledge specific to grades. In response to the question, "Do you know what GPA you need to be in good academic standing?", Katrina replied, " Well, right now my GPA is a zero. All I know is that it has got to be a 2.0 or above for me to get the money." The interviewer followed up to ask what letter grades make a 2.0. Katrina replied, "No. I've never followed GPA throughout high school." Olivia knew she needed a 2.0 GPA but did not know what grades added up to a 2.0.

Several students had a vague but close-to-accurate description of what is required for financial aid eligibility, often overestimating requirements. Vivienne, for example, said the grades needed to keep financial aid were "Good ones, I don't know. To not fail anything. I know I need to keep my GPA above a 2.5 or something like that." Denise also said, "I think it's a 2.5 GPA" without explaining what that meant.

Other students were much more confused about the role of GPA as it relates to SAP. When the interviewer asked, "Do you know what GPA you need to keep your aid?", six different students said no:

Felicia: "No, I don't."

Vivienne: "Not of the top of my head."

Immanuel: "No, actually I don't."

Charlotte: "Believe it or not, I don't."

Denise: "As far as the criteria to keep that financial aid, I am not entirely aware of it."

Genesis: "Couldn't tell you. I could not tell you. [shaking head.]"

Similarly, when asked what grades she needed to remain eligible for financial aid, many students could not provide GPA cutoffs or specifics. Angela said, "I think I just need to pass my classes." When asked what a passing grade was, Angela struggled to respond and instead spoke about the institution's pass/fail policy. She concluded by saying that she would not receive aid if she "didn't do good," but did not elaborate on what "good" meant. Charlotte said she "didn't know" what grades would make her eligible, while Olivia reflected on her past high school experiences:

Interviewer: Were you clear on what you needed to do to stay eligible to keep getting financial aid from Chicory and the government?

Olivia: No, not really. I realized this was something I should have focused more on. In high school, they don't teach you that kind of stuff.

Here, Olivia knew that she probably should have learned about this before her postsecondary career but claimed that her high school did not prepare her to understand financial aid policies. It is also interesting to note that all students in their study received email communication that outlined their eligibility status, SAP requirements, and other financial aid resources, but many students maintained that they were unsure about how to remain eligible for financial aid. For instance, Katrina acknowledged receiving an email from her institution about her financial aid eligibility status, but she said, "I'm still confused on that."

Additionally, students who knew about the GPA requirement did not understand the credit hour completion requirement. The interviewer asked, "Are you aware of other criteria that you need to keep your financial aid beyond GPA?" Mia said, "Um, not thoroughly no." Immanuel also did not. Olivia replied, "No, academic probation didn't really affect anything else." Vivienne had a slightly different perspective. She said:

> At the time I lost my financial aid, I wasn't enrolled as a student. First I withdrew and they were like "take a semester off. When you come back, you'll need to reapply for financial aid" or something like that. I think that's what happened.
>
> Here, students were very confused about SAP requirements, with Vivienne explaining that she needed to re-apply for financial aid instead of successfully completing a certain percentage of her credits. Other students were confused about the entire financial aid eligibility process. When asked about what she needed to do to keep her financial aid, she said, "In my head, I was just like, you just got to get good grades." When asked about if she knew what grades she needed, Scarlett said, "No." Then, the interviewer asked, "Do you know if course withdrawals or credit hours were part of your academic requirements for

financial aid standing?" Scarlett said, ashamed, "I don't know. Is it bad I don't know this yet?"

Several students also confidently expressed that they had not had contact with the institution, or they knew SAP policy information. However, students ended up providing inaccurate or incomplete information in many cases. When asked about if she knew how to maintain financial aid, Denise said, "I have not gotten any letters or emails." Similarly, Charlotte said, "I know there are other requirements, but I never got sent a distinct like 'here's what you need,' which is something I should probably look into because I would like to keep it. But, no, I was never quite sure." However, all students had received email communication regarding their financial aid eligibility status.

There was also confident confusion surrounding credit hours. Felicia said that she kept "doing math" to make sure she took enough credits, however, she did not remember an email correctly. Felicia said, "I am pretty sure it's 12 to be considered a full-time student. That's what the email said: you don't have 12 credits, you are not considered a full-time student, therefore you don't get financial aid." This is partially incorrect, as students can be enrolled half-time and still receive federal student aid. Christina was also incorrect about taking versus completing credit hours, saying that "I have to have at least 12 hours a semester" to maintain aid. Olivia went as far as to say that she was "lacking credits" and could not receive aid. To help her situation, Olivia said that because she did not earn enough credits in an earlier semester, her credit load will "probably be 23" in the fall so she can catch up. This is also incorrect reasoning, as she must successfully complete those credits with a high enough GPA, not merely enroll in the courses, and she would need a course overload waiver to take 23 credits in one semester.

Other students initially expressed that they were clear about what to do, but then later admitted that they were not. For example, Angela met with her advisor when enrolling for fall classes. But, when asked about financial aid and credit hours, she said, "Actually, I'm not sure about that." When asked about grades and criteria to keep financial aid, Immanuel said, "From my understanding, credit hours are what you need to get a degree and pass college. They are based on your degree audit. When asked if it was clear what to do to keep financial aid, Genesis said:

> It was clear to me. Of course, they laid it out in the paperwork, but I'm just a kid coming out of high school. I have no idea what any of this means. So about financial aid and stuff like that, I kind of just knew I had to pay the money. And I kind of knew what I had to do, but then in the first semester I didn't do as well in my grades. I got that email that was like you're gonna be on academic probation, financial aid probation. I was like, what does that even mean? What is that? I had no idea.

Here, some students initially felt that they were clear about expectations and financial aid eligibility requirements, but when they learned more or received communication from their institution, they realized they were not as knowledgeable as they thought they were. As a result, students could have likely been more resourceful or persistent to seek out financial aid information, but they did not fully understand financial aid policies and therefore did not know that they should seek out more information and resources to remedy their status.

Theme 2: Uncertainty (or Anxiety) About Communicating with Institutional Financial Aid

Students strongly expressed the fact that they were unsure about their financial aid eligibility status, and complicating matters, students described their experiences in communicating with the financial aid office and often expressed hesitation, confusion, or avoidance. First, most students said that if they had a question about financial aid, they would not seek out the institution, instead relying on other resources. Vivienne said that after receiving an email from financial aid, she would talk to her parents, saying "I would probably call my dad because he's the one directly affected by that." Like Vivienne and Felicia, Mia explained her email situation would have her call her mom for financial aid information, but that her mom may not be a great help because "she's not very into technology." Michael, Angela, and Immanuel all made similar remarks about reaching out to family instead of the institution.

Felicia was one of the only students who would click "reply." Felicia explained that when she received communication about her financial aid ineligibility, "I talked to my sister because she has financial aid. And I was like, 'Is this what I need to do"' and she said, 'Yes, that's what you need to do.'" When asked if her sister was not available, Felicia said, "I guess if the question was really pressing and my sister didn't know who to talk to, I would email back the email that was sent to me." Here, even though the email contained multiple ways for students to connect with financial aid, it was surprising to learn that many students would rather ask their family for help or information instead of replying to the financial aid email, calling the financial aid office, or physically go to the office (although risky because of COVID-19).

Despite there being records of the institution emailing the students multiple times about their financial aid eligibility status, many students simply did not remember the communication or did not believe that the institution had reached out. When asked if financial aid communicated with her, Scarlett said, "Not really. Nothing particular to me. I don't think so [making an uncertain face]." Katrina said, "I can't remember. There was something about not accepting a loan. I didn't understand what financial aid was like trying to explain to me." Holly said that the institution had not reached out over phone or email, necessitating her checking the student portal:

> Not that I've seen. Definitely no phone calls. The only way that I get the information is when you log onto [student portal], it gives you the notification that you have a hold on your transcript. It says I have a financial hold, so that's how I know about it. If somebody has sent me an email, I haven't seen it. But I'm not saying they didn't. But they may have sent me one and I just haven't seen it. But, in previous semesters this has happened, and I never got an email.

Like Holly, Michael said he did not get an email but that he needed to "start checking my email more regularly. I could have gotten in and just not seen it. I usually check email every couple of days. But, over the break, I kind of lacked on it a little bit, so I probably just didn't see it." Other students were even more avoidant of direct communication with financial aid, suggesting that they would strictly use Internet sources. Genesis said that she was able to connect with financial aid after she "searched through Gmail, like the director of financial aid." Vivienne said that she

would "just Google it or go through my email [looking for] keywords like financial aid. Or I would go on the student portal."

Conversely, Holly, Olivia, and Scarlett expressed that they preferred verbal or face-to-face communication, which was made much more difficult at the height of the pandemic. Holly said, "So far, whenever I have questions, I call." Olivia said, "The communication I like to use most is talking to people face to face. You miss things and emails may not have all the information you need." Likewise, Scarlett said, "I'm someone who likes calling because I like talking to a person. I'm weird like that! I would rather speak to a person and have direct information instead of being confused." Here, only a few students preferred verbal or face-to-face communication over digital resources or reaching out to family, and it was particularly interesting that Scarlett claimed that talking to a person made her "weird." We will revisit this finding later in our discussion section, but ultimately, students expressed anxiety, uncertainty, and avoidance when it came to seeking financial aid information and communicating with the financial aid office.

