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Empowering Futures: The Interplay of Education, Employment, and Income

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Education is recognized as a fundamental catalyst for individual and societal progress in the modern, knowledge-driven economy. According to a report by UNESCO (2016), the role of education is widely recognized as a fundamental driver of economic growth and development. It equips individuals with the necessary skills and knowledge to participate in the labor market, fosters innovation and productivity, and contributes to overall societal well-being. Moreover, education positively impacts health outcomes, social mobility, and civic engagement (Mbah et al., 2021). Higher levels of education are generally associated with increased employment opportunities and higher wages. Individuals with advanced degrees tend to have lower unemployment rates and greater job security. However, the relationship between education and employment is not linear, and other factors, such as job market conditions, technological advancements, and industry-specific skills, also play a significant role.

The United States, as a global economic powerhouse, places significant importance on education, with policies and programs designed to promote educational attainment and foster a skilled workforce (Bollyky et al., 2023). There has been a growing interest in exploring the linkages between education, employment, and income in recent years. That comes with policymakers, researchers, and stakeholders recognizing the potential implications of these interrelationships on socioeconomic well-being and future prospects for individuals (Korber & Oesch, 2019). In recent decades, the United States has witnessed significant economic and labor market changes, leading to shifts in employment patterns and income distribution (Mpofu et al., 2023). Concurrently, the value of education has been increasingly recognized as a crucial determinant of an individual's employability and earning potential. Understanding the dynamics among education, employment, and income is of utmost importance to policymakers, educators, and individuals seeking to foster a more prosperous and equitable future. This study presents a comprehensive review of existing research and highlights the significance of education in shaping employment opportunities and income levels in the United States.

Background to the Study

Over the past few decades, the United States has witnessed significant shifts in its economy, workforce demands, and technological advancements, all of which have contributed to the increasing importance of education in shaping labor market outcomes (Acemoglu & Autor, 2011; Mpofu et al., 2023). Traditionally, a high school diploma was often considered adequate for securing entry-level positions in various industries. However, the labor market landscape has undergone substantial changes, making higher levels of education increasingly crucial for individual success and economic growth. One of the key drivers behind this change is the rapid transformation of the US economy (Chase-Lansdale et al., 2019). Historically, the economy was dominated by manufacturing and manual labor, where many jobs required minimal formal education (Asravor & Sackey, 2023). However, with the advent of globalization and advancements in technology, the economy has shifted towards a knowledge-based and service-oriented model (Bollyky et al., 2023). As a result, there has been a surge in demand for a skilled and educated workforce capable of adapting to dynamic and complex work environments.

Technological advancements have also revolutionized industries and given rise to new job roles while making certain low-skilled positions obsolete. Therefore, the labor market now places a premium on individuals with higher levels of education, such as bachelor's and master's degrees, who possess the technical expertise and adaptability required to thrive in dynamic work environments. According to Bollyky and colleagues (2023), the growing income disparities between individuals with different educational backgrounds have also contributed to the increasing significance of education in the labor market. Studies consistently show that those with higher levels of education tend to earn more, widening the income gap between educated and less-educated individuals (Blake et al., 2018; Milojević & Inayatullah, 2018). As people recognize the financial benefits associated with higher education, there is a greater motivation to pursue advanced degrees and enhance one's economic prospects.

Moreover, the rise of automation and artificial intelligence has significantly impacted the nature of jobs available (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2018). Routine tasks are increasingly being automated, leading to a decline in demand for low-skilled jobs. Conversely, jobs requiring creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, and specialized technical skills have become more prevalent (Chase-Lansdale et al., 2019; Krahn et al., 2015). These roles often require higher levels of education and expertise, creating a strong incentive for individuals to pursue advanced degrees and certifications. Furthermore, globalization and increased competition on the global stage have also influenced the demand for highly educated workers (Ross et al., 2013). As companies expand their operations internationally, they require employees who can understand diverse markets, adapt to cultural differences, and possess the knowledge and skills to navigate the complexities of a globalized world. The US workforce must possess higher levels of education and expertise, enabling them to meet the demands of an ever-evolving global economy.

Despite the widespread public interest in education, there remains an ongoing debate among economists, sociologists, and other experts regarding the precise impact of educational attainment on a nation's economic activity and social welfare (Asravor & Sackey, 2023). The crux of the matter lies in determining how education directly affects these aspects. One prevailing viewpoint is that educational attainment plays a crucial role in influencing a nation's production of goods and services. This perspective is founded on the belief that education enhances an individual's skills in the workplace. Naturally, someone with a higher level of skills is expected to contribute more to the overall production than someone with lower skills. Thus, if there were to be an increase in educational attainment among the workforce, it could lead to higher skills and, consequently, a boost in the economy's output of goods and services.

Purpose of the Study

This research study aims to comprehensively examine the impact of educational attainment on the US labor market. The study aims to investigate the relationship between different levels of educational attainment (ranging from high school diploma to advanced degree) and various labor market outcomes. Ultimately, this study aspires to shed light on the importance of education as a tool for promoting economic prosperity, reducing unemployment, and enhancing job satisfaction in the United States. The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To examine the trends of unemployment among the various facets of educational attainment levels.

2. To assess the relationship between educational attainment levels (e.g., high school diploma, associate degree, bachelor's degree, master's degree, and beyond) and employment rates in the US labor market.

3. To investigate the correlation between educational attainment and income levels among workers in various sectors and industries in the US.

Significance of the Study

The success of any economy relies on a skilled and productive workforce. Through the examination of educational attainment and labor market outcomes, policymakers can identify strategies to enhance the skills and competencies of the workforce. This, in turn, can increase workforce productivity, enhance the country’s competitiveness in the global market, and attract investment from industries seeking a highly skilled labor force.

Thus, understanding the impact of educational attainment on labor market outcomes offers policymakers valuable insights to make data-driven decisions that benefit various stakeholders. Through this knowledge, policymakers can shape effective education and workforce development policies that bridge skill gaps, promote economic growth, foster inclusivity, and align education with the needs of industries. Ultimately, such efforts contribute to society's overall well-being by creating a highly skilled and competitive workforce, ensuring that individuals have access to better employment opportunities, and driving sustainable economic development.

The findings will significantly benefit educational institutions and educators. By gaining a better understanding of the changing demands of the job market, educational institutions can adapt their curricula, teaching approaches, and career guidance services to equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge for successful careers. Ultimately, this alignment between education and the labor market enhances graduate employability, promotes lifelong learning, and fosters stronger partnerships between academia and industry, all contributing to the overall success and growth of individuals and the economy.

Literature Review

Theoretical Underpinning. The study is guided by the human capital theory. The human capital theory is an economic and sociological theory that emphasizes the role of education and individual skills as a form of capital that contributes to economic growth and development. The theory suggests that investing in education and training enhances the productivity and efficiency of the workforce, leading to higher economic output and overall prosperity (Jong de, 2013). Viewing education as an investment in individuals rather than a mere expenditure is a fundamental concept of human capital theory. This perspective draws parallels between education and traditional forms of capital investment, such as machinery or equipment, that contribute to increased productivity and efficiency in a company (Korber & Oesch, 2019). Just like any investment, education involves an upfront cost, including tuition fees, time, and effort, with the expectation of long-term benefits. The concept is that individuals who pursue education and training are essentially "investing" in themselves to acquire knowledge, skills, and expertise that will pay off in the future.

The theory is at the core of the argument that increased educational attainment can positively influence a nation's economic activity. According to this theory, education is seen as a process that enriches an individual's knowledge, skills, and abilities, making them more productive and valuable in the labor market. The primary aim of education, from a human capital perspective, is to enhance human productivity and capabilities. Similar to how machinery and technology improve the productivity of a company's operations, education empowers individuals to become more productive and efficient contributors to the economy and society. By acquiring specialized skills and knowledge through formal education or training, individuals become more attractive to employers seeking those skills, leading to higher wages and greater opportunities for career advancement.

Thus, education not only imparts specific skills but also enhances an individual's adaptability and resilience. A well-educated person can learn new skills and adapt to changing economic conditions more effectively, making them more valuable in a dynamic labor market. The benefits of education tend to accumulate over time as individuals progress in their careers and gain experience. Their initial investment in education can continue to yield dividends through higher wages, promotions, and increased job stability. The idea is that individuals who receive a higher level of education are likely to acquire specialized skills that allow them to be more innovative, adaptable, and efficient in their work. As a result, they can contribute more significantly to the production of goods and services, which, in turn, benefits the overall economic growth of the nation.

