Chapter 11
Policy Framing in Higher Education in the United States

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Abstract This chapter situates policy framing in the context of higher education in the United States. First, the chapter overviews framing and frames as concepts of import to postsecondary policy making. Next, the chapter describes who in the U.S. engages in framing including interest groups, IPPOs, policy elites, the media, and social movements. To illuminate the role of framing and frames in U.S. postsecondary policy, and the diverse policy actors who frame, this chapter explores how the Truman Administration framed higher education's purposes as compared with the Bush and Obama Administrations. In doing so, the chapter shows how the rise of neoliberal ideology as a governing rationality within the institutional environment shifted how policymakers frame higher education policy problems and solutions. The chapter also explores how framing and frames can both encourage change in the institutional environment while embedding new institutional norms and paths into policy and institutional practice. The chapter concludes by describing why framing matters in U.S. postsecondary policy while surfacing the contested nature of framing as a concept and theory.

Introduction

Policy actors use words, images, metaphors, storytelling, and other rhetorical strategies to explain the world and the problems facing society. Within higher education, policy actors hold beliefs, feelings, and ideas about how the pressing issues facing the system arose and use framing to convey these understandings to public and policymaker audiences (Druckman, 2004; Orphan et al., 2021; Orphan et al., 2020). In the broadest sense, framing is the intentional use of language to present an issue (Bacchi, 2009).

Policy actors engage in framing to convince others of the rightfulness of their interpretation of policy problems and solutions and to frame the context of

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subsequent policy debates about these issues (Matthes, 2012). In this way, frames and the process of framing can be understood using an institutional theory lens; in this paper, we conceptualize frames as scripts available for organizational and policy action and conformity within institutional environments (Meyer & Bromley, 2013; Thelen, 1999). Scholars developed institutional theory to conceptualize the environments in which organizations exist. Institutional theory explores how institutional environments transmit norms and ideas that organizations adopt and conform to as they seek legitimacy (Meyer & Bromley, 2013). As we argue, global shifts in the institutional environment due to political or economic events may influence the types of frames political actors advance (Thelen, 1999).

When policymakers and the public broadly accept frames for policy issues and problems, which often happens when policy actors successfully connect frames to norms and ideas in the institutional environment, these frames move onto the policy agenda and policy actors design solutions for them (Birkland, 2011; Orphan et al., 2021). Once policy is enacted that reflects these frames, they become institutionalized. The words policy actors use to frame issues structure policy debate and action and subsequent institutional norms. As Schattschneider (1975) wrote, then, framing is consequential because "the definition of alternatives is the supreme instrument of power … [S]he who determines what politics is about runs the country" (p.17). In higher education, policy actors who effectively frame postsecondary issues and problems in policy debates influence the solution design process (Matthes, 2012). That said, policy actors face challenges in advancing frames when competing policy actors advance alternative frames that garner significant attention (Matthes, 2012). This fact is due to the contested nature of political power within institutional environments which imbues policy actors with differing types and levels of power (Thelen, 1999). People may reject or alter frames depending on who is engaged in framing as well as how well frames align with the norms present in the institutional environment. Frames may also forge new paths for institutional action both at the public policy and organizational policy levels that encourage organizations to align their activities with these new norms (Meyer & Bromley, 2013; Thelen, 1999).

While scholars are increasingly using framing theory to understand United States (U.S.) postsecondary policy (e.g., Adams, 2016; Orphan et al., 2020), examinations of framing in education policy are far more common in European settings (e.g., Kozma & Polonyi, 2004; Serrano-Velarde, 2015). The purpose of this conceptual chapter is to situate framing in the context of U.S. higher education while describing its institutional effects on the environment of postsecondary policy making. We start by discussing framing and frames as distinct concepts and institutional processes of import to consider when exploring the policy formation process. Next, we describe who in U.S. postsecondary policy engages in framing including interest groups, intermediary public policy organizations (IPPOs), policy elites, the media, and social movements. To illuminate how framing and frames operate in U.S. postsecondary policy, and how diverse policy actors engage in framing, we compare how the Harry S. Truman presidential administration (1945–1953) framed higher education's purposes with the presidential administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama (2001–2016). Throughout, we discuss how political and economic events in

the global institutional field affect how policy actors frame higher education's purposes. We also explore how particular framings for higher education's purposes contribute to framings of the system's problems and appropriate solutions. Specifically, we show how the rise of neoliberal ideology, which has become culturally rationalized in the U.S. environment (Meyer & Bromley, 2013), has influenced how policy actors frame higher education's purposes, value, problems, and solutions (Berman, 2012; Giroux, 2014; Meyer & Bromley, 2013; Thelen, 1999). We conclude by discussing why framing matters in postsecondary policy while surfacing the contested nature of framing as a concept and theory.

What Is Framing?

Scholars have examined framing in the media, public policy, mass communications, public relations, opinion polling, and marketing (Borah, 2011; Druckman, 2004). Where frames are often identified as ideas that "enable people to 'fix' discourse in place as speech acts" (Goldstein & Beutel, 2009, p. 277), framing is the use of these frames. van Hulst and Yanow (2016) described the importance of differentiating these terms, pointing to frames as a static term and framing as "offer[ing] a more dynamic and … potentially politically aware engagement" (p. 93). Frames can thus be understood as nouns (speech acts) that motivate action or promote specific understandings of issues, and framing can be understood as a verb describing policy actors' efforts to transmit these understandings to the broader institutional environment (Thelen, 1999).