Theme 3: Unaware That Financial Aid Resources Extended Beyond the First Semester

Finally, students often shared that the financial aid office played a pivotal role in their choosing Chicory, with many students claiming that they connected with the office frequently to understand financial aid options and complete processes. Christina explained, "At the beginning of COVID, it was tricky finding a school that wasn't too bad financially. So I talked a lot with the financial advisors at Chicory to see what I can do and complete the FAFSA." However, when Christina was explaining how she seeks financial aid information and resources now that she was a student, she expressed a sense of confusion and isolation, and she said she would not be sure who to turn to. Christina said, "I forgot the name of who I talked to," when reflecting on her initial experiences, and only two semesters later, felt that she did not have a support network on campus. When asked whether she would change her experience while on financial aid warning status, she said, "I probably would have tried to talk to someone about it."

These stories were common: Students made a strong connection with the financial aid office before they enrolled to receive information, help with the FAFSA, or resources to apply for different types of scholarships. However, once students entered financial aid warning status, they felt alone. Felicia recounted interactions with financial aid before enrolling and claimed to receive emails from financial aid about her eligibility status. She said that financial aid was "helpful" during her search process before she enrolled at Chicory, but when asked who she would contact if she had a question about financial aid during the upcoming spring break, Felicia said, "I don't know." Like Felicia, Charlotte experienced good communication from the financial aid office when she was exploring colleges and applying to scholarships, but when asked who she would contact about her financial aid, she said she would ask her success course professor and "again, I'd tell my mom and see what she thinks." Angela, Michael, and Holly, and Sc

Genesis was more pointed when describing her experiences, recounting how Chicory was initially communicative but over time, the school did not meet her expectations. Genesis recounted:

> Before I came to Chicory, they were very big on communication, sending me letters, sending me stuff like that. So I kind of was like, "Oh, like they're so community-like. They communicate. I love this and can't wait to go. And then getting to college on my own was kind of where it all started. I have no parents. My aunt was my legal guardian, but she said, "I can't bring you to college because I'm scared of COVID," and then the next week, she was in Miami. So I have come here all by myself. And the communication that I thought I was going to get from the school no longer existed.

Here, Genesis experienced a very difficult family situation prior to enrolling at Chicory, and perhaps this trauma informed how she viewed the communication from everyone, including Chicory. However, Genesis' narrative reveals that college students may be primed by financial aid to experience a certain level of communication early in the recruitment process, and once a student completes the FAFSA, is awarded aid, or accepts aid, the communication may drop off, leading to retention issues. In these situations, students like Genesis may have benefitted from more consistent communication from financial aid throughout her first year to retain her, even if that communication was meant to simply reach out, provide resources, and ask if she had questions. Unfortunately, Genesis was not retained by Chicory for the Fall 2021 semester.

Like the other students, Immanuel and Vivienne also claimed that they spoke to financial aid once during their first semesters but then would look elsewhere for assistance. Although both students claimed to not have received email communication from Chicory's financial aid office, Vivienne said she would talk "with my parents," about any issues. Immanuel recounted that before his first semester, financial aid was in constant communication about "scholarship requirements in writing to get the scholarship every year after this year." He remembered that he received the communication over email, specifying that he also received a PDF file with more details. However, when asked what he would do now, in his second semester, if he had a question about his scholarships, Immanuel said, "just ask my faculty advisor," even though Immanuel explained that his faculty advisor does not have a connection to the financial aid office.

Overall, students were consistently unclear that the financial aid office was available to them past their first semester, often seeking information and resources elsewhere. Although related to the prior theme regarding uncertainty about financial aid communication, this theme distinctly discovered that students *did* remember having positive contact with financial aid during their recruitment period, but after the first semester, students *did not* engage with financial aid or felt isolated from financial aid, possibly leading to many students in this study not being retained the next semester (Fall 2021).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Successfully answering this study's two research questions, we find that college students were generally confused and unclear about their financial aid eligibility status, were unsure about how to communicate with financial aid, and were unaware that financial aid advising and resources were available to them after their first semester. As previously stated, many students in this study were not retained by Chicory in the Fall 2021 semester: Charlotte, Genesis, Holly, Katrina, Mia, Olivia, and Scarlett moved on and have not re-enrolled at Chicory as of the writing of this study. Here, many students could not exercise their self-efficacy as financial aid policies and communication were either too unclear or intimidating to approach. As a result, many implications for future research and policy have emerged from these data. However, students in this study clearly revealed many implications for retention initiatives and practices surrounding financial aid and communication, affecting an institution's perhaps most at-promise population: students on financial aid warning status.

Implications for Research

Given the sizable gaps in the literature related to student experiences with SAP policies and financial aid eligibility, much more work could be done to explore how students gather information, engage with resources (both inside and outside of the institution), and how students perform self-efficacious behaviors to persist. However, just as important as student experiences, researchers could explore how financial aid offices engage in retention initiatives to communicate financial aid and other resources to students. Traditionally, retention initiatives have been associated with enrollment management divisions and student services offices, including academic advising, faculty mentoring, campus engagement, and other retention programs (Braxton et al., 2013; Mayhew et al., 2016). This study finds that financial aid offices may be just as critical when working to retain college students, especially after a student's first semester when the (perhaps) most difficult hurdle for financial aid is overcome: completing the FAFSA or other aid applications for the first time. As a result, researchers could explore financial aid communication strategies, targeted financial aid outreach and intervention, and how financial aid offices collaborate with other stakeholders—especially faculty members—to reach students and support them beyond their first semester.

Implications for Policy

Several researchers have already called for federal policy reform as it relates to satisfactory academic progress (Cox, 2019; Talusan & Franke, 2019; Vaughn, 2020), suggesting that institutions should be able to file SAP appeals on a student's behalf or facilitate automatic appeals if a student's GPA or credit completion rate falls too close to thresholds. However, institutional policy may be more important in these regards, as the Office of Federal Student Aid through the U.S. Department of Education mediates financial aid disbursement regulatory policy, but institutions have

much more control over retention policies, such as status remediation and communication.

For instance, Chicory instituted a student success course for students who do not make SAP, and the purpose of the course is to re-connect students with campus resources and allow them to find a sense of community and belonging. This approach—a student success course of students who do not make SAP—could be a crucial retention initiative for other institutions seeking to retain at-promise students who are one academic semester away from financial aid ineligibility. Further, institutions could offer success coaches or one-on-one success coaching support before students enter academic difficulties. Here, students with a lower sense of self-efficacy may be better able to foster their sense of belonging through more formal programs.

Moreover, institutions could enact retention policies such as academic or financial holds when GPAs or credit completion rates are too low, necessitating a face-to-face or virtual meeting with a retention team which could include an academic advisor, financial aid advisor, and one of the student's major faculty members. Similar to how K-12 organizations have case management teams for students enrolled in special education to administer individual education plans (IEPs), institutions of higher education could enact retention policies that create a community around the student and compel a student to meet with this team to move forward in their academic career. Again, students who feel less self-efficacious when it comes to financial aid knowledge and information may prefer the team approach to solving problems and staying eligible for aid.

Implications for Practice

Practitioners in financial aid and student support—who design, implement, and assess success interventions and strategies—can use this study's findings to improve communication strategies, support interventions, and collaboration across units to support student success. This study found that students were generally aware that they had to improve their grades (less so their credit hours) to keep their financial aid. No students used the term "financial aid warning," but they described criteria that were in sync with the warning, such as a 2.0 GPA and knowing they needed a certain (unclear how many) number of credit hours. Interestingly, more than one student described the 2.0 GPA requirement without knowing the letter grades that equaled that GPA. They knew they needed to improve their academic standing but precisely how was less clear—in this case, students had awareness but lacked the detail needed to be self-efficacious and act. Here, practitioners should acknowledge their information gaps and outline academic and financial aid policies during student contact events, such as new student orientation and campus visits. Additionally, the university should standardize language about financial aid polices so it can be shared and understood. For example, faculty members could be encouraged to add information to their syllabi about financial aid eligibility when discussing how course grades are calculated. Academic advisors should also understand the implications of course withdrawals on *SAP*.

The ambiguity that students expressed in this study led them to believe the criteria they needed to maintain were higher than what was accurate or even possible. As is human nature, college students tend to be more anxious about something that feels unclear to them (e.g., a daunting assignment feels overwhelming until talking it out with a peer). This looming sense of needing to improve without the precise details can lead students to imagine more difficult or impossible-to-achieve criteria. No student should feel that they need to take 23 credits in one semester to maintain financial aid eligibility, as Olivia did—she was self-efficacious but not in ways that were optimally beneficial. Left to their creative imagination, students may envision a more difficult road than the one they need to take. Much of this confusion could be remedied with improved communication strategies, ideally leveraging email, text, websites, and the student information portal to better connect with students. The purpose of more effective communication strategies is to teach students what they need to do to keep their financial aid and to stay on track to graduate, decreasing their time-to-degree, even if they are not struggling academically. Proactive outreach should be prioritized, so students are clear about expectations even if they already have the information or do not need to worry about their grades or earned credits.