Beyond individual economic gains, investment in education can have broader societal impacts. A well-educated population is more likely to participate actively in civic life, engage in democratic processes, and contribute positively to community development. According to Mbah and colleagues (2021), education's impact extends far beyond individual economic gains; it plays a crucial role in shaping the fabric of society and has profound societal implications. A well-educated population not only contributes to economic growth but also fosters active civic engagement, strengthens democratic processes, and drives positive community development. Education equips individuals with critical thinking skills, knowledge of social issues, and an understanding of their rights and responsibilities as citizens. A well-educated population is more likely to participate actively in civic life, engaging in activities such as voting, volunteering, and advocating for social causes. Informed citizens are better equipped to contribute meaningfully to public discourse, which is vital for a thriving democracy.

Education in the United States. In the United States, the education system is diverse and includes both public and private schools, as well as homeschooling (Ryan et al., 2012). The educational journey typically begins with primary education, which spans from kindergarten through fifth grade. This is followed by middle school or junior high school, encompassing grades six through eight. Afterward, students enter secondary education, which comprises ninth through twelfth grades. Secondary education encompasses both college-preparatory coursework and vocational training programs (Carlson & McChesney, 2014). These various forms of education cater to the needs and preferences of students and parents. Public schools are funded and operated by local and state governments and, hence, play a significant role in setting educational standards and regulations. The schools often mandate standardized tests for students in kindergarten through 12th grade (K–12) to assess their academic progress. Additionally, state governments oversee the administration and management of public colleges and universities, typically through a board of regents or a similar governing body (Glewwe & Muralidharan, 2016). Private schools, in contrast to public schools, are not funded by the government. They are independently operated and funded through tuition fees and other private sources (Korber & Oesch, 2019). Private schools often have more flexibility in designing their curriculum and educational approach, and they may not be subject to all the same regulations as public schools.

In addition to public and private schools, there is also homeschooling. Homeschooling is an educational option where parents or guardians take on the responsibility of teaching their children at home instead of sending them to a traditional school (Glewwe & Muralidharan, 2016). Homeschooling can provide flexibility in curriculum choices and teaching methods, but it typically involves adhering to state regulations and requirements related to curriculum and student assessments. State governments in the U.S. establish educational standards that outline what students should learn at each grade level. These standards serve as a framework for curriculum development and assessment. Standardized tests, often mandated by states, are used to measure students' proficiency in various subjects.

The cost of education in the United States is substantial, with a total expenditure of approximately $1.3 trillion (National Centre for Educational Statistics, 2019). The primary sources of funding for education come from state and local governments. They allocate resources to public schools, colleges, and universities within their jurisdiction. Additionally, the federal government contributes funds to support education, with an estimated $260 billion allocated in 2021. Federal funding may come in the form of grants, subsidies, and programs aimed at supporting various aspects of education. While education is primarily a state and local responsibility, the federal government plays a role in setting educational policies and providing financial assistance to states and schools (Lee & Lee, 2018). Federal agencies, such as the U.S. Department of Education, oversee federal education programs, distribute funding, and enforce federal laws related to education, including civil rights protections in educational settings.

Educational Attainment and Employment Rates. The issue of limited skills and qualifications due to low education attainment is a pressing concern that affects both individuals and the overall economy. When individuals lack the necessary education and training to meet the demands of modern workplaces, they face significant barriers to entry into many job markets (Asravor & Sackey, 2023; Chase-Lansdale et al., 2019). As a result, they may be relegated to low-wage, unskilled positions that offer limited opportunities for career advancement and financial stability. This not only impacts the individual's quality of life but also leads to lost potential for economic growth and productivity. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive approach that focuses on improving access to education and training opportunities for individuals from diverse backgrounds (Chase-Lansdale et al., 2019; Flores-Crespo, 2007). Governments need to invest in educational programs that cater to the needs of marginalized communities and offer flexible learning options to accommodate individuals who may face obstacles in pursuing traditional educational pathways. Scholarships, grants, and financial aid can also play a crucial role in reducing financial barriers and encouraging more people to pursue higher education and skill development.

Furthermore, collaboration between educational institutions and industries is essential to ensure that the skills being taught align with the evolving demands of the job market. By understanding the specific requirements of different industries, educational programs can be tailored to equip students with relevant skills and qualifications (Kecmanovic, 2013; Krahn et al., 2015). This approach not only benefits the individual seeking employment but also helps businesses find skilled and qualified candidates, thereby fostering a more efficient labor market. Limited job opportunities stemming from low education attainment perpetuate economic inequalities and hinder social mobility.

When individuals are limited in their career choices, they are more likely to remain stuck in a cycle of low-paying jobs with limited prospects for advancement (Keep, 2019; UNESCO, 2016). This can lead to a lack of motivation, decreased job satisfaction, and reduced productivity in the workforce. As a result, the overall economy may suffer from decreased innovation and competitiveness on a global scale. Skill mismatch is another significant challenge faced by individuals with low education attainment (Dadzie et al., 2020; Nuryanto et al., 2020). In a rapidly changing job market driven by technological advancements and shifting industry needs, individuals who receive an education that does not align with current job requirements may struggle to find suitable employment. This mismatch not only results in unemployment or underemployment but also contributes to a loss of productivity for businesses and the economy as a whole.

In a highly competitive job market, educational qualifications play a significant role in determining an individual's employability and attractiveness to employers (Sachs & Oppong, 2017). Employers often consider education as a tangible indicator of an individual's knowledge, skills, and commitment to learning. As a result, individuals with higher educational qualifications, such as college degrees or specialized certifications, are more likely to be preferred over those with low education attainment, especially when competing for positions that demand specific technical expertise or advanced problem-solving abilities. One of the main reasons why individuals with higher educational qualifications are favored is that advanced degrees or certifications are seen as evidence of the individual's dedication to their field of study (Kaki et al., 2021). Completing higher education programs demonstrates discipline, perseverance, and intellectual capacity, which are highly valued attributes in the workplace. Employers may perceive such individuals as more likely to adapt quickly, handle complex tasks, and contribute to the organization's success.

Moreover, certain professions have clear educational requirements mandated by industry standards or government regulations. For instance, professions in healthcare, engineering, law, and academia often require specific degrees or licenses to ensure a minimum level of competence and safety. Consequently, individuals without these qualifications may find it difficult or impossible to pursue careers in these fields. Another factor contributing to the preference for higher educational qualifications is the perception that these individuals possess a broader skill set (Aminu, 2019; Denanyoh et al., 2018). College and university programs typically provide a well-rounded education, exposing students to various subjects, critical thinking, and research methodologies. As a result, candidates with higher education may be perceived as more adaptable, with the ability to apply their knowledge across different scenarios and industries.

Educational Attainment and Income Level. Educational attainment and income level share a crucial interconnection, shaping the economic landscape of individuals and societies alike. As discussed, higher levels of education often translate into higher income levels due to the valuable skills and qualifications acquired through formal learning (Kasujja, 2019). Individuals with advanced degrees or specialized training are generally better positioned to access higher-paying job opportunities, which, in turn, leads to increased earning potential over time (Aminu, 2019). This relationship is an essential driver of economic growth and social mobility, as a well-educated workforce contributes to increased productivity and innovation, ultimately benefiting the overall economy.

Furthermore, vocational and technical education can play a vital role in empowering individuals with skills that are in demand in the job market (Ezeani, 2018). These programs can equip individuals with the necessary tools to secure well-paying jobs without the need for traditional four-year degrees. It is also important to consider the changing nature of work and the impact of technological advancements on the job market (Aminu, 2019). As automation and artificial intelligence continue to reshape industries, certain jobs may become obsolete while new roles emerge (Pinto et al., 2020). This calls for continuous learning and upskilling throughout one's career to remain relevant and adaptable to evolving job demands.

In addition, societies that prioritize education and invest in their human capital stand to benefit from improved social welfare, reduced income inequality, and increased economic competitiveness on the global stage (Kwiatkowski et al., 2019). Education not only provides individuals with the means to secure higher-paying jobs but also empowers them to make informed decisions, participate actively in civic life, and contribute positively to their communities. Moreover, education can also foster critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and adaptability, which are highly valued attributes in the workforce. The impact of education on income is not limited to an individual level but also extends to the overall economy. Nations with a well-educated workforce tend to experience higher economic growth and increased productivity (Lisá et al., 2019). This is because a skilled and knowledgeable labor force can drive innovation, entrepreneurship, and technological advancements, ultimately leading to a more competitive economy on the global stage.

Methodology

Research Approach. The research approach for this study is quantitative. A quantitative research approach involves collecting and analyzing numerical data to test hypotheses, identify patterns, and establish statistical relationships between variables (Erickson, 2017). The study used quantitative methods to examine the impact of educational attainment on the U.S. labor market by analyzing data on unemployment rates, employment rates, and income levels in relation to different levels of education.