Framing can serve a variety of functions and take different forms depending on the policy actors and contexts involved (Goldstein & Beutel, 2009). Policymakers use frames during storytelling to control policy discourses and contextualize policy issues (van Hulst & Yanow, 2016). We understand policy frames and framing as a form of policy feedback, as conceptualized by Thelen (1999), which generates new paths for policy action for organizations (in our case, postsecondary institutions). This policy feedback also leads to tangible policy solutions that encourage or force postsecondary institutions onto institutionalized paths.

Adams (2016) argued for examining policy texts such as policy statements, agendas, and speeches to ascertain the frames policy actors use. This reading of policy texts should not be taken at face value, though, as they contain "meaning as a result of wider social, cultural and political potentialities" (Adams, 2016, p. 301). In this way, social/political contexts and the broader institutional environment shape the efficacy and types of frames policy actors advance even as they may use frames to encourage postsecondary institutions to align with preferred paths (Thelen, 1999).

Framing can also problematize an issue previously not viewed as problematic (Adams, 2016). For example, in shaping education policy debates, the Bush Administration framed students as problems due to unequal academic success across demographic groups (Goldstein & Beutel, 2009). The Administration then framed teachers as blame-worthy for these 'problems.' Policy actors used this

framing to create the *No Child Left Behind* law which connected school funding to student performance on standardized tests and resulted in lower funding for schools enrolling high-needs students. Thus, frames can shape political arguments such as those about *No Child Left Behind* by explaining social issues that require remedying (Bacchi, 2009). While framing can be argumentation, frames may differ from the arguments they shape as they highlight specific points or (re)interpret issues (Hänggli & Kriesi, 2012).

Frames may also simplify issues by reducing complex phenomena within the institutional environment to manageable concepts the public can understand (Bacchi, 2009), creating sense-making that allows policymakers to describe an otherwise ambiguous issue as having an attainable solution (van Hulst & Yanow, 2016). By making sense of policy uncertainties, sense-making "brings a stronger process orientation to framing, seeing it as a many-dimensional socio-political process grounded in everyday practices and ordinary beliefs" (van Hulst & Yanow, 2016, p. 105). Interestingly, policy actors often reproduce existing frames or cultural values which contributes to their legibility and attractiveness (Bacchi, 2009).

In summary, policy actors use frames to tell stories about social issues within the broader institutional environment while also motivating organizations to align with existing or new institutional norms. When sense-making succeeds, framing effects have occurred (Druckman, 2004). Framing effects are present when policy actors and the public are convinced by a policy actor's framing/frames and incorporate them into their own beliefs and subsequent decisions. Framing effects are also evident when organizations align their activities with new institutionalized paths forged through framing (Druckman, 2004; Meyer & Bromley, 2013; Thelen, 1999).

Who Engages in Framing in U.S. Postsecondary Policy?

In the U.S., policy operates at the federal, state, and local levels (St. John et al., 2018). Policy actors operate at all three levels and may independently frame issues or partner with other policy actors to advance the same frames (Orphan et al., 2021). Policy actors who are viewed as credible and nonpartisan are often trusted more than those who appear to have an agenda, which lends seemingly unbiased groups greater power to frame public understanding and subsequent policy action (Callaghan & Schnell, 2009).

While policy actors may be concerned with the needs of students and, at times, faculty members, students and faculty members often exert less influence over policy discourses and policy formation processes. This is true unless these individuals are associated with established interest groups or social movements that have gained national appeal and standing. In fact, policymakers often prefer the information and framing of IPPOs over that of professors or students during open testimony about proposed legislation (Perna et al., 2019). For this reason, we focus our discussion on the policy actors that research demonstrates are most influential in framing postsecondary policy issues at all levels; namely interest groups, IPPOs, policy elites, the

media, and social movements. These policy actors may have competing interests regarding postsecondary policy, but all strategically engage in framing.

Interest Groups

As their name implies, interest groups serve specific interests, population segments, or ideologies (Gándara & Ness, 2019; Miller & Morphew, 2017; Tandberg, 2010). Marsicano and Brooks (2020) defined interest groups by their advocacy role, writing that they "spen[d] money lobbying Congress at a level that required reporting expenditures" (p. 449). Interest groups are thus inherently political (Gándara & Ness, 2019). Due to their political nature, interest groups deploy frames aligned with their ideological views or stakeholder groups. In the U.S., it is increasingly difficult to ascertain who is an official interest group because the line between policy actors and the public has blurred (van Hulst & Yanow, 2016). Interest groups also collaborate across political differences and policy actors which has led to an "increasingly crowded [field] with framers and situations to frame" (van Hulst & Yanow, 2016, p. 104).

In the U.S., a powerful set of interest groups with missions to influence federal postsecondary policy, colloquially known as the 'Big Six' (Cook, 1998; Marcus, 2014), includes five institutional membership associations who advocate on behalf of their members and postsecondary sectors: the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (regional public universities (RPUs)), the American Association of Community Colleges, the Association of Public Land-Grant Universities (public research universities and land grant universities), the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (private, independent universities and colleges), and the Association of American Universities (elite, research universities) (Orphan et al., 2021). The American Council on Education is an umbrella interest group that comprises institutional members across sectors which convenes the Big Six as an interest group coalition that advocates for issues, problems, and solutions of common concern across postsecondary sectors (Cook, 1998). This coalition frequently frames policy problems and issues via public letters addressed to federal policymakers and legislators co-signed by the six association presidents (McCoy-Simmons et al., 2022; Orphan et al., 2021). Through these letters, the Big Six claims to speak for all of U.S. higher education given its representation across sectors which garners them significant policy elite and media attention. The Big Six commonly frames the problem of low graduation and retention rates for students of color as stemming from inadequate public funding for postsecondary institutions rather than the shortcomings of colleges (Marcus, 2014). The Big Six also frames the perceived undue regulations on colleges as problematic and, in doing so, advocates for the interests of their member institutions rather than that of students or communities that may be protected by regulations (McCoy-Simmons et al., 2022; Orphan et al., 2021). One such letter signed by the Big Six supported the *Academic Freedom through Regulatory Relief Act*. This letter framed

