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When a Job Is Not a Job: Justifications of Part-Time Faculty Work in English and Math Departments at Three Colleges and Universities

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates justifications by academic professionals regarding part-time faculty working conditions, and it is based on sixty-two qualitative interviews in two disciplines at three post-secondary schools. While each university or college had its own justificatory strategy to claim their use of part-time professors was legitimate, each defined part-time faculty work as something other than a *real job*. The part-time faculty willing to express dissatisfaction regarding their work explicitly want faculty work to be a *real job*. Finally, the organizational structures of each college reinforce their respective justificatory strategies. This includes three different organizational boundaries between full- and part-time faculty members that can be metaphorically described as a wall, gateway, or ladder. Policy implications are identified regarding the need for pro-rata pay and participation in self-governance.

Keywords: sociology, culture, academic career, higher education, part-time faculty, justification, exploitation

On September 1, 2013, Margaret Mary Vojtko, an 83-year-old woman who taught French as a part-time professor, died of a heart attack. She was unable to afford to heat her home between her contract not being renewed after the 2012-2013 school year, and medical bills associated with cancer treatment, (Kovalik, 2013). The story initially appeared as an opinion piece written by an attorney associated with the United Auto Workers for *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* and was then reported on by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Ellis, 2013), and NPR (Sanchez, 2013). The issue of

her death created no small amount of controversy, with the original article accusing her employer, Duquesne University, of not caring about her fate, and the university responding with claims it gave her additional support (Walsh, 2013).

Writing an opinion piece for CNN.com, Gary Rhoades wrote,

> "The question is: How will we treat working people? Will we, the richest nation on earth, continue to structure employment in ways that reduce large segments of society to near Dickensian conditions of existence? Or can we muster the collective will to appropriately remunerate and honor the work of all working Americans? …In academia, that means tenure stream faculty, staff, students, administrators, and communities must recognize in Vojtko's fate the ugly and diminished future of higher education and choose, in big ways and small ways, a more equitable path." (Rhoades, 2013, para. 14-15)

The National Education Association marked ten years after her death by publishing a series of vignettes with part-time faculty discussing the difficulties associated with their work (Kuimelis & Flannery, 2023), and *Inside Higher Ed* marked the anniversary with an opinion piece calling for both better benefits for part-time faculty and better research on the topic (Kezar & Harper, 2023).

Vojtko's death fed into a pre-existing concern over part-time faculty working conditions. Stephen Werner compares academic work to a caste system, with part-time faculty framed as a low-status caste with minimal upward mobility (Werner, 2023). The claim of adjunct exploitation has not been universally accepted, however. James Stacey Taylor suspects "adjuncts are already receiving equal pay for their teaching, and just want pay that is, in Orwellian terms, "more equal" than that received by their more successful colleagues" (Taylor, 2016, para. 4). In short, part-time faculty working conditions are a source of controversy within American higher education.

This article examines the perspectives of academic actors from three different academic ranks and the ways in which their positionality and organizational affiliations influence their opinions of this broader debate. I argue that in addition to their rank and position, academic actors can be studied as moral agents. In other words, it is possible to study academic actors as striving for legitimacy, justifying their actions, and denouncing situations they perceive as unjust. I rely on semi-structured qualitative interviews with sixty-two part-time professors, full-time professors (tenured and tenure-track), and administrators. Recruited interviewees came from three postsecondary schools (a private teaching college, a public community college, and a public research university) and two disciplines (English and mathematics). The analysis of the interviews relies on theoretical tools from the pragmatic sociology of critique, which are well suited to understand respondents as moral agents. The interviews occurred from 2007 to 2010, a period where part-time faculty work appeared to stabilize in the US in terms of proportion of workforce and pay.

The findings of this study can be summarized in three points. First, while each institution had its own distinct justificatory strategy to claim their use of part-time professors is legitimate, they all define part-time faculty work as something other than a *real job*. Rather, each institution defines part-time faculty work as either an

avocation, as an elongated job interview, or part of graduate education. The idea that someone can reasonably expect to rely on part-time faculty work as their primary form of income is rejected in all three cases. Second, there appears to be an association between part-time faculty willing to express dissatisfaction and alienation regarding their work universally rejecting the university-supported justification entirely and explicitly want to develop their part-time faculty work into a *real job*. Third, these justifications are embedded within department and university policies, procedures, and contract details, with which they are mutually reinforcing. As different colleges rely on different justifications of part-time faculty work, the relevant organizational structures vary as well. A result of this is that there is always an organizational boundary between part- and full-time faculty members, though it differs how depending on the postsecondary institution. These boundaries can be metaphorically described as a *wall*, *gateway*, and *ladder.*

While I collected the interviews before the COVID-19 pandemic, my findings further illuminate higher education employment trends in the current moment, as will be elaborated on in the discussion section.

PART-TIME FACULTY AND THE GIG ACADEME

The rise of part-time faculty members within the professoriate can be understood as part of a general increase in contingent professional work (Barley & Kunda, 2006; Osnowitz, 2010). American higher education operates within a neo-liberalism, an economic system that prioritizes "individual freedoms over collective liberty and personal responsibility over shared welfare. They also include a preference for shifting responsibility over the provision of basic needs and public goods from democratic institutions to private enterprises" (Kezar et al., 2019, p. 14).

The expression of neoliberalism in higher education was described by Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades (2004) call academic capitalism. As they define it, academic capitalism is a set of organizing principles or a knowledge/learning regime based on academic actors "using a variety of state resources to create new circuits of knowledge that link higher education institutions to the new economy" (p. 1), taking on traits of the new economy, including organizing around dynamic networks to allow for adaptability. In this context, contingent faculty roles are often deprofessionalized through a range of material indignities caused or compounded by imposed economic insecurity. Lack of job security and poor levels of compensation have made housing and food instability surprisingly common among contingent and part-time faculty, with reports of periodic homelessness, reliance on campus food pantries, and wage-supplanting work in the underground economy, including sex work." (Kezar et al., 2019, p. 15)

Kezar et al. then build on this, noting a shift in neo-liberalism toward a gig economy, where "standard gig economy firms (e.g., Uber) breed a contingent workforce by incentivizing micro-entrepreneurship, say, by offering a convenient way to rent out resources people already possess but underutilize—whether a means of transportation, guest bedroom, skill set, or perhaps simply time and attention" (Kezar et al., 2019, p. 17).

Workers in the gig economy are construed by the system's advocates as empowered with the flexibility of choosing when and when not to work. While some may find gig work practical and lucrative, the vast majority earn well below a living wage. A recent survey found nearly half of all workers in the gig economy today depend on such jobs as their primary source of income… Even if work in the gig economy is plentiful, because wages are so low, many workers find the promised flexibility to be an illusion, since they must work longer and longer hours to make ends meet. (Kezar et al. 2019, pp. 17-18)

The gig academe, therefore, is higher education that works according to the economic and organizing principles of the gig economy. This has several consequences, including a fragmented workforce with many employees classified as contract employees despite being functionally full-time and long-term, deprofessionalization, an unbundling of professional activities (such as separating teaching, research, and service), among many others (Kezar et al. 2019, p. 20).

While the scholars just cited discussed higher education in general, this article focuses specifically on the work of part-time professors and their potential exploitation. As such, another point is worth noting which is that "fully contracted, short-term, and piecemeal work will be falsely cast as freedom from institutional control" (Kezar et al., 2019, p. 148). They explain:

As entrepreneurs, academics are framed as free to be more creative and unconstrained by academic conventions, rules, and policies. Believers in the value of tenure-track policies will be further derided for stifling innovation and advocating conformity. Working across global problems, in global spheres of work, will be touted as superior to long-term ties to an institution and its local politics and demands. (Kezar et al., 2019, p. 148)

This insight echoes a concern from Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) that beneath the rhetoric of freedom and flexibility exploitation is nevertheless present in a gig economy, or what they referred as a connexionist world (pp. 372-375). We will return to this insight and concern in the discussion section.

Part-Time Faculty Work: 2010-2025

The proportion of part-time faculty has steadily risen since 1967, when 20% of faculty were part-time (Feldman & Turnley, 2004), to a peak of 41.09% of the academic workforce in 2010 (Colby, 2025a). Since then, part-time faculty's proportion of instructional faculty has been relatively stable, falling slightly to 37.96% in 2024 (Colby, 2025a). One could argue based on this data that an equilibrium of sorts has emerged regarding the balance of contingent and tenure-track faculty members over the last ten to fifteen years. The institutionalization of roughly 40% of professors at American colleges and universities as part-time positions can be viewed as an expression of the gig academy discussed by Kezar et al. (2019).

The median pay of part-time faculty in the United States was $2,700 per 3-credit class in 2009 (Coalition on the Academic Work Force, 2012), and $4,100 per 3-credit course in 2023 (Colby, 2025b). These salaries rarely include benefits (Coalition on

the Academic Work Force, 2012, p. 10). One quarter of all part-time faculty in the United States receive some form of public assistance (Jacobs et al., 2015).

Research also suggests that not all part-time faculty wish to be full-time. A study commissioned by the American Federation of Teachers states that only 47% of all part-time faculty members want a full-time position teaching at the college level (American Federation of Teachers, 2010, p. 4). Additionally, 26% of part-time faculty rely primarily on their position for income, while 57% claimed they primarily did so because they enjoyed teaching (American Federation of Teachers, 2010, p. 10). The desire to be full-time tenure-track is associated with how much one depends on part-time teaching as a primary income source, teaching higher course loads, and having access to professional resources such as professional development funds and mentoring programs (Ott & Dippold, 2018). A later study found that 50% of part-time faculty would prefer to hold a full-time, tenure-track position (Yakoboski, 2018), and according to a survey by the American Federation of Teachers found that 63.2% of part-time faculty members wished to be full-time (American Federation of Teachers 2022, p. 5). This survey also found that 66.7% of part-time faculty thought about leaving academic work in the last two years (American Federation of Teachers, 2022, p. 9).

Charges of exploitation have helped create and mobilize new faculty unions in recent years. Herbert (2017) found a 25.9% increase in the number of certified private sector unions for university professors from 2012 to 2016. While this can be partially explained by the 2014 National Labor Relations Board decision that part-time faculty at religious institutions have the right to organize (Schmidt, 2014), it would appear a general effort to organize part-time faculty developed by the mid-2010's. At the same time, unions for part-time faculty members often met opposition. In 2023, roughly 27% of professors in the United States are unionized (Flannery, 2024, para. 9). That same year, Florida passed a bill that would decertify any public employee union with less than 60% of its members paying dues would be decertified. As a result, "all eight adjunct faculty unions at public colleges and universities in Florida have officially been decertified, according to state records, affecting roughly 8,400 adjunct professors altogether" (Schueler, 2024, para. 1).

We can see from this brief review that there has been a relatively stable structure of part-time faculty work within American higher education for the last ten to fifteen years. This includes the relative proportion of part-time faculty within the workforce, their pay, and benefits. Additionally, there is evidence that a reported desire to become full-time has also remained somewhat stable over the same period of time. It is also clear, based on the rise of unionization efforts, that there is some debate over how fair part-time teaching is to the instructors. Yet, at the same time, there continues to be a large number of people who engage in part-time teaching. The data in this article will highlight implications to better understand these dynamics by documenting how academic actors think about part-time faculty work and its controversies.

THE PRAGMATIC SOCIOLOGY OF CRITIQUE AND STUDYING ACTOR'S ANALYSIS OF EXPLOITATION

The pragmatic sociology of critique (PSC) is a post-Bourdieusian social theory developed by Luc Boltanski, Laurent Thévenot, Eve Chiapello, and others. PSC serves as the primary theoretical infrastructure for this analysis, as it allows us to make sense of various claims regarding part-time faculty members' working conditions and how individuals and organizations may make accusations or denials of their exploitation. This will be complimented by research by Robin Clair (1996) that helps define what makes a job *real* or not. As we will see below, framing part-time academic work as something other than *real* work allows it to be evaluated according to an *academic* form of worth rather than a market-based form of worth, thus limiting accusations of exploitation of part-time faculty members by their employing universities.

Qualification, Equivalence, and Tests of Worth

In PSC, the actions *qualification* and *equivalence* are key to observing how actors assign different types and degrees of worth to people, objects, and events. Evaluation, or the act of qualification, is the *assigning of worth* to an object or actor, substantiating that worth through *justification*, and making it something more than an ephemeral ideal through both discourse and action (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006, p. 131). Different regimes of justification or forms of worth that require evaluation occur in different ways. Examples of regimes of justification include market-based worth, which evaluates wealth, and domestic worth, which evaluates rules of etiquette. For PSC, evaluation, justification, and critique are all acts of qualification, as they are all actions of assigning a degree of worth, though in the case of criticism the degree of worth is found lacking. In a very real sense, then, a justification based on efficiency may be a *moral* justification as much as one based on civic duty. In PSC, actors are always making moral judgments, regardless of the realm of life one is currently action within (economic, political, familial, etc.).

Qualification cannot occur until the thing to be evaluated has been translated into a regime's standards and categories, allowing for a particular regime to be applied. "In order to criticize and to explain to somebody else what is going wrong, one has to bring together different sets of people and objects and to make connections between them" (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, p. 361). This process thereby establishes *equivalence* in the sense that all objects may be evaluated according to the same form of worth (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006, pp. 143-144).

The act of assigning worth is rarely a simple fiat. Rather, evaluation generally requires a *test of worth* of some kind, a social convention actors rely on in their attempt to evaluate, justify, or critique (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, pp. 314-319). A test grants a certain amount and type of legitimacy. In principle, worth can be questioned and re-tested. Further, the outcome of a test is "accompanied by a codification or, at least, an explicit formulation of valid proof" (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006, p. 212). A test that is unrecorded and not remembered is not a test.

Tests of worth vary in the degree of their results' clarity and scope. Some tests only give vague hints of worth; some offer complicated results that must be interpreted by experts, and others offer blunt answers that anyone can understand. Some tests may be focused on a specific trait, while others maybe focused on the worth of a person as a whole, a group of people, etc.

Genuine vs. Ceremonial Evaluation

The goal of a genuine evaluation, what Boltanski calls a *reality test*, is "to recognize whether this value is materialized in the very texture of reality and to attest it by evidence aspiring to general validity" (Boltanski, 2011, p. 106). Genuine evaluation is necessarily an uncertain activity (Boltanski, 2011, p. 106), as worth is not immediately obvious to the observer.

Alternatively, actors may resort to a ceremonial form of evaluation, or what PSC refers to as a truth test. Partially ritualized, ceremonial tests are "the work of confirmation." He continues:

[Truth or ceremonial tests] make visible the relationship between the order of symbolic propositions and the order of the states of affairs whose image they are – and hence to confirm and stabilize it – and this, in particular, by conjugating several modes of representation, such as statements, performances (in the theatrical sense), icons and gestures, between which correspondences are established (Boltanski, 2011, p. 104).

If a test of worth is ceremonial, it avoids the possibility of critique, the possibility that a state of affairs may not harmoniously overlap with a symbolic order. As we will see below, a formal organization such as a university may rely on ceremonial tests to avoid genuine evaluation.

Exploitation and Displacement

No test of worth is perfectly accurate or valid. *Displacement* is the deformation or corruption of equivalence. "The established tests of status are circumvented" (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 499), allowing forms of power and privilege to remain hidden yet influential. A test of worth cannot be effective to the degree that displacements occur. "The accumulating displacements help to undo the established tests, which are not only circumvented but have also proved ineffective, since they are less and less capable of furnishing access to the good that they promised" (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 499). Displacement is a form of anomie, in the specific sense that it is a failure of regulation (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, pp. 420-422).

At its most simple, exploitation "means certain contributions have not received their just renumeration," though it is often masked and given a veneer of legitimacy (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 373) as it intertwines with displacements often intentionally created to maintain power. Boltanski and Chiapello continue:

The denunciation of exploitation may consist in demonstrating that beings contributing to the creation of the profit have been forgotten or neglected, or that their

contributions have not been identified in full, or been underestimated. (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 374)

By focusing on how the act of evaluation occurs and may be corrupted, Boltanski and his collaborators emphasize the creative capacities of individuals to understand exploitation in their own normative terms (Boltanski, 2011; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Susen & Turner, 2014). This framework therefore enables nuanced empirical research of exploitation, rather than a researcher merely imposing a claim.

The Realness of Jobs

The discussion of exploitation is complicated by the question of what qualifies as work. Indeed, feminism has long pointed out problems regarding domestic activity being distinguished from work, resulting in a lack of compensation or even recognition (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). Robin Clair has studied the meaning of work and its constitution as a "real job" (Clair, 1996; Clair et al., 2008, p. 200). After a study on work done by university students, she concluded a job was "non-real" to the extent that it satisfied one or more of the following conditions:

(1) Enjoyable, (2) easy or nonskilled, (3) temporary or unstable, (4) have a low probability of success, (5) require little trust, (6) are not conducted in their natural time (e.g., a soldier in war time versus a soldier in peace time), (7) underutilize the worker in terms of duration and intensity, and (8) are not the primary means of support (Clair, 1996, p. 253).

Furthermore, Clair argues that many non-real jobs are often part-time, jobs that occur while one is still a student, or are "anticipatory" of real jobs (Clair, 1996, p. 250). Consequently, much of the work done by college students is viewed as non-real. With PSC's framework in mind, with the addition of Clair's work on *real jobs*, we now turn our attention to the three post-secondary institutions.

RESEARCH METHODS

From 2007 to 2010, I conducted sixty-two semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews with people associated with three postsecondary institutions in the Northeastern United States. This time period is key for understanding the use of part-time faculty members at American postsecondary institutions precisely because this is when a *new normal* was established in the relative proportions of part- to full-time faculty, resulting in a period of relative stabilization in higher education over the last 15 years. While the structure of the academic field on issues of contingent working conditions has remained strikingly similar since the interviews were conducted, they also took place prior to unionization efforts over the last decade following the death of Margaret Mary Vojtko; these activism efforts by unions have resulted in the greater publicization of the issues surrounding part-time academic labor, and also an accompanying homogenization of discourse through the dissemination of talking points.

This study relied on theoretical sampling, to ensure it represented a variety of occupational positions (full-time faculty, part-time faculty, administrators, and

graduate students). Potential interviewees were contacted via their email addresses, which were publicly available on department websites and posted course schedules. The names of interviewees and their employing institutions were replaced with pseudonyms. Interviews were roughly an hour long. Unless interviewees requested otherwise, all interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed. If there was no audio recording, the author relied on interview notes. The transcripts and notes of interviews were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software NVIVO. This project was approved by the institutional review board at the University at Albany, SUNY.

The study includes interviews at three academic institutions in the northeastern United States, which were also given a pseudonym to prevent identification of any interviewees. The interviews were conducted with full-time faculty (including both tenured and tenure-track), part-time faculty (including graduate students with adjunct contracts), and administrators, in the English and Mathematics Departments of all three postsecondary schools. English and mathematics were chosen for the study as traditional postsecondary disciplines whose reliance on part-time faculty parallels the general trend across all of American higher education (Blair et al., 2010, p. 51; Modern Language Association, 2008, p. 4). The fact that one is from the humanities and the other is a STEM field allows for another axis of comparison. Interviewees' institutional affiliations, disciplinary affiliations, and positions can be found in Table 1.

The three institutions in this study represent different types of colleges. First, Caussade College is a private Catholic college with roughly 3,000 undergraduate and 2,000 graduate students. Second, Mahican Community College is an associate's degree-granting public institution with over 10,000 full-time equivalent students. Finally, Orange University is a public research university with over 17,000 undergraduate students and roughly 5,000 graduate students. These three institutions are all located within the same metropolitan statistical area in the northeastern United States; as such, some part-time faculty members had affiliations with more than one of these institutions. In some cases, part-time faculty members served as part-time faculty members at multiple institutions or served as an adjunct at either Caussade College or Mahican Community College while obtaining a graduate degree from Orange University.

Interviews and Interpretation

Interview questions and the interpretation of participant responses focused on two groups of research questions. First, what justificatory strategies were commonly used by actors as they denounced or denied the existence of the exploitation of part-time professors? Did the types of justifications vary according to discipline, seniority, or college? Second, what structural and material components facilitated the justifications in actors' accounts? If part-time faculty work was not a *real* job - a key finding in this article as stated above - what was it, and how did this help the employing college avoid the accusation of exploitation? These questions were the basis of interviews with both full- and part-time instructors. This article begins each

section with a brief profile of the college or university. It then documents how each institution defines part-time faculty work as not a *real* job in a different way, and how this definition is embedded in the organization of work at each institution.

Table 1: Interviewees in Study by College, Discipline, and Position

	Tenured/ Tenure-Track Faculty	Visiting or Full-Time Non-Tenure Faculty	Part-Time Instructors	Graduate Students Teaching	Administrators	Total
Community College English	3	0	4	N/A	0	7
Community College Math	2	0	4	N/A	0	6
Community College Staff	0	0	0	N/A	1	1
Master's Granting English	6	1	8	N/A	0	15
Master's Granting Math	3	0	4	N/A	0	7
Master's Granting Staff	0	0	0	N/A	2	2
Research University English	5	0	2	6	0	13
Research University Math	3	0	1	4	0	8
Research University Staff	0	0	0	0	3	3
Total	**22**	**1**	**23**	**10**	**6**	**62**

While this article has no interest in objectifying part-time faculty or removing their agency, it is focused on the criteria of evaluation and their associated organizational structures. Similar things can be said about tenure-track faculty members, tenured faculty members, and administrators. Consequently, the empirical analysis of this article is not targeting specific questions of strategy to end part-time faculty exploitation, though a discussion of public policy implications can be found in the Discussion section. Finally, I wish to describe the "moral landscape" of part-time teaching as formed by common justifications, criticisms, and displacements. As such, the purpose of the article is not to morally judge a specific individual Dean, as some pro-adjunct writing does in denouncing *badmin*, or bad administrators (Kottner

2022, p. 171). For PSC, the build toward critique studies structural failures more than the moral culpability of individuals.

RESULTS

The results of this research are presented as a comparison of three case studies. The first case study of Caussade College will set the core argument regarding part-time teaching as something other than a *real job*. The second and third case studies, of Mahican Community College and Orange University respectively, present variations on the core idea presenting part-time teaching as something other than a *real job*.

Part-Time Faculty Work as Avocation at Caussade College

Founded in the early 20th Century, Caussade College is a private Catholic college in the Northeastern United States. While it offers a liberal arts education, the majority of its undergraduates receive professional degrees, and it has a few programs that offer master's degrees. At the time of data collection, Caussade College, part-time faculty members across all disciplines made $735 per credit hour with no benefits. Most math courses were three-credit courses, paying $2,205, while English courses were four credits, paying $2,940.

Pay vs. the Love of Teaching

Many interviewees at Caussade College argued the compensation for part-time teaching was too low, though no respondent specified a legitimate and non-exploitative wage. Part-time English professor Curtis Laskawski suggested exploitation is occurring at Caussade,

> I would love to see a day when we get paid what we are worth, and I would like to see myself working somewhere where I can have benefits and I can really, truly feel like a part of the community.