Research Design. The research design for this study is a cross-sectional design. A cross-sectional design involves collecting data at a single point in time from a diverse sample of individuals or groups (Bryman, 2006). This study, the study collected data on labor market outcomes and educational attainment levels from various sources for a specific period. By using a cross-sectional design, the study aims to capture a snapshot of the relationship between educational attainment and labor market outcomes in the United States during the designated time frame. The research design also aligns with the study's quantitative approach (Bhattacherjee, 2012), as it facilitates the use of statistical techniques to explore the relationships between variables. By analyzing data from a diverse sample of individuals with varying educational backgrounds, the study drew meaningful conclusions about the impact of educational attainment on the U.S. labor market.

Data Collection. The first step in this research involved collecting relevant data on educational attainment and labor market outcomes in the United States. The data was obtained from reputable sources, such as the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the U.S. Census Bureau, and other government surveys and reports. The data collected included information on unemployment rates, employment rates, income levels, and educational attainment levels among the U.S. workforces. Additionally, data on various sectors and industries was collected to explore the relationship between educational attainment and employment in different fields.

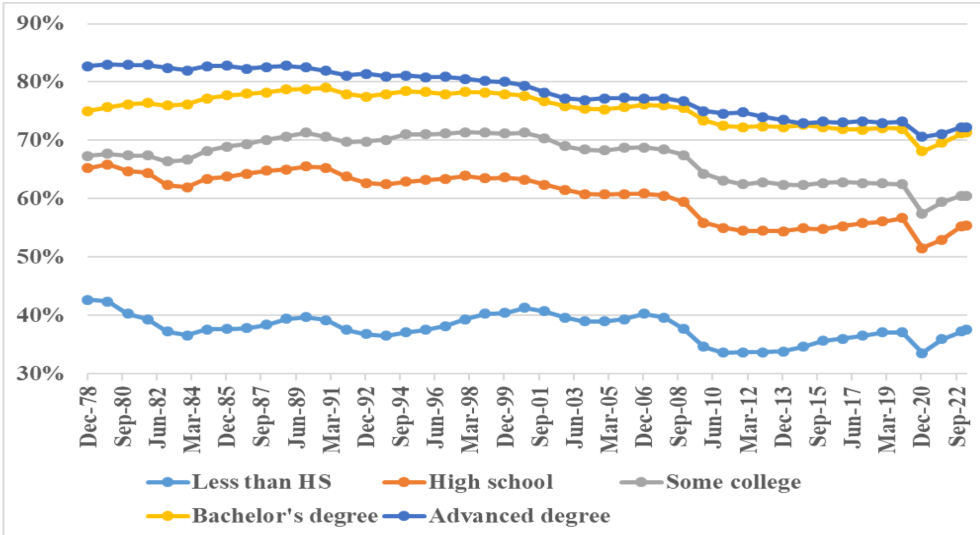
Data Analysis. Once the data was collected, it was cleaned, organized, and prepared for analysis. This involved checking for any missing or inconsistent data and ensuring that the data was in a format suitable for statistical analysis. The study employed various statistical techniques for quantitative analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to provide an overview of the trends and distribution of educational attainment and labor market outcomes. Data visualization techniques, such as tables and graphs, were utilized to present the findings in a clear and easily understandable manner.

Results

The study first looked at the trend of educational attainment levels and employment. The data indicated that there are varying trends in employment rates based on education levels over the years. Overall, the employment rate for all education levels combined has remained relatively stable, around 60%, with minor fluctuations over time. Figure 1 depicts the results.

The provided data highlights a clear relationship between educational attainment and employment rates, indicating that higher education levels generally lead to higher rates of workforce participation. Specifically, individuals with an "Advanced degree" consistently exhibit the highest employment rate, ranging between 70% and 80% throughout the years. This finding underscores

Figure 1. Trend of educational attainment levels and employment. Data sourced from U.S. Bureau of labor Statistic, 2023.



the significance of advanced education in enhancing employability and securing job opportunities in the labor market. Advanced degree holders are often equipped with specialized skills and expertise that make them highly sought after by employers, leading to a higher likelihood of being employed. Similarly, "bachelor's degree" holders also consistently demonstrate a relatively high employment rate, typically hovering around 70%. This trend further reinforces the notion that obtaining a bachelor's degree significantly increases an individual's chances of gaining employment. Bachelor's degree programs often provide a comprehensive education that prepares individuals for a wide range of professions, making them competitive candidates in the job market.

The data also shows that individuals with "Some college" education maintain a moderate level of workforce participation, with an employment rate varying between 60% and 70%. This implies that completing some college coursework, even without obtaining a degree, can have a positive influence on employability. These findings indicate that the skills and knowledge acquired during college studies can enhance an individual's appeal to employers, leading to a comparatively higher employment rate. Moreover, individuals who completed "High school" education also exhibit a similar pattern, with an employment rate remaining around 60% to 65% over the years. Although a high school diploma is often considered the minimum educational requirement for many entry-level jobs, the data indicates that having a high school education significantly contributes to an individual's chances of being employed.

On the other hand, individuals with "Less than HS" education consistently display the lowest employment rate, ranging between 33% and 42% throughout the dataset. This finding emphasizes the significant disadvantage faced by individuals with limited education attainment when it comes to accessing employment opportunities. Without a high school diploma or equivalent, these individuals may face substantial barriers in securing gainful employment and participating actively in the workforce.

The result presents a mean analysis of education and employment in the United States. It categorizes individuals into five education levels: "Less than HS," "High school," "Some college," "Bachelor's degree," and "Advanced degree."

Table 1. Mean Analysis of Education and Employment

	n	*Minimum*	*Maximum*	*Mean*	*Std. Deviation*
Less than HS	46	34%	43%	37.80%	2.32%
High school	46	52%	66%	60.42%	4.19%
Some college	46	57%	71%	66.92%	3.86%
Bachelor's degree	46	68%	79%	75.33%	2.82%
Advanced degree	46	71%	83%	78.14%	4.03%

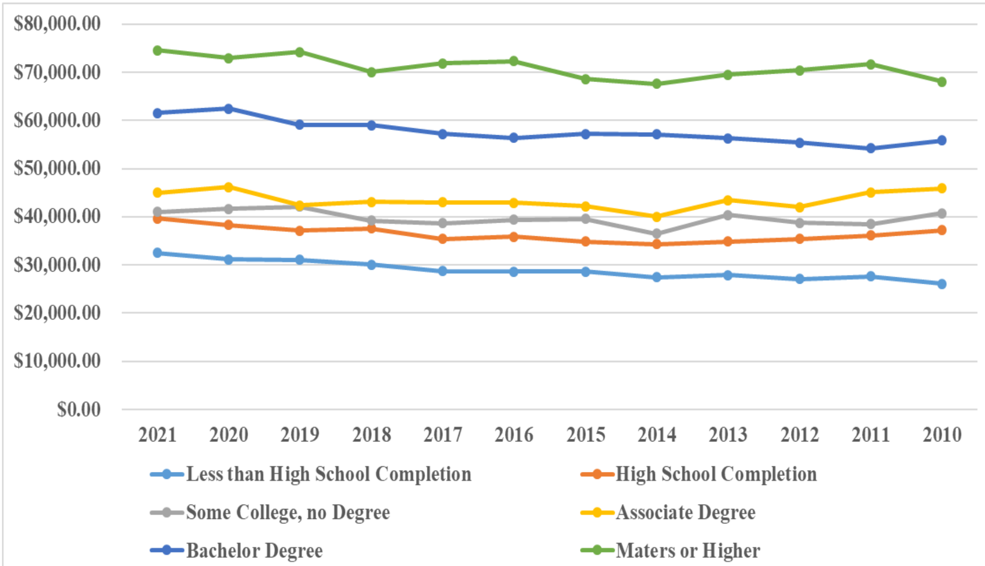
Note: n = 46 is number of data set from Dec. 1978 to Mar. 2023, Data sourced from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023.

The "Mean" column provides valuable insights into the average employment rates for each education level. Notably, individuals with advanced degrees exhibit the highest mean employment rate at approximately 78.14%. This finding suggests that individuals with postgraduate or advanced degrees are more likely to be employed compared to those with lower levels of education. Following closely are individuals with a bachelor's degree, with an average employment rate of about 75.33%. This indicates that individuals who have completed a four-year undergraduate degree also enjoy relatively high employment prospects. The "Some college" group has an average employment rate of around 66.92%, indicating that individuals who pursued higher education but didn't obtain a degree still tend to have favorable employment outcomes. For individuals with a high school diploma or equivalent, the mean employment rate is about 60.42%. While this rate is lower than those with higher education levels, it still highlights that completing high school can significantly improve one's employment prospects compared to having less than a high school education. Finally, individuals with less than a high school diploma have the lowest mean employment rate at approximately 37.80%. This reinforces the importance of education and how it can significantly impact an individual's chances of finding employment.