Additionally, practitioners should have a better understanding of what students know about financial aid and what support they seek. Students in this study often practiced self-efficacy and turned to parents, faculty members, or other stakeholders instead of the financial aid office who literally emailed them to connect. From here, students could benefit from stronger alignment between financial aid and academic policies, including financial aid and academic stakeholders on campus. Repetition between academic and financial aid policies could reinforce the criteria and create less confusion for students and staff, while creating student success teams that include academic and financial aid support staff would likely better connect students to campus.

The results of this study also demonstrated that students sought out information from a variety of sources outside of the financial aid office, with many students expressing that they felt uncomfortable with various modes of communication. Some students preferred email, others were more self-efficacious on the website or during face-to-face interactions. From here, institutions should allow students to opt-into certain forms of communication that best cater to their communication styles. Just as institutions of higher education must procure affirmative opt-ins for sending text messages to students, institutions could solicit for communication preferences during the application or enrollment process, or nudge students to update their communication preferences in their student portal. However, institutions need to develop the capacity to communicate with students in different ways, including an in-person campus presence as well as technologies such as email, text message, and phone call. By being flexible and available to students how they want, students may feel more comfortable and self-efficacious to discuss their financial aid eligibility status, which may be exceedingly uncomfortable for most students.

CONCLUSION

As echoed by prior research, this study finds that many college students who are one poor academic semester away from being eligible for financial aid simply do not understand this very situation and how to be self-efficacious (Cox, 2019; Vaughn, 2020). Students in the study did not accurately explain GPA requirements, credit completion rates, or accurate paths and strategies to remedy their status. In addition, students perceived financial aid communication as unclear, inconsistent, and confusing, urging these students to find resources and financial aid information elsewhere. However, the institution in this study did provide proactive email outreach to students on financial aid warning status, but many students in the study simply did not remember receiving the communication or were too confused to connect with the financial aid office.

Given these findings and the results from prior literature, financial aid offices must assume that students do not have intimate knowledge of financial aid policies and may be too intimidated or confused by financial aid communication to be self-effacing. Sadly, many students in this study were not retained by the institution the subsequent semester, and it is possible that had financial aid communication and policies been clearer or communicated differently, several of these students could be degree holders today. In some ways, students *did not know what they did not know* about financial aid, and financial aid offices should be asking themselves the same question: What don't students know about financial aid and how can we help?

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"So I Just Applied:" Understanding the Journey to Student Government Participation

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this narrative inquiry is to better understand why students in higher education are motivated to get involved in student government. We analyzed the responses of ten current student government leaders at public regional comprehensive institutions in the United States. The analysis is guided by Astin's theory of student involvement and the social change model of leadership development. The study finds that many leaders did not initially plan to engage in student government, emphasizing the impact of past civic involvement, current student engagement, and peer invitations on their subsequent student government participation. Implications call for institutions to deepen their understanding of enrolled students and provide accessible avenues for leadership development.

Keywords: student leader, higher education, student government, social change model

Colleges and universities have been centers for student activism for decades (Rhoads, 2016), and as civil unrest has increased over the last decade, their centrality in civic dialogue has increased (Broadhurst & Velez, 2019; McNaughtan & Brown, 2020; McNaughtan et al., 2018). While much of this student engagement comes from the student body, the role of student government leaders in guiding and serving as the voice for this activism should not be overlooked (Jacoby, 2017). In a comprehensive analysis of more than 70 student government associations, E. Smith et al. (2016) found that while many student leaders engaged in administrative discussions, they

also focused on current national political issues including immigration and educational funding, highlighting the importance of these experiences and leadership roles.

Despite the importance of student leadership on college campuses, there is a history of apathy and disengagement among students in formal leadership positions (Kiesa et al., 2007, Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006). Given the mantra of shared governance espoused by higher education institutions, strong student leadership matching the history of student activism is needed to ensure decisions made by institutional administrators align with student needs and demands (Taylor, 2013). There is a need for a better understanding of what motivates students to seek college leadership roles and what keeps them engaged after being elected or appointed (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Lizzio et al., 2011).

The purpose of this study is to present the experiences of student government leaders from public regional comprehensive institutions in the United States (US) focusing on what led to their engagement in an effort to increase understanding for students and administrators alike on how to strengthen these relationships. Using a narrative inquiry approach guided by Astin's theory of student involvement, we analyze the rich narratives of ten student leaders who were serving in an executive leadership role (e.g., president or vice-president) in their student government organization at the time of their interview. We find that many of the student leaders we spoke with did not intend to engage in student leadership, but their past experiences in civic engagement, invitations from peers, and mentoring relationships motivated them to engage initially, then continue their participation.

BACKGROUND

This study is framed using three areas of student government literature. First, we discuss current research on what motivates students to participate in student government. Second, we provide a synthesis of literature focused on the role of student government on college campuses. Finally, we discuss a summary of research on the experiences of student government leaders. These three areas guided our research questions and will be applied in the discussion section of this study.

Motivation for Student Government Participation

Research on student government participation has found that for many students it creates a positive and nurturing experience that enhances their college experience (Buultjens & Robinson, 2011). However, for some students there are barriers to participation (Simmons et al., 2018), with one of the most significant being lack of connection to the issues (Crabtree, 2022; McNaughtan & Brown, 2020). While participating in higher education governance, students are given a unique chance to be a part of college decision-making and develop a better understanding of institutional processes including budgeting, faculty evaluation, capital facilities decisions, and policy development (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). Engaging in institutional governance can be an incredible experience, but for most students, their motivation is more about personal fulfillment and growth (Lizzio et al., 2011; Workman et al.,

2020). Research in this area highlights four overlapping motivators connected to student engagement with institutional governance. These common motivators include prior civic involvement, a desire for institutional change, a sense of belonging, and personal leadership development.

The first motivator commonly discussed in the literature was prior civic involvement (e.g., Lizzio et al., 2011; Workman et al., 2020). A student is more likely to join student government if they have served in other civic capacities including high school student government or involvement in local government (Toich, 2019). Prior experience helped students better understand how to get involved with student government and how their participation might lead to an impact on their campus (Workman et al., 2020). In addition, Workman et al. (2020) found that for women past experiences with civic involvement helped them push through challenges they experienced in their role. Prior involvement also helped students understand the personal benefits of engagement in student governance in terms of relationships and future opportunities (Albrecht et al., 1994; Toich, 2019).

A second motivator for student participation in governance was a desire for institutional change (Dedicatoria et al., 2023). Changes that students may seek include institutional policy change, development of student support resources, opportunities to increase student activities, and a host of other interests. According to Moore and Ginsburg (2017), some students seek participation in student government as a way to develop their legacy, defined as seeking improvements that will last long after their term finishes. This motivation is connected to a strong desire to contribute to the campus social and academic life (Dedicatoria et al., 2023). For some students, this motivation occurred from seeing significant issues go unaddressed and feeling they had the skills and ideas to engage them (Gibson & Williams, 2019). In short, students desired to create change, or an act of community service, that could benefit the student population and strengthen campus relationships (Miles, 2010).

A third motivator found for joining governance organizations in college was a desire to find a sense of belonging (Cho et al., 2015). Specifically, students expressed a need to connect with peers and connect with others. Past research has found positive relationships between participating in extracurriculars and student satisfaction (Dedicatoria et al., 2023). Typically, these opportunities are the result of invitations from peers (Dedicatoria et al., 2023). This motivator was often tied with making an impact as it created an environment where students can feel they are part of a community working toward a common goal (Dedicatoria et al., 2023). The need to belong and be accepted by peers in any setting creates an intrinsic motivation that leads to searching for groups and organizations that align with personal goals and values (Montelongo, 2002).

Finally, an additional motivator for student government participation, according to the literature, included the rewards and benefits most students hear about during student government recruitment (Cho et al., 2023; Moore & Ginsburg, 2017; Orsini & Sunderman, 2024). Student government has a focus on professionalism and developing skills that most students desire to prepare them for future opportunities (Workman et al., 2020). Student government organizations tend to advertise their organization as a way to enhance skills and gain experience while influencing the student body in a positive way (Dedicatoria et al., 2023). Many students first describe

their reasoning for participating as to bolster and improve their resumes, but retention is achieved as students strive to connect with other and enhance their student community, resulting in a strong commitment to the organization (Cho et al., 2023).

Within the variety of motivators present for students to join student government in higher education, there is an overarching theme of intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is one's internal desire, while external motivation is focused on rewards and benefits (Cho et al., 2023). In this review of the literature, there were more intrinsic motivators commonly found among students, supporting Montelongo's (2002) conclusion that individual characteristics and desires have a higher influence on student participation than external motivators.

The Role of Student Government on College Campuses

The role of student government on college campuses extends from the historical context of how students were implemented in higher education institutions' governing boards. Student activism led to allowing space for students in university leadership roles, with the goal of providing a unified voice for the campus (Lozano, 2016). Student government in higher education is thought about as a form of public service with the goal of representing the student population along with improving the welfare of the college community (Goodman, 2022b).

With the history of how student government was formed on college campuses, the modern role of student government still stems from working for the student population's welfare (Komives et al., 2006). The role of student government has also been modified to be a form of communication for students to school administrators, providing an avenue close and amicable relationships with school administration (Alviento, 2018). Having respectable relationships with school administrators allows the student population's issues and concerns to be recognized by the higher education staff so administrators and student government leaders can actively work together to create solutions (T. Smith, 2018).