From an administrative standpoint, English professor and Coordinator for the Composition Courses Deanna Tolson agreed with the concern that the pay does not constitute a fair wage. "We're able in the English department, I think, to offer a bit more, because our courses are four credits and not three… But I'm pretty sure they pay better elsewhere. We can't give them the pay they deserve." Math Department Chair Allison Buscemi agreed with Laskawski and Tolson. "We don't pay highly and that bothers me," she admitted. "But then again, I have always found that people who love teaching don't really care."

The claim that those who love teaching do not care about their wage is repeated by several part-time faculty members. We can see motivations beyond money at work for Erica Volz, a hospital administrator with a master's degree in English, when she responded to a question regarding her long-term career plans:

Ultimately my goal was to teach college. I've sort of been stymied a little bit, because I have my master's but not my PhD. or my MFA. So this is about as far up as I can go without getting a terminal degree.

She continues later in the interview, answering a question regarding her future plans regarding teaching at Caussade College:

I'm really torn right now between doing what I love and working for a company that's constantly… giving me raises and has good benefits. It's hard because I like what I do in the healthcare arena and I'm good at it, but it certainly isn't the plan that I had for my life, and part of me just really wants to hold onto this because it is what I wanted to do.

English is something that Prof. Volz is passionate about and doing it in addition to her regular (and well-paying) job is emotionally rewarding, as it is an expression of her love of English. For Volz, that emotional reward is more important for her than a salary, even if she does not think the situation is ideal.

Retirees are also drawn to part-time instruction for non-financial motivations. William Breedlove is a retired high school principal who teaches math at Caussade. Money, he says, "is not my driver… The money all goes basically to my son, [and] my granddaughter." Another retiree is Melissa Vassel, a retired high school math teacher, for whom part-time teaching offers a very minimal financial motivation: "My goal was, when I retired, was I wanted something to do that would pay my health insurance, and [teaching at Caussade part-time] does. That was my goal." If one's sole concern is whether one's pay covers healthcare premiums or as a way to stay active in retirement, his or her personal calculus of whether a job is worthwhile will be different than someone who is trying to earn a living wage from working solely as a part-time faculty member.

Part-Time Work: Inappropriate Unless Avocational

The Department Chair of the English Department, Lori Bash, categorized part-time faculty members into three general groups:

We have some people who are doing this while they're doing their dissertation or while they're going to school, they're going for their Ph.D. And they do this generally because they need the money... Then we have the people who are retired… And then there's another group that survive on adjuncting and those are the ones who [are] adjuncting [at] three or four different schools and if they have two classes in each one, they can live. It's not very good, but you know.

Prof. Bash made a clear normative statement that "it's not very good" to try and live or survive off teaching at multiple schools, inferring that one ought to avoid doing so if possible. Deanna Tolson, Associate English Professor and Director of Cassadee's composition program, called this group "frequent fliers." "There are a lot of schools in the area," she said. "So often they'll teach one course for us, a course for Orange University, [and] a course for Mahican. And so, they're flying around to all those different campuses."

The only group that Prof. Bash expressed concern for are those who attempt to "survive" off the wages of part-time faculty work. Importantly, this is the only group that is attempting to treat part-time faculty work as a *real job.* It appears then that, in the eyes of the Department Chairs and satisfied part-time faculty, being a part-time faculty member at Caussade College should be an *avocational pursuit*, something one

may do for the sheer pleasure of teaching, or as something to do in one's retirement or spare time. To the degree that someone accepts that definition, then that individual will likely accept the arrangement of part-time faculty work at Caussade as legitimate and not exploitative.

Work at Caussade College is organized in a way that reinforces the idea that part-time faculty work is avocational and not a *real job*, including course caps, limited workspace, and exclusion from committee work and service, as discussed in the following sections. These organizational characteristics devalue the contributions of part-time faculty members. According to this logic, if one's contribution to the organization is minimal, then there can be no exploitation associated with minimal pay. This effectively becomes a justificatory strategy, since exploitation is based on the idea one is not compensated appropriately.

Course Cap. Limiting how many courses one can teach is one way that Caussade College reinforces the avocational nature of part-time instruction. Part-time professors in the English and Math Department at Caussade are not allowed to teach more than two courses per semester. Allen Valentin, the Dean of Math and Sciences, explained why:

No matter what, there is a rule that is always followed: an adjunct will never teach more than half a load [9 credit hours]. More than that is exploitation. Sometimes I'll get into an argument with a chair who thinks he's helping [the part-time faculty member], but no, no matter why you think it's a good idea, making someone work that much at that pay is exploitative, and Caussade doesn't do that.

It is striking to claim $735 per credit is not exploitative for eight credits worth of courses, but it becomes so if someone teaches twelve credits worth of courses. The Math Department Chair Allison Buscemi agreed with Dean Valentin's analysis when she comments on the course cap:

[A cap] is sometimes limiting but it's probably better for them [the adjuncts]. Most of them don't want to teach more than two classes. Some people though, adjuncting in three or four different places. That's tough. That is not a good thing. They're all over the place. And that's rough for them.

Dean Valentin and Professor Buscemi are not worried about part-time faculty members who only desire a course or two each semester. They see hiring someone to teach two courses for $2,205 each as legitimate and not exploitative yet hiring someone to teach more at the same rate of pay *becomes* exploitative or illegitimate. For reference, the standard teaching load of a full-time tenured or tenure-track professor at Caussade is three 3-credit courses a semester.

A reasonable interpretation of this is that the *rules* of legitimacy are different for part- and full-time professors, with the latter being a *real job*, and the former not. This argument suggests that it is good for the adjuncts to be avocational, as it would be exploitative for them to try to make adjunct work a real job at their pay, and most of them do not want real jobs anyway. By enforcing a course cap, Caussade reinforces the definition of part-time work as limited and not *real*, held in contrast to legitimate working conditions as defined by full-time, tenure-track or tenured positions.

Office Space. The Math and English Departments both use office space as an indicator of whether one's job was *real*. All full-time employees at Caussade in this

study preferred to have their interviews in their offices. Meanwhile, interviews with part-time Caussade professors took place in dining halls, coffee shops, and other spaces the part-time faculty members chose.

The Math Department had no office space for their part-time faculty. Instead, there was an alcove in a hallway that had a desk, some chairs, and a whiteboard. "Last year, I would arrange to meet with students and I'd meet them in the library or there's, like, this little space with a table outside in the hallway near where the classroom where I teach is, and I'd meet students there, but I wouldn't actually have an office," said part-time math professor Jack Newsome. "It would be nice if I had a space on campus, even if it was like a shared stuff with a bunch of other adjuncts, to have office hours."

The English Department, on the other hand, had a space for part-time faculty members. Many of Caussade College's buildings are former residential homes, and the English Department offices occupy former houses. Bedrooms have been converted into offices and living rooms into administrative assistant spaces. "It's a fairly nice space," remarked English Chair Lori Bash, describing the space for part-time professors. "It's the attic of the house next door. But it was an apartment, it's not, like, an *attic*. And it has computers in it, and it has a place where they can hang their coats, and have students meet them and that kind of thing" (emphasis in original). Though the situation for part-time professors in English was arguably superior to those in Math regarding office space, there was nevertheless a clear distinction between the office space of full-time and part-time faculty members. *Real* jobs come with *real* offices.

Committee Work and Service. A third way in which Caussade College reinforces a conception of part-time faculty work as avocational was in the delegation of committee work. Mathematics Department Chair Allison Buscemi put it simply: "Adjuncts have no responsibility beyond teaching except to be available occasionally for help [during office hours]." While tenured or tenure-track faculty were expected to sit on committees, part-time and visiting professors were not required or expected to do so. Additionally, no part-time faculty member had formal responsibilities advising students. Given the exclusive connection of service to full-time work, committee-work and advising effectively served as professional interaction rituals (Lawrence, 2004; Lawrence & Corwin, 2003), symbolically delineating who was *real* in the eyes of the Department through assigning symbolically important activities to some (full-time) faculty members and not other (part-time) faculty members.

A partial exception to this rule occurs in the English Department, where the Department offers bi-weekly teaching workshops to part-time professors who teach Composition. However, this is an exception that proves the rule. Although these teaching workshops are an activity in which part-time English faculty members may participate, the form it takes reinforces the distinction between the *real* work of the full-time faculty and the avocational work of the part-time faculty. The workshops are not for full-time faculty members. Furthermore, they are optional and come with additional pay, reinforcing the idea that part-time faculty are only expected to teach their course, and participating in the workshop is beyond their regular duties. It is

therefore not a professional interaction ritual that confirms their membership in the academy, but quite the opposite.

Dissatisfaction and Wanting to be Real

Two part-time faculty members at Caussade stated during their interviews they were dissatisfied with their experience of part-time faculty work. In both cases, their criticism can amount to frustration that part-time faculty work was not *real* enough work. Joy Wine, a part-time English professor at both Caussade College and Mahican Community College, is leaving it to find better paying work:

I'm looking for another job. I took a state test last year. It's very sad. I would love to stay in it, but… I'm 51 and I never had to work before with my husband's job. But I really need to now. I have two kids in college and we really can't afford our house right now.

Wally Perrine works as a part-time faculty member at both Caussade College and Orange University, and he echoes Wine's comments:

[Regarding] part-time teaching, I think I'm in my weaning sort of years with that. I've had a lot, there's not much – I mean, there's enthusiasm, but there's not much anymore. I kind of want to get onto more affordable things you know, higher paying jobs so I can support myself better.

Additionally, he also considers the working conditions very isolating:

There's no interaction whatsoever... [Sometimes,] there's an event somewhere you know. And even if I'm at an event I feel out of place, you know, part-time… Even when we're at an event together, I don't feel like there's any connection. They kind of see me, they know me, we don't know how to relate.

While only two respondents willingly spoke about leaving part-time faculty work, the significance here is that both respondents explicitly rejected the notion that part-time faculty work was both legitimate and not *real* work. Rather, its status as not *real*, with low pay and social isolation, explicitly made it less legitimate and worthwhile.

Case Summary

As we see, Caussade College uses a definition of part-time faculty members that makes their work avocational rather than a real job. Its administrators do not believe the legitimacy of hiring part-time professors, a belief that *scales up* the more they work; a legitimate rate of pay for one course is exploitative for three courses. This justification is then reinforced by and embedded in the organization of the college. Course caps, limited office space, and a disconnection from professional service all reinforce the notion that being a part-time professor is not a *real* job. Part-time faculty who wish for *real jobs* are the most likely to be dissatisfied with work, and also the most likely to quit part-time teaching and seek more lucrative jobs. Other institutions have their own variations on the notion that part-time academic work is something other than a *real* job, as detailed in the next two case studies.

Caussade College clearly distinguishes between part- and full-time faculty members. A hard "wall" of an organizational boundary is erected between them, and

the argument is made that a more legitimate, less exploitative environment occurs if that boundary is respected. To allow or encourage people to work full-time at the pay rates Caussade offers would be, in the eyes of Caussade's faculty members, exploitative. It is thus more legitimate for part-time teaching to remain an avocational pursuit, take organizational measures to limit course offerings, and pay people extra to attend meetings both serve that purpose. The obvious differences in office space also make it clear that part-time faculty members are in a more marginal position at Caussade.

Mahican Community College and the Elongated Job Interview

According to its website, Mahican Community College is an open enrollment institution with over 10,000 full-time equivalent students. At the time of data collection, the minimum salary for full-time faculty tenure-track was $48,981 a year. Mahican Community College pays substantially better than Caussade College. Part-time faculty members have a college-wide standard pay rate of $926 per credit hour until they reach nine credit hours, and $985 per credit hour for any credit hours beyond that. As introductory courses in both English and math at MCC are three credits each, and adjuncts are rarely hired for more than nine credit hours a semester, adjuncts in both departments can be expected to receive $2,928 per course per semester with no benefits. Additionally, there is no official course cap at Mahican Community College. Despite these differences, Mahican Community College, like Caussade College, also justifies part-time faculty work by denying that it is a *real* job.

Full-time faculty and administrators at Mahican Community College consider part-time faculty members who attempt to make it into a real job by teaching a number of courses, usually at multiple campuses to generate sufficient income, as doing something potentially self-destructive. "When I was younger," Benita Raatz, a former tenured English professor at Mahican Community College who transitioned from full-time to part-time work upon her retirement several years ago, recalled,

> There were people who had three different adjunct jobs, trying to put together enough money to live. They would teach three classes here, and three classes at Caussade, and another two courses at night at Orange University. That's just nuts.

Prof. Raatz presented part-time faculty work as not a "real job," and her opinion was that trying to cobble together enough courses at several universities in the attempt to create the income of a real job was unlikely to be worth the effort.

Indeed, many interviewees at Mahican suggested that it would be illegitimate or exploitative if part-time faculty work was a form of *real work*. "What it does is force you to decide whether you're teaching for money or for love," Prof. Raatz remarked. "And if you're teaching for money and you need the money, you can't do this job. It just doesn't pay squat. You know? It's just not worth it." The theme once again emerges that one who teaches "for love" is not necessarily exploited, but teaching for money would be unsustainable and potentially exploitative due to low pay.

Part-Time Work as an Elongated Job Interview

In addition to an avocational pursuit, Mahican Community College full-time faculty and administrators frequently defined part-time work as an *elongated job interview* for full-time positions. Math Department Chair Noreen Rumble recalled, "out of the eight people that I've hired, I believe five have been adjuncts. So, it's a little bit of a mix, but not quite half…. I think a number of people come here as adjuncts in hopes of getting a full-time job here." Regarding her department, assistant English professor Harriet Right remarked, "As far as I know, every single full-time person here worked part-time first."

As an elongated job interview, department chairs and other full-time faculty believe someone who teaches at Mahican part-time can demonstrate their ability to teach the students who enroll at the community college, many of whom lack preparation for college-level coursework, and who may be enrolled in remedial classes. Associate math professor Allen Strohmeyer argued, "We like knowing that people coming into our positions here have some firsthand experience with that actual reality… If they've been an adjunct here, we say, all right, they know what they're getting into."

Service as Indicator of Commitment. At the same time, teaching ability is not the sole metric when considering promoting a part-time employee to a full-time position. Math Department Chair Noreen Rumble, for example, stated that voluntary service for the department or college would be advantageous to someone looking for full-time, tenure-track work:

If they're interested in full-time job here, they should [volunteer to be on committees for the college]. I need people that are interested in what's going on. Some adjuncts can't come to meetings because they have children at home or whatever, but they participate via e-mail. They get involved even if they can't come to the meetings.

This is very different than Caussade College, where part-time faculty were not expected to do anything beyond teaching, save for possibly be paid to attend a workshop. However, this difference fully conforms to the difference between defining part-time academic work as an avocational activity and defining it as an elongated job interview. There is a (potential) continuity between part- and full-time work, and it is the responsibility of the applicant-adjunct to take on the service work to demonstrate they are worthy of a full-time position.

Concerns Regarding Adjunct Work as Job Interviews

Several part-time professors voiced concerns regarding treating part-time faculty work as an elongated job interview for full-time positions. Part-time math professor Stan Schultz acknowledges potential pitfalls to this approach:

I think it's definitely a possibility because I've seen it happen [where people transition to tenure-track positions], but it's not always a guarantee either. I mean, I've seen people who are adjuncts for a long time and when openings occur, they

didn't get the position. Of course, that leaves them frustrated and... I would guess a quarter to a half, just off the top of my head [but] I have no official statistics.
Joy Wine, an English part-time instructor from Caussade College, used to teach at Mahican Community College.

Well, I ended up over here because I left Mahican Community College very bitter because I thought they had unfair hiring practices... I did everything I could to get in there and I know I was more qualified than many people who were hired. I went through the interviewing process three times and had a lot of experience and they hired people – it's not at all like the process [where] they do a national search, and they're looking for a PhD. I don't have a PhD. So, I ended up really devastated.

As we can see from these two respondents, justifying part-time faculty work as an elongated job interview only creates legitimacy to the degree that people have faith that the system is fair. To the extent that people feel they are passed over, part-time instructors seeking full-time work may feel exploited or at least unfairly treated. Ms. Vine is, as she described it, "frustrated and bitter" because she feels illegitimately excluded from full-time positions.

Case Summary

Like Caussade, Mahican Community College attempts to organize and define part-time faculty work as something other than a *real* job. However, the most common justification for part-time instruction at Mahican was that it served as an elongated job interview, a way of entering full-time academic work. This differs substantially from Caussade's justificatory regime, which is more focused on framing part-time work as an avocation and somehow *other* to full-time, tenure-track academic work. Part-time faculty members' attendance at faculty meetings and participating in service indicated a commitment to the college by the part-time faculty member. Problems arise, however, to the extent that part-time instructors seeking full-time positions do not view the process as fair. Expecting part-time instructors to participate in uncompensated service in the hopes of being selected for a full-time position can also result in exploitation, particularly if the full-time position never materializes.

The organizational boundary between part- and full-time tenure-track positions at Mahican Community College cannot therefore be described as the impermeable wall that exists at Caussade. Rather, the boundary is explicitly set up as a gateway. Ideally, the part-time faculty who are worthy may pass into the ranks of the full-time tenure-track faculty. However, to the degree a part-time instructor expects their work to be a *real job* in and of itself, or to the degree they do not believe the hiring practices of full-time faculty members is fair, they will not view this arrangement, and its organizational boundary, as legitimate.

A third relationship exists between part- and full-time work at the public research university, Orange University.

Orange University

Orange University is a large public research university of just under 20,000 students, and it is in the same general region as the other two colleges. Department chairs and full-time faculty in both the English and Math Departments expect that the vast majority of their part-time faculty are also enrolled graduate students at Orange University. Steve Raisik, Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs within the university's College of Arts and Sciences, observed, "The use of graduate students as part-time faculty members has been a trend over the last five years" for many departments in the College of Arts and Sciences at Orange University. According to Prof. Aaron Benson, Director of the Undergraduate Program for the Math Department, about two thirds of the part-time faculty are graduate students in their fourth year or later. In the English Department, Chair Cal Jackson stated that "75 or 80 percent" of English graduate students spend time teaching as part-time faculty after their assistantship funding runs out after three years.

Unlike Caussade and Mahican Community College, Orange University does not have a single pay scale for all part-time faculty. The English Department pays the university-wide minimum salary for part-time faculty members, which is set at $2,800 per course, but departments can pay more. The Math Department pays $5,000 per course, almost twice that of the English Department.

Part-Time Teaching as Professional Development

The claim that Orange University treats its part-time faculty members fairly is grounded in the claim that the university has an obligation to hire graduate students as part-time faculty members, because the experience of teaching part-time is part of graduate education. "Certainly, the people who get hired first as adjuncts are graduate students who are making progress," stated Math Professor Aaron Benson. Professor Max Farmer, Director of Graduate Studies for the English Department, makes a very similar claim regarding the program:

We've never had to say, you can't teach any longer… When there are issues or problems, or if there are student complaints, undergraduate complaints that are particularly notable, we will sit down and talk it out and see what's going on. Talk to the mentor, and talk to the student in question, just to see what's happening, and what might have transpired. And usually, it's sorted out at that level.

Most graduate students employed by their departments to teach part-time are hired on the basis of having "good standing" in the department: They are making progress on their coursework and dissertation, as deemed appropriate by their professors. As such, part-time teaching positions are distributed to current graduate students in ways that often resemble financial aid awards.

Legitimate Compensation: Graduate Development and/or Pay

While the Mathematics Department pays part-time faculty substantially more, the English Department provides more formalized professional development to graduate

students. This arrangement makes sense within the justificatory framework of Orange University, as it expects part-time faculty to be graduate students. The opportunities are related to teaching, including mentoring and workshops.

Mentoring. Teaching mentors are assigned to English graduate students when they begin coursework in either the M.A. or Ph.D. degree programs, and their teaching mentors are assigned based on their research interests. This position is distinct from the graduate student's dissertation committee chair, and different professors often fill the two positions. The formal apprenticeship of part-time faculty members to full-time instructors through the mentorship program reinforces a teacher-student learning model and reflects an organizational view of teaching as part of graduate education. According to undergraduate director Peter Royce, a teaching mentor "goes and observes the class, writes up some brief comments and talks with the student teacher." Faculty observations occur once or twice a year according to Professor Royce.

In contrast, when answering the question of what resources are available to math part-time faculty members, Professor Benson replied,

They just either come to me [as Director of Undergraduate Studies in Math] or they go to one of their colleagues who has taught the course before... For instance, they can come to me if they wanted some – to see past exams or that sort of thing so they get an idea of the level they're pitching it at"

In other words, questions or problems regarding teaching are handled through informal networks within the department.

Workshops. In addition to the teaching mentors, the English Department also offers professionalization courses and workshops, and these take the form of official graduate courses. "This department is very good at trying to professionalize us," said graduate student Cindy Smith. "They give a lot of workshops and things, where we learn how to build a resume, we learn how to have an interview, we learn how to publish papers." These courses are English 810 (English Internship) and English 815 (English Workshop). The internship is a required course, which can be fulfilled several different ways. Fourth-year graduate student Kelly Sanders co-taught a course with a tenured professor to fulfill his internship requirement, though there were many other ways one could do so, including "literally taking a position of intern at [Orange University] press, for example. Some people present a series of lectures to the department."

The workshop course includes matters such as writing curriculum vitae, giving effective job interviews, and publishing scholarly work. All-but-dissertation (ABD) graduate student Tom London described it as a "pedagogy class." He continued:

We workshop our syllabus, and talk about ways – teaching strategies in the pedagogy. You know, kind of – you know how you would structure your class and different examples of ways to approach the class from different situations. So, I mean, that's pretty – my best – so that's like a whole semester [that is] intense... that's definitely useful. Yeah. That's what's going on, and usually that class is in co-relation to like your first semester of teaching. So you come in and you talk about what happened in your class.

Courses such as these codify the department's effort at training graduate students to be full-time professors at universities and colleges. In doing so, the English Department presents itself as compensating its graduate students who teach in appropriate ways. The fact that the English Department can substitute professional development for salary is an indicator that part-time faculty work is not a *real* job, but rather part of an education that will help one get a *real* job in the future.

Non-Graduate Part-Time Professors

Three of the part-time faculty members at Orange University included in this study were not graduate students. One is Wally Perrine, who also works at the English Department at Caussade, and who is leaving academic work to find better paying work. Oliver Street is a part-time professor from the Mathematics Department. A former graduate student, Oliver decided he was happy to end his graduate career with a master's degree, rather than continue to a Ph.D. "Research just wasn't for me," he says. At the same time, however, he enjoys teaching and usually gets three courses a semester to teach. Consequently, he is also able to make an income ($30,000 with benefits) he seems quite happy with in the short-term, though he admits he isn't sure what he wants to do after a few more years of teaching as a part-time instructor.

Kendra Rawls is quite different. The wife of an administrator, she dropped out of graduate school over twenty years ago to raise their children. She became a part-time professor in Orange University's English Department after her children had gone to college, and when she heard they had a shortage of faculty. As a part-time instructor at Orange University, she has often taught writing-intensive courses, and believes she is often assigned to teach them because graduate students prefer not to, due to the heavy grading load.