The data provides a trend of educational attainment and earning potential. The consistent pattern revealed in the data shows that higher levels of education are associated with higher earnings. This finding underscores the critical role education plays in shaping career opportunities and financial success for young adults in the workforce.

Starting with individuals who have less than high school completion, it is evident that their earnings are consistently the lowest over the years, ranging from $26,100 in 2010 to $32,500 in 2021. These findings highlight the potential disadvantages of not completing basic education, as it can significantly limit earning potential and access to well-paying jobs. On the other hand, high school graduates demonstrate higher earnings compared to those with less than high school completion. Their earnings range from $37,200 in 2010 to $39,700 in 2021. Completing high school provides

Figure 2. Trend of Annual Earnings of Full-Time by Educational Attainment. Data sourced from National Center for Education Statistics, 2023.



individuals with a foundational level of education, enabling them to access a broader range of job opportunities and better-paying positions.

Individuals who attended college but did not obtain a degree, referred to as "Some College, no Degree", experience further increases in earnings over the years, from $40,800 in 2010 to $41,000 in 2021. This suggests that even without completing a degree, some college education can positively impact earning potential and contribute to higher-paying job opportunities. The data also highlights the significant earning advantages for individuals with a two-year associate degree compared to those with only a high school diploma or some college education. Earnings for those with an associate degree start at $45,900 in 2010 and decrease slightly to $45,000 in 2021. The findings indicate that an associate degree provides valuable skills and specialized knowledge that can translate into higher-paying jobs. That could be attributed to various factors, such as economic fluctuations, changes in the job market, or shifts in demand for specific skills during this period.

Bachelor's degree holders consistently demonstrate higher earnings compared to all the previous educational categories. Their earnings rose from $55,900 in 2010 to $61,600 in 2021, showing substantial growth in earning potential. These findings underscore the significant value of a four-year undergraduate degree in unlocking higher-paying job opportunities across various industries and professions. Lastly, individuals with a master's degree or higher exhibit the highest earnings among all the educational categories. Their earnings rose significantly from $68,100 in 2010 to $74,600 in 2021, showcasing the substantial financial returns on investing in advanced education. This category represents professionals who have pursued postgraduate studies, which often leads to leadership roles, specialized careers, and higher-paying positions.

The consistent upward trend in earnings as an individual progresses from less than high school completion to higher education levels highlights the immense value of investing in education. Those with higher levels of education, such as associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, and master's degrees or higher, consistently enjoy higher earnings, while individuals with less education experience lower earnings. These findings underscore the significance of obtaining advanced education for young adults, as it can significantly impact their long-term financial success and career prospects in an ever-evolving job market.

The following table 2 presents the median annual earnings of full-time, year-round workers aged 25–34 in the United States from 2010 to 2021, categorized by their level of educational attainment. For those with less than high school completion, the earnings range from $26,100 to $32,500. The mean earnings for this group are approximately $28,917, with a relatively low standard deviation of $1,918. This suggests that the earnings for individuals in this category are relatively consistent, with limited variability around the mean.

Table 2. Mean Analysis of Education and Annual Income

	n	*Minimum*	*Maximum*	*Mean*	*Std. Deviation*
Less than High School Completion	12	26,100.00	32,500.00	28,916.66	1,918.25
High School Completion	12	34,300.00	39,700.00	36,400.00	1,604.53
Some College, no Degree	12	36,500.00	42,100.00	39,725.00	1,566.19
Associate Degree	12	40,000.00	46,200.00	43,441.66	1,808.79
Bachelor’s Degree	12	54,200.00	62,500.00	57,658.33	2,471.09
Master’s or Higher	12	67,600.00	74,600.00	71,000.00	2,322.61

Note: n = Number of data set from 2010 to 2022. Data sourced from Annual Earnings by Educational Attainment. National Center for Education Statistics, 2023.

High school graduates exhibit earnings between $34,300 and $39,700, with mean earnings of $36,400 and a standard deviation of $1,605. Similar to those with less than high school completion, high school graduates experience relatively stable earnings with moderate variation around the mean. Individuals who attended college but did not obtain a degree, known as "Some College, no Degree," have earnings ranging from $36,500 to $42,100. The mean earnings for this group amount to $39,725, with a standard deviation of $1,566. Like the previous categories, this group also demonstrates moderate earnings consistency around the mean.

For those with an associate degree, the earnings range from $40,000 to $46,200, with mean earnings of $43,442 and a standard deviation of $1,809. The earnings for this category also show moderate variability around the mean, indicating a relatively stable earning pattern. Individuals with a bachelor’s degree experience higher earnings between $54,200 and $62,500. The mean earnings for this group are $57,658, with a higher standard deviation of $2,471 compared to the previous categories. This suggests that the earnings for bachelor's degree holders exhibit more significant variation around the mean.

Finally, those with a master’s degree or higher have the highest earnings, ranging from $67,600 to $74,600. The mean earnings for this group are $71,000, with a standard deviation of $2,323. Like the bachelor's degree category, the earnings for individuals with a master's degree or higher also demonstrate relatively higher variability around the mean. The relatively higher variability around the mean earnings for individuals with a Master's Degree or Higher may be attributed to the diverse range of specializations and industries within this educational category. Factors such as the specific field of study, professional experience, geographic location, and industry trends can lead to significant variations in earnings within this group, contributing to the observed higher standard deviation.

Conclusion

The analysis of education and employment in the United States reveals a compelling positive correlation between higher levels of education and employment rates. Among the key findings, individuals holding advanced degrees display the highest mean employment rates, closely followed by those with bachelor's degrees and some college education. Moreover, completing high school or attaining some level of college education also significantly boosts employment prospects when compared to individuals without a high school diploma. It is imperative to acknowledge that these findings are based on a sample dataset, and caution should be exercised when extrapolating these results to the entire U.S. population. Nevertheless, they undeniably underscore the pivotal role of education and continuous learning in augmenting employability, thereby contributing to a more equitable and prosperous society, especially in the ever-evolving job market.

Furthermore, the data underscores a parallel relationship between higher educational attainment and median salary levels. Specifically, individuals with advanced degrees, such as master's or higher, and those with bachelor's degrees consistently report the highest earnings, while those with less than a high school completion tend to have the lowest income levels. These findings emphasize the enduring significance of investing in education and attaining higher qualifications as a means to enhance career prospects and ensure financial stability during early adulthood. However, it is essential to recognize that while educational attainment plays a crucial role in shaping earnings, other variables such as work experience, industry involvement, and regional disparities also exert notable influence on an individual's earning potential. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between education and various contributing factors is essential for forming a more accurate picture of the complex relationship between education and employment outcomes.

Recommendations

In light of the research findings, several important recommendations emerge:

1. Promoting Access to Higher Education: Governments and educational institutions should prioritize initiatives aimed at removing the barriers to higher education. This includes bolstering scholarship, grant, and financial aid programs, which can play a pivotal role in making advanced degrees and bachelor's programs more accessible to individuals from diverse backgrounds. These measures hold the potential to significantly improve employment prospects and earning potential for a wider range of students.

2. Enhancing Career Counseling and Guidance: Comprehensive career counseling and guidance services are crucial for helping students make informed choices regarding their educational and career paths. Educational institutions, career centers, and counselors must step up their efforts to provide students with a clear understanding of the various career avenues and earning prospects associated with their educational decisions. Such guidance can empower individuals to make choices that align with their long-term goals, ultimately leading to more favorable career outcomes.

3. Encouraging Lifelong Learning: The research findings underscore the importance of continuous learning and professional development in today's dynamic job market. Employers should prioritize investing in employee training programs to ensure their workforce remains competitive and adaptable. Simultaneously, individuals should proactively seek out opportunities for skill and knowledge enhancement, positioning themselves favorably in the ever-evolving job market landscape.

4. Addressing High School Dropout Rates: To enhance employment opportunities and earning potential, concerted efforts must be directed toward addressing high school dropout rates. Implementing targeted interventions and support systems can be instrumental in boosting high school completion rates. By doing so, more individuals will have the chance to pursue further education or vocational training, thus improving their overall prospects in the job market.

5. Fostering Collaboration Between Academia and Industry: Strengthening the collaboration between educational institutions and industries is vital for aligning educational curricula with the demands of the job market. Such collaboration ensures that graduates possess the skills and knowledge sought after by employers, facilitating a smoother transition from education to employment. Additionally, the establishment of internship and apprenticeship programs can provide students with invaluable work experience, bridging the gap between theory and real-world application and ultimately enhancing their employability.

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Future Scenarios: A Powerful Tool for Envisioning Change

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With headwinds increasing, there has never been a more pressing need for innovative thinking and creative imagination to spur strategic change in higher education. Yet inspiring such thinking and imagination is challenging. Efforts to envision a thriving future different from the status quo are frequently met with skepticism and both passive and active resistance. In the words of one trustee reacting to a proposal to update a campus facility: "I'm all for progress; it's change I don't like." Entirely serious and apparently unaware of the irony of his statement, he could have been speaking for most board members, staff and faculty.