regulations as being overabundant, costly, and ineffective, stating that "the sheer volume, ineffectiveness and cost of regulations and related actions promulgated or proposed by the Department of Education have far exceeded what might reasonably be required" (American Council on Education, 2015).

Other postsecondary interest groups engaged in framing include those advocating for unionized professors, the for-profit education sector, and wealthy, elite universities (e.g., Columbia University and Harvard University) (Marsicano & Brooks, 2020). Interest groups are also involved in negotiated rulemaking that determines postsecondary law (Natow, 2016). Such interest groups include accrediting bodies, financial aid administrators, campus government relations officers, and the Big Six (Natow, 2016). Interest groups operating at the state level tend to advocate for increased state funding for public universities and colleges (Tandberg, 2010). Often interest groups frame policy proposals and problems in ways that reveal the perceived harms experienced by the interests or ideologies for which they advocate (Cook, 1998; Natow, 2016; Tandberg, 2010), such as Young Invincibles who advocates on behalf of students for debt forgiveness and college affordability (n.d.).

Intermediary Public Policy Organizations

IPPOs are boundary-spanning organizations situated between policymakers and other stakeholder groups (Hammond et al., 2019; Ness, 2010; Ness et al., 2020) that seek to manage change in both those parties. IPPOs operate at all policy levels, with some active to influence and inform state policy and others working on federal policy. Intermediary organizations operate independently of these two parties and provide distinct value beyond what the parties alone would be able to develop (Honig, 2004, p. 67).

Some IPPOs lobby elected officials (Miller & Morphew, 2017; Orphan et al., 2021), but IPPOs mostly exert influence and attempt to frame policy issues and problems by sharing information and framing problems and solutions (Hammond et al., 2019; Ness et al., 2020). While policy elites may have the final say in enacting policies, IPPOs exert power as external policy actors who are able to influence policy elites (Broucker et al., 2019). IPPOs engage in motivational and mimetic framing by encouraging states and postsecondary institutions to adopt desired policy solutions by demonstrating that others have done so and enjoyed success (Miller & Morphew, 2017). Some IPPOs also frame the roles of policy actors as Complete College America (CCA) did by framing governors as meritorious "game changers" when they enacted policies aligned with CCA's framings of problems and solutions (Ness et al., 2020). As such, IPPOs exert power by identifying and encouraging alignment with dominant or new institutional paths (Thelen, 1999).

While IPPOs' framing of policy issues and problems are often influenced by their ideological leanings, Orphan et al. (2021) found that some IPPOs were more transparent about their ideologies than others. IPPO ideology also influences how they frame issues. Gándara and Ness (2019) found that both progressive and

conservative IPPOs identified state funding and college affordability as policy problems but framed the causes of these problems in different ways. Progressive groups framed unaffordability as resulting from inadequate government funding while conservatives blamed government subsidies. While disagreement can exist across political ideologies, IPPOs may form echo chambers composed of coalitions that advance narrowly defined frames for problems and solutions (Orphan et al., 2021), and these frames may align with existing institutional paths. Many higher education IPPOs are funded by the Gates and Lumina Foundations to advocate for specific policy solutions (Orphan et al., 2021), a fact that has led some scholars to call foundations advocacy philanthropists, shadow lobbyists, and policy patrons (Lubienski et al., 2014; Tompkins-Stange, 2016). Common funding sources among IPPOs may also contribute to an echo chamber effect and the nationalization of education policy and policy frames which previously had largely been state-based (Orphan et al., 2021).

Policy Elites

Policy elites are elected officials and policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels with the power to enact policy change (Natow, 2016). Policy elites primarily convey frames during political campaigns and while in office through the media, then analyze public responses to frames using opinion polling (Hänggli & Kriesi, 2012; Matthes, 2012). Opposing policy elites may advance counterframes (Matthes, 2012), which can also influence public opinion (Callaghan & Schnell, 2009). Policy elites may address their opponents' frames covered by the media but do so less in political advertisements that tend instead to focus on delivering their core frames rather than responding to counterframes (Hänggli & Kriesi, 2012). In education policy, policy elites receive support in developing frames from "policy engineers" who identify frames that distill "strategies geared towards the improvement of educational practice" (Adams, 2016, p. 292).

A notable example of policy elite framing was that of President Obama who framed the purpose of community colleges as being to enhance workforce development (Bragg, 2014). While community colleges have long aligned curricular offerings with regional workforce needs, they are multi-purpose institutions that engage in a variety of educational activities including offering the first 2 years of college to bachelor's-degree-seeking students, basic literacy courses, and personal enrichment opportunities (Thelin, 2019). Nonetheless, the Obama Administration's focus on the sector's workforce development role narrowed the purpose of community colleges to their workforce development role within policy discourses and the institutional environment. As this example shows, policy elites have significant power to frame policy issues in indelible ways.