The student government is a source of protection for college campuses. Student government is charged with the responsibility of creating legislation that will be sustainable and improve the university and its future (Goodman, 2022a; Scott, 2018). The role of student government includes the protection of academic freedom and student success by arguing for broadening access to student benefits and creating more resources to ensure student success (Lozano & Hughes, 2017). Protection of the college campus also includes securing and safeguarding institutional finances, while trying to create more affordability by overlooking student fees (Goodman, 2022a; Scott, 2018).

The main role of student government is to provide a voice for students who are within formal structures to create a platform where issues and problems can be presented, and plans developed to resolve conflict (Lozano, 2016). Student government is an important facet of the overall operation of college campuses because the organization is committed to a public purpose (E. Smith et al., 2016) to represent peers and help the institution effectively fulfill its mission (Scott, 2018).

Experiences of Student Government Leaders

According to the literature, the student government experience is often showcased as a positive one for the organization and the student (Cho et al., 2023; Goodman, 2022b). When a college or university places an emphasis on student government, it has proven to increase enrollment and retention (Miles, 2010). Furthermore, students who participate in student government or other forms of leadership conclude that they develop critical life skills in a low-risk environment like none other (Goodman & Arndt, 2022). Students develop time management and collaboration skills, an increase in self-esteem, and a strong sense of pride for the organization they are representing (Hine, 2013; Miles, 2010).

Research in this area consistently demonstrates that students learn not only more about the skills needed in a professional workplace that aid them in their eventual transition, but they learn more about themselves through different collaborations and challenges. Leadership has proven to be a generative process that is a delicate balance between power and influence (Tillapaugh & Haber-Curran, 2016). This is why students in student leadership never stop developing their skills. Administrators serve as mentors or role models for more experienced students, while these students play the same role for their less experienced peers (Hine, 2013). This ensures that fine-tuned leadership skills are not only practiced and promoted but continually taught as new students pass through.

Despite the clear benefits, not every experience of student government leaders is simple. Not only can the initial election process be flawed through biases (Lee-Johnson et al., 2022; Workman et al., 2020), but the leadership itself can be lacking key components that give the best experience to students (Hine, 2013). Once in the leadership role, students hope to lead and not simply manage, which includes hearing and understanding the voice of their fellow students, but this cannot be accomplished without appropriate representation (Goodman, 2021).

According to the literature, the representation of different races, ethnicities, and genders in student government is not where it should be, but the main focus is on the gender gap (Lee-Johnson et al., 2022; Workman et al., 2020). Men and women have different ways of leading, but this is not to say that one is better than the other. That said, humanity is more comfortable with one gender and does not see the benefit that change could bring (Goodman, 2022a; Tillapaugh & Haber-Curran, 2016). The experience of women in student government has been a greater challenge for this reason.

Even though more women attend college than men, they are less represented in student government and less likely to reach the highest status of leadership within student government, such as president (Workman et al., 2020). This is not to say that it is no longer a positive experience, but women in this study identified challenges and barriers not discussed by their male counterparts (Lee-Johnson et al., 2022). It is still understood that women experience many of the benefits that men do and are more likely to gain a deep-rooted community because of the unique challenges they face (Workman et al., 2020). Even with what someone might deem a negative, the literature counteracts with how students often turn it into a positive. This is what sets

the experience apart and what encourages people to keep participating in student government, despite the potential challenges students might face.

THEORETICAL FRAMING

This study is guided by Haber and Komives (2009) social change model of leadership development. The model stems from student involvement theories created by Astin which focused on the benefits of student involvement to both students and institutions (McNaughtan & Brown, 2020). As the model has evolved, seven "Cs" have emerged as mechanisms within the framework. Wagner (1996) discusses how these seven components can be divided into three distinct areas. In addition to the foundational aspects of the social change model, Harper and Kezar (2021) have called for a critical approach to the model that can better support marginalized groups. They posit that the model in its current form can perpetuate White normative ideals and the use of community cultural wealth could enhance the model (Acevedo & Solorzano, 2023). While this study does not focus on identities, findings do acknowledge diverse experiences. Each area of focus is discussed below.

The first area of focus is on group values. Collaboration, common purpose, and controversy with civility are three Cs associated with group values. The collaborative component alludes to the idea that multiple stakeholders are needed for social change and leadership development (Haber & Komives, 2009). Common purpose extends collaboration by focusing on how those multiple stakeholders must have common goals and values for social change and leadership development to occur. The third component is controversy with civility which posits that collaboration and common purpose will typically result in controversy, which must be handled with respect, trust, and civility. In summary, the model outlines how leadership is not an isolated affair, and collaborative efforts need to be undertaken to advance social change (Buschlen & Dvorak, 2011).

The second area of focus is on individual values. The first C in this area is consciousness of self which highlights how leaders need to be aware of their own beliefs, values, and goals to develop in leadership (Lane & Chapman, 2011). After leaders develop a consciousness of self, they should seek congruence, the second C in this area. Congruence occurs when leaders have consistency in their leadership, acting in a spirit of consistency, authenticity, and integrity (Komives & Wagner, 2016). The final C in the individual values area is commitment, which captures the concept of motivation and fortitude needed to carry out leadership and social change. These individual values all are connected to leaders possessing a strong sense of self, which results in courageous, authentic leadership.

The last area in the model is societal/community values, and there is only one C: citizenship. Citizenship captures the idea that individuals are interconnected to their surrounding community (Wagner, 1996) and highlights how leadership occurs in context and has the ultimate goal of individual, organizational, and societal change. For this study, we applied this model as we analyzed data and identified themes associated with what motivates students to engage in leadership and strive for organizational change. In connection with this model, our study was guided by the following two research questions:

RQ1: What do current student government presidents and vice presidents perceive to have influenced them in their decision to participate in student government?

RQ2: What are the experiences or factors that student government presidents and vice presidents perceive to have impacted their continued engagement and experience in student government?

DATA AND METHODS

Data for this study are from a larger qualitative dataset focused on the experiences of student body presidents and vice presidents at regional public universities in the United States. This subset of data for this study is focused on how student body presidents and vice presidents perceive their motivation for engaging in student government and what has influenced their continued engagement.

The sample was designed with several characteristics and limitations in mind. First, we selected open-access, four-year public higher education institutions that are classified as regional comprehensive. McNaughtan and McNaughtan (2019) found that these institutions are often more student-focused and allow for closer relationships between students and administrators than some larger, more prestigious research-centered universities. Second, we sought a sample that was diverse in terms of cultural context, and while all institutions are regional public institutions, they are located across the United States in diverse political, demographic, and economic environments. Finally, we selected presidents and vice presidents because they have roles that typically work with senior administrators. We felt this would increase the likelihood of mentorship and enhance perspectives on student/administrator relationships. We employed a purposeful sampling approach (Patton, 2014) to select participants for this study. Specifically, we utilized the institutional list from the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges to form our initial sample. We then randomly selected 50 institutions from that list and identified the student body presidents and vice presidents for each.

To recruit participants, we sent an initial and a follow-up email to our sample of 50 student leaders, which resulted in 11 interviews of which one was removed because they were concurrently serving as a professional staff in student leadership. Each interview was conducted over Zoom, transcribed, and de-identified and all participants were given pseudonyms, selected by request from the participant or randomly by the research team. Table 1 provides a list of participants, their pseudonyms, select demographic characteristics, and institutional information. Given that respondents were already taxed for time, dedicating hours to institutional service beyond their course work, employment, and social obligations, we employed guidance from McClure and McNaughtan (2021), including keeping interviews to under 45 minutes, establishing credibility through shared past student leadership experience, and conducting the interviews virtually.

Table 1: Select Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Race	Sex	Position Title	Years in SG Service	Enrollment	Geographic Location
Ben	Hispanic	Male	President	4	25,000	Southwest
Cole	White	Male	President	2	10,000	West
Deann	White	Female	Vice President	3	10,000	West
Ezra	Multi	Male	Vice President	2	10,000	Midwest
Frank	Black	Male	President	2	5,000	East
Gina	White	Female	Vice-President	4	15,000	Southeast
Hosea	Hispanic	Male	President	2	25,000	Southeast
Ivan	White	Male	President	2	5,000	South
Jeff	Indian	Male	President	3	15,000	Midwest
Kyra	White	Female	President	2	5,000	Midwest

Methodological Approach and Analysis

For this study we applied a narrative inquiry approach, focusing on the stories and experiences of student leaders (E. Smith et al., 2016). As part of our process for utilizing narrative inquiry in this study, we did a cursory review of the literature to identify potential existing themes previously discussed and conducted two initial conversations with past student leaders to develop a set of open-ended interview questions to elicit perspectives on the student leader experience that could be utilized to ascertain narratives and personal stories (Creswell & Poth, 2016). While conducting the interviews guided by the narrative inquiry methodological norms we focused on understanding and interpreting stories shared by participants (Clandinin 2022). We focused on the first five interview questions (out of 17 total). The five questions from the larger project analyzed for this study with their associated Research Question number (e.g., RQ1 or RQ2) are listed below.