To be fair, higher education is not as static as some critics claim—over time our institutions have evolved with our society. But the pace of change outside our institutions is accelerating and, as a result, enduring assumptions about higher education no longer prevail. In fact, many long-standing assumptions have been inverted in the past five years. Among these:

- *Higher Education is Always Growing.* In fact, overall student enrollment is as low as it was almost 20 years ago. It had been in decline for several years before the pandemic and has not recovered most of the pandemic-era declines. Birth-rate data predict further decreases over the next 10 years which will impact all but the most elite institutions. Where there is population growth it is within racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups that have been least likely to attend college in part because of affordability barriers (Grawe, 2021). Further, since 2009 the gap between high school graduates and college goers has continued to expand at an increasingly rapid pace—college is no longer viewed as an automatic or even a wise choice by many who can make a decent living without foregoing years of income and accruing debt while in school. It's not surprising then that community college enrollment dropped dramatically during the pandemic and has not recovered, impacting the transfer pipeline. And, there is also a downward trend in international student enrollments caused primarily by factors other than the pandemic. All of these constricting forces have resulted in fewer institutions, as mergers and closures of tuition dependent institutions (the norm except among the most elite) gradually shrink the overall number of institutions in the US and serve as a concrete reminder that higher education is no longer growing (Moody, 2023).

- *Strong Return on Investment.* In fact, the broader public and prospective students who long viewed college as a valuable investment are increasingly skeptical of the return on investment, especially as tuition continues to rise while government aid is relatively stagnant (Gertler, 2023; Schleifer, Friedman & McNally, 2022).

- *A college degree is necessary for professional success*. In fact, companies and states are now much more focused on skills-based hiring than degree acquisition and many jobs no longer require degrees (Joffe, 2023; Milligan & Camera, 2023). Moreover, for those seeking to advance their skills there are viable alternatives—lower cost certificates, competency-based options, and industry partnerships that drive students to specific options (Dodd, 2023).

- *Institutions of higher education are respected and trusted to self-govern*. In fact, political interference in curriculum and student physical and mental wellness has become commonplace, undermining the autonomy of institutions, faculty and staff. The latest Gallup poll reveals that overall confidence in higher education is 21 percentage points lower than it was in 2015 (Brenan, 2023).

Resistance to Change

Many of these changes not only invert our long-standing assumptions, they also do not align with experienced leaders' accumulated reservoirs of knowledge about how to address specific challenges, and were widely unanticipated. It is clear that to be successful, higher education institutions must be poised to readily adapt and to imagine longer term change, despite the difficulty of predicting the future.

Yet, we struggle to envision possible futures and when new ideas – even resource-neutral ones – are proposed they tend to be rejected almost reflexively as we know from the familiarity of these reactions and countless similar ones:

- "That's not how we've always done it."

- "I can work around that and continue to do things the right way."

- "We don't have the resources to do that."

- "That won't work here, we tried that fifteen years ago."

Resistance to change is a natural human reaction. Thus, leaders are called upon to be strategic not only in meeting existential challenges but also in how they overcome resistance and fear of the change that will allow institutions to meet those challenges (Kegan and Lahey, 2001; Keller & Aiken, 2014). One powerful strategy to encourage openness to imagining possibilities is to help the campus community envision its future through the use of creative scenarios. Scenarios describe possible futures, make them come alive and seem attainable, and clarify changes and choices necessary to achieve a desired future.

Scenarios: A Vision to Overcome Resistance

Scenarios are one of many creative approaches to release the imagination and have fun, which furthers even more expansive thinking about what is possible and what is desirable. They are especially powerful for those who have trouble imagining or believing in a new direction, because they weave possibilities into a realistic narrative that helps people visualize novel ways of doing things and different futures (Furr, Nel & Ramsoy, 2018). Additionally, they can also help to overcome our tendency to "systematically overlook subtractive changes—to improve a situation by taking something away rather than adding" (Adams, et al., 2021).

Building from signals and trends that point toward possible futures, Alexander (2020) and Staley (2019) provide powerful general scenarios representing future higher education models. They draw upon ideas, technology and tools, and research on pedagogy, leadership, human behavior, demographics and economics, workforce demands, evolving student expectations, etc., that point to how an institution might do a better job of achieving its goals.

Their resulting scenarios are enlightening and thought-provoking. Additionally, scenarios are a powerful tactic to playfully revive discussion of important topics that have become taboo because they arouse so much emotion and disagreement. Yet to break through resistance and inspire agile thinking, institutions need specific scenarios that will ring true enough for constituents that they can imagine where their college or university might be in a decade and then work toward necessary change. To that end, leaders would benefit from guidance in how to develop institution-specific scenarios that bring a campus community together around a shared vision for what is possible, reinvigorating the process of strategy development.

Guidelines for Scenario Development

- Provide several varied examples, as we do below, to familiarize a team with the concept and design of this tool for envisioning the future.

- Construct a narrative, or several narratives of possible, plausible futures based on current trends, information and environmental signals that are widely recognized. As Alexander (2020) notes of his scenarios: "The basis for this work lies in the present, as I examine the real world of colleges and universities and the contexts that shape them for clues as to the emerging future. I identify drivers of change, based on objective evidence, and then proceed to informed speculation about what trends those colleges and universities will craft later in the 21st century."

- To be realistic, the narrative must be data-based, using institutional data trends. It should create a sense of urgency but also context-based familiarity, portraying a believable, if previously unimagined evolution.

- The narrative should incorporate necessary and important changes for the institution's success – what we could and should make of our current and near-future circumstances to thrive – illustrating what these changes might look like.

- Institutional scenarios may reflect significant improvement and removal of obstacles or they may present an ambitious vision involving transformational change.

Below we provide three examples of scenarios written by senior leaders for actual institutions in the US and Europe, though names and some details are changed. One is a large, urban, comprehensive university; another a highly ranked business-focused university; and the third is a small, rural, regional college. Our intent is to offer useful examples for leaders who are interested in exploring scenarios as a tool for groups to experiment with on their own campuses.

Following the scenarios we analyze what works and why in each example to assist leaders and groups inspired to experiment with this powerful, engaging and fun tool for envisioning change.

Scenario 1: Crystal Lake University in 2033

Crystal Lake University (CLU) – a large, private, comprehensive university in central Florida – emerged from its near-death experience a much smaller place with a radically different curriculum. Having inadequately prepared for both the demographic changes in the mid-2020s and the persistent fallout from the DeSantis administration's state policy interference in higher education and individual institutions, CLU found itself having to cleave off entire colleges and the faculty and staff within them. After dealing with two more hospital closures – the aftermath of significant physician shortages and defunding of academic medical centers – CLU spun off its medical school. Research and graduate education, once a pillar of the institution's strategic plan, was dramatically scaled back. The people who remained on campus barely blinked when the institution lost its R1 status, except to lament the prestige that was supposed to come when Carnegie conferred that classification upon the institution 25 years earlier.

To survive, CLU leaned on the quality that had defined it before its growth boom in the 2000s: experiential education and its relationships with employers. Desperate for talent and seeing an opportunity to obtain distressed real estate assets – the institution had some capacity, after all – firms swooped in to partner more directly with CLU. Unused academic space from an abandoned college became a novel hybrid of corporate offices and lecture halls. Students often go from a classroom back to their cubicle to continue their required work. Faculty and staff alike smirk when they hear students refer to space formerly known as CLU's administrative headquarters as the DUB (Disney Universal Building… named for two companies with significant presence in Florida).

Students no longer apply to colleges, but to a collection of employers instead. These employers, embedded within the admissions staff of the institution, help evaluate potential applicants. To avoid anti-trust concerns, the student is not admitted to a particular employer; instead, they are admitted to an industry in which several employers have agreed to common standards and prerequisites for admission.

Feedback from employers is embedded into the culture from the get-go. As part of the application process, prospective students enter the institution with an initial performance review, the student's individual strengths and weaknesses fully catalogued. As students matriculate and move to campus, they are given their laptop, their dorm room, and of course, a professional development plan.

Students still pay tuition, but it is heavily subsidized by employers. Students don't take out loans – employers prefer to call it an investment – but they do pay their eventual employers back in the form of reduced salary in the opening years of their careers.

Academic disciplines still exist at CLU, but students do not major in those programs. Students' plans of study are derived and customized based on the initial evaluation and are updated as students improve (or don't). Need to improve written communication? An intensive writing class is switched into the plan. Not functioning well within a team? That feedback is communicated to the student directly, and he is placed into a class that does exclusively group work. Students do have the opportunity to pick classes, but the courses in the catalog now are emblazoned with company logos endorsing the content of the course. These badges serve as a signal of utility and marketability. Courses without these endorsements often are sparsely populated and eventually cut. Teaching faculty are still technically employees of CLU; however, since the employer pays a portion of their salary, they are almost treated as middle managers supervising their charges.