Responding to a question about how much she feels like she experiences a sense of belonging in the Department, Rawls admits to being conflicted. "At times I kind of created that [sense of belonging]," she says, "and other times I've gone into a 'caste system' to participate in those things, so I just exploited myself. And other times I'm not sure that I really want to get involved." Later in the interview, she returns to this sense of inner conflict:

Sometimes it bothers me, and other times I just… love it some days. I walk in and I just think, "This is the population I love to work with." I was barely over $10,000.00, I'm $12,000.00, something like that, which I think, 'Well, should I really be doing something else?' And I think it won't have the same rewards for me, and I know that. So, I feel like I'm fighting against my own nature sometimes. I have to push myself. But every semester, at the end of the semester, I will be grousing my husband and say, "I don't know. Why am I doing this to myself? Why don't I just to work at Denny's?"

While the three have very different experiences, all three wished to view part-time instruction as a *real job* in and of itself, and all three voiced concerns that it was not. The closest to being satisfied was Oliver Street, who was both younger and, as a math instructor, making more money than either Perrine or Rawls. However, even in Street's case, he doubted this was a sustainable position and was unsure what came

next. Though exceptions to the rule, the experiences of non-graduate student part-time instructors highlight the amount the expectation that part-time professors are graduate students is institutionalized within Orange University's structure.

Debt and Delay Impede Professional Development

Clara Amberson, an ABD graduate student in English, referred to herself as a "disgruntled graduate student" before her interview officially started. During the interview, she explained her earlier comment:

You know, just a cycle of debt and delay… I don't think I'm that disgruntled, but, I mean, everyone knows that we hired tons of adjuncts and so they don't have to hire actual [full-time professors], and they're not well compensated… I mean if I stop to think about it, I find it really almost too much to think about, you know. In a politically sort of conscious academic environment where there's globalization and it's like, so [who are the] sweatshop workers?

Amberson has two concerns. First, she believes part-time faculty members are not well-compensated, comparing working part-time at Orange University to working at a sweatshop. Second, her comment about debt and delay is a reference to graduate assistantships, which pay $8,000 a year in exchange for the graduate student teaching one course a semester (or helping in the English Department-run University Writing Center during their first year). In the English Department, assistantships end after the third or fourth year of graduate school, at which point many graduate students end up teaching two courses: twice as many courses as they taught during their assistantships yet earning roughly $2,000 less a year than their assistantship salaries. This is also roughly the time most graduate students transition from coursework to focusing on their dissertation research. English Department professor and Director of Graduate Studies Max Farmer echoed Amerson's concern:

The main reason [it is a problem] in this program is because while you're an assistant, you teach only one course a semester. And typically, when you become a part-line instructor, you're teaching two courses a semester. You actually have to work twice as much to earn approximately, in the neighborhood of the same amount of money. And the other bad news is that this happens at precisely the moment you need to spend perhaps your greatest effort and intensity on the project that is your dissertation. You need a lot more time by yourself to write. So, it's always an issue, and it's typically what slows people down. Typically. So that, if they were going at a certain pace before that, unless they are relatively unusual, they will just inevitably have to spread their time out, and therefore they won't make the same kind of progress they made before.

Amberson's and Farmer's concerns are grounded in the ideal of a good faith effort for departments and universities to provide sufficient financial aid to enable students complete graduate school in a timely manner, and that the current structure falls short of that ideal, creating debt and delay instead. On this specific issue, the higher pay from the Math Department would appear to help lessen the *debt* element of this concern. This article's methodology limits the ability to effectively consider

whether the English Department's professional development activities assist their graduate students obtain successful full-time academic work following graduation.

Case Summary

The use of part-time faculty members at Orange University differs substantially from the other two postsecondary institutions in this study in that it is the only one with doctoral graduate programs for English and Math, and it expects that part-time faculty members will be graduate students. Both departments rely on a rhetoric of professional development to justify the use of part-time faculty. This rhetoric is then buttressed by several organizational characteristics, such as the expectation that a graduate student in good standing can be expected to be given courses, or the idea in the English Department that professional development can be a legitimate substitute for salary.

While part- and full-time faculty members are all viewed as academic actors, the boundary between them now metaphorically takes the form of a ladder. The part-time faculty are equated with graduate students, and are lower status than the full-time tenure-track faculty members. Being a part-time instructor is framed as a valuable learning experience that may help the graduate students obtain full-time faculty positions at another institution. While in some ways this appears to be a more permeable organizational boundary than what exists at Caussade, it differs from Mahican Community College in that the students are not expected (or wanted) to remain at Orange University.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this research, I found evidence of colleges and universities responding to controversies regarding part-time faculty members by using organizational structure to manage and justify the working conditions and compensation of part-time faculty work. In doing so, I make three empirical claims. First, each institution presents part-time faculty work as something other than a *real job,* facilitating a denial of exploitation in the process. Each institution instead has a distinct understanding of the difference between full- and part-time academic work. Second, these justifications move beyond rhetoric and become embedded in the organization of the colleges and universities. Except for Orange University having different pay scales, the English and Math Departments of the universities generally share an understanding of part-time faculty work. Third, respondents who expressed reservations regarding the legitimacy of part-time work rejected the claim it was *unreal* work in various ways.

Many of the characteristics Clair (1996) associated with jobs that are *not real* appear to apply to part-time faculty members in the English and Math Departments at all three postsecondary institutions. Part-time faculty work is defined by all three organizations as temporary and unstable. At Caussade College, part-time faculty members were expected to be engaged in an avocational pursuit, rather than trying to make part-time faculty work into a *real job*. Part-time faculty members at Mahican Community College were viewed as a mixture of both avocational academics and

people engaged in elongated job interviews for full-time positions at the college. Finally, Orange University expected their part-time faculty members to be graduate students who were in their advanced years beyond their assistantships, actively using their part-time teaching experience to build skills and curriculum vitae in preparation for seeking a full-time, tenure-track position on the academic job market.

As the researcher, I did not assume all part-time faculty members aspired to be full-time tenure-track professors. However, I was expecting they would think of their work as a *job*, even if it was part-time, and therefore the calculation would be if their working conditions and wages were sufficient to be non-exploitative. These findings surprised me in that I was not expecting how many part-time professors were happy with it as an avocational position. Additionally, while I was not expecting administrators to admit their institutions exploited part-time professors, I also did not expect them to systematically frame part-time faculty work as a non-job as a *solution* to potential exploitation. Indeed, one could argue the framing of part-time faculty work as not a *real* job was at least partially successful and legitimated.

Defining part-time academic work in this fashion facilitated a denial of exploitation from the perspective of administrators and/or full-time faculty members. These are all ceremonial tests or truth tests, semi-ritualized justification rather than substantive investigations (Boltanski, 2011, p. 104), with most deploying the most common justifications used by their departments. Caussade and Mahican were explicit in their concern for anyone who attempted to use part-time faculty work as a primary means of financial support, while also acknowledging that it was not an uncommon practice. Meanwhile, Mahican and Orange University had defined part-time faculty work as an "anticipatory" position, where one may eventually get a full-time tenure-track position (within the organization in the case of Mahican, or elsewhere in the case of Orange University). Thus, from the perspective of the organization, it may be a hobby, a job interview, or part of their graduate education, but it wasn't a *real job.* And because it was not a *real job*, the calculations of what constituted exploitation could be changed from those of a market-based regime to an academic regime.

On Part-Time Satisfaction, and the Realness of Jobs

The results of this study are consistent with previous findings that aspiring academics (Jacoby, 2006; Maynard & Joseph, 2006) and those whose primary source of income is part-time faculty work (Baldwin & Chronister, 2002) are more dissatisfied than those who are *voluntarily* part-time faculty. Indeed, the distinction between voluntary and involuntary contingent employment goes beyond job satisfaction and is central to the discussion of the legitimacy of the work itself (Kezar & Sam, 2010). However, the distinction between full and part-time faculty is also woven into the structures of particular organizations and departments and is directly related to particular organization strategies regarding the justification of employing part-time faculty members. As long as one views the activities of part-time faculty members as volunteer work or an apprenticeship, then they will not view the employing colleges as exploitative. If a part-time faculty member expects or needs to live off the financial

income from their part-time faculty labor, then they are likely to find it a rather exploitative experience. The organizational definition of part-time faculty work as a non-real job helps explain this divide.

Questions Associated with an Avocational Faculty

On July 8, 2015, Southern Virginia University posted an advertisement for a "Volunteer Professor" position (Schuman, 2015). This was a part-time volunteer opportunity, and Southern Virginia hoped to recruit a retired professional to fill it. There was no salary for the position, though the volunteer professor had full access to the library and the dining hall, and they were given a room on campus for their use. Unpaid, purely voluntary adjunct positions have also been advertised at Southern Illinois University Carbondale (Associated Press, 2018), and Tulane University (Flaherty, 2019), among others.

This article, with its findings on part-time academic work being something other than a *real job,* would suggest that these positions are not aberrations, but rather an idealized expression of the way part-time faculty work is often organized in colleges and universities. Indeed, if one combines the findings of this article with current demographics of the academic work force, then, over half the instructional staff in U.S. higher education do not have *real jobs*. This state of affairs has raised concerns for many researchers who critique the deprofessionalization of academic work (Rosinger et al., 2016), and its proletarianization (Garrison, 2012).

A justificatory strategy that suggests the work done by part-time and full-time tenured and tenure-track professors is similar (i.e., both teach three-credit university courses), but the former is not a *real job* worthy of *real* compensation, threatens to erode the professional status of the professoriate.

Implications for Public Policy

How does a finding that part-time work fits into a discussion of public policy? There are at least two important implications.

First, this article comes to a normative conclusion that it rejects out of hand the idea that work cannot be exploitative if it is not part of a real job, even if there are people who accept this, as it is a discursive framing that invites abuse. To use Boltanski's language, it is a displacement par excellence that sidesteps effective moral judgement. Second, this article rejects the idea that there is a *silver bullet* that will end exploitation in higher education (or other sectors of the economy). Rather, any changes will be gradual and hard fought.

The findings in this article are compatible with the claim that despite the rhetoric of the gig economy allowing people to have increased flexibility and therefore freedom in their work lives, gig economy workers tend to have less power and economic security. It highlights precisely how the rhetoric of flexibility is more ideological than actual. This is true even if some accept that their part-time academic work is a *side hustle*, not a real job, or otherwise an expression of independent gig work (Nelson et al., 2020). As such, it agrees with the arguments describing the gig

academy one finds in Kezar et al. (2019). A core concern with the gig economy this article highlights is that part-time work *correctly* classified as such may be denigrated. In either case, the promise of freedom is illusory if pay and working conditions are sufficiently problematic (Kezar et al., 2019, p. 18).

Rejecting the claim part-time faculty work is not a real job requires dealing with financial inequities. The status quo found in the three institutions in this study and beyond is one that claims part-time work's compensation cannot *scale up* to full-time without it being exploitative. If that is the case, then it is likely exploitative at part-time as well. The American Federation of Labor explicitly states their goals for collective bargaining include pro-rata pay for contingent faculty. "Part-time/adjunct faculty should be paid a salary proportionate to that paid full-time tenured faculty of the same qualifications for doing the same work" (Stollar et al., 2014, p. 4). In other words, if an assistant professor makes $90,000 a year, and according to their contract 50% of their time is to be spend teaching 6 courses a year, then the pro-rated salary for a part-time professor ought to be $7,500.

To state the obvious, this goal is not one that is easily within grasp, but it should be a goal that the academic labor movement aspires toward. Without it, part-time faculty work will remain something less than a real job. This in turn will further deprofessionalize the professoriate.

Second, this article begs the question of what is the distinctiveness of full-time tenure-track employment that sets them apart from part-time faculty. The findings in this article suggest teaching is not, by itself, such a distinctive. This is a troubling question, as a lack of a compelling answer may lead to further deprofessionalization of American professors by the processes of the gig academy.

One potential area of focus is the role of professional service in one's university or discipline plays as professional rituals (Lawrence, 2004) that create professional identities or maintain symbolic memberships. In all three post-secondary institutions, notions of professional membership are carefully managed, though in different ways. Additionally, one may ask if the arrangements at these universities will minimize the potential for exploitation of part-time faculty members as academic gig workers.

The idea of service being important to make academic work a real job is strongly related to a policy recommendation from Kezar et al. (2019): an ideal of workplace democracy that goes beyond standard collective bargaining rights. As they argue:

"Essentially this notion involves applying democratic techniques to the functioning of workplaces including voting systems, debates, democratic structuring, systems of input, due process, and systems of appeal … In higher education, a democratically controlled workplace would need a more equitable distribution of power than what is afforded through limited shared governance such as a faculty senate" (Kezar et al., 2019, p. 152).

The *bread and butter* workplace issues such as pay and benefits need to be supplemented with the ability to have a voice that can be heard by the organization as a whole. This is true for the full-time tenure-track faculty members, and it is true for part-time faculty. An opportunity to engage in service that is part of the governance of the institution would allow part-time professors to engage in the professional rituals of their colleagues, creating the potential for solidarity. This

would be a different arrangement than at Caussade College, where part-time professors are discouraged from service, and access to self-governance was lacking. It would also be different than Mahican Community College or Orange University, where a potential professional future is used as a partial justification for part-time faculty work. All service ought to be explicitly stated in contracts, stating what is voluntary, required, or (as in the case of Caussade workshops) attached to additional compensation.

Thus, we can see the results of this article supports and deepens the recommendations that Kezar et al. (2019) make in *The Gig Academy*. They support the need for unionization and workplace democracy as important goals to push back against the dysfunctional elements of the gig economy influencing American higher education. They deepen the recommendations by highlighting how much of a challenge is embedded in the idea that some forms of work are not real jobs.

Future Research

Several avenues for future research present themselves. One of the most important may be a need to study the forms of boundary work (Star & Griesemer, 1989) in contemporary American higher education that distinguish full-time tenured and tenure-track faculty members from their part-time counterparts, especially at teaching-oriented institutions. Such a study would benefit from an approach similar to the one found in this article, where both accounts of the distinction and the structure of work are documented and layered onto one another.

Another topic that this article does not speak to is offering an explanation, or at least an account, of which part-time faculty come to express their frustration and alienation, and which continue to express the acceptable statements about part-time faculty work as not a *real job.* One would assume economic positionality and needs are undoubtedly central. Someone who needs a job to be real is much more likely to be frustrated at working part-time within the academic world. Beyond this, however, the interviews did not offer a clear sense of what other factors would influence this frustration. For example, one could imagine ethnicity, gender, and years of experience all play a role. Consequently, this could be an area of fruitful research moving forward.

More broadly, one could argue there is a social problem worth addressing when a field depends on a group's labor while also denying that it is truly work. This is the case with contingent faculty in American higher education. While it is beyond the scope of this article to solve this problem, it is nevertheless important to document it clearly. The interviews still speak to challenges within the world of academic work. As we move deeper into crises involving funding cuts, and state legislatures desiring to monitor and censor what professors are teaching, we must have an even more clear understanding and justification of who has *real jobs*, including *real* employment protections, and therefore who *matters*.

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Issues of Equity and Access in State-Designated Promise Programs: A Critical Analysis of Free Community College Legislative Frameworks

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ABSTRACT

Tuition-free college programs, often referred to as promise programs, have proliferated across the country. While previous literature on promise programs has shown positive results for the students who receive these scholarships, it has failed to account for program design and administrative features of the program (such as income caps, age, time eligibility, merit, etc.) and what consequences these program design choices have on equitable student outcomes. This critical policy analysis adds to the emerging literature on promise program design by analyzing 202 tuition-free community college legislative frameworks proposed at the state level. Findings show that tuition-free community college legislative frameworks are proposed with various eligibility, application, funding, and administrative requirements, with critical consideration given to how policy decisions around these legislative constructs can exacerbate opportunities for traditionally underrepresented students.

Keywords: community colleges, promise programs, critical policy analysis

Tuition-free college has become a popular educational policy initiative throughout the country (Ison, 2022; Miller-Adams, 2015, 2021; Perna et al., 2017). In collaboration with private associations, educational foundations, and philanthropy organizations, local and state municipalities have created scholarship programs designed to reduce tuition costs and fees for eligible students. Often referred to as promise programs, these scholarships are awarded to students from a given geographical community in hopes of increasing the number of students entering

higher education, reducing the overall cost and debt burden students and families endure when pursuing higher education, and improving the overall economic prospects of the community where the scholarship is offered (Bell, 2020; Miller-Adams, 2015, 2021). While promise programs exist that provide scholarship dollars to four-year institutions, community college promise programs remain the most dominant iteration of promise programs in existence today (Miller-Adams, 2015, 2021; Perna & Leigh, 2018). As the sector of American higher education facilitating the growth of promise programs throughout the country, community colleges stand to gains in enrollment that often follows a promise program (Bell, 2020; Bell & Gándara, 2021; Miller-Adams, 2015, 2021) but also face unique challenges and burdens in facilitating enrolment increases that can stretch institutional resources beyond administrative capacity (Littlepage et al., 2018).

Despite the simplicity of the *free college* moniker, the growth of tuition-free programs has led to various program designs, providing scholarship dollars to different students under different timeframes, income limits, pre-college characteristics, and merit-based accomplishments (Bell, 2020; Perna & Leigh, 2018; Perna et al., 2021). While previous research on promise programs failed to account for program design features when evaluating student outcomes or equitability issues, more recent scholarship has raised critical questions about the administrative burden of program design, the political calculations that determine who gets these scholarships, and access issues across students of color and lower-socioeconomic students (Bell, 2020; Gándara, & Li, 2020; Perna et al., 2020, 2021; Rosinger et al., 2021). This critical policy analysis contributes to the growing literature by examining a sample of 202 tuition-free community college legislative frameworks introduced at the state level, evaluating the proposed program design and eligibility requirements when debating a promise program. The analysis takes a critical lens to the tuition-free agenda to ascertain who stands to benefit under specific program designs and what student populations might be excluded from the benefits under certain conditions.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

While some form of tuition-free public higher education has been a policy consideration for more than 150 years (Harnisch & Lebioda, 2016), many of these programs have emerged in recent years (Collier & Parnther, 2021; Miller-Adams, 2015). Miller-Adams (2015) identified fifty such programs in an early typological study. Perna and Leigh (2018) expanded Miller-Adams' early typological framework and found 289 programs offering some version of free college. College promise programs vary dramatically in their design (e.g., first-dollar to last-dollar awards, student eligibility requirements, and institutional eligibility type (Davidson et al., 2020; Miller-Adams, 2015; Perna & Leigh, 2019; Rosinger et al., 2021). While no single definition or conceptualization can capture all the potential features of a promise program, a promise scholarship differs from other types of scholarships (e.g., merit-based, need-based) in that these programs offer scholarships that 1) often reduces the cost of tuition to zero for the institution attended, and 2) offer scholarships to all eligible students from a defined cohort, school district, municipality, or state to

stimulate economic growth in the region (Miller-Adams, 2015, 2021; Perna & Leigh, 2019). Because students from a particular region or locality are targeted for the scholarship, promise programs are also referred to as place-based scholarships (Perna & Leigh, 2019).

Early research on promise programs primarily focused on student outcomes, yielding generally positive results for participating students (Bell, 2020). However, many early studies failed to account for program eligibility requirements and their subsequent impact on what student populations can take advantage of promise scholarship opportunities. Newer scholarship has begun to fill this gap (Gándara & Li, 2020; Perna et al., 2020, 2021). Using data from WE Upjohn and the Penn AHEAD inventory of promise programs, Gándara and Li (2020) constructed a sample of thirty-three promise programs that award scholarship dollars to public two-year institutions and compared enrollment data to similar two-year institutions that did not have a promise program. The authors found no positive relationship between promise programs and the enrollment of Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander females and males. Still, they did find a positive relationship for Black, White, and Hispanic females and males. The authors found that first-dollar programs increase White student enrollment over last-dollar programs when looking at program characteristics. In contrast, programs with merit requirements were associated with increases in female student enrollment. Both Perna et al. (2020) and Perna et al. (2021) conducted case studies of four community college promise programs from four different states, evaluating program design characteristics for equality and outcomes. Perna et al. (2020) noted that college administrators employed enrollment strategies (e.g., full-time enrollment over part-time enrollment) to increase completion rates and demonstrate efficiency with the scholarship dollars utilized. However, administrators noted that these eligibility requirements might be detrimental to vertical equity. Perna et al. (2020) explained that horizontal equity awards financial aid dollars equally amongst students from different ethic or socioeconomic categories, while vertical equity assumes structural barriers in accessing higher education that require dollars and resources to be allocated to students based on their particular needs. Perna et al. (2021) noted how political and organizational characteristics can influence policy design implementation in environments where the goals of promise programs are ambiguous.

Both Bell (2020) and Rosinger et al. (2021) provided key insights into the political dynamics in free-college program design. Using political design theory and utilizing a nationally representative sample of 2,850 individuals, Bell (2020) found that individuals were more inclined to support tuition-free policies when the program included a merit-based requirement, such as GPA. However, respondents were less willing to support tuition-free programs with a means-tested income limit and preferred program designs with universal eligibility. Rosinger et al. (2021) drew on theoretical insights from administrative burden to typologize twenty state-enacted tuition-free programs. The authors found that program design features would increase students' responsibility as they navigate application and eligibility requirements, which vary dramatically from program to program. In addition to indexing program design elements that would increase administrative burden, the authors also indexed

support initiatives that would potentially lessen these burdens but were less frequent than elements that added to the administrative burden. Together, these studies demonstrate that specific program design features related to socially constructed target populations can determine which political coalitions form to support tuition-free policies and how program requirements may exacerbate educational inequities. Drawing on additional critical disciplines and methodologies will enable researchers to evaluate promise program design thoroughly and these programs' capacity to create effective change and equitable outcomes within educational contexts.

CRITICAL POLICY ANALYSIS

Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) is both a critical orientation and methodology that illuminates and critiques the power dynamics in the construction of public policy (Fairclough, 2003, 2013; Levinson et al., 2009; Young, 1999; Young & Diem, 2018). CPA asserts that knowledge creation and production is a critical component of the policy process and attempts to draw out various epistemological assumptions in the policy formation that tacitly (or explicitly) reinforce socially constructed positions of marginality. By bringing a critical eye to the epistemological assumptions underlying the positivist approach to policy formation, CPA scholars closely examine the positions of power and how social phenomena are interpreted and communicated to reinforce socially constructed power relations (Levinson et al., 2009; Young & Diem, 2018).