1. How did you get involved in student leadership? (RQ1)
2. What are the main reasons you decided to engage in student government? (RQ1)
3. What are some of the barriers to getting involved in student government? (RQ1)
4. Do you have any mentors who encouraged you to participate? (RQ2)
5. How did mentors influence your experience in student government? (RQ2)

DISCUSSION

Prior to conducting the study, we received approval from our Institutional Review Board (IRB). Interviews with participants were analyzed employing Strauss and Corbin's (1998) three-step approach to coding qualitative data: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. During the open coding stages, the data were coded simultaneously using an inductive method that combined descriptive and values-based coding to extrapolate themes connecting the participant's explicit and implicit understanding of FWA to develop preliminary codes. Participant response transcripts continued to be coded until no new codes emerged, thus ensuring saturation had been reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The team of researchers then coded the remaining transcripts, and intermittent discussions were held to increase validity. Axial coding was employed to ensure connections across themes and reflect on the alignment between participant's comments and the guiding theoretical framework (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Selective coding led to the most salient quotes used to represent the themes of the study.

Positionality

The three researchers involved in this study have all participated in student leadership experiences as undergraduate students. The lead author served in student leadership for four years with one of those years serving as the student body president for a public regional university. He then pursued a masters and doctorate in higher education. While in graduate school he continued to participate in student government and studies university leadership as a professor at a large public research university. He has also served as an advisor for several student organizations and views student leadership as a positive influence in the lives of students. The second and third researchers are current undergraduate students who have mainly been involved in student organizations.

FINDINGS

In this study, we identify four common experiences related to how students described their path to student leadership. First, the vast majority of those we interviewed had experience with extra-curriculars that led them to student government. Second, students shared that they did not plan on getting involved in student government. These first two themes highlight how many students attend college with plans to engage in athletics, sorority/fraternity life or other extracurricular activities, but most did not see student government as a viable option. Third, their previous engagement experience was typically coupled with a specific invitation from a peer to join student government. Below, we share perspectives on each of these themes from participants.

Pre-College Involvement Experiences

During the student leadership interviews, another common theme that surfaced was that most students had involvement experiences prior to college that prompted them to value engagement. Students reported that prior experiences helped them to see that

their involvement was important and worthwhile. Cole shared his experience of participating in high school band and how that made him feel like he was a part of something bigger than himself. This past involvement gave him a sense of belonging and security that made joining student government less daunting and easier to try. Hosea shared how her childhood experience of helping her parents' campaign for a local election had a lasting impact that led to her wanting to participate in student government in college. She said:

> I would go door-knocking with my dad when I was four years old. We were working to get the first Hispanic woman to the [state} legislature. And so that's always kind of stuck with me. I even worked on a campaign when I was in high school, where I got hired.

Deann continually ran for student government in high school, and while she never won an election, she decided to keep trying. She was passionate about creating change, and every year when she ran for election, she gained more experience. Her experience and passion for wanting to be in student government in high school led her to student government in college.

While some students had prior experience in governance organizations, other students had experience in different organizations that prompted them to become involved in student government during college. Jeff shared how he "joined a volunteering organization" and was selected for their board. Similarly, Ivan discussed how he volunteered at a citizen's climate lobby where he served as an area commissioner. Ivan went on to discuss how his local position and volunteerism created a fuller understanding of how government works and a passion for student leadership.

A few students also discussed how they desired a sense of belonging and a higher purpose. Kyra shared her journey of joining student government during college. She was prompted to join because of her desire for a higher purpose outside of class, since she grew up with her mother being in local government. This created a fascination of representation that bled into Kyra. She wanted to be a part of student leadership while attending college. In summary, the role of pre-college involvement fueled a craving for higher purpose, drive, and belonging, which in turn led students to college student government.

Involvement Leads to Student Governance Positions

While interviewing student leaders, one of the most common narratives was that students came to college with a desire to be involved but did not plan on engaging in student governance. However, after getting involved in other organizations, students saw opportunities to make changes or lead by participation in student government. Gina "got a postcard in the mail," Ezra "was gonna play football" and Anna started out working in the "resident's hall association" to cover the cost of housing. All the students' stories did not begin with a desire to be involved but each person found that these opportunities led them to student government involvement. Ben shared his experience, which started with taking a position doing statistics for basketball games while he was an athlete who was not selected for the team. The coach saw his potential

and found him a position as a "student ambassador," where he could be paid to help with orientation, game management, and recruitment.

In a similar vein, Frank shared how his interest in student leadership was sparked by participation in student activities. He said:

> I was a part of the traditions like our freshman orientation, and I wanted to add some ideas for diversity and inclusion. Our homecoming and Commencement weeks were planned by [student leaders] as well. My first official position was on their diversity and inclusion board. I joined the student government, and I was the vice chair of the undergraduate Black Caucus, which was advocating for black students, specifically in policy.

Frank's experience was work related while others were involvement related. For example, Ezra came to his institution planning to play football but was cut from the team. He took student leadership positions in athletics and the math club, which led him to be selected for a student leadership board that his campus student government oversaw. This experience helped him see student governance as a viable path forward.

While some students had experiences in student involvement that then led them to participate in student governance, other students had planned to get involved in specific student organizations, but when those opportunities did not work out, they jumped right into student governance. Cole shared:

> So, there are a lot of reasons why I came to [institution name], and the biggest one was, it is the only university I knew that had a student-run political center. I wanted to come here and do that so badly. During my fresh.

Cole then went on to share how he then started looking at other campus organizations that engaged in political activism and found student government. Similarly, Anna was working in student housing when her position was changed, and she was asked to serve on student committees like student fees, parking, and climate change. That experience connected her with student leaders in student government, and she decided to continue her involvement there. These stories while different in terms of the organizations they served in, highlight the common bridge of involvement generally, to student government specifically.

A few students also discussed how their journey to student government came from their academic experiences. Gina shared a story of being selected for an academic program that focused on "leadership," which prompted her to seek opportunities to experience leadership and community engagement. In summary, whether students came to college intending to be involved in a specific program or not, by recognizing student governance as a place where they could make change and find leadership opportunities, it became a positive space for them.

The Power of Invitations

The third emerging theme resulting from the student interviews highlighted how almost every one of the student participants shared a common experience of being invited to participate in student government by a peer or administrator. For example, Ezra shared how while working in housing, he had lunch with a friend who "told me

that there were some leadership spots open," so he went on to apply. Ezra offered a sentiment that was shared by many that his initial view of student government was that it would be a great "resume builder" and support his "professional growth," but over time he found it fulfilling.

Ben and Cole both shared how it was someone they knew and trusted who encouraged them to join student government, and in both cases, it took multiple invitations. While reflecting on the first conversation Ben shared:

> I think that [conversation] help me to see that it would be cool to be on the Student Senate even though I didn't know exactly what it did. . . I had some friends that applied for student government with me, so that helped a lot too.

For Cole, he was getting his student ID when he was asked by a friend to play Candy Land in the student government office. Deann shared that he was approached at an all-freshman event where students were introduced to potential leadership opportunities.

Although the initial invitation was often not the one that led to involvement, persistent friends and having a chance to be involved prior to fully committing shifted their perspective and for these participants, resulted in full participation. Hosea, a student who initially thought college student government was similar to high school where nothing is accomplished, later joined because of his two friends and said:

> I'm glad I listened because, you know, I do notice the actual change that our SGA is doing across campus and that the administration is very receptive and listening to our concerns and wanting to change things.

Many students, such as Cole and Ben, noted that when they joined and got involved with student government, they had a perspective shift. They also believe that recruiting students could be easier if they could see or participate in the work that is done.

Ivan posited that if students "just started joining circles of other people who've been very involved in important things" and then start "learning from them," he felt they would find passion and a desire to be involved. He went on to say that regardless of area or issue, student government is the place where change can happen.

DISCUSSION

This study's findings are in line with existing literature on student government participation which emphasizes the multifaceted motivations and experiences of student leaders (e.g., Buultjens & Robinson, 2011; Dedicatoria et al., 2023; Lizzio et al., 2011). The documented motivations—such as prior civic involvement, a desire for institutional change, a sense of belonging, and personal leadership development—corroborate previous research (Buultjens & Robinson, 2011; Goodman, 2021a; Lizzio et al., 2011) and demonstrate how for many students, engagement leads to more engagement. The prevalence of intrinsic motivators over external ones, as observed in our study, resonates with the emphasis on individual characteristics and personal goal setting as precursors to student involvement (Cho et al., 2023; Montelongo, 2002). Additionally, our findings support the positive impact of student

government participation on leadership development, aligning with literature highlighting the generative nature of leadership experiences (Goodman & Arndt, 2022; Tillapaugh & Haber-Curran, 2016).

Our study was guided by Haber and Komives' (2009) social change model of leadership development, which posits that leadership is a collaborative and values-based process. The findings resonate with the model's three areas: group values, individual values, and societal/community values. For example, we find that for some of the student leaders, their feeling of belonging to the institution through club involvement and engagement enhanced their desire to get involved. In addition, as they individual or group values, they decided to engage with the student government to promote and apply those values.

The individual values of consciousness of self, congruence, and commitment were evident in our participants' reflections on how much of their motivation came from their own goals and future professional pursuits (Lane & Chapman, 2011; Komives & Wagner, 2016). The societal/community value of citizenship was reflected in their interconnectedness to the college community and their aspirations for positive change (Wanger, 1996). These narratives highlight how our story's outcomes can be impacted by connection to organizations that lead to additional opportunities.