CLU's curriculum, previously a rigid, inflexible schedule with time designated for internships and experiential education, transformed to a fluid experience. The distinct experience of leaving the classroom to do internships no longer exists; instead, students' coursework and professional experience co-exist. The academic setting integrates problems from the students' professional experiences. Theory enters the classroom but always with a lens toward the applied.

The new CLU treats the four-year degree as a maximum time allotted to complete. Because undergraduate students are constantly evaluated, some students who meet minimum standards for employment are permitted to graduate early (in practice, nearly half of the students who complete do so a year early). Because students are admitted to a particular industry, the firms – which at this point are quite familiar with the capabilities of each student – begin a bidding process to compete for that student's employment. The financial aid the student required to enroll and progress is accounted for in the negotiation. In times of economic boom – especially for talented graduates – these loans may be entirely wiped out.

But not everyone gets to graduate. Even with the abandonment of CLU's rigid curriculum, some students simply are not ready for the pace and intensity that the professional/academic model brings. Students find difficulty transferring their credits from this loose model to other institutions. Some of the students who make it through speak of the pressure the constant evaluation and stakes place on them.

Graduate education and research proceeds in much the same fashion as undergraduate education, albeit with a much smaller footprint than before. Mostly offering master's degrees, the partnerships between industry and the institution is evident in these programs as well. Courses are offered outside normal work hours, and CLU's online presence has grown significantly. Faculty at the institution still conduct research, but not surprisingly, it is aligned with and mostly funded by partner firms. There is a role for basic science at institutions, but it is generally funded by larger firms that have dedicated R&D budgets.

The investment from private industry was timely and is largely responsible for keeping the institution afloat; however, the institution is only half as large as it was a decade ago. Some staff at the institution murmur privately that the labor shortage that fuels this model may not last forever. What then? Will the institution's corporate partners, desperate for cash, leave CLU to fend for itself? Has such a transformation weakened the institution's ability to adapt to new conditions?

Such musings are always interrupted by the push alert telling staff members their thirty-minute nutrition and productivity-enhancement break is over and that is time to get back to work.

Scenario 2: Alpine University in 2033

Zurich, Switzerland, 8:16am, January 23, 2033. Carla navigates her electric wheelchair off the tram in front of the new state-of-the-art central Zurich campus of Alpine University. Built just last year, the campus occupies an airy converted industrial building near the main train station. The renovation was completed by a famed Australian architect who designed a similar multidisciplinary building which was unveiled on the university's main campus in 2022 to great fanfare. The doors glide open and Carla notices a group of classmates speaking casually to the Chief Technology Officer (CTO) of Zurich Insurance Group while waiting in line at the coffee bar in the lobby. Olivia, the CTO, will be delivering today's workshop on customer centricity. Carla instantly recognizes her because she watched the pre-recorded ultra-high-definition video lecture materials last night, which she streamed to her TV from the comfort of her couch. She also listened to some audio-only podcast style pre-workshop instructions while on the tram this morning. Olivia is a great presenter, having attended some of the university's executive trainings on public speaking skills, which are delivered in partnership with the Zurich Opera.

After years of lobbying from staff, students, alumni, corporate partners, and other stakeholders, the university finally relented and established a permanent foothold in Switzerland's largest city and one of Europe's key economic hubs. Since the university's founding, being nestled into the foothills of the Alps in a calm, small college town away from the hustle-and-bustle of Zurich has been central to its identity.

Zurich is home to the largest concentration of not only the university's alumni, but also its corporate relationships. One reason the university finally established a Zurich campus was to take advantage of the diverse network of companies and industry experts located in the city or within easy reach. For example, nearby Zug, which due to its unique regulatory and corporate tax environments has emerged as one of the world's most prominent concentrations of blockchain and cryptocurrency companies. In financial services broadly, the market is moving so quickly that practitioners are accruing knowledge at a rate which outpaces academia. Thus, the university has increasingly partnered with industry experts to ensure its curriculum offerings reflect and retain the university's position as one of Europe's leading business schools. In fact, co-creation of electives evolved into co-creation of entire degree programs with Switzerland-headquartered companies such as UBS, Nestlé, and Rolex. The power and respect afforded to higher education has even enabled the university to bring fierce competitors into collaboration, such as the highly respected Pharmaceutical Regulatory and Commercialization program jointly delivered by Roche and Novartis, which has a 100% employment rate upon completion.

Coupled with practitioner collaboration was the opportunity to deepen ties with ETH Zurich, Europe's highest ranked technical institution, which has retained its place alongside MIT and Caltech as a Top 10 university worldwide in the QS and Times Higher Education rankings for many years. The relationship began in the early 2020s with the launch of co-delivered programs for executives. Now, as technology sweeps across all aspects of business, the two institutions have found value in enmeshing their complimentary historical strengths. Students at both institutions have cross-registration privileges, giving them equal exposure to engineering and computer science expertise at one, and finance and entrepreneurship expertise at the other. International students comprise 45% of total enrollment, as a joint effort to lobby the federal and cantonal governments to grant special work visas for graduates without European work rights was successful. In 2023, 39.5% of the Swiss population over 15 years old had a migration background including dual citizens. Now in 2033 that figure has risen to 44% and is continuing an upward trajectory.

This spirit of partnerships and co-creation extends to a range of peer institutions outside of Switzerland. Once Carla graduates, she is looking forward to having full access to the extensive and high-quality video, audio, and virtual reality content from London Business School, Stockholm School of Economics, Technical University of Munich, and a handful of other partner European business and technical institutions. All schools have committed to granting access to their Metaverse campuses, encouraging alumni from other schools to dress their avatars in their home institutions' swag when visiting, where they offer synchronous lectures and seminars exclusively for alumni. These have become a fantastic way to network across Europe without having to leave the kitchen table. Last year, Carla's older sister Elise (already an alumna from Alpine University) met Francesca, an alumna from SDA Bocconi in Milan, during a Metaverse seminar on art-backed lending co-hosted by a Zurich-based Multi-Family Office and the Zurich Sotheby's office. Sharing a passion for both art and finance, Elise took the train to Milan shortly thereafter for a weekend meet up, where they visited an exhibition at the Fondazione Prada (and had lunch in the Wes Anderson designed café of course). Francesca is planning to come up to Switzerland in June for Art Basel and will stop off in Zurich for a night so they can have dinner together.

Scenario 3: Northern Upstate College in 2033

The year is 2033 and Northern Upstate College president, Kenneth Sullivan, is striding across the administrative quad, still dotted with melting snow in late spring, on his way to meet student government president Natalia Clarke for coffee. Natalia is doing a project on the history of Northern for her gen ed class while pursuing her bachelor's degree in renewable energy. She has completed two internships, one focused on solar power and another at a biofuels company, and she is debating between two job offers slated to start when she graduates in May.

Natalia is interviewing President Sullivan about the changes he has overseen at Northern during his 10-year presidency. He explains that in 2023, the college's enrollment had plummeted from a high of over 3,000 in 2016 to a low of 1,526 seven years later. Incoming students were decreasing by 10% each year and the first to second year retention rate had dropped to 48.3%. Students were leaving the college faster than they could be recruited. Why?

Hypotheses about what caused the attrition of more than half the incoming class were abundant, ranging from insufficient dining options to the campus being too rural to ineffective academic support structures. But, Sullivan explained, we knew that many students had overlapping financial and academic challenges; 46% of the fall 2022 incoming class had below a 2.0 GPA after their first semester. Many were also deeply homesick and felt out of place at the college, especially the students that had been recruited from New York City and had never lived in such a remote, rural location. Most had come to Northern for programs like business, nursing or criminal justice; they could have enrolled in a similar program close to home with no travel or additional housing costs. These students stayed at Northern a year or less and left with debt and no degree.

It was clear that something fundamental had to change, both for Northern's economic sustainability and for it to fulfill its student-focused mission. President Sullivan assembled a strategic planning council whose job was not to write a strategic plan but to develop a strategy for the college's sustainability. "The council made three dramatic and, at first, seemingly impossible recommendations: 1) reduce program offerings from 56 to fewer than 20, keeping only programs that were meeting the specific needs of society and the economy and which Northern had a competitive advantage in offering; 2) focus student recruitment on the local population for the majority of degrees, complemented by an aggressive but tightly targeted national marketing campaign for degrees not offered elsewhere; and 3) reduce the campus size, infrastructure and student affairs offerings."