The Media

The media may be the most accessible policy actor engaged in framing as journalists translate policy frames and counterframes created by policy actors for public consumption (Henig, 2009; Matthes, 2012). For this reason, policy actors hoping to advance their desired frames into the institutional environment often seek to leverage the media's "ability to commandeer the bully pulpit, over faceless bureaucracies and multiheaded legislatures" (Henig, 2009, p. 296). Media frames are shaped by a variety of factors including organizational ideology, a journalist's gender, and societal cultural values (Borah, 2011).

One example of media framing is how reporters tend to frame the RPU sector in the U.S. (Orphan, 2020). RPUs were established to facilitate postsecondary access to students regardless of their preparation levels (Thelin, 2019). As a result of their access missions, RPUs facilitate greater upward mobility for low-income people than any other U.S. postsecondary sector (de Alva, 2019). Despite their important role, the national media often frames RPUs as struggling, middling, amorphous, and vulnerable (McClure, 2018; Orphan, 2020). In one media story, a reporter framed the sector using the metaphors of death and survival, pointedly asking, "Public Regionals never die. Can they be saved?" (Gardner, 2017). Interestingly, local media tend to frame RPUs in more appreciative ways, often describing their local RPU's efforts to improve the workforce and community wellbeing (Orphan, 2020). Given the media's national reach, the frames they advance exert influence public and policy elite opinion as well as the institutional environment.

Social Movements

Social movements are composed of "signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers" (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 613). Social movement activists use culturally relevant frames to convey arguments, enlist support, and attract media attention (Bacchi, 2009; Benford & Snow, 2000; Matthes, 2012). Social movements use collective action frames to describe an issue, evolve with changes in the institutional environment, motivate action among activists, and recruit people to join (Benford & Snow, 2000). Movements may elaborate on the causes of problems, assign blame, and diagnose solutions (Ness et al., 2020). Social movements may also use frame articulation to show the connections between disparate issues and amplification to focus attention on specific issues.

An important social movement that has framed policy issues, problems, and solutions within U.S. postsecondary policy is for social and racial justice (which is connected to the international Black Lives Matter movement) (Anyon, 2009; Hailu & Sarubbi, 2019; Rhoades et al., 2005). Students and faculty members involved in this movement have organized to end school segregation, protect Affirmative Action,

establish Ethnic Studies departments, ensure equitable access for disabled, female, and bilingual students and students of color, and found tribal colleges to strengthen tribal nation sovereignty (Anyon, 2009; Crazy Bull, 2015; Hailu & Sarubbi, 2019; Rhoades et al., 2005). Highly effective social movements advance policy frames that lead to policy and organizational change (Meyer & Bromley, 2013).

Framing Higher Education's Purposes, Value, Problems, and Solutions

In the U.S., the policy actors described above have framed higher education's purposes in various ways that are context dependent (St. John et al., 2018). In this section, we use prior research and key policy texts to compare how the Truman Presidential Administration (1945–1953) and the Bush and Obama Presidential Administrations (2001–2016), in partnership with other policy actors, framed higher education's purposes. These administrations are noteworthy because they exemplify how the ascendence of neoliberal ideology changed how policy elites framed higher education's purposes (Berman, 2012; Giroux, 2014; Orphan, 2018; Tomlinson, 2018). Indeed, neoliberal ideology spans party identification in the U.S., with Democrats (e.g., President Obama) and Republicans (e.g., President Bush) advancing neoliberal frames for higher education (Orphan et al., 2020). Neoliberal ideology emphasizes higher education's obligations to improve the economy and advocates for the use of assessment, surveillance, and accountability to evaluate colleges (Berman, 2012; Broucker et al., 2019). Neoliberal ideology also emphasizes education's individual benefits over its collective benefits, ultimately changing the purpose and structure of schools (Meyer & Bromley, 2013). By comparing these presidential administrations, we show how moves in the global institutional environment towards neoliberalism opened new pathways for policy framing and action (Broucker et al., 2019; Thelen, 1999). We conclude by describing how different frames for higher education's purpose have led to distinct framings for policy problems and solutions.

Framing Higher Education's Purposes

In 1947, President Truman established a commission to study the future of higher education which argued that higher education's purpose was to promote educational opportunity and strengthen democracy (Gilbert & Heller, 2013; Thelin, 2019). The Commission's timing is notable, given Thelen's (1999) observation that the sequencing of international events can create openings for new domestic policy understandings. The Commission was active during the early days of the Cold War when the U.S. wanted to demonstrate the superiority of its democratic and capitalist system.

The Commission's report framed education as "by far the most hopeful of the nation's enterprises" (Truman Commission, 1947, p. 5), stating that "education for all is not only democracy's obligation but its necessity" (p. 5). While the Truman Commission framed higher education's societal role as one of democratic nation building (Gilbert & Heller, 2013; Thelin, 2019), Critical Race Theorists have argued that attention to equity was animated by the U.S.'s desire for global hegemony rather than genuine concern for the status of minoritized communities (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Bell, 1980).

During this time, policy actors framed the knowledge creation role of universities in terms of the utility of research to humanity and to U.S. global dominance (Berman, 2012; Tomlinson, 2018). During the 1970s, the federal government began reducing barriers for postsecondary institutions to partner with the private sector on research (Berman, 2012). This change aligned with newer framings for higher education's role in producing knowledge; namely, policy actors increasingly framed knowledge university research as being most useful for industry and U.S. economic and military advancement. Prior to this, policy actors saw university-produced knowledge as potentially useful to industry, but postsecondary institutions were not assigned any special responsibility for producing knowledge for industry. This shift was a precursor to neoliberal ideology which came to dominate domestic and global policy discourses in the 1980s–1990s (Berman, 2012).