In summary, institutions should enhance their understanding of past student engagement experiences to identify potential student leaders or help students see how their past experience can help them participate in college student leadership (Buultjens & Robinson, 2011). This type of information could also help in connecting students with similar values and experiences that could lead to engagement invitations. Recognizing that leadership development and a desire for change are prevalent among students, institutions should provide accessible avenues for aspiring leaders to find mentors and mechanisms for change (Komives & Wagner, 2016). It is crucial to impress upon current student leaders their significance in recruiting and providing opportunities for future leaders, fostering a culture of leadership development within the student body (Broadhurst & Velez, 2019).

Implications

Considering the results of this study, we identify several implications for institutional practice. First, institutions should utilize Haber and Komives' (2009) social change model of leadership development as a tool for engaging future student leaders. Given the alignment between our study and this model, institutions should conduct student interest and experience surveys with an emphasis on understanding past leadership engagement and desired future experiences. These data could help institutional staff better recruit and engage potential student leaders (Buschlen & Dvorak, 2011). Similarly, students should be pushed to know and understand the values of their organizations. For many of the students in this study, their first organizational values were connected to student government, or they felt the need to promote their organizational values and so they joined.

In addition to recruiting, institutions should maintain avenues for students with leadership aspirations to readily access mentors and mechanisms for change

(Crabtree, 2022). Given that the participants in this study shared a common desire for leadership development and institutional change, these opportunities should be developed by institutional leaders and easily accessible to students. As part of this implication, current student leaders have an obligation to share their initiatives with campus and promote greater student involvement in critical issues. Invitations were critical to engagement and as was evident in the narratives of these participants, the path to student government was incredibly diverse. None of our students discussed finding student leadership on their own; they were all invited. Institutions, staff, and current student leaders should focus on individualized invitations. This work will require greater awareness and engagement with their campus but given the significant potential for increased engagement from students, these intentional efforts are needed.

Finally, our findings highlight the role of pre-college experience and identity as a leader playing a critical role in attaining executive leadership positions. Some participants even discussed losing elections but maintaining a desire to be involved due to their support from mentors or friends and their identity as a leader in their past engagement experiences. The social change model for leadership can be a catalyst for developing leaders, but more importantly helping students to identify as leaders.

Directions for Future Inquiry

In addition to several implications for higher education practice, this study resulted in three distinct directions for future research. First, given the finding that administrators' invitations can help increase involvement, future research should further dissect the relationship between administrators and student leaders. Understanding the relationship between student leaders and administrators could shed light on power dynamics and potential collaborations around institutional goals (McNaughtan et al., 2021). Studies in this vein could focus on how student leaders view administrators and provide insight into how administrators can better engage with students.

Second, future investigations should strive to understand how student identity impacts student leader experiences. In this study, a diverse set of student leaders were interviewed, and while we did not identify significant differences in why students got involved in student leadership based on student salient identities, there were comments made on how they felt the need to represent diverse voices on their campus. This highlight of diversity may be more influential when examining how it impacts their leadership specifically (Workman et al., 2020).

Finally, a longitudinal analysis of student involvement motivations, considering life experiences, would provide insights into the evolving nature of student engagement throughout their academic journey (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Similar to past studies on student development that tracked students from college entry through graduation, a study that focused exclusively on student leaders could provide insight into the impact of student leadership experiences on the student's life and provide insight into the diverse pathways to student leadership.

CONCLUSION

Our study contributes valuable insights into the motivations and experiences of student government leaders, emphasizing the need for collaborative actions between institutions and student leaders to foster a culture of engagement, leadership development, and positive institutional change. The results of the study highlight that all engagement experiences, before and during college, can be jumping points into student governance. As administrators seek to promote civic engagement, their knowledge of their students and work to promote shared governance has the potential to enhance the student experience (McNaughtan & Brown, 2020).

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Open Campuses for the Elite and Restricted Campuses for Others: Class Segregation in Public Higher Education During the COVID-19 Shutdown

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ABSTRACT

Segregation is often seen in terms of race. However, it can also be based on socioeconomic status. Public colleges and universities in the U.S. had highly divergent responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite operating under similar health and legal considerations, campuses at most elite institutions were treated as essential functions while the neighboring campuses of less elite institutions were often treated as non-essential functions. This was problematic during the pandemic, but the discrimination appears to be continuing after the emergency has passed. The policy of continued reduction of the role of the college campus is an attractive option for less exclusive institutions. While a campus is most valuable for the more marginalized students, it is their campuses that closed and remain limited. The community college campus is the foundation of higher education for many students. The purpose of this article was to explore the value of the campus experience.

Keywords: access, segregation, elite, COVID-19, public university, public community college

The responses of public institutions of higher education in the U.S. to the Covid-19 pandemic have been highly divergent (Healy et al., 2020). In practice, campuses at most elite institutions were treated as essential functions while the nearby campuses of many less elite institutions were being treated as non-essential (Krebs, 2020). The continued reduction of the college campus is an attractive option for less exclusive institutions. While a campus is most valuable for the more marginalized students (Xu & Jaggers, 2016), it is these campuses that closed with some never returning to the

previous level of activity. The college campus is the foundation of higher education for many students. It is where many students can best gain knowledge, interpersonal and communications skills. These skills and experiences provide the rich learning that employers value and increase the capability of the student. The purpose of this paper is to explore the value of the campus experience and how it has changed for some during and after the COVID-19 shutdown. This situation can be better understood through an examination of COVID-19 pandemic related responses and their impact on students.

SEGREGATION BY CLASS THROUGH CAMPUS CLOSURE AND REDUCTION

For many institutions, the decision to keep a campus closed during 2020 was highly individualized (Smalley, 2020). While local conditions matter, status and public profile seem to have driven many decisions on campus closings. Maintaining an open campus was the common standard for elite public institutions while others, including many community colleges were closed.

The inequity of this situation is striking. An examination of neighboring institutions shows the divergence being more in line with institutional eliteness than the influence of COVID-19. This disparity of response is visible through the diverse examples of California and Texas.

A TALE OF TWO CLASSES: CALIFORNIA

Public higher education in California is somewhat unique in that its institutions are divided into three separate systems. The University of California System (UC) the California Community Colleges (CCC), and the California State System (Cal State). The UC System is made up of residential research institutions located throughout the state with the highest costs, admission standards, and public profiles (University of California, 2020).

The CCC system and the Cal State System, while being similarly dispersed throughout the state, have institutions with lower requirements, costs, and public profiles (The California State University, 2019). Cal State and CCC institutions form one class of institutions in that their students are similarly diverse in terms of socio-economic status, ethnicity, and familial experience with higher education. Cal State universities and CCC colleges have historically provided a quality campus experience, with abundant social organizations, sporting events, special interest groups, academic support, and cultural events (The California State University, 2019). The primary difference between the systems has been in the demographics of the student body, the research focus of the faculty, and the public profile of the institutions (The California State University, 2019; University of California, 2020). Due to similar locations, there was little institutional difference in COVID-19 risk.

Despite this clear similarity between the UC system and the CCC and Cal State systems, their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown could not have been more different. The Cal State System was one of the first large higher education entities to announce that of its institutions would remain closed for the fall of 2020

(Burke, 2020). Similarly, the CCC system kept its campuses closed throughout the 2020-2021 year (Garcia, 2021). In contrast, the UC System Chancellor announced the UC institutions could open their campuses with restrictions.

Even as state and local restrictions were implemented and reduced throughout California, the disparity continued. While the UC institutions maintained operational campuses, their Cal State counterparts moved all functions to a limited online delivery or eliminated them entirely (Burke, 2020; Hubler & Cowen, 2020). The contrast between the elite and non-elite institutions permeates the collegiate experience but can be most clearly seen by examining the campus services offered in the first month of the fall 2020 term. The system flagship UC-Berkley welcomed students back to campus with social-distancing restrictions and limitations for the fall 2020 semester (Hubler & Cowen, 2020), but campus services, residence halls and the recreation center were all open (Kell, 2020). Athletic training continued, and after initially cancelling seasons, varsity games were played. The university even provided on-campus care for employee children.

In contrast, nearby Cal State East Bay was online only for the entire 2020-2021 academic year (Cal State East Bay, 2020). Nearby Berkeley City College of the CCC was closed with almost all classes, offices, and services being online only. These less elite institutions are very close to UC Berkley but were treated differently. The divergence was quite clear. Students at the elite university largely received the full benefits of a campus experience while the others did not.

The inequality of access in the Bay Area was standard across California. Open for the elite and closed for others was the standard. In California this became the norm (see Table 1).