Popkewitz (1997), Levinson et al. (2009), and Young and Diem (2018) argued that knowledge production and dissemination are essential in the policy process and that critical policy scholars illuminate how knowledge is negotiated through social power structures that often exclude particular frames of knowledge from groups that lack social power. Fairclough (2013) explained that policy documents are constructed from ideological problem-solution paradigms. Policy documents have a practical argumentative structure grounded in how policymakers with power problematize a specific policy agenda. These problematizations rest on ideological presuppositions about the conditions of the world and value prerogatives about how the world should be organized. Saarinen (2008a) described how presuppositions in policy texts assume background knowledge on behalf of the reader, but these presuppositions are often described as common ground despite being ideologically loaded. By critically examining tuition-free program legislation, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of how policymakers conceptualize the free college agenda and hypothesize about the social conditions necessary for coalitions to form in support of these programs. A better understanding of these conditions will enable advocates for tuition-free community college to craft messages and policy designs that foster broader coalition support by mitigating the burdens that might deter students of color and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds from benefiting.

METHODS AND DATA

This article analyzes 202 state-level legislative documents around the tuition-free college agenda. The Education Commission of the States, a non-partisan educational policy organization based in Denver, Colorado, collected data on tuition-free college legislation nationwide and created a dashboard displaying each state's legislation and bill status (e.g., passed, tabled, in committee). I reached out to a member at Education Commission of the States whose role was to track and update this dashboard, allowing me to access the list of state-proposed and/or enacted free college legislation sponsored between 2014 and March 2020. This original sample included 253 pieces of legislation and ten resolution documents from thirty-seven states and the District of Columbia. While my initial plan was to search out the specific legislative state from each state's legislative website (all proposed legislation is available via state websites that share updates of the legislation as it moves through its respective committees and edits), Education Commission of the States also provides me greater access to each legislative text, allowing me skip searching out each document on my own[1].

This study aimed to analyze salient program features and eligibility requirements; therefore, I excluded large omnibus appropriation bills that did not include specific program features. I also excluded legislative documents that provided scholarship dollars exclusively to four-year institutions. After these exclusions, the sample included 202 documents from 35 states and the District of Columbia. In many instances, the same legislative framework was proposed multiple times throughout a legislative session or was sponsored by different legislators in different years if the bill did not initially pass. To account for this overlap, I identified the number of legislative documents from each state included in the sample and the number of unique legislative frameworks contained within each state's legislative agenda (Table 1). A legislative framework is considered unique if it was not an exact duplicate of another legislative text or did not substantially alter the program's application and eligibility requirements. The final sample of 202 legislative documents included 122 unique legislative frameworks. The purpose of this study was not to document or inventory the frameworks that have become law, but to interrogate the various ways policymakers conceptualize the free college movement by illuminating the different ways tuition-free college is operationalized within all types of legislative frameworks, even those that have not been passed. Thus, this analysis examined all 122 unique legislative frameworks, regardless of their legislative status, in an effort to gain a deeper understanding of the entire policy landscape surrounding tuition-free college and the critical issues associated with all potential legislative frameworks. I used

[1] Specific mention must be given to Dr. Sarah Pingel and her work at the Education Commission of the States, who not only made this research possible, but who graciously shared time and resources that allowed me to skip searching out each legislative document from various state websites.

Table 1: Sample of Legislative Documents and Unique Legislative Frameworks Included in Analysis

State	# of Legislative Documents *N* = 202	# of Unique Legislative Frameworks *N* = 122	Legislative Documents
Alabama	2	2	SB 357(2018-2018), HB 96(2018-2018)
Arizona	4	3	SB 1284(2020-2020), HB 2427(2019-2019), HB 2145(2018-2018), SB 1463(2020-2020)
Arkansas	1	1	HB 1426(2017-2017)
California	3	3	AB 2(2019-2020), SB 291(2019-2020), AB 19(2017-2018)
Connecticut	5	4	SB 15(2020-2020), HB 7424(2019-2019), SB 273(2019-2019), SB 747(2019-2019), HB 5371(2018-2018)
District of Columbia	2	2	SB 357(2018-2018), B 2281(2017-2018)
Florida	4	1	SB 1004(2020-2020), SB 132(2020-2020), HB 55(2020-2020), SB 1354(2019-2019)
Hawaii	12	5	HB 2375(2019-2020), HB 519(2019-2020), HB 2501(2017-2018), HB 2165(2017-2018), HB 1594(2017-2018), SB 2250(2017-2018), SB 2206(2017-2018), HB 1591(2017-2018), SB 2061(2015-2016), SB 135(2017-2018), SB 1020(2017-2018), HB 1154(2017-2018)

State	# of Legislative Documents $N = 202$	# of Unique Legislative Frameworks $N = 122$	Legislative Documents
Illinois	11	8	SB 2324(2019-2020), HB 5239(2019-2020), SB 2329(2019-2020), HB 901(2019-2020), SB 2091(2019-2020), HB 3581(2019-2020), HB 5514(2017-2018), HB 4030(2017-2018), HB 3900(2017-2018), HB 3498(2017-2018), SB 2146(2015-2016)
Indiana	2	2	SB 520(2019-2019), SB 198(2017-2017)
Kansas	1	1	HB 2515(2019-2020)
Kentucky	2	2	SB 231(2018-2018), HB 626(2016-2016)
Maine	2	2	LD 860(2019-2020), LD 1445(2019-2020)
Maryland	14	6	SB 307(2020-2020), HB 415(2020-2020), HB 268(2019-2019), SB 260(2019-2019), SB 240(2019-2019), HB 16(2018-2018), SB 1141(2018-2018), HB 1830(2018-2018), HB 1203(2018-2018), HB 329(2018-2018), SB 7(2018-2018), HB 931(2017-2017), SB 1173(2017-2017), HB 1608(2017-2017)
Massachusetts	11	7	H 1211(2019-2020), S 769(2019-2020), S 744(2019-2020), H 1245(2019-2020), H 1221(2019-2020), H 1216(2019-2020), H 3004(2017-2018), H 633(2017-2018), S 681(2017-2018), S 692(2017-2018), S 687(2015-2016)

State	# of Legislative Documents $N = 202$	# of Unique Legislative Frameworks $N = 122$	Legislative Documents
Michigan	7	5	SB 268(2019-2020), HB 5580(2019-2020), HB 4464(2019-2020), HB 4456(2019-2020), SB 267(2019-2020), HB 6259(2017-2018), HB 4834(2017-2018)
Minnesota	3	3	SF 1308(2019-2020), HF 4361(2017-2018), S.F. 5(2015-2016)
Mississippi	8	5	HB 59(2020-2020), SB 2617(2019-2019), HB 72(2019-2019), SB 2581(2018-2018), HB 1255(2018-2018), HB 1253(2018-2018), HB 87(2018-2018), SB 2323(2017-2017)
Missouri	2	2	SB 783(2018-2018), HB 986(2015-2015)
Nevada	1	1	SB 391(2017-2018)
New Jersey	10	5	S 1477(2020-2021), A 2691(2020-2021), A 5979(2018-2019), A 3090(2018-2019), S 1281(2018-2019), A 1936(2018-2019), A 5315(2016-2017), A 5108(2016-2017), S 2558(2016-2017), A 4086(2016-2017)
New Mexico	7	4	SB 323(2020-2020), HB 14(2020-2020), HB 139(2020-2020), SB 195(2020-2020), SB 293(2019-2019), HB 313(2019-2019), SB 84(2018-2018)

State	# of Legislative Documents $N = 202$	# of Unique Legislative Frameworks $N = 122$	Legislative Documents
New York	19	9	A 8616(2019-2020), S 6002(2019-2020), S 5821(2019-2020), A 7486(2019-2020), A 2997(2019-2020), S 2114(2019-2020), S 1725(2019-2020), A 10134(2017-2018), S 4794(2017-2018), S 4749(2017-2018), A 4100(2017-2018), A 2917(2017-2018), A 2261(2017-2018), S 2020(2017-2018), A 929(2017-2018), A 5098(2015-2016), S 4760(2015-2016), A 3573(2015-2016), S 484(2015-2016)
North Carolina	1	1	SB 524(2019-2020)
North Dakota	2	1	SB 2334(2019-2020), HB 1273(2019-2020)
Oklahoma	2	1	HB 2926(2015-2016), HB 1733(2015-2016)
Oregon	10	7	SB 1566(2020-2020), HB 2910(2019-2019), HB 3345(2019-2019), SB 497(2019-2019), SB 1032(2017-2017), SB 1043(2017-2017), HB 3004(2017-2017), HB 2488(2017-2017), SB 577(2017-2017), HB 3423(2017-2017)
Pennsylvania	4	1	HB 244(2019-2020), SB 111(2019-2020), SB 1111(2017-2018), HB 2444(2017-2018)
Rhode Island	2	2	HB 5862(2019-2020), HB 5773(2017-2018)

State	# of Legislative Documents $N = 202$	# of Unique Legislative Frameworks $N = 122$	Legislative Documents
South Carolina	4	1	H 3214(2019-2020), S 25(2019-2020), H 4439(2017-2018), S 339(2017-2018)
Tennessee	7	4	SB 2259(2017-2018), HB 2114(2017-2018), SB 1218(2017-2018), HB 531(2017-2018), HB 1071(2017-2018), SB 605(2015-2016), SB 2471(2013-2014)
Texas	11	6	HB 630(2019-2020), HB 2887(2019-2020), HB 1040(2019-2020), HB 998(2019-2020), HB 730(2019-2020), HB 2727(2019-2020), SB 33(2019-2020), SB 32(2019-2020), HB 4251(2017-2018), HB 1947(2017-2018), HB 2517(2015-2016)
Utah	2	2	HB 103(2020-2020), HB 260(2019-2019)
Vermont	4	1	S 38(2019-2020), H 792(2017-2018), S 231(2017-2018), S 102(2017-2018)
Washington	14	9	SB 6614(2019-2020), HB 2255(2019-2020), HB 2254(2019-2020), SB 5884(2019-2020), HB 1950(2019-2020), SB 5393(2019-2020), HB 1340(2019-2020), HB 1123(2019-2020), SB 6101(2017-2018), SB 5666(2017-2018), HB 1840(2017-2018), HB 2955(2015-2016), HB 2820(2015-2016), SB 6481(2015-2016)
West Virginia	6	3	HB 4750(2020-2020), SB 1(2019-2019), HB 2450(2019-2019), HB 2449(2019-2019), SB 284(2018-2018), HB 4267(2018-2018)

qualitative software to organize the legislative documents. I developed a list of attributes used to classify and categorize the legislative texts from consulting the literature surrounding tuition-free college programs and reading the legislative texts themselves. As I read more legislative documents, particular attributes of the legislative agenda became more salient, requiring me to add new attributes and those classifications to previously read documents.

FINDINGS

Last-Dollar Promise Design and the FAFSA

More than three-fourths of the legislative frameworks evaluated for this analysis were constructed as last-dollar programs requiring completion of the FAFSA (Table 2), a feature consistent with the majority of promise programs in existence today (Miller-Adams, 2015; Perna & Leigh, 2017). Under a last-dollar scholarship design, students must first apply for and accept other financial aid awards that do not require repayment (often referred to as gift aid) before any additional promise scholarship is added to their accounts. The promise scholarship fills the gap between the total amount of gift aid awarded to the students and the total cost of attendance.

Table 2: Descriptive Findings of Program Requirements and Attributes

# of Legislative Texts	# of Legislative Texts
Target Populations of Scholarship	
High School Graduate	88
Any State Resident	82
Adults	9
Adult w/ Previous College Credit	5
Public Servant	3
State-Identified Industry	2
Indigenous Population	2
Business Identified Industry	3
State-Identified Industry	2
Specified High School Graduate	1
Pell Eligible Students	1
Medicare Eligible	1
BA Recipients without employment	1
Homeless Students	1
Range of Scholarship	
Statewide	177
Business Identified Industry	2
County	3
Multi-Region	9

Single Community College	2
IHE's the Scholarship can be used at	
Multiple Two- and Four-Year Institutions	69
Multiple Two-Year Institutions	127
Single Two-Year Institution	5

# of Legislative Texts	# of Legislative Texts
Last-Dollar	154
First-Dollar	43
FAFSA Required	
Yes	157
No	39
Income Cap	
Yes	62
No	140
Enrollment Status	
Full or Part-Time	116
Full-Time	72
Part-Time	4

Under most last-dollar scholarship designs, students need only apply for any potential gift aid; they do not need to be awarded grants or scholarships to benefit from the promised scholarship. From an economic perspective, higher-income students gain the greatest financial benefit from last-dollar program designs, as most gift aid applied to a student's account is need-based. While merit-based scholarships are included in the gift-aid analysis, the federal Pell grant remains the most predominant award that calculates the total gift aid. As a need-based award, the Pell grant is awarded to those students who demonstrate the greatest economic need when completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). In cases where students demonstrate the most significant financial need, their federal Pell grant award can often cover the published cost of tuition and fees at an American community college, essentially nullifying any potential dollars that could be awarded via the promise program (Ma et al., 2024).

Because low-income students have most, if not all, of their published tuition and fees covered by existing federal and state dollars, last-dollar, community college programs have been criticized as a disingenuous promise, as students from higher-income brackets receive the larger amount of promise program scholarship dollars (Gándara & Li, 2020; Perna et al., 2020). Viewed only through an economic lens, scholars correctly demonstrate the unequal amounts of scholarship dollars applied to students across the economic threshold. However, several studies have noted that last-dollar, community college promise scholarships increase both enrollment and retention for lower-income students (Carruthers & Fox, 2016; Pluhta & Penny, 2013), and that by promising students at a young age that their tuition and fees will be

covered encourages students to enroll in higher education who might not have (Dynarski et al., 2018). From this perspective, the success of tuition-free programs relies on their simplistic message: if you pursue higher education and complete all necessary steps to enroll and secure your awards, your tuition will be covered. Thus, proponents of tuition-free community college exist in the tension between recognizing the success of last-dollar programs in aiding lower-income students with their higher education pursuits while simultaneously advocating for all the necessary funding and services needed for equitable student outcomes. Holding this tension might necessitate that higher-income students receive the benefits of a promise scholarship.

While gains in equitable access to higher education have been documented through last-dollar program designs, another barrier to higher education becomes salient when constructing promise scholarships around existing federal dollars: completing the FAFSA. Several legislative frameworks included in this analysis were constructed as last-dollar programs that do not specifically mention the FAFSA as a required source of gift aid. Still, virtually every last-dollar program design requires the student to complete the FAFSA to gain access to the promise scholarship:

> The grant shall supplement and shall not replace state grants, gift aid, institutional aid, or federal aid through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid process. The board shall promulgate regulations to ensure funds from this program do not affect eligibility for other state grants, gift aid, institutional aid, or federal aid through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid process. (MA H1221)

> Subject to the amounts appropriated by the general assembly, a Tennessee Promise Scholarship shall be the cost of tuition and mandatory fees at the eligible postsecondary institution attended less all other gift aid, as defined in § 49-4-902. Gift aid shall be credited first to the student's tuition and mandatory fees. (Tennessee, SB 2471)

While completing the FAFSA has become ubiquitous with the college enrollment process, previous research on FASFA completion has demonstrated that lower-income students and students of color complete the FAFSA at different rates relative to their higher-income peers and White peers, respectively (Snyder et al., 2019), and that community college students complete the FAFSA in lower rates relative to students in other higher education sectors (Holzman et al., 2019; McKinney & Novak, 2012).

Advocates for generous program designs may feel concerned over the FAFSA's continued role in providing post-secondary students with financial access to higher education. However, emerging evidence on the relationship between promise programs and FAFSA completion does show promising results. That is, FAFSA completion rates appear to increase after implementing a program that requires the FAFSA for participation (Cannon & Joyalle, 2016; Davidson et al., 2020; Pluhta & Penny, 2013). While these increased completion rates are positive, it is unclear if these gains have been made equitably across all students of color and students from

different socioeconomic quartiles. Exacerbating this inequality is that undocumented students and international students are not eligible for Title IV awards that come from completing the FAFSA. More research is needed to ensure that traditionally under-resourced students have access to the supports required to secure their promise awards. In addition, programs that utilize the FAFSA as the gateway to the promise scholarship cannot assume that all eligible students will have the cultural capital to navigate the FAFSA's administrative requirements. This is particularly true at community colleges, where previous research has shown that community college students are more likely to be selected for financial aid verification relative to their peers at four-year institutions (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2018). As more time unfolds after a program is enacted requiring the FAFSA, state policymakers and higher education scholars need to be mindful of equity issues in navigating the federal financial aid process and ensure that FAFSA completion rates are equitable across historically underrepresented student populations.

Income Cap Requirements

While most legislative frameworks rely on the FAFSA, thirty percent implemented an income cap, targeting students who demonstrated some level of financial need. Some legislative frameworks specify income quartiles based on state income data, while others rely on the estimated family contribution (EFC) number generated when students complete the FAFSA.

> …has an adjusted gross income of less than thirty-six thousand dollars ($36,000) per year. (New Mexico, SB 84)

> A dependent student who reports on a Free Application for Federal Student Aid a parental federal adjusted gross income of $60,000 or less. (Arizona, SB 1284)

> …have an annual family income that does not exceed $125,000, where "annual family income" means both taxable and nontaxable income, as derived from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) for the academic year. (New Jersey, A 1936)

> …has completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid or an institutionally approved student aid application, (F) has an expected family contribution, as computed from the student's Free Application for Federal Student Aid, of five thousand three hundred dollars or less, and (G) has accepted all available financial aid… (Connecticut, HB 5371)

While state-specific economic conditions explain some of the wide variances in eligible incomes, the disparity between some of the highest and lowest income caps reveals that states have different conceptualizations of what constitutes economic need for family households. Designing tuition-free community college programs with income-based means-tested parameters (public policies available only to targeted

populations based on predefined criteria, instead of universal policy designs targeted to an entire population) will result in the loss of students whose family income is just above the income threshold. These income caps most likely affect the "hard-working middle-class," whose income is just enough to bring them above poverty thresholds but whose household income lacks the healthy financial margin necessary to meet college costs (Bell, 2020, p. 7).

In addition to excluding students on the income margins of the program's design, income cap eligibility requirements require institutions and state higher education agencies to institute some form of income verification. While verifying incomes when clear thresholds might be more manageable, several frameworks create more complicated formulas for determining what incomes qualify for the scholarship:

> In addition to other eligibility requirements outlined in this chapter, students who demonstrate financial need are eligible to receive the Washington college promise scholarship. For the purposes of this act, students who demonstrate financial need are students with family incomes at or below seventy percent of the state median family income, adjusted for family size. (Washington, HB 1340)

These income verification requirements compel institutions and/or state agencies to divert financial and student support resources away from direct interventions proven to foster student success. In addition to the lost resources required by institutions to administer the scholarships, the mere presence of an income cap is likely to discourage eligible students from pursuing the scholarship, as administrative burdens such as these stigmatize low-income families as financial dependent and in need of services, creating a psychological burden associated with the scholarship (Rosinger et al., 2021).

Placing an income cap on such programs, specifically those designed as last-dollar, exacerbates the criticisms leveled towards last-dollar programs that do not provide any real scholarship dollars to students. That is, lower-income caps will only include students whose household income will qualify them for the federal Pell grant and other state need-based aid. Theoretically, a state could design a promise program with income caps that would specifically target Pell-eligible students, essentially requiring little to no investment by the state. The community college sector may face further decreases in state appropriations, as state legislators consider implementing programs primarily designed around the Pell Grant. This effort aims to increase overall enrollment, potentially supplanting previous state appropriations with increased revenue from the federal government.

Income cap requirements also face a difficult political terrain. Both Bell (2020) and Perna et al. (2021) found that income cap diminishes political support for the program, particularly from students and families whose income level excludes eligibility. In a progressive income tax context, households pay higher income tax as their income increases. Higher tax obligations mean that higher-income households pay more to support local public spending, such as community colleges. Excluding students from higher-income brackets fractures the political coalitions needed to maintain a tuition-free program.

Reimbursement and Post-Residency Requirements

Below are examples from six states with post-residency requirements associated with reimbursement provisions that have been proposed and enacted as part of state-sponsored tuition-free programs.

> ...maintain residence in the state for a length of time equal to the number of years the student receives a scholarship under the program, beginning once the student receives a degree… If a scholarship award recipient fails to maintain residency in the state, the funds received under this subtitle shall be converted from a scholarship award to a loan payable to the state… (Maryland, SB 1049)

> … A student shall agree to reside in the state for three consecutive years and be employed within six months after receiving a bachelor's degree, associate degree, or certificate… If a student does not comply with the provisions of this subsection, the scholarship shall convert into a loan and the student shall be liable for repayment of the scholarship amount in its entirety at an interest rate and on a schedule as determined by the board. (Missouri, SB 783)

> If a scholarship recipient fails to meet the requirements of subsection (a). of this section, the authority shall retroactively convert the recipient's scholarship award into a loan, pursuant to regulations adopted by the authority. (New Jersey, A 5315)

> If a student or former student fails to fulfill any of the requirements set forth in clause (i) of this subparagraph, the trustees shall convert to a student loan the full amount of the tuition which would have been paid by such student, as determined by the New York state higher education services corporation, plus interest, according to a schedule to be determined by such corporation. (New York, A 8616)

> A student shall be required to sign a contract agreeing to reside in New York state for a period of five years subsequent to completion of his or her academic program. (New York, A 5098)

> Upon completion of his or her program of study, or upon disenrollment from an eligible postsecondary institution, the student must reside and work within this state for the same period of time he or she received funds from the program. If the student does not reside and work within this state for the specified period, the student must repay the total amount awarded, plus an annual interest rate equal to the federal student loan interest rate in effect when the student entered the program. (Florida, SB 132)

Under these provisions in Florida, New York, New Jersey, Missouri, and Maryland, students must agree to remain in the state after securing their post-secondary award

and maintaining gainful employment for a specified number of years. While exemptions allow students to leave the state for additional education and military service, most students must remain in the state and begin a service term of employment. By requiring their scholarship recipients to work after graduation, the state benefits from increased tax revenue from its newly educated citizens. Students who fail to meet these post-residency requirements often have their initial scholarship converted to a student loan that must be repaid to the state, usually at a prorated amount based on the number of years the student worked in the state after graduation.

These post-residency requirements and reimbursement provisions unveil the growing neoliberal disposition of the state towards its citizens. The state does not have a moral obligation to invest in its citizenry and help craft the next generation of a democratically engaged population capable of addressing emerging social concerns. Rather, the citizen is reoriented as an economic investment opportunity only deserving of educational investment when the state receives a reasonable rate of return on its investment. The most comparable analogy to this financial relationship is an employer's reimbursement provisions on an employee who severs their ties to the organization after financing additional education and training. Employers often place years of service agreements with tuition reimbursement policies to retain an educated employee (and theoretically, a more innovative and profitable employee) in the years after the education is received. By requiring their citizens to remain in the states in the years after a scholarship has been offered, the citizens' relationship to their civil authority is reoriented to one of employer-employee. It is not the moral responsibility of the civil administration to provide economic and social services to its citizens to live healthy, productive, and engaged social lives. Rather, the citizen is a means to economic development, an entity that deserves economic and civic investment if and only if the said investment has a financial benefit to the civil authority.