The 1980s was an important turning point for postsecondary policy due to national events which forged new understandings and policy feedback mechanisms for postsecondary policy (Thelen, 1999). During this time, college enrollments declined as the Baby Boomer Generation graduated and high school classes grew smaller (Thelin, 2019). The U.S. also experienced a recession which constrained public postsecondary funding (Berman, 2012). Policy actors began framing higher education's purpose as economic and individual rather than collective and democratic in response to these events (Giroux, 2014). While this framing was not novel (the Truman Commission also highlighted higher education's economic role), what was new is how higher education's purpose was narrowed to its strictly economic role (Gilbert & Heller, 2013). Postsecondary leaders advanced this framing by arguing for continued public investments in their colleges to fuel economic growth and individual earnings rather than to strengthen democracy (Thelin, 2019). Federal and state policymakers adopted this framing (Berman, 2012; Tomlinson, 2018). Policy actors also saw U.S. higher education as a vital counterpoint to Soviet Union scientific innovation during the Cold War, further entrenching the system's role in promoting U.S. global dominance (Thelin, 2019). This economic framing marked the ascendency of neoliberal ideology as a governing political rationality for postsecondary policy (Berman, 2012; Giroux, 2014).

Fifty-nine years after the Truman Commission, the Bush Administration, under the purview of Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, established a Commission to analyze higher education (Department of Education, 2006). The Commission's report only mentioned democracy once and framed higher education's purpose in far narrower terms; specifically, higher education's purpose was to ensure individual prosperity and strengthen the national economy.

Inherent in framings about higher education's purpose are considerations of its value to society (Tomlinson, 2018). As policy actors increasingly framed higher education's purpose as being purely economic, policymakers began valuing higher education for the individual and national economic prosperity it generated, and this change reflected neoliberal shifts in the global institutional environment (Tomlinson, 2018). In this framing, higher education was commodified and evaluated by its return on investment (ROI) to the economy (instead of society *writ large*) and consumers (namely, students purchasing tuition and industry investing in research) (Tomlinson, 2018). In response, postsecondary institutions increasingly rationalize themselves to policy elites and regulators by demonstrating their ROI and accountability to neoliberal standards rather than by showing how they improve democracy and advance equity (Meyer & Bromley, 2013). Conversely, the Truman Commission's framing of the system's value surfaced its ability to promote economic prosperity as well as democracy and equity (Thelin, 2019; Tomlinson, 2018).

How policy actors frame higher education shapes how they frame college students. Where the Truman Commission framed students as contributors to society and capitalism deserving of educational opportunity, policy actors now frame students as consumers and future workers purchasing a service that will ensure their individual prosperity and promote national economic growth (Orphan et al., 2020; Saunders, 2007; St. John et al., 2018). As policy actors frame students as consumers, postsecondary funding shifted from being given directly to colleges as social institutions advancing democratic society to being given to students via need-based grants or loans that allows them to purchase the colleges and universities they want to consume (St. John et al., 2018; Thelin, 2019). Students have also been framed as human capital being prepared for consumption by industry (McDonald, 2013; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Tomlinson, 2018). In framing students as human capital, Orphan et al. (2020) found that U.S. governors focused on ensuring students' expedient movement through college in order to enter industry. In this framing, U.S. higher education becomes a means to an end (a pathway to economic prosperity for individuals and society) rather than a process of learning and holistic development (Saunders, 2007; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Yet as Broucker et al. (2019) asserted, efficiency goals may erode the educational mission of schools.

IPPOs have framed students and postsecondary institutions in similar ways (McDonald, 2013). CCA frames students' motivations as being to achieve "a college degree or valued workplace credential" (American Dreams Are Powered by College Completion, n.d.), which ignores other public values potentially motivating students. Strikingly, IPPOs engage in this framing irrespective of their ideological leanings showing the entrenched nature of neoliberal ideology as the institutionalized frame for U.S. postsecondary policy (McDonald, 2013; Orphan et al., 2020). This framing has created transactional relationships between students and institutions as students pay institutions to improve their human capital while ensuring an enjoyable collegiate experience (Saunders, 2007; Tomlinson, 2018). In short, neoliberal framing has reshaped the relationships individuals, communities, and policy actors have with social institutions while redefining higher education's purpose.

Framing Higher Education's Problems and Solutions

How policy actors frame higher education's purposes and societal value lead to frames for the system's problems and solutions. With its concerns about higher education's democratic purposes, the Truman Commission framed unequal access and unaffordability as the major problems facing the system (Thelin, 2019). The Commission framed the solutions to this problem as increased funding, federal oversight, and expansion of the community college sector (Gilbert & Heller, 2013). Alternatively, the Spellings Commission framed low graduation and retention rates as higher education's most significant problem because both diminished the economy (Department of Education, 2006; Markwardt, 2012). In this framing, college access was de-emphasized, and college completion was prioritized. The Spellings Commission's framing of higher education's problems as economic was a departure from that of the Truman Commission which framed higher education's problems as connected to societal inequities (Markwardt, 2012; Thelin, 2019). In this section, we describe how contemporary frames for postsecondary policy problems and solutions are situated in neoliberal ideology which governs the institutional environment (Berman, 2012; Giroux, 2014). We also describe how various policy actors advance neoliberal frames and promote the Completion Agenda movement as a policy path to solve postsecondary policy problems. We consider the Completion Agenda movement because social movements can rationalize new institutional norms and generate new institutional paths that cause organizations to change their actions and policies (Meyer & Bromley, 2013; Thelen, 1999).