President Sullivan explains to Natalia that at first, these suggestions seemed absurd. In a world where every college was clamoring for more students, cutting programs by more than 50% and reducing marketing and student recruitment was institutional self-sabotage, wasn't it? The plan would not even save money at first since all the faculty in the discontinued programs were unionized and would have to be paid while they taught out their current students. The college risked losing its state support, an allocation that had remained flat for 15 years but still made up 25% of the overall budget. People worried that the contraction could lead to the state system, of which Northern was a member, absorbing the campus into another institution. In short, Sullivan concluded, the plan was widely ridiculed by faculty, staff and alumni and seemed very unlikely to gain the necessary traction or support needed to enact it.

Natalia listened with interest because her campus looks very similar to this scene President Sullivan was describing as "very unlikely." Northern has only 18 majors centered on agriculture and technology, the areas for which the college is known and has a strong regional reputation. She assumed this had always been the case. From her perspective, everyone on campus is proud of the college's distinctive identity as an applied science institution that addresses national challenges at a local level. All programs focus on at least one of the college's three priorities: climate change, food chain security, and healthcare. Northern graduates are known for having multiple job offers at graduation and for effectively meeting the needs of their community at the local, state and national level. Most students come from a 100-mile radius, especially if they are studying subjects like electric and hybrid automotive production and maintenance or nursing, important programs but ones where many students have other options closer to home. Programs like renewable energy, the first of its kind when it launched in 2008, and food and agribusiness draw students from all over the country.

President Sullivan also explained how the college used to have a very complex infrastructure of staff and programming meant to help students feel a sense of belonging, to keep order in the residence halls, and to manage students' involvement in extracurricular activities. A complementary infrastructure existed in academic advising to ensure class attendance and to assist students in navigating their class selections and academic challenges. A third set of professionals assisted with student support services like tutoring and a complex web of overlapping opportunity programs. Of course, these functions still exist and operate in 2033, but their scale has been dramatically reduced by centralization both at the campus and the state system level and by utilizing technology to complete many processes that previously required a staff member.

Natalia considered how it is that she and her fellow students have such a strong sense of belonging and community without this vast student activity infrastructure. She is part of two clubs in addition to student government, but these are largely run by the students themselves with the guidance and direction of their faculty members. Students' extracurricular activities center around their academic interests; Natalia is part of both the renewable energy advocacy club and the mechanical engineering team. She appreciates that her hobbies are complementary to the projects she completes for her degree. Her faculty advise these groups and spend time with the students socially as they pursue their advocacy projects or go to engineering competitions. Natalia knows nearly every student on campus and loves the sense of camaraderie. Though she and her friends have very different interests, they all approach their subject and extracurriculars with a shared sense of purpose, strengthened by the college's strong identity.

Natalia asks President Sullivan how he worked past opposition and doubt to such a foundational change. "The most difficult choice in my career was to close nearly 30 programs; it took time as my colleagues left or migrated to other roles at the college. It was difficult to adopt a mindset of enrolling 450 new students a year instead of 800." But the move paid dividends; first to second year retention rates rose steadily from 48.3% to its current rate of 86%. State allocation was not reduced as had been feared because state officials recognized the college's bold action to alter its own trajectory. This stable allocation goes much farther in supporting a campus of 1500 students than it did when supporting infrastructure designed for twice as many. Right sizing the college's physical footprint and staffing levels resulted in a balanced budget and the college is on solid financial footing for the first time in twenty years.

What Makes a Scenario Work?

In order to help others develop effective scenarios tailored to their institutions, we conclude with an analysis of key elements that make each scenario a powerful tool. These elements can be incorporated into any institution's exploration of scenario development to create compelling narratives that erode resistance to change, unleash imagination, and spark future-focused strategic thinking. Among the key elements:

- *Details make the narrative come alive*. Details contribute to the development of the story and also make the vision of a different future seem more familiar and less disruptive. The details align with current practices and values in certain ways and place the vision in a well-known setting, including actual data and recognized people, programs, traditions, and even climate. For example, the places and companies named in the Crystal Lake University and Alpine University scenarios will be very familiar to constituents. The same is true of Northern Upstate College which is in a rural setting with long winters, and takes pride in its well-known and successful programs in energy and food science. The disappointing data in the Northern Upstate College scenario will be equally familiar to those who work at and know the college, and reminds readers that action is needed.

- *Widely known challenges are addressed.* Each scenario reflects specific challenges that have been stubbornly enduring at the institution. Alpine University has for some time examined the idea of opening an urban campus closer to corporate partners but the commitment to a small-town identity – which is linked to debates about public and private funding sources for such an endeavor, and the extent to which public institutions should encroach on each other across cantonal lines – always got in the way of envisioning how much more connected students could be if the university expanded in the way described in the scenario. CLU, which recruits heavily in the northeastern US, has been threatened by widely recognized undergraduate enrollment shortfalls which will only become more prevalent with demographic trends, and also faces strong pressure to reduce tuition given its costly private university cost of attendance, and budget overextension to climb in rankings. Few on campus can dispute these realities—they are part of an underlying anxiety about the strategic plan's lack of success and the future at CLU. Closure or merger is clearly imminent at Northern Upstate College, and as part of a state system this would be relatively seamless and quite feasible, as has been demonstrated in several other states in the recent past.

- *The scenarios capitalize on current strengths and location while also representing dramatic change based on trends*. CLU has historically been known for internship and paid experiential education achieved in partnership with major local businesses. National trends point to ever increasing interest in reducing the cost of education and positioning graduates for career opportunities through such partnerships and paid internships so CLU can exploit this current value proposition. At the same time the co-location, prioritizing of corporate needs, and the degree of corporate control over the curriculum and even the faculty to some degree, represent a dramatic but conceivable innovation in response to the contextual and societal factors discussed at the beginning of this article. Alpine University builds on existing partnerships to achieve unimaginable collaboration between corporate competitors and academic competitors to develop highly successful new programs, expand value to alumni, and foster unity within Europe. Additionally, the scenario purposefully features only women. By subtly suggesting successful achievement and normalization of current gender-based goals for student and faculty recruitment, internal readers may feel a heightened sense of goodwill towards the scenario and be more open to other elements of it. Northern Upstate College embraces shrinking to build on what it does best – undergraduate programs in climate change, food chain security and healthcare – and develops a new, extremely pared down model for student services, extracurricular opportunities, and support.

- *Envisioned changes make sense because they still fit the context and mission, providing a convincing description of what the future looks like.* Alpine University welcomes enhanced technology, an emerging strength of the university, to offer an updated flipped classroom model. Technology also establishes a footprint where it can maximize alumni engagement through networking and lifelong learning opportunities, as the story that closes the scenario demonstrates. CLU recognizes that the loss of R1 status is irrelevant because a focus on research and graduate education no longer served the university and hadn't brought the reputational boost that was intended in any case. Instead, the university reclaimed the quality that had defined its success 30 years earlier. It is clear why dramatic change, even applying to a collection of employers instead of the college, for example, makes sense. Northern Upstate College faces existential challenges – the college is not sustainable and is likely to be absorbed or close – yet with the major changes described the students have good job offers before graduation and the college's commitment to individual student success is no longer an unfulfilled promise, it is a genuine outcome.

- S*kepticism and concern are acknowledged and addressed directly*. Both CLU and Northern Upstate College acknowledge the fear of getting smaller. They also address realistic issues such as the cost to teach out programs at Northern Upstate College and anti-trust concerns at CLU, as well as the possibility that the envisioned model may need to be adjusted if the labor shortage subsides. As the examples show, scenarios may be more or less transformative and more or less utopian, and even somewhat dystopian, for example CLU's controlled thirty-minute nutrition and productivity-enhancement break. In the end, at Northern Upstate College a seemingly "absurd, impossible, self-sabotaging" proposal actually turns out to be very successful, as does the expansion into an urban campus for Alpine University. And even though CLU's model admittedly doesn't work for every student, it is very successful for most and reverses a negative enrollment trend while reducing the cost of college.

Conclusion

Once scenarios are developed by small groups or individuals, they can be shared with multiple audiences for broad engagement and feedback before a strategic direction is established. Scenarios that may seem extreme to some may also excite constituents and open their minds because of their innovative, bet-it-all approach; they may also help constituents accept a middle ground of major change that seems somewhat less extreme but is still transformational. Campuses can try several scenario options on the continuum of incremental to transformative change; both may offer a powerful vision for the future, even if the outcomes of each may not match everyone's ideals.

Strategic visioning processes can be predictable, cautious, deadening exercises that focus on short-term likelihoods, but they need not be. Instead, they can be processes that embrace unavoidable uncertainty (Webb, 2019) and result in playful, imaginative, expansive thinking that turns out to be very serious and productive with respect to future visioning that will position an institution for success.