Under such provisions, recent college graduates would be forced to turn down employment opportunities that align with their long-term career goals, potentially hindering their overall career aspirations. Additionally, graduates would be unable to relocate closer to family if a member falls ill or is unable to follow a spouse whose job relocates outside the state. In extreme cases, a college graduate could lose their job should an employer require them to move out of state. While these provisions would affect all college graduates' livelihoods, low-income students, in particular, would be significantly harmed by these provisions, as students with limited financial capital would be unable to endure the sudden shock of their college debt.

Specified Degree Pathways

In certain legislative frameworks, students are only eligible for scholarships when enrolled in specified certificate or degree pathways that align with desired workforce credentials:

> Approved programs shall be consistent with those sectors identified by the four (4) workforce development districts across the state, and the career-tech programs shall lead to high-skill, high-wage jobs. (Mississippi, SB 2581)
>
> A student enrolled in a four - year institution under the control of the state board of higher education is eligible for a tuition waiver under this chapter if the student is pursuing a major in a field of science, technology, engineering, or mathematics. A student enrolled in a two - year institution under the control of the state board of higher education is eligible for a tuition waiver under this chapter if the student is pursuing a degree or certificate in a field of technology or a skilled trade. (North Dakota, SB 2334)
>
> Pennsylvania Targeted Industry Cluster Certificate Scholarship Program. -- Notwithstanding any provisions of law, the agency may use money allocated for adult reeducation for the Pennsylvania Targeted Industry Cluster Certificate Scholarship Program. Priority. When reviewing an application for aid under this section, the agency shall prioritize aid for programs that lead to an industry-recognized credential that is articulated with college credit. The agency shall annually determine and post on its publicly accessible Internet website industry recognized credentialed programs which qualify for aid priority under this section. (Pennsylvania, SB 111).
>
> The terms and conditions of this clause may also be deferred for a grace period, to be established by the corporation, following the completion of an approved undergraduate program or a graduate or higher degree program or other professional licensure degree program. (New York, S 1725).

In some state contexts, such as North Dakota, specific industries are identified for the scholarships, while other frameworks, such as Mississippi and Pennsylvania, have simply targeted industries recognized by the state. The frameworks reinforce the narrative that higher education only has social utility if it benefits the market and creates incentives for students to pursue academic pathways that might not align with their ultimate career or social goals. Should students be implicitly compelled to choose an academic pathway that does not fit with their educational desires and dispositions because the state has deemed it beneficial? This inequitable context is exacerbated by the reality that the state has played a crucial role in creating this economic context, slashing appropriations to higher education that have forced students and families to rely on a higher level of student loans (Canché González, 2020; Velez & Woo, 2017). Faced with dire economic prospects, low-income students might feel compelled to pursue these limited academic pathways in the hopes of deferring high post-secondary costs.

Scholars must also ask critical questions about how the state identifies these particular sets of skills and credentials over others. Scholarship on higher education policymaking has noted the private sector's increased efforts to usurp the state's role in framing educational policy reforms (Ball & Olmedo, 2011; Fontdevila et al., 2019;

Lubienski, 2016). Corporate leaders use their privileged positions within local and state contexts to influence pro-market reforms within the educational policy context (Fontdevila et al., 2019). The academic pathways identified in the above state contexts do not include traditional liberal arts curriculum or other academic pathways that do not have precise labor force alignment. A promise scholarship that provides opportunities to every academic pathway an institution of higher education offers allows students to pursue a diverse array of curricular options based upon their academic dispositions and goals. It recognizes the market utility of a college education and the benefit to both the public and private sector without reorienting the purpose of college to a sole market pursuit.

DISCUSSION

The extent to which tuition-free college will remain salient in the public and private discourse surrounding higher education is uncertain, given the recent change in federal education policy priorities brought about by the second Trump administration (Heritage Foundation, 2023). However, it is vital that scholars and policymakers remain aware of the ongoing research surrounding existing promise programs and the ways that these programs provide opportunities to historically underrepresented populations. This research contributes to the literature on tuition-free college programs by taking a critical perspective on the various provisions that state policymakers consider when debating and enacting these programs. Taking a critical perspective of education policy and the specific provisions that policymakers consider when debating and enacting these programs can help scholars and tuition-free college advocates better understand the ideological assumptions of policymakers and their approach to addressing both economic workforce and higher education access issues simultaneously. The criticism or issues identified in this paper are not exhaustive of all potential concerns of tuition-free college, and different theoretical orientations grounded in critical policy analysis can certainly bring awareness to other potential gaps between the policy rhetoric of policymakers and the actual legislation they craft (Young & Diem, 2018). Further research on promise programs should continue to investigate important outcome metrics, such as student enrollment and persistence rates, while holding a critical eye on how policy design options might help or hinder various student populations.

This research began at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, so the legislative documents included in this analysis do not include any tuition-free plans crafted over the previous year. Both Michigan and Alaska have passed legislation that would provide tuition for displaced workers and first responders (Schwartz, 2021; The Office of Governor Gretchen Whitmer, 2020). Before the pandemic, only a few legislative frameworks proposed scholarships to civil servants and other public service workers. With the worst of the pandemic subsiding, it seems reasonable to assume that more state legislators will propose promise scholarships targeting those populations who sacrificed time and health to serve the rest of society. Targeting deserving populations for tuition-free programs may be an honorable policy to acknowledge the sacrifices and suffering of many frontline workers and first

responders; however, equity issues surrounding women's access to higher education must also be considered. As we emerge from the pandemic, it is becoming more apparent that females were far more likely to leave the labor force to care for children or other dependents (Boesch et al., 2021). Having left the paid workforce to attend to their households, women might not enjoy the benefits of tuition-free programs relative to their male peers.

Targeted populations within tuition-free program design highlight a general tension in the tuition-free community college policy landscape (and in the general educational policy landscape, for that matter). Targeting specific student populations for education interventions and rewards might inadvertently leave other deserving populations outside the benefit. Yet, creating universal programs that fail to account for the specific inequities faced by low-income communities and communities of color might create educational environments that allow traditionally privileged populations to benefit from free college in more substantial ways relative to their peers. The tuition-free movement could increase higher education access and provide economic relief to students and their families who feel that a college education is beyond their financial means. However, the analysis reveals that gaining access to a tuition-free program is not as similar as the *free college* moniker suggests. Whether its specific provisions for target populations (e.g., first responders, income thresholds) or provisions that disproportionately affect students of color or lower socioeconomic students (e.g., post-residency, FAFSA completion), program design choices will influence who ultimately gains access to these programs.

The criticisms leveled at policy implementation and program design options in this analysis are not exhaustive nor meant to dissuade the reader from the utility of the tuition-free agenda in achieving equitable student outcomes. My experience as a post-secondary administrator who ran a promise program, along with my previous scholarship on the subject, has shown me the power of a promise scholarship in helping students from traditionally underserved populations access higher education and progress through graduation (Ison, 2022). However, assuming that state policymakers are motivated to implement policies that achieve equitable outcomes over policy considerations is misguided (Bell, 2020). To ensure that equitable outcomes for all students are achieved through free college initiatives, a collation of supports must reflect on their program design choices and be willing to address areas where equity was sacrificed for political expediency. In addressing these gaps, institutional leaders and policymakers can craft a more equitable future for the free-college agenda.

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A Cross-Case Analysis of Sophomore Students' Reflections on Self-Efficacy: Signals for Innovative Sophomore Programming

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ABSTRACT

The persistence of sophomores warrants more attention. We used self-efficacy theory to conceptualize how sophomore students described their mastery of course-related tasks, social engagement, and connection, or lack thereof, to the campus and university, and what influenced their confidence. In a qualitative cross-case analysis of data drawn from a sequential mixed-methods explanatory study on the self-efficacy of undergraduate sophomore students ($n = 20$), we found disparities between low ($n = 5$) versus high ($n = 15$) levels of self-efficacy, especially among sophomore transfer students who lived off campus. Findings indicate course-related tasks presented challenges for participants irrespective of self-efficacy scores, engagement was externally motivated, and involvement fostered connectivity and growth in self-efficacy. Implications for practice include the creation of innovative sophomore programming.

Keywords: sophomore transition, self-efficacy, connectivity, involvement, engagement

For almost 3 decades, colleges and universities allocated extensive resources to help students make successful transitions from high school to college (Barefoot, 2008; Upcraft et al., 2005). Many institutions experience challenges related to freshman persistence and direct additional retention efforts toward the first-year experience (Barefoot, 2008). These efforts include seminars, orientation or other transition programs, learning communities, and other formal student engagement opportunities. Retention scholars have posited although most student departure is after the first-year experience, an increasing amount of students stop out during their sophomore year (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Schaller, 2018; The Advisory Board Company, 2015; Tinto, 2012; Tobolowsky, 2008). Yet, there is a dearth of recent empirical research on the retention and persistence of sophomore college students.

The sophomore year experience often encompasses a compulsory major declaration and decreased levels of institutional support (Sanchez-Leguelinel, 2008; Schaller, 2018; Schreiner, 2018; Schreiner et al., 2012; Tobolowsky, 2008). The pressure to select a major or to navigate a competitive admissions process for entry into an academic major can cause great difficulty for some and can impact students' development of self-efficacy (Hunter et al., 2010; St. John et al., 2004; Vuong et al., 2010). As a result, college sophomores at many institutions become forgotten and feel invisible (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Sanchez-Leguelinel, 2008; Tobolowsky, 2008).

A continued lack of student engagement or involvement for students such as commuters can influence student departure. These constructs are distinct as Astin (1984) conceptualized involvement theory as a student-centered theory rather than engagement which is an institutional theory (Kuh, 2009). Astin (1984) suggested the responsibility for engagement rests with the student in which authentic involvement requires an investment of energy related to the on-campus experience.

Individual student efforts are predominant for sophomores because they receive less holistic support compared to that in their first-year experience which can lead to a lack of academic and social integration (Edman & Brazil, 2009; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Moreover, these individual efforts are typically related to discrete differences in psychosocial factors experienced by sophomores which "extends beyond the inner world of self" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 562) and are influenced by interaction with the surrounding environment.

A student's level of cognitive, intellectual, and moral development can affect academic persistence and the coping strategies employed in times of challenge or crisis. Prior research focused on students' sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and life purpose proffers a holistic analysis for the study of college student transitions but few studies examined psychosocial factors of persistence among undergraduate sophomores specifically (Bandura, 1995, 1997; Baxter Magolda, 2009; DeWitz et al., 2009; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Schaller, 2005; Vuong et al., 2010). This study fills a gap in recent research on college sophomores by examining second-year experiences through a qualitative mixed-methods cross-case analysis informed by Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy. The following research questions guided this study: (1) How do interview participants' views of self-efficacy relate to their responses on the College Self-Efficacy Inventory? and (2) What environmental influences were found to influence the self-efficacy of the interview participants?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Bandura's (1997) conceptual framework, a social cognitive theory, provides a frame for understanding environmental influences on self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is malleable, and sources of efficacy beliefs include mastery experiences (most authentic source), vicarious experiences provided by social modeling, social persuasion (least influential), and physiological and emotional states, such as interpretation of stress and tension (Bandura, 1995). In essence, students gain greater self-efficacy through mastery of tasks, but social modeling of peers, faculty, and staff in academia can also be influential.

Although students may judge their performance based on their physiological and emotional responses, social support through persuasion can be influential in "strengthening coping efficacy" (Bandura, 1995, p. 181) to reduce or eliminate the threat of potential stressors. The influence of the college environment, the student's behavior, and the student's internal personal factors of cognition, affect, and biology vary in differing circumstances (Bandura, 1997). For example, evaluations and feedback from professors can influence "students' judgments of their capabilities and scholastic performances" (Bandura, 1997, p. 225). In this study, we used Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy to conceptualize the ways in which sophomore students described their mastery of course-related tasks, social engagement in and out of class, and connection, or lack thereof, to the campus and university, and what influenced their confidence as they navigated changes in their educational environment during the second year.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In prior research, transition advocates elevated awareness of the challenges students face and encouraged the creation of support programs for this critical year (Capik & Schupp, 2023; Kranzow & Foote, 2018; National Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, n.d.; Price-Williams & Sasso, 2024; Schaller, 2018; Schreiner, 2018; Schreiner et al., 2012; Tobolowsky, 2008; Young, 2018). In the review of literature, we considered research specific to native, transfer, and first-generation sophomore students. The following is organized around emergent themes from the literature related to the identity development of sophomore college students, barriers to persistence, and factors of success.

Sophomore Social Identity Development

Traditional sophomore college students move through a very intense cycle of identity development that is influenced by external factors and experiences in the college environment. Chickering (1969) defined identity formation during this time as establishing comfort with one's gender, body, appearance, cultural heritage, sexual orientation, sense of self, and life role. In a study of intellectual development in the college years, Perry, Jr. (1968) found students experienced development as "primarily internal" (p. 51), while considering pressure and standards from the external environment. Baxter Magolda (2007) maintained students extract themselves from what they acquire from authorities "to define their own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings" and this "involves far more than information and skill acquisition" (p. 69). According to Baxter Magolda (2007), sophomore students advance from absolute knowing, where knowledge is viewed as certain and instructors as authorities, to transitional knowing, where knowledge is uncertain.

Daunting Issues for Sophomores

Hunter et al. (2010) defined the sophomore year as a time for turning inward and exploring how one fits into college life and the world and contended that prolonged indecisiveness, poor academic course selection, low levels of academic and cocurricular engagement, behavioral problems, and increased time to degree completion all can manifest in the sophomore year. In addition, Gahagan and Hunter (2006) distinguished financial hardships, academic concerns, and questioning purpose in life as daunting issues for sophomores.

Schreiner et al. (2012) characterized the sophomore year as a volatile time where students are enrolled in general education courses avoided in the first year, experience increased pressure to declare a major or undergo a competitive admissions process to enter an academic program and have little interaction with faculty. Sophomore students also experience a sense of abandonment and invisibility often associated with the sophomore college experience resulting from a decrease in support systems and first-year programming (Sanchez-Leguelinel, 2008). At the same time, sophomore students value a sense of belonging, effective academic services, opportunities for intellectual growth, and approachable faculty (Sanchez-Leguelinel, 2008).

To investigate how sophomores viewed themselves, their relationships, and their academic experiences and decisions, Schaller (2005) conducted a qualitative study at a midsize Catholic university using focus groups and individual interviews and found few sophomore students attained a level of commitment. It is imperative to go beyond perceptions to understand how students' views of their academic experiences relate to their confidence in those choices. According to Schaller (2005), a supportive and encouraging environment in which students feel safe to reflect and explore is conducive to moving students toward a level of commitment. Schreiner (2018) asserted thriving sophomore students function at optimal levels and are psychologically engaged. Both assertions are valid in current higher education settings.

Factors of Sophomore Success

Sophomore success approaches are typically anchored in the first-year experience to prevent the ubiquitous *sophomore slump* (Capik & Shupp, 2023). This has been identified as a deficit approach that decenters concepts of student flourishing or minimizes student academic ability (Perez, 2020). This is a historical artifact in higher education (Freedman, 1956; Lemons & Richmond, 1987). Kennedy and Upcraft (2010) profiled this sophomore slump as academic disengagement, dissociation, career or major indecision, and developmental fugue.

In addition to developmental and psychosocial challenges encountered by sophomore college students, transfer sophomore students must begin anew and establish themselves in an academic environment akin to their first-year experience (Blekic et al., 2020). Barefoot (2008) noted the challenge in higher education in simply identifying students who are considered transfers and how their experiences are similar or different from native sophomore students. Barefoot (2008) stated "the diversity of students, coupled with many pathways of college attendance, require that we go beyond assuming that all students within a certain stage of transition need the same type of assistance" (p. 92). Many assume the services extended to sophomores are well received by all students, but those individuals neglect to realize the transitional issues influencing the move of a sophomore from one academic institution to another.

Perez (2020) examined the flourishing or thriving factors of sophomores to highlight significant individual psychosocial factors such as self-efficacy. Other scholars reported a great deal of self-exploration and questioning of oneself occurs in the sophomore year among college students (DeWitz et al., 2009; Elias, 2008). Many have found stress, social support, and campus climate influential on self-efficacy (Edman & Brazil, 2009; Zajacova et al., 2005). When assessing the transition of college sophomores who are first-generation college students and intent to persist, Vuong et al. (2010) identified sophomores' perceptions as influential on academic performance and persistence (Vuong et al., 2010). Price-Williams and Sasso (2024) identified demographic differences in self-efficacy among 208 college sophomore students. Heterosexual sophomore students reported higher levels of overall self-efficacy (p = .001), social efficacy (p = .004), and course efficacy (p = .042) compared to participants who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning/unsure; traditional students between the ages of 18 and 24 reported higher levels of efficacy compared to posttraditional students who were 25 years of age or over (p = .016); and participants who planned to leave the institution reported lower scores in overall self-efficacy (p = .048) and social efficacy (p = .014; Price-Williams & Sasso, 2024).

METHODS

We employed a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design encompassing a quantitative analysis (first phase) followed by qualitative interviews (second phase). We collected data from the College Self-Efficacy Inventory (CSEI) to select participants with high and low levels of self-efficacy in the second phase to explore how sophomores characterized their self-efficacy in and outside of the classroom and leveraged support systems to persist. Through a linking method called "connecting" (p. 2139), the sample for the qualitative phase of the design originated from the quantitative results, which is characterized as *integration on the methods level* (Fetters et al., 2013).

Participants and Procedures

The site selected for this study is generically identified as State University and is a predominantly White institution, public, master's college and university in the Midwest. We used purposive extreme-case sampling to select the respondents who fell within extreme cases (Johnson & Christensen, 2019) or *outliers* and indicated a willingness to participate in an interview. Extreme-case sampling allows for the selection of cases from the extremes as a potentially rich source of information for comparison (Johnson & Christensen, 2019). A total of 208 sophomore students out of the total sophomore population (N = 2,252) with 30 to 59 earned credit hours without confidential holds at State University completed the CSEI instrument, resulting in a 9.5% response rate. A total of 168 respondents in the sample (n = 208) indicated their willingness to participate in an in-person interview.

To determine the lower and upper ranges for identifying extreme cases, we ranked the self-efficacy scores of the respondents willing to be interviewed from highest to lowest, 10.00 to 3.87. The range of 6.13 was divided to determine the upper, middle, and lower levels of overall mean self-efficacy. Respondents with a self-efficacy score between 3.87 and 5.91 fell within the lower level, while respondents with a score between 7.97 and 10.00 fell within the upper level. Respondents who fell within the middle level were not considered extreme cases and were not invited for an interview. Eleven respondents who agreed to be interviewed were placed in the lower one-third of overall self-efficacy. In addition, 66 respondents constituted the upper one-third of overall self-efficacy with the remainder not determined to be extreme cases. A total of 77 extreme cases were invited by email to participate in an interview.

Data Collection

The CSEI instrument contains 19 items following the statement: "How confident are you that you could successfully complete the following tasks". The responses are rated on a 10-point scale ranging from a score of 1 as "not at all confident" to a score of 10 as "extremely confident" (Solberg et al., 1993). Three subscales are derived from the response items and are identified as course efficacy, social efficacy, and roommate efficacy (Solberg et al., 1993). Survey results from phase 1 aided in developing open-ended questions for semi-structured interviews. Each semi-structured interview spanned between 15 to 45 minutes, occurred in person, and was audio recorded. A portion of the interview focused on interview participants' views of self-efficacy as its relation to responses on the CSEI subscales. Participants also describe their levels of confidence in participating in class discussions, engaging with professors and staff, making new friends, or joining student organizations. Finally, participants shared what they believed influenced their confidence. To ensure internal validity of the qualitative data (Merriam, 2009), all 20 participants were sent a copy of their interview transcript for validation. Nine students reviewed their transcript and reported no changes or additions in their email responses.

Data Analysis

Content analysis allowed for identification of patterns or themes in the interview material (Leedy et al., 2012). Merriam (2009) defined content analysis as "the simultaneous coding of raw data and construction of categories that capture relevant characteristics." (p. 205). Codes are labels that assign symbolic meaning and coding is considered an analysis and interpretation of the meaning of data (Miles et al., 2014). *Vivo coding,* a descriptive coding method, was used in the first cycle of coding in the analysis to assign words or short phrases as codes. In the second cycle of coding, pattern codes were used to group the summaries of the first cycle into categories or themes (Miles et al., 2014). *Pattern coding* helped to condense large amounts of data, to generate early analysis, to develop a cognitive map, and to lay the groundwork for cross-case analysis (Merriam, 2009; Miles at al., 2014). Coding allowed for distinguishing experiences reported by sophomores with high versus low self-efficacy.

Limitations

This study was executed at one site, which was a public, predominantly White institution in the Midwest; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to other academic institutions. The findings are limited to only one point in time in early April and semi-structured interviews were conducted the week before final examinations. The proximity to final exams may have restricted participation as the sophomore students were approaching a heightened period of the semester. Many sophomore students' recollections and challenges occurred in the fall of the second year of college and were resolved by the second semester. More can possibly be gleaned from the collection of data in the fall of the sophomore year. Finally, no academic information was collected from the participants in the study. More specifically, academic information collected from official records can be more valid and useful than self-reports from students themselves. Academic information, such as cumulative grade point average, would be useful in understanding the relationship between college sophomore students' self-efficacy and academic performance.

FINDINGS

A total of 20 extreme cases of sophomore college students accepted an invitation to be interviewed: 5 with low self-efficacy and 15 with high self-efficacy. Over half of the interview participants self-identified as White, non-Hispanic and the majority were of traditional ages between 18 and 24 (see Table 1). Most of those interviewed self-identified as heterosexual, except for two participants. Eight of the interview participants identified as first-generation college students and four of those individuals also identified as one of the eight transfer students. Three of the interview participants were sophomores with 30 to 59 credit hours but were in their first physical year of college on campus due to completion of college credit while in high school. Among the 20 sophomore students who participated in an interview, nine lived on campus and 11 lived off campus.

Table 1: Demographics of Interview Participants

	Total	Black/ Non-Hispanic	Hispanic	2 or More Races	White/ Non-Hispanic
Male	7	1	1	0	5
Female	13	2	2	1	8
First-Generation	8	2	2	0	4
Transfer	8	2	2	1	3
Transfer & First-Generation	4	1	1	0	2
On Campus	9	3	1	0	5
Off-Campus	11	1	2	1	7
Traditional	19	3	2	1	13
Post-traditional	1	0	1	0	0

Among the five sophomore college students with low self-efficacy (see Table 2), four lived off campus and none of the five were involved on campus. Three of the five with low self-efficacy were first-generation college students. Two of the first-generation college students with low self-efficacy were transfer sophomores and the third was an early sophomore who completed college credit while in high school to qualify as a sophomore but were in their first year of college.

Fifteen participants reported high levels of overall self-efficacy (see Table 3). Most transfer students in this group lived off campus and were not involved on campus. In contrast, all but one of the native sophomore students with high self-efficacy were involved on campus. These participants reported high confidence in academic courses and social tasks. Most of the students with high self-efficacy described strong social support from family members and peers through involvement on campus. Three themes emerged from the analysis: deficits in efficacy in completion of course-related tasks, externally motivated social engagement, and involvement fostered connectivity and growth in self-efficacy.