The Spellings Commission framed the causes of unequal college completion across demographic groups as higher education's unwilling or inability to innovate, contain costs, be efficient, and maintain affordability (Markwardt, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). In this framing, the Commission ignored the financial realities created by declines in postsecondary funding since the 1980s (Laderman & Weeden, 2019; Welner, 2011). As the neoliberal framing of higher education's purpose gained traction, postsecondary public funding continued declining and hit a historic low during the Great Recession (Laderman & Weeden, 2019). In a sense, the downward funding trend is logical given how policy actors frame higher education's purposes – if individuals and private enterprise are the primary beneficiaries, why should the public fund higher education (Berman, 2012)? Irrespective of the impact of funding cuts on colleges, policy actors and IPPOs across the ideological spectrum have perpetuated neoliberal framings for higher education's problems (Horn & Kelly, 2015; Massy, 2013; Miller & Morphew, 2017). Indeed, IPPOs who embrace neoliberalism are powerful shapers of policy debates (La Londe et al., 2015; McCoy-Simmons et al., 2022; McDonald, 2013; Orphan et al., 2020).

Scholars have identified President Barack Obama's speech to the U.S. Congress in 2009 as the birth of the Completion Agenda movement (Hammond et al., 2019; Markwardt, 2012; Ness et al., 2020.) During this speech, President Obama framed the problem of unequal college completion as threatening the U.S.'s global

economic dominance and recovery from the Great Recession, referencing the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development's finding that the U.S. was no longer the most educated country in the world (Hammond et al., 2019; Ness et al., 2020). President Obama also framed the necessities created by the knowledge economy for college graduates as a guiding rationale for improving educational attainment, stating that "[i]n a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity – it is a pre-requisite" (2009, para. 62). President Obama identified the year 2020 as a goal date to remedy this problem. Given Thelen's (1999) observation that global events can forge new paths for policy action, it is logical that President Obama advanced this economic and individualistic framing during the Great Recession when public and policy elite receptivity to these economic arguments was likely high (Bragg, 2014).

Shortly after this speech, the Lumina Foundation, the largest private foundation devoted to U.S. higher education, announced its own goal date of 2025 to ensure 60% of the population possessed a quality postsecondary credential and structured its funding opportunities to align with this goal (Hammond et al., 2019; Ness et al., 2020). The Gates Foundation also became a major policy actor in the Completion Agenda movement (Miller & Morphew, 2017). Other policy actors joined the Completion Agenda movement by launching new IPPOs (e.g., CCA), reconfiguring their existing work, or structuring policy debates to connect them within the movement (Miller & Morphew, 2017; Ness et al., 2020), events demonstrating that this new institutional path had gained broad acceptance. Since its creation, CCA has arguably become the most influential IPPO advancing the Completion Agenda movement, deriving its power from its ability to frame postsecondary problems and identify solutions, and receiving significant funding from the Gates and Lumina Foundations (Hammond et al., 2019; Miller & Morphew, 2017; Ness et al., 2020).

Since the Completion Agenda movement began, it has become *de rigueur* for policy actors to frame the problem of unequal degree completion across racial groups as being economic (Bradbury & Triest, 2016). In this framing, the untapped potential of students of color to become human capital or, in CCA's framing, support a "strong economy" for which "the skills gap must be closed," are most salient (Complete College America, 2011; Clay, 2019). As Roummel Erichsen and Salajan (2014) argued, this framing of unequal postsecondary access and success situates both as problems facing individuals seeking financial prosperity and the U.S. seeking global economic dominance rather than problems facing a society with persistent systemic racial oppression.

When higher education fails to meet the demands placed on it by students, policymakers, or the public, policy actors commonly frame the system as in crisis (Christensen et al., 2011; Newfield, 2008; Thelin, 2019). This framing has been used by authors of popular press books including *Academically Adrift* (Arum, 2010) and *American Higher Education in Crisis? What Everyone Needs to Know* (Blumenstyk, 2014). When framed thusly, higher education's failings to position the U.S. as a global economic power or prepare quality human capital are often framed as causes for the crisis (Markwardt, 2012; Erichsen & Salajan, 2014). For example,

the Spellings Commission argued that higher education was in crisis due to low completion and retention rates (Department of Education, 2006; Markwardt, 2012). Later, CCA decried the "college graduation crisis". Scholars have critiqued the crisis framing used by IPPOs and other policy actors as manufactured to advance a neoliberal reformist agenda (Berliner & Biddle, 1996; McDonald, 2013; Picciano & Spring, 2012). Nevertheless, the framing of U.S. higher education as in a state of perpetual crisis persists and has motivated urgent action among postsecondary institutions and policy actors (Adams, 2016).