Table 1: California Data Summary Table

System	System Focus	Students Served	Cost	Campus Status
University of California System	Highly Selective Research High Public Profile	Highly Prepared High SES Predominantly White and Asian	Highest	Fully Open
California State System	Access Oriented Lower Standards Lower Public Profile	Limited Preparation First-Generation Mixed SES Greater Black and Latine %	Lower	Closed
California Community Colleges	Open Access Lowest Public Profile	Predominantly First-Generation Greater Developmental Need Greater Black/Latine	Lowest	Closed

A particularly concerning outcome of this very uneven and inequitable response is that things have apparently not gone back to the way they were done in 2019. The Cal State system underwent a planned change of chancellors in December of 2020. The original chancellor who made the immediate decision to close the campuses for a year also announced that savings could be made and learning advantages could come from more digital operations (Smith, 2020). His successor made it a point to announce that things would not be the same again at Cal State institutions (Seltzer, 2020), and that the future would be more hybrid and less of a traditional campus-based model. This has not been associated with success, as the Cal State system has had a substantial drop in enrollment and in 2024 is facing a 1.5-billion-dollar deficit (Smith, 2023). It is especially disappointing that the much of the fiscal and enrollment problems are driven by a massive drop in Black/African American, Latine, and first-generation college students for which Cal State institutions had been so critical.

The California Community College system has also suffered during the time after the COVID-19 shutdown. Substantial declines in enrollment and upward transfer have occurred across the system, and this has been most visible among non-white students. Calls have been made to make investments in activities to promote retention and completion in hopes of reversing the post-COVID trend (Perez et al., 2022). A complete departure from this recent downward trend Calbrite College. This is a new community college in California that has no traditional campus and delivers classes entirely in an asynchronous online format. Founded just before the start of the pandemic shutdown as a small resource for working adults, Calbrite has grown rapidly and far beyond its original goals. It is now of substantial size in comparison to other CCC institutions and is rapidly expanding. While this model is quite laudable for its intended purpose of providing additional career enhancing education for working adults who have presumably already managed to gain some of the skills that can come from a campus-based education, the Calbrite student body is now about ten-percent traditional aged and forty-percent unemployed (Calbrite, 2023). This likely means that half of the Calbrite student body would be better served with a richer and campus-based college experience. The expansion of the mission of Calbrite College may be the most visible sign of the continuing trend towards maintaining the reduction in campus activities that began with the COVID-19 shutdown. It is, however, not the only sign. Prior to the shutdown, about twenty percent of the CCC student body was online (Payares-Montoya, 2022). As of the spring of 2022, well after the campuses were fully reopened, that percentage was still fifty percent (Payares-Montoya, 2022).

Unlike California, the institutional independence of public higher education in Texas allows for an institution level examination. While most public institutions in Texas quickly returned to having open campuses in the fall of 2020, the exceptions indicate unequal access.

UNEQUAL ACCESS IN TEXAS: A TALE OF TWO COUNTIES

Travis County

The flagship urban institution in the state is the University of Texas at Austin (UT-Austin). It is in the south-central portion of the state but serves a statewide and international student body. Like most Texas public institutions, it opened in fall of 2020 with restrictions. The residence halls were open, a full slate of student affairs and academic services were available, and the football team hosted games. The restrictions were difficult and expensive, but the university provided a fully functioning campus for its students. UT-Austin treated the provision of a campus experience as an essential function, to its student's benefit. UT-Austin is a selective institution with a higher cost of attendance and a relatively low number of first-generation college students. Less than 29% of its student body is made up of Black/African Americans and Latines and the student body largely comes from affluent families (University of Texas at Austin, 2020).

The students at neighboring Austin Community College (ACC) were not so fortunate. The campus was closed to the public through the spring of 2021, and face-to-face interactions were all but eliminated (Austin Community College, 2021). ACC is non-selective and has a low-cost of attendance. Most of its students are from families earning under $50,000 per year. Many are first generation and 40% of ACC students are Latine or Black/African American (Garza, 2019).

UT-Austin and ACC operate in the same city: Austin, Texas. They are under the same legal and health authority. Yet UT-Austin was fully functioning and ACC's campus that was closed to the public. UT-Austin, like many flagship institutions around the country, has drawn historically high applications and interest since the COVID-19 shutdown and has fully returned to its previous level of campus operations. ACC, however, has had a downturn in overall enrollment with a substantial increase in students taking fully online classes (Remadna, 2023). The elite students are getting just as much of the campus experience as before, while students at ACC get even less.

The situation in Travis County might be muddled by the fact that the two institutions are a flagship university and a community college. The divergent provision of open campuses in Texas becomes clearer, however, when examining the area around Dallas County. Dallas County has two non-flagship public universities and four area community college districts.

Dallas County

Two hundred miles to the north of the University of Texas at Austin is the University of Texas at Dallas (UT-Dallas, 2020 is located in Dallas county's northern edge. Its student body has few who are first-generation or are eligible for a Federal Pell Grant. Less than 46% of the student body are from homes earning under $50,000 per year and 22% are from homes with annual earnings over $110,000. The racial makeup of UT-Dallas is over 90% Caucasian and Asian. The University of North Texas at Dallas (UNT-Dallas) is located in Dallas County near its southern border (Crane, 2020).

UNT-Dallas has a student body where over 70% of are first generation and more than 80% are either Black/African American or Latine (University of North Texas, 2020). A striking 76% of the UNT-Dallas students come from homes earning less than $50,000 per year (Univstats, 2020). UNT-Dallas is both less selective and less expensive than UT-Dallas. They both have residence halls, compete in lower profile sports conferences, and have similar ancillary revenue opportunities. Much like in the California example, the Dallas County Community College District (DCCCD) provides a second lower price and lower profile institution in Dallas County. Unlike the public universities, the colleges of the DCCCD are spread throughout the county.

Other than the affluence and elite status of the respective student bodies, UT-Dallas and UNT-Dallas are virtually identical in their situations related to the COVID-19 response. They operated under the exact same legal mandates from Dallas County. They, however, responded very differently to the COVID-19 pandemic. UT-Dallas fully opened its campus in the fall with substantial reduction in crowding and class sizes. Activities and services continued with enforced social distancing and mask wearing. An early announcement was made that the fall 2021 semester would operate without any restrictions (University of Texas at Dallas, 2021). UNT-Dallas, however, basically became a fully online institution. All classes and services were moved online, and all activities were cancelled (University of North Texas at Dallas, 2021).

At first glance, it might be thought that this divergence in campus access was just racism. This could not be further from the case. The University of North Texas System descends from North Texas State University, which was the first public university in Texas to have a racially integrated student body. By 1956 the university had a colorblind undergraduate application and soon become the state's first predominantly white public university to have a Black administrator and a Black regent (Thurman, 2004). UNT-Dallas was purposely founded in an area with a majority minority population to better serve Black/African American and Latine students. UNT-Dallas exists to provide a quality collegiate campus near those students. Excluding racism, the remaining factors are class and affluence. This can also be seen in the area community colleges.

Unlike with the California example, the community colleges in Texas are county-based independent entities. Responses to COVID-19 differed by college. Dallas College, an urban multi-college system in Dallas County, was the first institution in the state to announce that it would keep its campuses closed through the fall (Owens, 2020). It was soon announced that they would remain closed through the 2020-2021 academic year. Neighboring Tarrant County College, (a multi-campus community college in and around Fort Worth) also remained closed (Tarrant County College, 2020). These urban community college systems serve the least affluent parts of the Dallas/Fort Worth metropolitan area, and their campuses were basically closed. This contrasts with Collin College (Collin College, 2020) and North Central Texas College (North Central Texas College, 2020), the community colleges that serve the most affluent counties in the metropolitan area. These institutions were open with restrictions before the fall of 2020.

As in California, the difference in the tactics of these Texas institutions seems to be related to the exclusivity and profile of the college or university. Like California,

the institutions doing critical work for the least advantaged students did so with closed campuses. California and Texas were different, but both had closed campuses for the disadvantaged but maintained open campuses for the elite. This can best be understood in terms of what makes the campus valuable.

Also like the California example, the University of North Texas system has used the experience of the COVID-19 shutdown to as an opportunity to diminish campus activities. A system vice president penned a national article penned an article decrying the end of the lecture hall, along with the spurious claim that online lectures were superior and would not limit other campus experiences for traditional students while significantly cutting costs (Fein & Heap, 2020). After the COVID-19 shutdown had ended, UNT-Dallas strategic plan included building on the online education experience of 2020 to expand the institutions online programming and online student services (Williams et al., 2022). This is even though the institution largely exists to provide on-ground education in its low-income location. On the community college side, Dallas College moved to maintain greater online programming while other enrollment declined (Buice, 2021). This can be easily seen in two ways. First, Dallas College has the declared intention to provide every program in a fully online mode whenever possible (Dallas College, 2023a). Second, the college went from having 46% of its students taking at least one online course in 2019 to having 67% taking at least one in 2022 (Dallas College, 2023b).

THE CAMPUS EXPERIENCE MATTERS: EVEN MORE SO FOR THE MARGINALIZED STUDENT

Colleges provide a better learning environment than most students can find online or at home. Vibrant on-campus experiences can powerfully enhance the learning experience of the students (Xu & Jaggers, 2016). A classroom can be valuable to most students as the richest form of communication is face-to-face (Tierney, 2020).

Marginal student populations have the most to gain from a rich campus learning experience, and consequently have the most to lose from their absence. Students, who are first generation, low-SES, have learning challenges or students with developmental education needs, and ethnic minorities (Sublett, 2021), can all be expected to suffer from limited offerings.

Conversely, enhanced learning support can always be beneficial, but it may provide the greatest benefit to at-risk students (Weitzer, 2020). Many learning enhancements, such as seminars, lectures, projects, advising, and workshops, cannot be effectively provided off campus. Limiting these experiences may have a particularly negative impact on more vulnerable students (Weitzer, 2020).