The cross-case analysis revealed profound disparities between the two groups with low and high levels of overall self-efficacy. The sophomore students in this group with lower levels of overall self-efficacy mostly lived off campus and were not involved in any activities or organizations on campus. This group struggled with reading textbooks, text anxiety, and managing their time. The sophomores with lower overall efficacy reported lower levels of confidence in

Table 2: Lower 1/3 Self-Efficacy Interview Responses

Scores	Social SE	Course SE	Roommate SE	Notes
Ashley SE 1.63 CE 6.43 RE N/A SES 3.87	Low-confidence class discussion Size of Class Low confidence in meeting new people No Friends on or off-campus Works on campus Medium confidence speaking with a professor	Low confidence in reading textbooks Does not read textbooks Does not take books to class Low confidence in time management Procrastination/ Low Motivation Confident in writing	Off-Campus Lives with Family	Native Sophomore Low evidence of esteem Support- Siblings/ No parental support Not involved on campus Works on campus
Jasmine SE 4.38 CE 4.00 RE 3.75 SES 4.11	Confident in speaking in class No confidence in meeting new people Nervous about meeting new people High confidence in speaking to a professor	Confident in reading textbooks Skims textbooks, boring, repetitive High confidence in writing Low confidence in test-taking Test anxiety Confident in note-taking	On campus Confident in sharing space/ chores	Transfer sophomore First-generation Interview responses do not reflect the survey Not involved on campus
Monica SE 5.00 CE 5.14 RE 7.00 SES 5.47	Confident in speaking in class Median confidence in meeting people Confident in speaking to professors	Confident in reading textbooks When necessary Effort reflects perception Low confidence in writing skills Low confidence in time management Confidence in test-taking	Off-campus Lives with Family	Transfer Sophomore Works off-campus No parental involvement, First generation Challenges in studying Not involved on campus
Adam SE 2.50 CE 9.00 RE N/A SES 5.53	Low-confidence class discussion Focused on others' perceptions Conflict avoidance No confidence in meeting new people No Friends on campus Prefer to email professor	Confident in reading textbooks Time consuming and boring Pays off Confident in academic work Sets high goals for self	Off-campus Lives with Family	Early sophomore Carpools with a friend Not involved on campus No mention of parental support, First-generation URCA Program
Sierra SE 5.13 CE 6.14 RE N/A SES 5.60	Low-confidence class discussion Nervous in class Focused on others' perceptions Low confidence in meeting new people No on-campus network Works on campus Confidence in speaking with a professor	Low confidence in reading textbooks Does not read textbooks. Overwhelming/ Low comprehension High confidence in note-taking Low-confidence in test-taking Test anxiety	Off-campus Lives with Family	Transfer Sophomore Off-campus friends Has a mentor Not involved on campus Parental support

Note. SE = Social Efficacy, CE = Course Efficacy, RE = Roommate Efficacy, SES = Overall Self-Efficacy Score

Table 3: Upper 1/3 Self-Efficacy Interview Responses

Case	Social SE	Course SE	Roommate SE	Notes
Thomas SE 9.00 CE 7.71 RE 6.00 SES 7.89	High confidence speaking to professor High confidence in class discussion Median confidence meeting new people	High confidence in writing & test taking Low confidence in time management-overwhelmed	On campus High confidence in negotiating chores/ space	Early Sophomore Leader in a fraternity Involved in clubs sports on campus
Maria SE 6.50 CE 9.71 RE N/A SES 8.00	High confidence speaking to professor Medium confidence in class discussion Prefer to email professor Low confidence in meeting new people	High confidence in taking notes High confidence in taking tests High confidence in reading textbooks	Lives off campus with family	Transfer Sophomore Post-traditional, First-generation Does not feel connected
Juan SE 9.00 CE 8.14 RE 6.00 SES 8.05	High confidence in class discussion High confidence speaking to professor High confidence in meeting new people	High confidence in writing skills Low confidence in test taking Low confidence in managing time-work schedule	Lives off campus with roommates Having difficulty in roommate situation	Native Sophomore First-generation Involved on campus Works off campus
Noah SE 8.00 CE 8.14 RE N/A SES 8.07	Medium confidence in class discussion Depends on class size/ comfort Concerned with others' perceptions High confidence speaking to professor High confidence in meeting new people	High confidence in writing Medium confidence in reading textbooks Boring and rented, will read if necessary High confidence in test taking	Off campus Lives with family	Transfer Sophomore First-generation Not involved on campus
Abigail SE 7.00 CE 9.57 RE 8.50 SES 8.26	Low confidence in class discussion Concerned with others' perceptions High confidence speaking to professor High confidence in meeting new people	High confidence in test taking Low confidence in writing Trying to conform to professor opinions Really worried about own opinion	On campus Low confidence in negotiating chores/ space. Conflict avoidance	Native Sophomore Joined sorority Involved in Exercise Science club and Big Brothers/Big Sisters Organization
Michelle SE 8.75 CE 7.86 RE N/A SES 8.33	High confidence in class discussion High confidence speaking to professor High confidence in meeting new people	High confidence in reading textbooks Medium confidence in test-taking, anxiety High confidence in note taking	Off campus Lives alone	Transfer Sophomore No Friends No Family Support Not involved on campus

Case	Social SE	Course SE	Roommate SE	Notes
Antony SE 8.38 CE 8.43 RE 8.25 SES 8.37	High confidence in meeting new people High confidence in class discussion Speech class influenced confidence High confidence speaking to professor	Low confidence in fall of sophomore year in all areas Reported higher confidence in spring of sophomore year	On campus Some difficulty with roommate- resolved	Native Sophomore International student H.S. in U.S. Teaches fitness classes on campus
Charles SE 8.63 CE 8.14 RE 8.50 SES 8.42	High confidence speaking to professor High confidence in meeting new people	High confidence in taking notes High confidence in taking tests High confidence in reading textbooks	On campus High confidence in negotiating chores/ space	Transfer Sophomore Sibling support- brother RA on campus
Andrew SE 10.00 CE 10.00 RE 3.25 SE 8.58	High confidence in class discussion More confident than past College is open and free, non-judgmental High confidence speaking to professor/ staff Mid-confidence in meeting new people	High confidence in time management Uses a planner; plans ahead Medium confidence in reading textbooks New to reading textbooks Time consuming Confident in note taking	On campus Now confident in negotiating chores/ sharing space Prior issues resolved; H.S. friend moved out	Transfer Sophomore Strong social support Positive staff encounters with staff, advising, RA in dorm
Kayla SE 8.38 CE 8.86 RE N/A SES 8.60	Medium confidence in class discussion Shy High confidence speaking to professor Medium confidence in meeting new people	High confidence in writing High confidence in reading textbooks Medium confidence in time management Procrastination	Off campus Lives with family	Transfer Sophomore First-generation Family support from uncle and older cousin No involvement on campus
Beth SE 8.88 CE 8.71 RE 8.00 SES 8.63	Medium confidence in class discussion Concerned with others' perceptions High confidence speaking to professor High confidence in meeting new people	High confidence in writing skills Medium confidence in test taking	On campus High confidence in negotiating chores/ space	Native Sophomore Focused Interest Community
Chloe SE 9.00 CE 9.14 RE 8.25 SES 8.89	High confidence in class discussion High confidence in meeting new people High confidence speaking to professor	Low confidence in time management Procrastination, classes not a priority Not motivated about gen ed courses Just "muddling through"	On campus High confidence in negotiating chores/ space	Native Sophomore Sibling and sorority support Sorority is priority

Case	Social SE	Course SE	Roommate SE	Notes
Kiana SE 8.88 CE 8.57 RE 10.00 SES 9.00	High confidence in class discussion High confidence speaking to professor/ staff Sees networking opportunity Advance learning; mentoring High confidence in meeting new people	High confidence in time management Plans ahead High confidence in test-taking	Off campus with roommates High confidence in negotiating chores/ space.	Native Sophomore Strong social support-family/student organization First-generation
Molly SE 8.50 CE 9.43 RE 10.00 SES 9.16	Medium confidence in class discussion Will email professor or TA High confidence speaking to professor High confidence in meeting new people	High confidence in managing time Low confidence in test taking-anxiety High confidence in reading textbooks	On campus High confidence in negotiating chores/ space	Early Sophomore Sorority Student nursing group RA in Residence Life
Amy SE 10.00 CE 9.14 RE 9.25 SES 9.53	Mid-confidence in class discussion Tries to figure out on own Contingent upon student's mood Confident speaking to professor/ staff Must be welcoming High confidence in meeting new people	High confidence in writing Confident in reading textbooks Works harder on major courses Uses memorization for gen ed courses	On campus High confidence in negotiating chores/ space. Prior issues resolved; roommate moved	Native Sophomore Strong social support Joined clubs Works on campus SI instructor on campus

Note. SE = Social Efficacy, CE = Course Efficacy, RE = Roommate Efficacy, SES = Overall Self-Efficacy Score

engagement in class and meeting new people. These participants were less involved on campus than students with high efficacy and reported little or no connection to State University.

Deficits in Efficacy in Completion of Course-Related Tasks

Regardless of high or low self-efficacy scores, participants revealed a lack of confidence in course-related tasks. Their self-assessments were incongruent with skills and tasks typically associated with student success. This indicates a possibility that reports on the CSEI instrument may be inflated. Four students reported high confidence in writing abilities but provided no evidence of success nor did they share any influence on their writing abilities. Several transfer students acknowledged prior struggles with writing in college. Noah stated, "I didn't do as well as I wanted to grade-wise last semester, but I feel like I'm doing better this semester." Monica self-identified as "weak" in writing, but valued feedback and attributed the source of her growth to the professor. Although most interview participants reported high levels of confidence in taking notes, the way in which some of the transfer sophomore students approached notetaking or used notetaking in courses varied. For example, Sierra seemed to lack the skill or a method in note taking and remarked, "I think I'm really good at taking notes, just because I usually try and write down everything." Another student relied heavily on notetaking to perform successfully in courses. Charles exclaimed, "If I just take good notes and at least show up to class, I'd be able to retain enough information."

Half of the college sophomores stated they do not read their textbooks and characterized the event as boring, repetitive, and time-consuming. Reading textbooks was especially a challenge for participants with lower overall self-efficacy. Most of the transfer students' statements related to a lack of skills in reading and comprehending their textbooks. Andrew stated, "I've never had to do that in my previous years. I had to figure out ways to help myself learn." Another student stated they did not like reading textbooks at the same time they admitted low confidence with the task. Sierra stated, "I'm not good at comprehending stuff that I read, especially if it's my biology." Jasmine reported a strong reliance on taking notes and resolved to "skim" the text. Another transfer male student spoke in economic terms of reading textbooks. Charles recognized he "probably should be reading" because he is paying for school. At the same time, Charles acknowledged that he did not even open some books "because I know that just by doing certain things, there's other things that I can exclude and I can still be successful."

Six of the 20 students reported low levels of confidence in taking tests and quizzes. One student explained her ability to attain a decent grade, even if she studied the night before. Chloe stated, "I kind of often study the night before an exam and get a B, so that's not too bad." Many spoke of their battle with nervousness and anxiety, including transfer students. Sierra explained,

> I feel like I psych myself out when I take tests and quizzes, which I tend to do in all areas of my life, honestly. I'm not diagnosed with anxiety, but I say I have

> really bad anxiety, because I just get really worked up over little things. It messes with my concentration and how I perform with whatever task I'm doing. I don't know. I'm not a good test taker.

"Overthinking" and "questioning oneself" were described about test-taking by other transfer students. The impact of text anxiety was realized by Molly when she stated, "I have terrible, terrible, terrible test anxiety. That is my one weakness that has not really strengthened in my transition to college."

Time management is another area in which both native and transfer participants reported low levels of confidence. Ashley allocated a verbal score of "zero" to this effort and stated, "I just got three zeros on three assignments because I forgot to do them." Thomas reported it is an area of struggle that often leaves him feeling overwhelmed. Two students, one native, and one transfer, spoke of their struggles in balancing their workload with other demands in their life. Juan stated, "I struggle too with the time management because with my job now I work all overnight shifts and so that has become a struggle for me." Monica explained the challenges in working, going to school, and balancing both with a social life, "It's like I can run myself into the ground with this and have no social life and have no 'me' time or I can split it to where get the most important super stuff done with good quality."

Externally Motivated Social Engagement

Sophomore students' motivation and purpose for engagement relied upon external factors. This external influence included environmental and interpersonal factors. This suggests participants lacked the ability to cultivate and trust their inner voice. The data also revealed a shortfall in a broader meaning-making capacity to develop interpersonal relations rather than transactional relations.

First, speaking in class and meeting new people were challenges for the sophomore students with lower self-efficacy, of which only one was native. Sophomore students in this group who reported lower confidence in speaking in class were focused on others' perceptions, were nervous about speaking in front of others, and wanted to avoid conflict in class discussions. Class size impacted engagement, wherein if the course held too many students or too few students, the comfort level of the student changed.

Charles, a transfer, stated he does not participate because he is forced to take general education courses in which he has no interest. Adam, an early sophomore, stated he did not participate because he did not want to be judged by others or seem lacking in knowledge. Chloe felt more comfortable, like the two male students, when the class size is smaller and environmentally conducive for discussion. The other students with high confidence in this type of engagement were fond of group discussion, more likely to ask questions if confused, and considered themselves open-minded.

The interview participants were asked to describe their level of confidence in interaction with faculty and staff outside of class. The majority of the sophomore students who responded to this question were confident in talking to professors or staff outside of class. However, the motivation for doing so varied for some. For some, seeking out professors was self-serving to increase one's academic

performance in class. Many of the transfer students sought out professors for political reasons to somehow advance themselves within their major or within the course but lacked understanding on how this could benefit their learning. Monica stated,

> Anytime I see a professor especially if it's one that I don't really interact much in the classroom with. If I see them outside the classroom, I might just like introduce myself. Possibly talk about the topic that was discussed, umm just to get my name out there, just so they know who I am.

Jasmine responded, "Most of the time I'm just quiet. Being able to have an actual conversation with my classmate or teacher, it's an accomplishment."

Many of the sophomore students with high confidence in meeting new people reported involvement in activities or work that cultivated their interaction with others. For example, Charles, a resident advisor on campus explained, "I would say I have plenty of confidence when it comes to dealing new people or new situations of meeting new people because partially that's my job but at the same time I feel it's just my personality." Beth, who lived in a focus interest community in residential housing, found that experience to be "extremely helpful . . . as far as meeting new people."

Five sophomore students described their interaction with new people as contingent upon the approachability and friendliness of the other party and common interests. Some transfer students described themselves as nervous, shy, careful, and standoffish. When speaking of her experience on campus, Monica stated, "One to 10, 10 being amazing and one being awful, I think a 4 because people seem hostile when you try to approach them or something." Sierra disclosed she has no close friends and prefers to be with other family members. Neither of the two students lived on campus or were involved in any clubs or organizations. One post-traditional learner, Maria, described her experience as difficult in finding other students on campus with similar interests in her age group. She stated,

> I mean, I know a few girls that are in my classes that are my same age, but their maturity levels are different that's why I'm not . . . I mean, I got three kids at home and school and that's my main focus. Sometimes I do cut through the engineering building and that's, obviously, male-dominated still. Just walking through there with all my art stuff, you'll get the odd, weird glances. That intimidated me enough to where I don't walk through there anymore.

When asked, Maria said she would embrace the opportunity to interact with other undergraduate students in her age group. As a first-generation, post-traditional learner, Maria reported she almost withdrew from attendance at State University, because of the social environment.

Involvement Fostered Connectivity and Growth in Self-Efficacy

To understand environmental influences on the self-efficacy of the interview participants, each was asked in what way they felt connected to the campus and the university. Even further, participants were prompted to share any experiences inside or outside of the classroom on campus that supported or hindered the development of their confidence. To identify the sophomore students' support system, or lack thereof, and understand how they navigate the educational environment, the interview

participants were asked to describe their level of confidence in dealing with obstacles in college. The findings indicated involvement fostered connectivity and growth in self-efficacy. Students who lived on campus and were engaged in an activity, and/or had family members who attended State University, reported connectivity compared to students who lived off campus and were not engaged.

Seven of the 20 sophomore students who participated in an interview described a lack of connection to State University. Three of the seven sophomore students associated their lack of connection with living off campus and lack of involvement in on-campus events. Even though Ashley is a native sophomore, she identified her only connection as "being an employee on campus." Adam attributed his lack of connection to living off-campus. He stated, "I just come here and go to school and come home and so I don't do that much here. I come here to go to school." Adam's only involvement is in the undergraduate research program, where he serves as an undergraduate research assistant. Sierra, a transfer student living off campus, felt the on-campus activities were for students who live on campus. Among two Hispanic, female students who lived off campus, one student felt less connected than she expected to be and the other described herself as "uncomfortable here because it's still new." Monica described many barriers to her attempts to become involved and found the campus climate to be unwelcoming. She stated,

> There are so many activities, like clubs and organizations, but they're very hard to get a hold of. I'm a commuter now and it's just the different times and the days that I'm here, I'm always in class so they're like we have something over here going on but I have class at that time. I feel like there it's not the strong of the community here as my other school. I feel like there's more of a tension of segregation here on campus.

The remainder of the participants described a positive connection to campus. Three students, who all lived on campus during their first 2 years, associated their connection to campus relative to faculty, staff, or location. Other students associated their connection with involvement in student organizations, activities, or sorority/fraternity life. One student described her connection to campus in relation to the attendance of other family members at State University.

Andrew, a native sophomore who lives on campus, described his connection to campus in a positive light. He characterized the faculty and staff on campus as helpful and stated, "I definitely love it here." Kiana and Beth depicted their connection to campus in relation to the campus location and size. Kiana, a native of New York City who moved off campus with roommates in the second semester of her sophomore year, explained she was able to formulate more personal relationships with people on the small campus compared to the lifestyle one lives in a large city. Beth, a native sophomore, spoke positively about her experiences on campus and the support of university employees. She stated,

> I like how I feel that the university really pushes people. They want you to succeed. That's one thing that I really like about this university. It's a very rural campus and I grew up in a very small rural community, so that's one way that I feel connected.

Other interview participants associated their positive connection to campus with their involvement in student organizations or attendance of athletic events on campus.

Two male students, one who lived on campus and one who lived off campus, described their attendance of athletic events and connection "to other fans." Juan, a first-generation, native sophomore lived on campus and worked as a desk manager in university housing. He found his work on campus provided an opportunity "to establish relationships, professional relationships with like people." Juan was involved in a service organization for students he described "as making a difference and what we do is a good thing so that's one way that I feel connected to the university outside my work."

Four of the interview participants associated their connection to campus through their involvement in a sorority or fraternity on campus. Chloe, a native sophomore who lived off campus with roommates stated her involvement, "keeps me really connected to campus." Thomas, a native sophomore, stated his fraternity membership "makes me feel like this is where I should be." Even though Abigail lives off-campus, she feels highly connected and stated, "I think that really gets me connected because you meet other organizations and I am also in exercise science club, Big Brothers Big Sisters so that keeps me connected, too." Whether sophomores lived on or off campus, participants who reported a positive connection to the university also described some level of involvement. The following is a discussion of the findings and implications for practice.

DISCUSSION

Findings of this study revealed students with low self-efficacy were not involved on campus, struggled with academic tasks, and were less engaged in class and meeting new people as determined by Hunter et al. (2010) and Price-Williams and Sasso (2024) to be challenges in the sophomore year. This lack of involvement may connect to a feeling of invisibility noted in prior research (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Sanchez-Leguelinel, 2008; Tobolowsky, 2008). Experiences of students living on campus can differ from those of commuters. Students who lived off campus did not speak confidently about the potential of engagement. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) asserted that students living on campus might be psychologically more open to the impact of the college environment than commuters.

In comparison, the sophomores with high levels of self-efficacy reported high confidence in social engagement and course-related tasks. Yet, most transfer students in this group lived off campus and those students were not involved in any activities or organizations, unlike the native sophomore students with high self-efficacy. Even further, transfer sophomores in the study who were first-generation and lived off campus lacked a strong support network (i.e., family, mentors, peers), which mirrors existing research on first-generation sophomore students (Capik & Schupp, 2023).

Differences in efficacy are context-specific and can be highly impactful on student performance and success. In addition to differences identified in course-related contexts, interview participants identified numerous instances where their level of social efficacy was lower, which mirrors sophomore transitional issues discussed in earlier studies (Sanchez-Leguelinel, 2008; Schreiner et al., 2012; Tobolowsky, 2008). This was especially true for sophomore transfer students and early sophomores who only completed one or two semesters at State University. At

the end of the second semester of the sophomore year, many students in this study were still attempting to overcome those challenges.

Reading and comprehending textbooks were reported as areas in which the interview participants held the lowest course efficacy. There is an expectation for college students to comprehend and apply what is read in textbooks to the course curriculum. Yet, the interview participants identified comprehension and time management as barriers to reading as a part of their study regimen and prized their ability to adapt regardless of their lack of preparation. These are sophomore academic challenges experienced across academic programs (Estepp et al., 2019).

Many of the interview participants relied heavily on the professor for the transference of knowledge, thus, removing themselves as responsible for learning as found by Baxter Magolda (1992). In addition to reading textbooks, many of the interview participants struggled with efficacy in writing. Many reported their struggles to conform to what is expected of the professor. Similarly, some of the sophomore participants restricted their engagement in class to avoid confrontation in fear of the perceptions of others. Baxter Magolda et al. (2010) identified areas of struggle for first- and second-year students "to judge the credibility of information, to consider their own values, to recognize stereotypes, and to navigate diverse opinions" (p. 211). These struggles seemed to be paramount for interview participants who reported low efficacy in course-related tasks.

Future research should consider different subsets of transfer students as the diversity of contemporary college students is shifting (Blekic et al., 2020). There are different subpopulations of sophomores. Early sophomores constitute a subset of what can be a very diverse sophomore population (high school students who acquire college credit) and are increasing on college campuses. Lateral or reverse transfers are also an increasing population of sophomores. These subpopulations should be examined across institutional types such as public versus private. Their self-efficacy should be examined in the first semester of their second year.

Implications for Practice

More than ever, the persistence of college students beyond the sophomore year is detrimental to the fiscal vitality of an institution in higher education. Early efforts of colleges and universities to support the transition of college students beyond the freshman year may be instrumental in combatting post-sophomore attrition. An expanded focus requires institutions to think differently about student transitions and persistence across the academy. These findings mirror similar findings in the current literature. The creation of a welcoming environment with space on campus for commuters, the fostering of a connection to the university through involvement, and the identification of sophomore students who may be at risk for attrition are key strategies for supporting student success and persistence. To integrate the findings from this study, institutional initiatives might include innovation of sophomore programming to include transfer orientation, the construction of a sophomore success program, and the enhancement of student–faculty relationships.