To address the perceived crises of higher education's failure to fulfill its economic purposes, policy actors have framed solutions as being the need for disruptive innovation, accountability, and performance-based funding (Adams, 2016; Broucker et al., 2019; Markwardt, 2012). Proponents of disruptive innovation have pointed to distance learning, lack of affordability and access, and the supposed appeal of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS) as evidence that higher education as an 'industry' is primed for disruption (Brookings, 2020; Christensen et al., 2011; O'Malley, 2019). Strikingly, the framing of disruptive innovation's utility reveals market-based rationality common in neoliberal ideology (Adams, 2016; Giroux, 2014). Disruptive innovation is concerned with identifying new markets, underserved customers, and untested products that higher education might offer, or that might be offered by third parties, that would disrupt the status quo (Christensen et al., 2011). While MOOCs failed to disrupt higher education due to poor retention and completion rates (ironically the same problems that policy actors believed MOOCs would solve) (Al-Imarah & Shields, 2018; O'Malley, 2019), policy actors continue to frame higher education as needing disruption, and these policy actors span ideologies and include the Center for American Progress, EduCause, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Brookings Institution (Brookings, 2020; Christensen et al., 2011; Horn & Kelly, 2015; Massy, 2013; Miller & Morphew, 2017).

The Completion Agenda movement has advanced a diagnostic frame and rationality to solve the problems it asserts have been created by postsecondary institutions that hinder students' expedient graduation and entry into the workforce (Markwardt, 2012; Miller & Morphew, 2017). In assigning blame to colleges and universities, policy actors frame solutions to fix postsecondary institutions (Miller & Morphew, 2017). To fix on-time completion, for example, CCA used language such as "time is the enemy" to frame solutions to remediation including forcing colleges to provide co-requisite remediation (2011).

The administrations of both Presidents Bush and Obama advanced accountability as a solution. The major distinction between these presidential administrations was in their strategies for holding institutions accountable. Where the Bush Administration advanced sanctions for educational institutions, the Obama Administration sought greater transparency for student outcomes through publicly available data dashboards (Lederman & Fain, 2017). The emphasis on quantifiable outcomes is connected to the broader moves towards rationalization and quantification in the institutional environment that has embraced neoliberal ideology (Meyer & Bromley, 2013).

Policy actors advancing the Completion Agenda movement have framed assessment and performance-based funding as solutions that would promote accountability, reflecting changes in how institutions are rationalized and demonstrate their legitimacy in the institutional environment (Meyer & Bromley, 2013). Performance-based funding allocates appropriations to postsecondary institutions based on their performance along state-identified metrics and prizes institutional alignment with state economic goals, efficiency, and assessment – all tenants of neoliberalism (Giroux, 2014; Orphan, 2018). Despite research demonstrating that performance-based funding may constrain postsecondary access and fail to produce desired results, this solution has gained widespread acceptance with 41 U.S. states using some form of performance-based funding (Hillman, 2016).

Not only do policy actors have power to frame the problems and solutions, they can also frame research and information as legitimate or delegitimate (Lubienski et al., 2014; McDonald, 2013). In the current case, IPPOs framed the research showing the limited and unintended impacts of performance funding as problematic which caused policy elites to mistrust empirical evidence (Miller & Morphew, 2017). Policy actors can also use information and research politically to frame their desired policy solutions to garner support, as has been the case when IPPOs selectively use research to frame the benefits of performance-based funding (Lubienski et al., 2014; McDonald, 2013; Ness, 2010). These activities culminate in the endurance of neoliberal frames for postsecondary policy solutions.

Why and How Framing Matters

Frames and framing are not merely words – they are expressions of the broader institutional environment that may generate change by forging new paths or reinforcing existing ones that dictate acceptable organizational behaviors (Meyer & Bromley, 2013; Thelen, 1999). That said, research is mixed on the power of frames to enact policy change. The efficacy of frames is reliant on several factors including policy actor credibility, prior stakeholder knowledge, available information, competing frames, timing, repetition, and congruence with prevailing societal norms and values. It is also likely that the broader institutional environment determines the attractiveness of particularly frames. We discuss why and how framing matters as well as the limits of framing in this section.

The language used in frames can moderate framing effects. Policy actors may use buzzwords and catchphrases like ‘lifelong learning’ or ‘no child left behind’ to frame policy issues in relatable and attractive ways that may not lead to enduring policy change (Stenersen & Prøitz, 2020). Research reveals that these short, catchy phrases can initially propel an issue into public view but are less productive within policy elite circles because they are hard to define or transform into actual policy (Stenersen & Prøitz, 2020). This is particularly true when a chain of equivalence is lacking, and the buzzwords fail to align with important social issues.

Prevailing societal and institutional norms also determine the efficacy of frames and framing (Adams, 2016; Bacchi, 2009). Research shows that frames that distill complex policy issues into simple ideas that reference existing cultural values are more successful (Adams, 2016; Bacchi, 2009). As described, U.S. higher education's purposes have been framed in various ways, and these frames are often situated in the broader societal and global concerns and dynamics of their time. As such, frames can change people's understanding of social institutions such as colleges, but people's existing cultural beliefs about social institutions can also influence how they respond to frames (Bacchi, 2009).

While frames that adhere to existing cultural values enjoy success, exceptional policy actors may successfully advance new frames that are misaligned with prevailing societal values (Bacchi, 2009). Policy actor potential to advance new institutional paths using frames points to how the policy actor engaged in framing matters. President Obama's speech launching the Completion Agenda movement took place during his first year in office – a time when the popularity of U.S. presidents is at its height (Gallup, n.d.). He was largely viewed as a change agent advancing a message of hope that touched on societal values of optimism and progress and his election was seen as historic as he was the U.S.'s first bi-racial president (Rockman, 2012). These personal attributes likely worked in his favor as he built on the momentum established by the Spellings Commission to launch a national movement with one speech (Ness et al., 2020).