The social and cultural aspects of higher education campuses greatly benefit many (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Students with a rich campus experience are advantaged in learning how to develop cultural capital and social capital (Jensen & Jetten, 2016). The personal abilities needed to develop these types of capital are highly valued professionally and relate to economic prosperity in the United States. What are often referred to by employers as soft skills are boosted by developing social and cultural capital. Most students can benefit from campus activities, clubs, performing groups and sports teams/events, but these are often the most critical for

students from less-advantaged backgrounds (Jensen & Jetten, 2016). Consequently, the ethnic groups most harmed by closed campuses should be Latines and Black/African American students.

LONG-TERM IMPACT OF A SHORT-TERM SOLUTION: PERMANENT CAMPUS REDUCTION

While this disparity of educational quality is ethically troubling in the short-term, the long-term connotations of this situation could be dire and far reaching in terms of the access to quality college and university experiences in the U.S. Campus closures were generally described as short-term responses to a temporary emergency. Forces outside of the control of higher education leaders provide a strong indication to the contrary. Many campuses that were closed in the fall of 2020 remained closed long after most of the population had functional immunity to the COVID-19 danger. The elimination of an entire year of full-service campus access was a substantial loss to the students of these institutions (Weitzer, 2020). This extended the challenge to students and normalized the practice of limiting campus interactions. Other considerations are now causing institutions and policy makers to continue the policy of limited campus interaction.

Decades of diminishing state support for higher education are unlikely to be reversed during the greatest relative loss of state tax revenue in U.S. history (National Governor's Association, 2020; Soergel, 2020). Simultaneously, states were expected to fund costly responses to the pandemic (Mitchell, 2020). Consequently, state funding for many institutions is expected to continue to decline. The disruption of campus-based revenue sources and off-budget expenditures to provide online education in mid-semester in response to the pandemic exacerbated this lost funding for the institutions that stayed close (Mitchell, 2020). This and the political movement toward providing free college, in all likelihood, will increase the attractiveness of a lower cost delivery method for higher education. Low-cost efforts are often centered in the community college, regardless of its impact on the student. Minimally functioning campuses with large online enrollments where few students physically attend will not only lead to a substantially lower quality of educational experience, but it will also likely lead to at least somewhat lower costs. Many institutions that made the necessary investments to temporarily offer a high volume of online courses for a long period of time are in a poor financial position to return to a campus-based model in the future. This condition will incline institutions to maintain the shift to providing a less active campus experience, whether that was their original intent or not. While attractive on the surface, the negative impact of this strategic shift will be substantial and centered on the most at-risk students.

FINDINGS: THE END RESULT

Campuses provide a tremendous value to college and university students. This has been widely known for generations, sometimes conveniently forgotten in recent years as cheaper alternative delivery methods have become technically feasible (Laberge, et.al., 2020). The experience of the COVID-19 shutdown had the unfortunate benefit

of making clear the value of rich campus educational experiences by taking them away. Students at elite public institutions needed open campuses and they were provided. They are not unique in this need (Sublett, 2021). Students from less advantaged backgrounds as well as affluent students need this support at least as much as their more affluent counterparts (Tierney, 2020). Regardless of the intent behind it, a separation of higher education access occurred and continues to exist. The campus experience is being maintained as an essential function for the students of elite public institutions while it is being diminished and treated as a non-essential luxury for many more marginal students. It is evident from the examples of California and Texas that the services and educational opportunities for the elite were and continue to be protected while the same cannot be said at many institutions where the elite do not attend. The idea of providing broad higher education access where the elite are given the top educational experiences while the others are given something less is not new. This can be easily seen in the higher education contributions and failings of Alabama Governor George Wallace (Katsinas, 1994).

Expanded And Separated Higher Education Access: The Vision of George Wallace

While being arguably the most prominent supporter of government mandated racial segregation in the United States, George Wallace only took this stance after he lost a gubernatorial election in 1958, in which he was endorsed by the Alabama chapter of the NAACP (Jackson, 1998). Contrary to popular opinion, Governor George Wallace was an aggressive proponent of expanded access to quality higher education while being the face of segregation (Katsinas, 1994). In his later years he became anti-segregation. While his actions for and against segregation were clearly influenced by political opportunism, his commitment to providing broad collegiate access was clear in his establishing Alabama's two-year colleges (Katsinas, 1994).

This expansion of higher education access occurred in 1963, at the beginning of his first of many terms as governor (Pearson, 1998). This is notable in that 1963 also saw him standing in the schoolhouse door to announce his defying a court order to desegregate the University of Alabama (Pearson, 1998). This shows the elitism and expedience aspect of the Wallace vision.

The Post-COVID Version of the Wallace Philosophy

There are striking parallels between the approach of many institutions after the COVID-19 shutdown and that of Governor George Wallace in 1963. The movement toward off-campus, low interaction programming creates two divergent experiences. The education in its simplest form is available to almost everyone, but the best is preserved for the elite. This programming difference is driven by expediency and not seen as providing equal quality. Asynchronous online programming is not equal to a rich campus experience in equipping students to develop social and cultural capital in a professional environment (Jensen & Jetten, 2016). The Wallace approach provided basic access to higher education but maintained qualitative inequality. The institutions he created were valuable to Black/African American students but could

not provide equal experiences or outcomes to the University of Alabama. This was done for political expediency despite its clear inequality (Katsinas, 1994).

While the similarities between post-COVID changes in access and George Wallace's efforts in 1963 are striking, it is the differences that are disturbing. While the governor's efforts were eventually ruled unconstitutional, are blatantly offensive by 21st century standards, and he himself denounced them in his later years, they were somewhat forward thinking in 1963. These efforts produced far greater college attendance among Black/African American in Alabama (Katsinas, 1994) during a time when such attendance was poor across the country. While a more just and effective form of racial segregation seems offensive today, it was at least a functional step forward. This cannot be said for the post-COVID changes. Simple access has been maintained, but the shift away from the campus that began during the shutdown is reducing the real quality of the education that can be accessed by the less privileged. This qualitative reduction in higher education that is available to the less affluent likely diminishes the value for the student who receives it. It is particularly troubling that much of American higher education is embracing an approach that the younger George Wallace would appreciate, but the older and wiser Governor Wallace would reject.

What Can College and University Professionals Do to Promote True Equality of Access?

Higher education leaders and faculty members are uniquely positioned to influence the collegiate experience. What they provide for students is foundational and influences all that follows for the student. Limited campus tactics are promoted for a variety of reasons. Some of these, such as adapting to the schedule of working professionals, have merit. They do not, however, eliminate the need for a campus experience for most undergraduate students. Providing the rich, full campus experience is ultimately an issue of equal treatment and educational quality. Political and financial forces make reducing the provision of campus interaction attractive to politicians and administrators, but it need not be done. The college community can work to maintain fully functioning campuses. The marginalized students whose futures are at stake cannot speak for themselves. Colleges and universities must do so.

This can be done by emphasizing the value of the campus and making all its advantages available to a wider geographic range at a relatively low price. Due to their geographic dispersion, community colleges are uniquely capable of doing this. They can now provide a more efficient campus experience rather than a reduced one. This can be done through leveraging the investments made and lessons learned during the COVID-19 shutdown. Faculty and leaders can encourage institutions to use these processes and technologies to promote student engagement rather than avoiding it. Most institutions are now capable of classes with multiple synchronous live connections to multiple locations. They can also easily record and archive class meetings for later viewing. Administrative and student service functions can be fully performed with a much smaller number of campus visits than before. Team and group activities can be done virtually some of the time without a substantial loss of

connection (Laberge et al., 2020). Consequently, students who live too far away to commute to campus daily can now have a rich campus experience with far fewer trips to campus. This capacity to barely function off-campus can be used to create a fully functional campus experience with limited attendance. Many potential students have challenges that preclude them getting to campus daily. This does not mean that they do not need this experience. Colleges can now provide this crucial campus experience in a more efficient manner.

DISCUSSION

The responses of the discussed examples in the states of California and Texas fell short of the goal of providing equal treatment and access to all students. The decisions made in response to the COVID-19 epidemic disadvantaged the less advantaged students. This may be indicative of a wide-ranging problem and a long-term trend. For decades, public colleges and universities have provided high quality campus educational experiences to non-elite students much like those at flagship state universities. This provided the ladder for hard working students to become just as capable as their elite counterparts. Every time one of these institutions ceases to provide a fully functioning campus experience, that opportunity diminishes. The campus experience is indeed an essential function and diminishing it for the less advantaged while preserving it for the elite is segregation by economic class in its most basic form. The fact that this segregation is not based on race does not reduce its impact. Ongoing study of this trend could be very valuable to understanding and promoting quality higher education access.

Conclusion

Decisions were made in response to the COVID-19 epidemic that were not equally costly to all students. For some, the collegiate experience was largely maintained while for others it was materially diminished. These results decisions were disturbingly reminiscent of the 1963 higher education vision of George Wallace. While they were not made necessarily made to take political advantage of racial segregation, students were treated quite differently by class. Class segregation would seem unacceptable in current society, yet that occurred and may be continuing to occur with frequency. This is class segregation today, it will be segregation tomorrow, and unless resisted by public colleges and universities, could be segregation forever.

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