Innovation of Transfer Orientation Programming

Although transition programming is more common at private institutions in the sophomore year and focuses on career planning, major selection, and academic advising (Blekic et al., 2020; National Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, n.d.; Tobolowsky, 2008), there is a need to innovate transfer orientation programming to support first-generation transfer students in the sophomore year. The findings of this study also indicated first-generation transfer sophomores are less likely to enter with a support network (Blekic et al., 2020; Capik & Shupp, 2023). Gahagan and Hunter (2006) stated "retooling existing initiatives and developing new programs are two solid strategies for improving the experience of second-year students" (p. 19).

One might find a typical transfer orientation to include a transcript review, academic advising, a campus tour, and exposure to services provided by the registrar (i.e., student identification), parking services, and textbook services. Transfer orientation is an opportunity for social engagement and networking, and this should expand beyond icebreakers or speed-dating exercises (Sterling, 2018). For example, roundtable discussions during orientation based on academic and social interests (i.e., undergraduate research, study abroad, service learning; Kranzow & Foote, 2018) would allow for small-group discussion in more depth. Moreover, faculty facilitation of the roundtables would allow for conversations centered on course-related tasks and expectations. Although transfer orientation is rarely mandatory, a higher yield may result from the promotion of program outcomes and the opportunity to engage with faculty.

Construction of a Sophomore Success Program

Tinto (2012) maintained students are more likely to succeed in educational environments where expectations are clear and high, where academic and social support is provided, where performance assessment and feedback are ongoing, and where students are actively involved in and outside of the classroom. Institutions should formalize a sophomore success program and integrate it into broader campus-wide enrollment management plans (Sterling, 2018).

A sophomore success program should connect students to an "intellectual commons," such as a midpoint success seminar to integrate career and major exploration (Schaller, 2018). Public institutions continue to fall behind private colleges and universities in cultivating visibility and undergraduate class identity (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior) among sophomores. Programming devised in private institutions included publications directed to sophomores to help create a class identity, retreats, class trips, and social gatherings to build community (Tobolowsky, 2008).

This program should also formalize experiential learning opportunities across high-impact practices (HIPs; Provencher & Kassel, 2019). Young et al. (2015) emphasized the importance of HIPs as sophomore initiatives but challenged institutions to consider quality, effectiveness, and outcomes when developing programming. HIPs have a cumulative effect over time through participation and

influence sophomore persistence (Provencher & Kassel, 2019). Higher education administrators should be intentional in program development to facilitate expansion in social capital (Schaller, 2018), be clear about the intended outcomes, and encourage attendees to engage in expanding their network.

Enhancement of Student–Faculty Relationships

Although participants in this study reported confidence in talking to professors outside of class, their motivations varied, lacked meaning, and were infrequent. Yet, those with low self-efficacy struggled with course-related tasks such as reading textbooks, preparing for exams, and time management. These deficits resulted in lower performance and self-efficacy. Schreiner and Tobolowsky (2018) maintained a lack of interaction intensifies disengagement or dissatisfaction in the classroom. The authors also articulated the value of formal and informal interaction. A starting point is knowledge; faculty can benefit from expanded knowledge of student transitions, especially those experienced by sophomores. With smaller classes, sophomores can benefit from short mid-point informal meetings with faculty to connect and develop social capital (Schreiner & Tobolowsky, 2018). Large class sizes can be a barrier to one-on-one meetings. However, faculty can socialize students to the discipline (Schreiner & Tobolowsky, 2018), intentionally define and model the student–relationship, and optimize their teaching style to influence students' mastery of course efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

CONCLUSION

Findings from this study present new ways of thinking about specific initiatives through which institutions can more intentionally facilitate sophomore success. Engagement of institutional stakeholders with sophomores may support the expansion of their self-efficacy, which leads to persistence toward graduation. Institutions should crystalize and formalize a sophomore success program using enrollment management frameworks. These efforts should also involve faculty crucial in defining and modeling the faculty–student relationship inside and outside of class, especially when the learning environment is large in size. The college environment heavily influences the self-efficacy of sophomore students and holds the potential to assuage barriers associated with the second-year transition. Campus communities, irrespective of size and type, should celebrate and support all college sophomores, native and transfer, through effective and innovative programming.

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Institutional Ethnography of Women Faculty in Higher Education: Understanding Gendered Experiences and Power Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we explored the day-to-day work of women faculty members in higher education to understand the impact of various processes, policies, procedures, and discourses on their work-life balance. For this study, *faculty* includes lecturers, assistant professors, associate professors, and full professors. The term *women* encompasses individuals who identify as women, including cisgender and transgender women, to ensure inclusivity in our analysis. Utilizing feminist standpoint theory, we analyzed data collected from four focus groups to highlight the challenges and barriers women faculty encounter in balancing their professional and personal lives, with a particular focus on how privilege and power dynamics influence their academic experiences. Framed as an institutional ethnography, our analysis reveals that women faculty often struggle to balance their personal and professional responsibilities. Participants described the challenges of rigid work schedules, insufficient medical leave, and heavy and uneven workloads. These findings reinforced the need for equitable policies to create a more inclusive and empowering academic environment for women faculty members.

Keywords: institutional ethnography, women faculty, caregiving, care receiving, receiving care, uncompensated work, ideal academic worker, tenure, career advancement, feminist standpoint theory

Research suggests that women faculty members face distinct challenges impacting their career trajectories and work-life balance.[1] Researchers have documented the persistence of gender disparities in higher education and revealed the barriers that women faculty members face, which impact their path to promotion, job satisfaction, and overall career progression (Hart, 2016; Xu, 2008). For example, research has found that women faculty experience biased evaluation processes (Valencia, 2022), limited access to resources (Ceci et al., 2023), and disparities in promotion and tenure outcomes in academia (Ceci et al., 2023; Mickey et al., 2022). Workplace inequalities compound the challenges women faculty face in balancing their personal and professional lives (Mickey et al., 2022). Specifically, women faculty members struggled to achieve a satisfactory work-life balance due to the double burden of academic responsibilities and caregiving obligations (Bender et al., 2021; Breuning et al., 2021). These disparities and barriers profoundly affected the work-life balance, job security, professional development opportunities, leadership roles, and contributions to the academic community of women faculty members (Rosa, 2021). Understanding and addressing these issues is essential not only for promoting gender equity but also for creating an inclusive and diverse higher education environment that benefits all faculty members.

In this study, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of the institutional processes that organize and coordinate the experiences of women faculty, with the goal of identifying systemic issues contributing to gender disparities and their implications for work-life balance (Smith, 2005). Specifically, we began from the standpoint of women faculty at a Midwestern University (MU, pseudonym) to shed light on the underlying institutional structures that perpetuate gender inequities and hinder work-life balance in higher education. Through the lens of feminist standpoint theory (Campbell & Gregor, 2004; Smith, 2005) and intersectionality (Collins, 1998), we sought to understand how the intersection of gender with other social identities impacted the work-life balance of women faculty members. Acknowledging this intersectional perspective is important for understanding the challenges and inequalities faced by women faculty members in higher education. By examining how various social identities intersect with gender, we aimed to contribute to the research on higher education as a gendered institution (Blalock et al., 2023) and offer recommendations for creating a more inclusive and equitable academic environment.

Through this research, we aspire to contribute to the existing knowledge base on gender inequities relating to work-life balance in academia. By recognizing the complexities of women's experiences and considering the broader institutional context, our findings informed policy changes impacting women faculty members. We begin by discussing the literature on gender equity and work-life balance in academia, including the challenges and barriers that women encounter in academic settings, as well as initiatives that promote work-life balance and support. Next, we

[1] We define work-life balance as a person's capability to navigate, coordinate, or integrate their personal and professional lives in a manner that matches their intended way of life and work (Culpepper et al. 2020).

describe our IE approach, including data collection and analysis. We then present an in-depth analysis of the barriers that women faculty face, including scheduling workarounds, imbalanced workloads, and short-term medical leaves, exploring the impact of institutional practices and power dynamics. We conclude by providing recommendations for promoting gender equity and work-life balance in academia as we endeavor to create a more equitable and supportive environment for women faculty members.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender Equity and Work-Life Balance in Academic Settings

First, research suggests that gender inequities in academia make it difficult for women, especially mothers, to maintain work-life balance and scholarly productivity (Bender et al., 2022; Breuning et al., 2021; Casad et al., 2020; Mickey et al., 2022). For example, Bender et al. (2022) conducted a reflexive thematic analysis of open-ended survey responses from 51 academic mothers (faculty and graduate students) recruited globally, with the majority located in the United States, to examine how COVID-19 impacted their scholarly productivity. The study found that pandemic-related disruptions intensified the conflict between personal (parenting) and professional (academic) roles, resulting in reduced scholarly productivity, altered childcare demands, and increased emotional distress, including guilt, anxiety, and exhaustion.

Similarly, Breuning et al. their colleagues (2021) surveyed 1,003 scholars of political science and international studies (655 women, 338 men), with the majority of participants based in the United States. While both men and women perceived the COVID-19 pandemic as negatively affecting their productivity, qualitative responses revealed that women, particularly mothers, experienced greater challenges due to increased caregiving responsibilities. The authors concluded that the pandemic may widen existing gender and parent productivity gaps in academia. Mickey et al. (2022) conducted a case study of U.S. university responses to the pandemic. They found that while institutions adjusted some evaluation procedures, such as tenure delays, these changes often reinforced neoliberal ideals of the *ideal academic*. These standard disadvantages women and caregiving faculty. Finally, Casad et al. (2020) reviewed gender inequality in STEM fields. They identified systemic barriers, including unequal service loads, a lack of mentorship, and biases in performance evaluations, which hinder women's advancement and make achieving a sustainable work-life balance challenging. These studies demonstrated that structural and cultural barriers in academia continue to disadvantage women faculty, especially mothers, limiting their capacity to thrive professionally while managing caregiving responsibilities.

Challenges and Barriers that Women Encounter in Academic Settings

In addition to the work-life balance concerns faced by women in academia, scholars have also documented persistent structural barriers that hinder their professional advancement. Research suggests that gender biases and stereotypes in hiring,

evaluation, and promotion processes continue negatively impacting women's academic careers (Ceci et al., 2023; Chesak et al., 2022; Mickey et al., 2022; Ward & Hall, 2022). For example, Ceci et al. (2023) examined gender bias across six domains of academic science using meta-analytic and adversarial collaboration methods. They found that while explicit bias was reduced in some domains, such as hiring and grants, women still faced disadvantages in teaching evaluations and salary, with broader structural inequities continuing to affect career progression.

Similarly, Mickey et al. (2022) conducted a case study on faculty evaluations during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that even well-intentioned institutional changes often reinforced neoliberal assumptions about productivity, disproportionately disadvantaging women and caregiving faculty. Chesak et al. (2022) analyzed focus group data from 28 women physicians at various career stages and identified recurring barriers, including implicit bias, structural inequity, and institutional opacity, in promotion processes. Ward and Hall (2022) qualitatively synthesized tenure denial lawsuits filed by Black professors. They found that gendered racism and inconsistent application of promotion guidelines contributed to inequitable outcomes in historically white institutions. These studies demonstrated that gendered structural and cultural barriers persist in academia, limiting women's full participation and reinforcing disparities in advancement and recognition.

Challenges in Achieving a Satisfactory Work-Life Balance

Another theme that builds on these challenges is the difficulty of achieving a balance of work and life in academic settings. Research identifies long working hours, high workloads, and publication expectations as contributing factors to work-life imbalance across faculty (Blackburn, 2022; Fazal et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2023; Rosa, 2021; Shi et al., 2021). Rosa (2021) conducted a critical review of work-life balance literature in neoliberal academic contexts. The review found that institutional responses often emphasize individual responsibility rather than addressing structural or systemic barriers, reinforcing expectations of constant availability and self-management.

Fazal et al. (2022) synthesized eight qualitative studies conducted in Pakistan, focusing on women faculty in higher education. Their review reported that inflexible schedules, limited childcare provisions, and weak administrative structures hindered participants' ability to balance caregiving and academic responsibilities. Shi et al. (2021) conducted a systematic review of 27 studies examining the global experiences of women in neurosurgery. Articles included data from 25 countries and highlighted challenges such as balancing work and caregiving, advancing professionally, and accessing mentorship.

Lee et al. (2023) reviewed 20 studies on university academics in Australia and New Zealand. Their scoping review found that high workloads, performance expectations, and limited time for research were consistent sources of occupational stress. Blackburn (2022) reviewed literature published between 2020 and 2022 on women in STEM in U.S. higher education. The review reported a decrease in research productivity, an increase in caregiving responsibilities, and limited institutional support for women faculty during the COVID-19 pandemic. These studies document

the institutional and structural conditions that contribute to conflicts between academic workload and work-life balance among faculty.

Successful Initiatives to Support Women Faculty

A growing body of research has addressed these persistent challenges by examining institutional efforts to enhance work-life balance and support the career advancement of women faculty. Research suggests that institutional supports such as family-friendly policies and mentorship programs positively influence women faculty's work-life balance, job satisfaction, and career progression (Agha et al., 2017; Culpepper et al., 2020; Lester & Sallee, 2023; Llorens et al., 2021; Ocobock et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2014). For example, the University of South Carolina implemented family-friendly policies, including modified duties and flexible tenure clocks for faculty with caregiving responsibilities (Lester & Sallee, 2023). Agha et al. (2017) surveyed 625 higher education faculty members in Oman to examine the effects of work-life balance on job satisfaction and teaching performance. They found that work-personal life enhancement had a positive impact on faculty outcomes. In contrast, work interference with personal life and personal life interference with work have adverse effects on job satisfaction.

Similarly, using surveys, interviews, and reflective essays, Thomas et al. (2014) examined a peer mentoring initiative involving 42 tenured women STEM faculty at a large Midwestern research university in the United States. They found that peer mentoring circles offered both personal and professional support, enhanced participants' sense of belonging, and contributed to institutional retention efforts. Participants also utilized the mentoring structure to communicate faculty needs to leadership, resulting in policy adjustments and an expansion of mentoring support. Ocobock et al. (2021) conducted a literature review focused on mentorship in academia and presented a set of recommendations emphasizing the value of structured mentorship networks, formal mentor training, and accountability mechanisms.

Culpepper et al. (2020) conducted a study at a single land-grant university (LGU) located in a suburban area near a large urban center in the United States. The researchers used a mixed-methods approach, analyzing survey responses from 828 tenure-track faculty at this research-intensive university and examining 443 open-ended comments to explore how partner status, gender, and rank influence faculty agency in work-life balance. They found that single women associate professors experienced less institutional support and greater scrutiny in work-life decisions than married colleagues, especially those with children. Llorens et al. (2021) conducted a global perspective review to examine how gender bias manifests as a series of distinct but interconnected issues throughout the course of an academic career. Drawing on literature synthesis and insights from international workshops, they found that these biases accumulate over time, shaping disparities in publishing, funding, hiring, and recognition, particularly for women with intersecting marginalized identities. The authors outlined concrete actions at the individual, institutional, and societal levels to foster a more equitable academic environment. These studies demonstrate that institutional policies and programs, such as flexible work arrangements and structured

mentorship initiatives, can help women faculty address barriers to achieving a satisfactory work-life balance and advancing in their academic careers, while also underscoring the importance of addressing systemic inequities and the psychological impacts across diverse faculty groups.

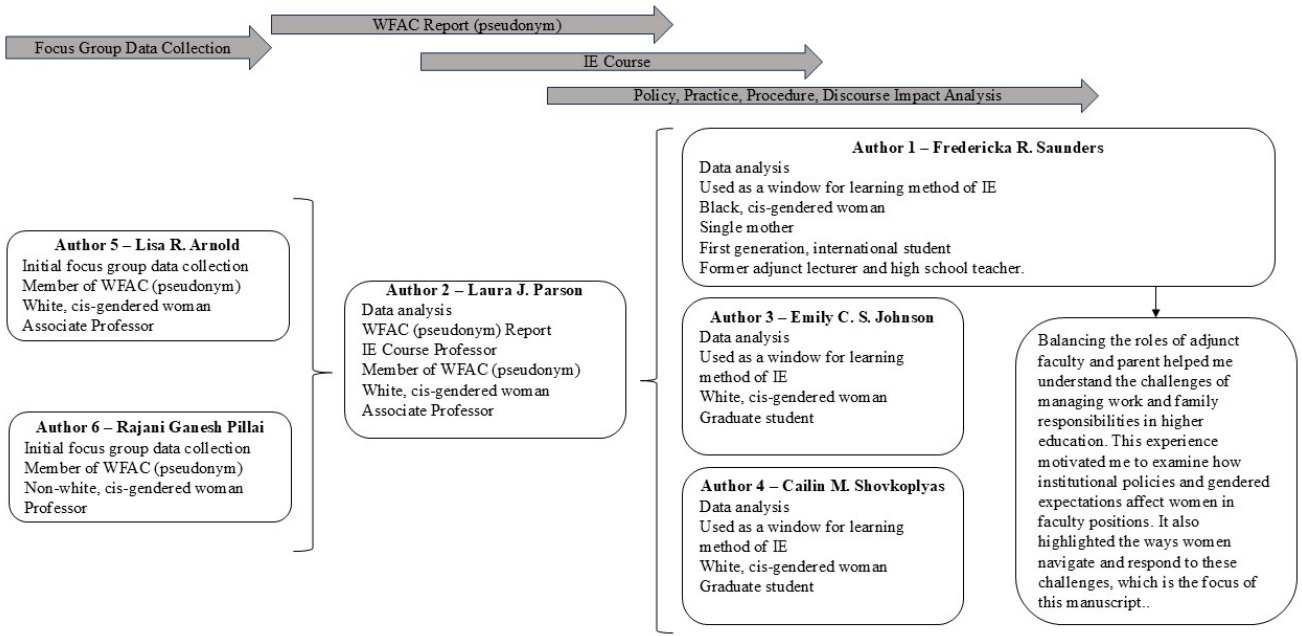
Work-Life Imbalance Relative to Men and Nonbinary Faculty

Comparing the experiences of cisgender men with those of women faculty members helps us better understand the difficulties they encounter in attaining work-life balance. Research suggests that structural expectations in academia often privilege cisgender men over women and nonbinary faculty in achieving work-life balance (Bianchi et al., 2012; Ceci et al., 2023; Mickey et al., 2022; Wright-Mair, 2023). For example, Ceci et al. (2023) conducted an adversarial collaboration that examined gender bias across six academic science domains in the United States. They found that although women's representation has improved in specific disciplines, caregiving expectations and institutional norms continue to disadvantage women's academic success and integration of work and personal life. Similarly, Mickey et al. (2022) conducted a case study of faculty evaluation systems during the COVID-19 pandemic and found that neoliberal logic persisted in U.S. higher education. These systems prioritized quantifiable productivity, undervaluing the service and caregiving work disproportionately performed by women. Bianchi et al. (2012) analyzed time-use data from U.S. households. They found that women, especially married mothers, performed nearly twice as much unpaid domestic labor as men in similar family structures. This imbalance reduced the time available for professional work and contributed to long-term disparities in academic achievement.

Nonbinary faculty face different but related challenges due to institutional structures that uphold binary gender norms. Wright-Mair (2023) employed critical qualitative inquiry to explore the experiences of racially minoritized LGBTQ+ faculty. This study found that racism, heterosexism, tokenization, and neoliberal academic norms collectively undermined participants' mental health, professional advancement, and sense of institutional belonging. Mentoring relationships, typically viewed as sources of support, often reinforced institutional expectations and symbolic labor that disproportionately burden marginalized faculty. These findings demonstrate that while cisgender men benefit from institutional norms that support uninterrupted academic focus, women and nonbinary faculty encounter systemic barriers that interfere with their ability to achieve work-life balance and sustain long-term academic careers.

In this study, we report on how institutional processes and policies influence the ability of women faculty to achieve or struggle with achieving a sustainable work-life balance. We aim to show how these systems either support or hinder women in managing both professional and personal responsibilities. By identifying policies, procedures, and practices that may hinder work-life balance, we aim to provide insights that contribute to creating a more equitable and supportive academic environment for women faculty. Understanding the intersection of work and personal life is essential for advancing gender equity in higher education, and our research addresses these important challenges**.**

Figure 1: Researchers' Positionality



METHOD

We employed an institutional ethnographic approach to explore the intricate dynamics of gender inequities and their effects on the work-life balance of women faculty members in higher education. We focused on exploring how institutional texts, policies, and practices shaped the daily experiences of these women. By examining the systemic issues that contribute to gender disparities and, by extension, work-life challenges, we gain a deeper understanding of the institutional structures and barriers that impact work-life balance. The institutional ethnographic (IE) framework (Smith, 2005) served as the methodological backbone of this research, aligning to understand the social organization of work and how institutional policies, practices, and procedures shape individual experiences. For example, we examined how formal parental leave policies and unwritten expectations around research productivity during leave shape women faculty's decisions about when and how to take time off after childbirth. We aim to reveal the challenges and identify areas for potential intervention within institutional structures. This study represents an effort to address gender inequities and improve the work-life balance of women faculty members in higher education, fostering a more equitable and supportive academic environment. Three questions coordinated our data analysis and subsequent data collection:

1. What is the day-to-day work of women faculty members in higher education?
2. What are the processes, policies, procedures, and discourses that coordinate the daily work of women faculty members?
3. What challenges do women faculty members in higher education face in the pursuit of work-life balance?

We collected data through focus groups and document analysis to provide context for participants' experiences. In addition to the focus groups, we conducted a targeted review of institutional documents to gain a deeper understanding of the formal structures that shape faculty experiences. We examined tenure and promotion guidelines, departmental bylaws, faculty onboarding materials, and relevant web pages from MU. These documents were publicly available or shared by participating departments and dated between 2023 and 2024. This analysis helped identify alignment or disjuncture between formal policies and the lived experiences shared during focus groups. We remained reflexive throughout the research and used the discussion to acknowledge and discuss potential biases that might impact data analysis. Our methods section ensures transparency by outlining data collection and analysis steps. As is typical of IE research, we combined focus groups and policy identification to explore the experiences and institutional structures that coordinate the work of pursuing work-life balance for women faculty.

Participants

Participants self-selected into the study by responding to campus-wide recruitment emails or targeted messages to faculty members interested in gender equity. Members of the research team sent recruitment messages using their password-protected MU email accounts, which ensured the confidentiality of participants' responses. A total

of 23 full-time employees participated in four focus groups, with 19 identifying as White, two as Asian, and one as Black or African American. We assigned each participant a pseudonym to protect their identity.[2] Participants had the option to choose between single-gender or mixed-gender focus groups. Each of the four focus groups (see Table 1) consisted of 5-7 tenured-track faculty members as participants.

Table 1: Faculty Participants by Racial/Ethnic Group and Focus Group

Focus Group	Number of Participants	Type of Focus Group	White	Asian	Black or African American
1	5	single-gender, women	5	0	0
2	6	single-gender women	5	1	0
3	5	single-gender women	4	1	0
4	7	single-gender, men[3]	6	0	1

Data Collection

The primary data collection method included analyzing data from four focus groups at MU in March 2022, following the recruitment of participants in February 2022. Focus groups were held in person at MU for approximately one hour. Facilitators posed 5-6 open-ended questions about participants' experiences as faculty members at their current institution, which covered onboarding and orientation, promotion, leadership opportunities, career support, and gender equity policies. Facilitators audio-recorded and transcribed focus group discussions for later analysis (Creswell, 2014). We securely stored all material data on a password-protected drive. Our exploration of focus group data provided insights into individual experiences, which informed the document analysis of institutional policies, tenure guidelines, promotion criteria, and the MU web pages.