Sources viewed as credible and trustworthy also have greater ability to create framing effects, as do those with oration skills (Callaghan & Schnell, 2009). When frames are appealing and advanced by trusted sources, they can endure and shape public opinion and policy long after the policy actor has left public office (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2011). This seems to be the case with President Obama – the Completion Agenda movement has outlasted his presidency. The movement's longevity may also be due to the power of IPPOs such as CCA and funders such as the Lumina Foundation to sustain it, as well as paths that have been forged in the institutional environment that compel postsecondary institutions and policymakers to sustain the movement.

Another moderating factor for framing effects includes a person's political party identification. Policy actors who frame a conservative issue to a conservative audience produce a positive framing effect, while the opposite is true when policy actors present a conservative frame to a liberal audience (Dharshing et al., 2017). Partisan frames are also more effective among the politically aware, which disproves the assumption that less politically aware people are more susceptible to framing (Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010). Moreover, an issue frame sponsored by one's own political party is often more influential than when the same frame is sponsored by an opposing party (Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010). Interestingly, those with moderate political knowledge are the most susceptible to framing effects as they seek information to form an opinion, but do not seek as much information as the political knowledgeable who often seek conflicting sources of information to form their opinions (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2011).

How the media frames issues can also shape their attractiveness. The media can disrupt policy actor frames by questioning the source's credibility (Callaghan & Schnell, 2009) and resist policy elite frames by demonstrating their incongruence with existing cultural values, sharing opposing information, or repeating counter-frames (Matthes, 2012). While the media is an influential policy actor that develops and broadcasts frames, people do not adopt frames without question. Media frames tend to be weaker if the institutional environment contains competing frames or if the frame presents a weak argument.

The agency individuals possess to accept, refute, or counterargue policy actor frames can also mitigate their effects (Callaghan & Schnell, 2009). The public may resist framing effects by thinking critically, drawing on their preexisting knowledge, or consuming multiple media sources – an activity that is becoming increasingly difficult due to the polarized nature of U.S. media (Borah, 2011; Lecheler & de Vreese, 2011). Relatedly, Matthes (2012) found that while media frames influenced an individual's attitude, "their attitudes were still shaped by … argument-based frames" over the frames used by policy elites or the media (p. 257). As Borah (2011) wrote, then, "framing effects are far from being the magic bullet-like effects where citizens play a passive role" (p. 252).

Conclusion and Possibilities

Exactly how and when does framing matter in postsecondary public policy and for whom does it matter? As we have shown, the answer to this question is far from straightforward. That said, a contribution of our chapter is showing how the framing of higher education's purpose leads to specific frames for policy problems and solutions that may reflect or change the broader institutional environment. While we anchored our analysis in prior research and key policy texts, our chapter presents a conceptual argument and thus opens the door to empirical hypothesis testing.

We have described the various policy actors engaged in framing including the media, IPPOs, policy elites, social movements, and interest groups. At times, these policy actors form coalitions to advance policy frames favorable to their constituent groups or aligned with their ideologies. In the U.S., the dominance of neoliberal ideology, which is embraced by policy actors regardless of type, ideology, and governmental level (local, state and federal), has inspired policy solutions that embed neoliberal governing rationality and market-based solutions into postsecondary policy (Broucker et al., 2019). Other research has demonstrated how the broader neoliberal social/political context contributes to the institutionalization of neoliberal rationality within the academic administration of college campuses (Berman, 2012; Orphan, 2018; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Future research should examine how campus leaders respond to neoliberal policy frames for higher education's purposes by reshaping campus discourses and advancing neoliberal (or other) frames for localized problems and solutions or resisting these frames in favor of alternative frames.

We also hope our discussion inspires future research into how framing for higher education's purposes has evolved. This research could explore the implications of these shifts for the system's democratic and public purposes and equity imperatives. For example, scholars could study the genealogy of frames for higher education's purposes, value, problems, and solutions – opinion polling and discursive analyses would be fitting methodological approaches. We also encourage scholars to use time series and difference in different methods to study how specific frames for higher education's purposes, problems, and solutions correlate with funding for and public opinion about the system. Given the ascendence of false information, fake news, and efforts to use misinformation to distort and disrupt democratic processes in the U.S. and globally, we advocate for research examining how higher education's purpose, problems, and solutions are framed in an era of truth decay (Kavenagh & Rich, 2018).

We conclude by reflecting on how policy actors might engage in framing in the neoliberal institutional environment in which there is an assault on truth, facts, and the democratic mission of social institutions. Scholars have shown that neoliberalism weakens social institutions by narrowing their purpose to economic ends at the exclusion of their broader democratic and equity purposes (Berman, 2012; Giroux, 2014; Orphan, 2018; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Given that healthy democracies require social institutions that concern themselves with the maintenance of democratic norms and processes, we believe it is incumbent on policymakers to carefully consider how they frame higher education's purpose, value, problems, and solutions. Likewise, Bacchi (2009) urged policy actors to reflect on how the frames they advance affect different groups. Such reflexivity surfaces the contested and context-dependent nature of social institutions, and the multiple and competing priorities, understandings, and evaluations various actors place on these institutions. By reflexively examining higher education's purposes in broader ways, policy actors may advance democratic and aspirational frames for the system's role in addressing threats to democracy (Kavenagh & Rich, 2018). Such approaches could enliven debates about the social purposes of higher education and its role in strengthening democracy. We do not argue for higher education's economic purposes to be stripped – this is a clear strength and contribution of the system and benefit to individuals and the economy. That said, we hope that policy actors will broaden the frames they use to describe U.S. postsecondary education so that the system's democratic and equity aims might be fully realized.

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