[2] To protect participant confidentiality, we do not include a full demographic table that links pseudonyms to specific characteristics. Due to the small size of the focus groups and the combination of personal, professional, and demographic details shared, providing such a table could increase the risk of identification.

[3] An IE seeks to understand the standpoint of the population of interest, but participants are not limited to members of that group, as members of other groups, such as allies, may be able to provide insight into the institutional factors (policies, procedures, and discourses) that coordinate the activities of the population in focus. In this study, we also spoke to men faculty to provide a more nuanced understanding of the institutional factors that coordinate the work of women faculty as they pursue work-life balance.

Data Analysis

After receiving IRB, we explored the daily experiences of women faculty members at MU as a starting point to understand the integration of their work within the higher education institution (Smith, 2005). We collected entry-level and level two data. Entry-level data consisted of the day-to-day work of women faculty in balancing academic and non-academic tasks, while level two data encompassed the policies, practices, procedures, and discourses that coordinate the work identified in step one (Campbell & Gregor, 2004). We began by identifying the work-related work-life balance as described by participants in the interview responses (Campbell & Gregor, 2004). This involved a close reading of transcripts to examine how participants discussed their everyday work and how institutional expectations influenced their experiences. We labeled the work the participants identified as the explicit, formal tasks they were responsible for (such as attending meetings, teaching classes, and conducting research). Then, we labeled the unspoken work that went into that task as the invisible, emotional, and logistical labor (such as coordinating childcare, managing emotional stress, multitasking during meetings, and navigating institutional barriers for accommodations). Next, we explored the work identified in the level one data to identify the policy, practice, procedure, or discourse that coordinated that work. To identify MU and state-level policies, procedures, practices, and discourses that coordinated the work. The policies we explored included MU's policies on flexible work and remote work opportunities to assess how supportive or restrictive they are compared to state regulations that promote work-life balance. We also investigated MU's medical leave policies to understand how they support faculty during major life events and how they compare with state mandates. Finally, we analyzed practices around scheduling meetings to assess how they accommodate or conflict with faculty members' responsibilities. We scrutinized the procedures for promotion and tenure at MU to determine their impact on women faculty, especially those who may need to take leave or work flexibly.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data collection, analysis, and reporting process, we sought trustworthiness through triangulation (Creswell, 2014). Trustworthiness is important because it helps reduce bias and makes the findings more credible by using diverse types of information to support the results (Creswell, 2014). For example, we utilized multiple data sources, including focus groups and institutional records, which enabled cross-validation and data convergence, thereby enhancing the credibility and dependability of the results. Further, we ensured transparency in reporting the research process by clearly documenting the methodology, data collection procedures, and data analysis techniques (Creswell, 2014). This transparency enabled other researchers to evaluate the study's validity and potentially replicate it, further enhancing its credibility.

Ethics

We adhered to the ethical guidelines and principles of relevant institutional review boards and professional organizations. We obtained participants' informed consent prior to their involvement in the study and ensured voluntary participation by reminding them that they could withdraw from the study at any time. We protected their privacy and confidentiality by using pseudonyms and saving research files in password-protected files. We kept any identifiable information anonymized or confidential to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of the participants.

FINDINGS

Our analysis of focus group data identified the key challenges women faculty face in pursuing work-life balance. Those challenges include scheduling work around life, an imbalanced workload, and short-term medical leave. Each of these findings are discussed in detail below. As part of this, first, we discuss each challenge as described by participants (entry-level data). Then, we identify and describe the policy, practice, or procedure that coordinated the daily work and provided evidence of that theme (level two data). According to our analysis, these issues are not unique; instead, they are intricately linked to institutional policies and structures that shape the day-to-day experiences of women faculty members. We aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of how work-life balance is negotiated and where systemic changes are needed by examining these topics through participant narratives, as well as an analysis of institutional regulations. Each problem is examined in detail in the sections that follow, which also establish connections between personal experiences and the broader institutional context.

Scheduling Work Around Life

Our analysis of focus group data suggests that personal work-life integration presented a significant challenge for women faculty members, including navigating meeting times that coincided with the need to pick up children from school and care for them after school. First, participants described how attending meetings often conflicted with family commitments, leading to challenges in achieving a satisfactory work-life balance. Mary shared some of the following concerns:

> Cuz' recently; this is something that I've been thinking about, like, pretty much all the meetings that I go to that relate to my leadership role are like starting at 3:00 PM. And it's really hard if you have elementary-aged kids to swing it. I've just, you know, like, someone sitting in the group has been aware of me frantically, like, I'm on the phone, I'm on Zoom, trying to get into my house, and get kids set up with snacks, and then switch over, and it feels like I'm always getting called on to contribute to the meeting right when I'm in the midst of doing that.

Mary expressed her frustration with the timing of meetings related to her leadership role, noting that the meetings typically start at 3:00 PM. As a parent of elementary-aged children, Mary faced a scheduling challenge between those meetings and

picking up her children, as schools in the Midwest operate between 8:00 am and 3:00 pm. This presented a challenge for Mary as a parent, balancing her work and the demands of parenting without support to accommodate or adjust her scheduling.

As a result, Mary described her efforts to manage responsibilities, often multitasking between phone calls, Zoom meetings, and attending to her children's needs, such as setting them up with snacks. Despite her efforts, Mary described how she would be called upon to contribute to meetings precisely when juggling these tasks, adding to the difficulty of balancing her professional and family obligations. Although University hours in the Midwest are typically between 8:00 am and 5:00 pm, there was an institutional practice of holding meetings at 3:00 pm, which created a challenge for her as she wanted to be a good employee by fully engaging in meetings and a good parent by attending to her children's needs.

Luna also shared the difficulties she faced as a single mother, particularly in balancing her responsibilities of getting her child to school and attending meetings. Meetings were frequently scheduled at 8:00 a.m., directly conflicting with her school drop-off duties. Additionally, her after-hours responsibilities, such as student discussion groups and contributing to teaching and service for promotion and tenure, created further challenges in managing her role as a full-time parent.

> I would- I was going to say, I would, meeting times I was like "Eh! Meeting times." But then I realized I had a part of an institute that I'm regularly required to show up at things either 8:00 in the morning, um, or, like, discussion groups with students at 6:00 in the evening. And I don't, I, I'm a single mom, I don't, you know, and I just have to say, I just have to say, "I can't be there." I have to get my child to school, I can't just not take her to school today. Um, and I suppose they could say I should get a babysitter but I, 8:00, 8:00 in the morning is not my working time. Um, and so potentially a policy that says no required meetings can be held outside of whatever we decide the university's working hours are would be useful. I don't- I don't know what our- I don't know what the university's working hours are.

Luna reflected on her struggle to balance her responsibilities as a single mother with the demands of her professional obligations. She reflected on how she often had to attend events early in the morning or late at night as part of her institute commitments. Luna expressed frustration with the conflict between taking her child to school and attending these required meetings for her role as a faculty member. Luna emphasized that early morning meetings do not align with her schedule as a single mother. As a single mother, Luna cared for the children and ensured they got to and from school; the practice of having meetings at 8:00 am and 6:00 pm created a challenge between her desire to be a good parent and to be a good faculty member as she had to determine priority between her child and her employment.

The experiences that participants like Mary and Luna shared are directly reflected in these institutional inequities. Mary explained the challenge of juggling her meeting schedules with her parental duties, emphasizing how strict institutional procedures did not adequately consider her dual roles. Similarly, Luna's challenges as a single mother highlighted how institutional scheduling procedures unfairly burden professors with caring responsibilities, particularly regarding early morning and late evening meetings. These incidents highlight the necessity of adaptable

regulations that consider caregiving responsibilities and take into consideration the many realities of faculty life. Institutions can better support faculty members like Mary and Luna by addressing these systemic gaps and guaranteeing fair treatment across a range of personal and professional circumstances.

Imbalanced Workloads

Participants described having heavy workloads that they felt were unattainable, which led to burnout for some women faculty participants. For example, Joanne described the pressure to teach more classes, retain students, and attract students as challenges to the research expectations. Joanne voiced her concerns about the increasing workload expectations in her department, particularly regarding teaching responsibilities. She highlighted the challenges of balancing teaching, service, and research obligations, especially as a pre-tenured faculty member:

> It just feels like we're expected to do more and more with less and less. Um, teaching is a huge problem in my department. We have so many PTAs, and we can't teach our classes, and we're pressured to teach more, and retain students, and attract students. And, so, my time is spent teaching and doing service, when, and that's really concerning for someone who is pre-tenure. My research is taking a real hit, and it feels like I am not doing a good job at balancing it. And that bleeds over to my home life, feeling like I'm not good at any of the roles that I'm in.

Joanne expressed worry about the impact on her research productivity due to the heavy teaching and service demands. The pressure Joanne felt to contribute to the teaching and service functions created a challenge in meeting the requirements of her position to make research contributions. Her desire to be a good faculty member and achieve tenure conflicted with her ability to manage her workload without compromising her well-being. This workload imbalance affected her professional advancement, spilled over into her personal life, and left her feeling inadequate in all roles.

To understand the policy that organizes expectations for research productivity at MU, we explored the MU Promotion, Tenure, and Evaluation (PTE) policy, which outlines the expectations for making research contributions. The MU PTE Policy stated that each faculty member would contribute high-quality research. However, while the policy described a need to meet those expectations, the document does not provide clear expectations of how much research productivity was needed to achieve a substantial contribution as measured by meeting PTE expectations. The expectation that faculty members conduct research without clearly communicating how much should be done created a challenge for women faculty members who felt they should be doing more research. However, because their expectations were not clearly outlined, they never knew how much was enough and felt pressure to keep pushing to achieve an unclear baseline. The policy creates a challenge for faculty members who want to be effective, receive promotion and tenure, and achieve a work-life balance.

Short-Term Medical Leave

Women faculty described challenges with requesting and receiving accommodations for parental leave. For example, Violet described her experience of being pregnant and delivering a baby during the semester as a faculty member in academia.

> Um, I'm, uh, not in a tenure-track job, so my experience has been very different. Um, without a lot of protections, uh, you mentioned maternity leave. Um, when one year, many, many years ago, I was, I found myself pregnant and going to deliver during uh, a semester. Um, and I asked my, my Department Chair to give me part-time and be paid part-time, of course, for that for that time. Um, his response to me, "Well, you understand from my perspective, that's not good news." Um, yeah, and, and so I took, I taught halftime and was paid half time. And was back in the classroom a week after my daughter was born.

Violet described the challenge of requesting maternity leave for individuals on a non-tenure track. She recounted her experience of being pregnant and due to deliver during a semester, as it created a challenge between being a woman and working. When she requested part-time work and partial payment during her maternity leave from her Department Chair, she received a dismissive response implying that her pregnancy news was unwelcome. Despite this, Violet was compromised by teaching halftime and being paid accordingly. Although she wanted to spend more time with her young child, she returned to the classroom just one week after giving birth to her daughter, as she felt pressured to do so.

Alice provided accounts of her experiences of working 80-hour work weeks and teaching from a sick bed after having a stroke in academia.

> Uh, my department is completely toxic and dysfunctional. I would just like to be treated fairly… I have filed equity complaints, and they have found discrimination, but they said it's the whole department, not just the Chair, so they can't take action… And I mean, you know, before tenure, you keep quiet, it's so scary of losing your job. You get tenure, and even I got promoted myself, nothing changed. No matter what how much I do, what I accomplished, I work 80-hour weeks, nothing matters. I have taught while hospitalized after a heart attack, you know, from my hospital bed. Who cares? Nobody. So, I, I am actually completely sick of the environment here. And, you know, I will say, I think [Cultivate] for what, has done a lot for white women. It has done nothing for women of color. I am completely isolated. Nobody has ever reached out to find out how I'm doing. All right? I, I, I, things like work-life balance don't apply to Brown people like me. I realized that a long time ago. So, I, I, I have nothing good to say is the bottom line.

Alice expressed her frustration with the toxic and dysfunctional environment in her department, emphasizing the need for fair treatment. Alice highlighted the silence often maintained before obtaining tenure due to fears of job loss, contrasting with the unchanged circumstances even after achieving tenure and promotion. She spoke to the disregard for her extensive efforts, including working 80-hour weeks and teaching while hospitalized after a heart attack.

Alice also noted the disparity in support between white women and women of color, feeling isolated and overlooked in her experiences. She felt that the work-life

balance did not apply to individuals like her, expressing that she had nothing good to say. The PTE policy states that the Department/Unit Chair/Head shall review and evaluate the candidate's portfolio, prepare a written report, and evaluate the faculty member's performance in teaching, research, creative activities, and service since their last post-tenure review. Although Alice was experiencing health challenges, she still felt pressured to teach and work based on her perceptions of how the PTE policy would be implemented and the evidence she needed to provide to support her career advancement. This created a challenge for Alice, who felt pressure to teach during her hospitalization and struggled to balance work and life.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our analysis of focus group data from MU revealed significant challenges women faculty members faced as they tried to balance their professional and personal lives. These challenges included the need for more flexible work options, heavy workloads, and the inadequacy of medical leave. We linked each of these issues to specific institutional factors. First, we found that participants described how MU's policies were often rigid, and they noted limited flexibility in scheduling, which was crucial for those with caregiving responsibilities. Second, participants described how practices at MU disproportionately allocated administrative and service tasks to women, which are often unrecognized in tenure and promotion considerations. Third, participants described how procedures for parental leave were not only insufficient but also inconsistently applied, which affected women more meaningfully due to societal expectations around caregiving roles. Finally, participants described how prevailing discourses within MU perpetuated gender stereotypes and biases, contributing to a work environment that felt unwelcoming or even hostile to some women faculty. Next, we discuss each finding in detail, situating it in the literature and providing recommendations for future practice.

Flexible and Remote Work

Mary and Luna described how flexible and remote work options were needed because they found it difficult to attend meetings while having to tend to their children during the time that the meeting was being held. Having flexible meeting times is important, especially for faculty members who were also parents or had other caregiving responsibilities. This necessity aligns with prior research indicating that flexible working arrangements can meaningfully alleviate work-life conflicts and enhance job satisfaction among academic staff (Hansen, 2020; Lee et al., 2023). Participants suggested that scheduling meetings and work responsibilities around school pick-up and drop-off times would greatly improve their ability to balance professional work with family responsibilities. Accommodating these times would help them manage their roles as faculty members and parents more effectively. Allowing faculty to choose their work hours and locations could also enhance focus and productivity, accommodating personal commitments more effectively.

We recommend formalizing support for flexible and remote work arrangements to ensure all faculty can avail themselves of these options without penalty. Future

research should explore how these flexible work policies impact faculty members' long-term career trajectories and academic productivity, particularly among women and underrepresented groups in academia. In this study, traditional schedules often clashed with personal responsibilities. Universities need to rethink their scheduling policies to accommodate their faculty's varying needs so that they can accomplish institutional and personal goals without stigma. Likewise, research suggests that setting policies that limited meetings to standard working hours meaningfully helped faculty manage their dual responsibilities more effectively (Thomas et al., 2014). Those changes not only helped individual faculty members but also enhanced the overall productivity and morale of the academic community.

Heavy and Imbalanced Workloads

Joanne described heavy and imbalanced workloads as a significant challenge, particularly for pre-tenured faculty who expected to excel in teaching, research, and service. The PTE policy mandated high-quality contributions in these areas but does not clearly define what constitutes substantial evidence for their PTE dossier. This lack of clarity created a challenge between the desire to meet professional goals and maintain a work-life balance.

Joanne highlighted the increasing workload expectations in her department, especially in teaching. She noted that the pressure to teach more classes, retain students, and attract new ones has meaningfully impacted her ability to conduct research. Her story illustrates the conflict many faculty face: striving to fulfill the comprehensive demands of the PTE policy while managing personal well-being and professional development.

This issue aligns with prior research indicating that imbalanced workloads can lead to faculty burnout and dissatisfaction, particularly affecting those not yet tenured (Ceci et al., 2023; Mickey et al., 2022). To address these challenges, participants suggested that universities clarify what constitutes substantial contributions in teaching, research, and service within the PTE policy, thereby helping faculty better manage their time and efforts. Additionally, implementing policies that ensure a more equitable distribution of teaching, research, and service responsibilities, acknowledging faculty members' varied strengths and career stages, could alleviate some of the pressures.

We recommend policy adjustments, including redefining success in tenure and promotion processes to include a broader range of valuable contributions beyond traditional metrics. Establishing support systems, such as teaching assistants or research grants, could help faculty manage heavy workloads and maintain productivity without compromising their well-being.

These recommendations are supported by research suggesting that when institutions provide clear guidelines and support for managing workloads, faculty satisfaction and retention improve (Ceci et al., 2023; Mickey et al., 2022). Future research should explore the long-term impacts of these workload management policies on faculty career trajectories, especially for women and underrepresented groups, to ensure that tenure and promotion processes are equitable and supportive. Addressing heavy and imbalanced workloads is crucial for preventing burnout and

ensuring that all faculty members have a fair opportunity to succeed in their academic roles without sacrificing their personal lives or well-being.

Medical Leave

Violet and Alice shared their experiences, highlighting the challenges associated with medical and parental leave within academia, especially for non-tenure track faculty and women of color. Violet recounted her struggle with obtaining adequate maternity leave; when she requested to work part-time during her pregnancy, her department chair responded negatively, suggesting her situation was inconvenient for the department. Despite her needs, she returned to teaching just one week after giving birth, feeling pressured to resume work prematurely to maintain her position and income.

Alice detailed her severe health challenges, including teaching from her hospital bed after a heart attack. Her narrative revealed not only the lack of support for her health concerns but also a broader issue of equity and inclusion within her department. Alice also touched on the additional layers of difficulty she faced as a woman of color, feeling isolated and unsupported, and highlighted the disparity in how work-life balance policies are applied.

These accounts underline significant faculty support gaps during crucial life events, such as childbirth, severe illness, or other personal crises. Current policies often compel faculty members to return to work too soon, risking their health and hindering their professional performance. This challenge is further compounded by disparities in how institutions interpret and implement federal guidelines such as the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which provides basic leave protections but often falls short in addressing the nuanced needs of academic professionals (U.S. Department of Labor, 2023). This aligns with research that underscores the necessity of comprehensive parental and medical leave policies (Bender et al., 2021; Breuning et al., 2021).

For example, even though the FMLA requires unpaid leave for qualified workers, many faculty members struggle to fully utilize these benefits due to financial or career progression constraints. Furthermore, the availability and application of parental and medical leave policies are strongly influenced by the type of institution, including public versus private, unionized versus non-unionized, and research-intensive versus teaching-focused. For instance, because they have more funds, research-intensive universities may be able to offer more comprehensive policies, while smaller institutions may not have the means to provide sufficient support. These gaps might be filled by improving cooperation with professional associations and bringing institutional policies into compliance with federal criteria. This would ensure that all professors, regardless of the type of institution, receive fair and substantial support during life events.

To address these issues, we suggest institutions develop and enforce clear, equitable leave policies that support faculty during significant life events without forcing them back to work prematurely. There should also be a supportive environment that acknowledges and actively addresses the unique challenges faced by non-tenure track faculty and faculty of color, ensuring that all faculty members

receive fair and equitable treatment. Additionally, implementing robust support systems that include not just leave policies but also resources for mental and physical health, childcare, and eldercare, catering to the diverse needs of the faculty, would greatly enhance their work-life balance.

Future research should explore the impact of improved leave policies on faculty retention, satisfaction, and overall well-being. Investigating how these policies are implemented across different demographics within academia could provide deeper insights into achieving equity and effectively supporting a diverse faculty body. Studies could examine how flexible and comprehensive leave policies influence the career trajectories of underrepresented groups, such as women of color, nonbinary faculty, and those in non-tenure track. Furthermore, studies that compare institutions with diverse policy frameworks may shed light on the most effective ways to promote inclusion and fairness in various academic contexts.

Strengthening parental and medical leave policies is not just a matter of fairness. It is also crucial for retaining talented faculty and promoting a healthier, more productive academic environment. Studies reveal a strong correlation between supportive work environments and improved organizational loyalty, lower turnover, and higher productivity (Samsudin et al., 2024). Additionally, by tackling challenges faced by people with multiple disadvantaged identities, policies can reduce their struggles and create a more inclusive environment. These changes are essential for building a supportive academic community that values and cares for its members throughout their personal and professional lives.

Based on these findings, higher education institutions can collectively address these challenges by establishing standardized, flexible work arrangements that accommodate the diverse schedules of their faculty members while considering institutional and regional differences. Workloads should have been carefully balanced through clear policies that ensure to avoid overwhelming faculty, focusing on a fair distribution of teaching, research, and service duties supported by professional organizations and regional collaborations to navigate varying state and federal regulations. Comprehensive parental and medical leave policies should be developed and implemented universally, with flexibility for local adaptation to allow faculty to take adequate time off without pressure to return prematurely (Rosa, 2021).

CONCLUSION

In this study, using institutional ethnography, we explored the significant challenges women faculty face in achieving work-life balance. Our findings from focus group data, combined with an analysis of current policy practices, procedures, and discourses, revealed key areas of concern, including the need for flexible and remote work options, the burden of heavy and imbalanced workloads, and the struggle to secure adequate parental leave.

We identified that inflexible work schedules, disproportionate workloads, and insufficient parental leave policies systematically disadvantage women faculty, particularly affecting those with caregiving responsibilities. These challenges are compounded for non-tenure track faculty and women of color, who often face additional systemic barriers.

Our analysis aligns with existing literature that underscores the importance of institutional support in enhancing work-life balance. Research has consistently shown that flexible working arrangements can meaningfully alleviate work-life conflicts and enhance job satisfaction among academic staff (Kumar et al., 2023). Such findings suggest that by implementing flexible work policies, institutions can improve faculty retention and job satisfaction. Additionally, equitable workload distribution policies must be established to ensure that faculty members distribute workloads fairly. This includes redefining success in tenure and promotion to recognize various scholarly contributions. Moreover, extending and enforcing comprehensive parental leave policies and supporting faculty during significant life events are crucial.

Future studies should investigate the long-term effects of these policy changes on faculty members' academic productivity and career trajectories, with a particular focus on gender and racial disparities. It is also vital to explore the institutional climate and its impact on the implementation and effectiveness of these policies. Research should continue to investigate how various models of flexible work and leave policies impact faculty engagement, satisfaction, and overall well-being. Higher education institutions can create a more supportive environment by addressing these critical areas through informed policy changes and supporting a culture that values diversity and equity. This not only promotes gender equity but also enhances the overall success and well-being of all faculty members. Such changes are essential for nurturing a thriving academic community that respects and supports its members' varied needs and contributions.

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