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Playing to Win in Higher Ed: Developing Effective Strategies for Colleges and Universities

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Colleges and universities often resist adopting business concepts. Higher education, it is claimed, is different and should not be treated as a business. One example is the resistance to the proposal by Astrid Tuminez, the new president of Utah Valley University, that “exceptional accountability” become one of the university’s key values along with “exceptional care” and “exceptional results.” The article on the controversy notes that, “many faculty interpret ‘accountability’ as a corporate term,” and see it as inappropriate as a core value for a university. David Kieffer, an analyst, explains why it is challenging to introduce business concepts in higher education: “I’ve seen a lot of corporate leaders come to higher ed and think they can run it like a bank. And you can’t. It’s not a bank. It’s not a retail company. There are complexities to it that are different on purpose” (Marcus, 2022). While many concerns about treating an institution of higher education (IHE) like a business are legitimate, it makes sense to at least consider successful approaches used in the business sector to determine if they would help IHEs better fulfill their missions.

One concept worthy of consideration is the Playing to Win framework developed by Alan Lafley and Roger Martin in their book *Playing to Win: How Strategy Really Works*. Their framework is straightforward and easy to apply, and it seems relevant for IHE use in addressing the strategic challenges and opportunities they face. In “Stop Planning!” Peter Eckel and Cathy Trower highlight part of the Playing to Win framework and suggest that it would help IHEs overcome the problems often encountered when trying to develop strategies through the strategic planning process. This article offers a more detailed description of the framework to provide IHE leaders an opportunity to consider its usefulness for developing strategies for their institutions.

A Failure to Develop Real Strategies and Why This Matters

The Playing to Win framework is worthy of consideration because many IHE strategic plans are not designed to advance a real strategy. One indication that strategic plans do not produce real strategies is their similarity to one another. If there are any choices reflected in strategic plans, they often resemble what is found in other institutions’ plans. Eckel and Trower highlight this problem when they write: “Too often strategic plans fall short of serving as a guiding light for the future. Some are triumphs of form (or wordsmithing) over substance. Their key points often are expected, and they share much in common with those of similar, but also dissimilar, institutions” (Ecker and Trower, 2019). If you review IHE strategic plans, you will find very similar goals such as a commitment to student success; preparing students for their futures; fostering diversity, inclusion, and equity; and proving impactful research. This similarity ensures that IHEs do not drift from the status quo, which is what many need to do.

Because college and university strategic plans are so similar, many fail to articulate and advance strategies that differentiate their institutions from others. They do not articulate a distinctive vision for the future that advances an institution's unique mission and leverages its unique capabilities and attributes. Given strategic plans' failure to differentiate, Aimee Hosemann and Rob Zinkan ask: "If little specification or originality exists in an institutional strategic plan – that is, if from one campus to the next, they are all pretty much the same – why would institutions invest so much time, effort, and money to produce them" (Hosemann & Zinkan, 2021, p. 2)? One reason for this similarity is that many strategic plans reflect institutional ambitions "to become more similar to aspirant institutions (colleges and universities that are perceived to be 'better' or ranked more highly) rather than developing institutional strategies that create a unique and valuable position" (Hosemann & Zinkan, 2021, p. 57). This often leads to a failure to leverage an institution's unique characteristics and puts institutions in competition with one another.

To be valuable, Hosemann and Zinkan propose that strategic plans must secure an institution's "unique place in the universe" (Hosemann & Zinkan, 2021, p. 41). They also recommend that institutions ought to avoid the "brand trap of chasing awareness" (53). Instead of seeking to be "known," institutions should seek to be "known for something – something that supports a defined market position" (Hosemann & Zinkan, 2021, p. 53). Mark William Roche also makes this point when he writes, "For a university to flourish, it needs to embrace a distinctive vision and instantiate or embody that vision in specific practices" (Roche, 2017, p. 4). Wendy Fischman and Howard Gardner, in The Real World of College: What Higher Education Is and What It Can Be, also highlight this problem when they share their findings that most institutional missions demonstrate that "they are trying to be all things to all people" rather than seeking to develop a unique approach (Fischman & Gardner, 2022, p. 240).

Given that most IHE strategic plans do not advance real strategies because of their similarity to others and their inability to employ institutions' unique strengths, it is worth exploring whether a business strategy framework like Playing to Win can help IHEs develop real strategies.

What is Strategy?

It is important to begin with Lafley and Martin's definition of strategy as this will make it clear why many institutions' strategic plans do not advance real strategies. The following excerpt is from *Playing to Win*.

> "Strategy therefore requires making explicit choices – to do some things and not others – and building a business around those choices. In short, strategy is choice. More specifically, *strategy is an integrated set of choices that uniquely positions the firm in its industry so as to create sustainable advantage and superior value relative to the competition*" (Lafley and Martin, 2013, p. 3).

In a later work, Martin offers a more concise definition of strategy to distinguish it from planning: "*strategy is the act of making an integrating set of choices, which positions the organization to win* [emphasis added]; while planning is the act of laying out projects with timelines, deliverables, budgets, and responsibilities" (Martin, 2021).

The first element of the definition is that strategy involves choices. Institutions often try to do everything rather than making choices to focus on one or a select few areas. This is the concern that Fischman and Gardner express when they write that many institutions are "trying to be all things to all people." Making choices will typically involve giving up some aspirations, such as focusing on the region in which the IHE is located rather than seeking to be a national university, or prioritizing flexible educational programing for adult students rather than offering a four-year, residential experience for students who just completed high school. It is also important to note that these choices are integrated and connected to one another. This promotes a unified strategy rather than unrelated efforts that fragment IHE focus.

Lafley and Martin believe that the choices that will help businesses develop effective strategies are in response to the following five questions: "What is our winning aspiration? Where will we play? How will we win? What capabilities must be in place? and, What management systems are required?" (Lafley and Martin, 2013, p. 15). The next section explores these questions in depth.

The definition also proposes that the set of choices "uniquely positions the firm within its industry." An organization should differentiate itself from its competitors by, in the case of businesses, offering customers something unique. This focus on uniquely positioning the firm resembles Hosemann and Zinkan' suggestion (noted above) that strategic plans ought to secure an institution's "unique place in the universe." A strategy ought to distinguish an organization from others rather than seeking to blend into the crowd or mimicking an aspirant organization in the pursuit of prestige.

Lafley and Martin's definition also includes the concepts of superior value and sustainable advantage. Martin explores these ideas in an article titled, "Untangling Value Proposition & Competitive Advantage." He defines value proposition as: "for a defined set of customers, it is the value to them of your offer versus the costs to you of producing and delivering it to them" (Martin, 2022). To achieve what he calls a "winning value proposition," organizations achieve one of two things. "The value of your offer is distinctly greater than that of any competitor, and you can deliver it at proximate cost to competitors." This is a differentiation strategy that seeks to provide unique value to customers that other businesses cannot provide (Lafley and Martin, 2013, p. 83). Another approach to a value proposition is that "the value of your offer is proximate to that of competitors, but you can deliver it at a distinctly lower cost." This low-cost strategy allows customers to purchase a comparable product or service for a lower price (Lafley and Martin, 2013, p. 81).

Martin defines competitive advantage as: "the method by which you will deliver your value proposition in a way that competitors, whether direct, tangential, or potential, either can't or won't replicate – and that inability to replicate is what makes the value proposition a winning one" (Martin, 2022). Competitors cannot match your organization's value proposition because they do not have the capabilities to do so, or they will not seek to match the value proposition because they would have to give up something they value (Martin, 2022). In either case, trying to replicate your organization's competitive advantage will require competitors to radically change their identities and how they invest resources.

Although this is not explicitly stated in the definition, Martin identifies what he says is the first question to ask of any proposed strategy to determine if it is truly a strategy: "I look at the core strategy choices and ask myself if I could make the opposite choice without looking stupid… If the opposite of your core strategy choice looks stupid, then every competitor is going to have more or less the exact same strategy as you. That means that you are likely to be indistinguishable from your competitors" (Martin, 2015). This question is best linked to identifying the organization's winning aspiration. As an example of the application of this question, Martin explains how one firm listed great customer service as its strategy, but the opposite of great customer service is providing "crappy customer service," which no business would embrace (Martin, 2015). Martin is not suggesting that great customer service is not important, just that it is not a real strategy. He claims that "The finest strategies are those in which other competitors do things largely, if not diametrically, opposed to what you do – and make money doing them. This means that you have made a distinctive choice" (Martin, 2015). An example Martin provides in the article is Vanguard's decision not to offer managed funds while Fidelity, another financial management firm, offers managed funds. Both financial management firms do well, but their strategies reflect distinctly different choices.

For IHEs, Lafley and Martin's view of strategy is helpful for a number of reasons. It suggests that an institutional strategy should reflect clear choices that provide direction to the entire institution and allow the institution to justify doing some things and not doing others. The strategy should uniquely position the IHE in a way that leverages its strengths and distinguishes it from others. Examples of this distinction are providing a unique educational experience that meets the needs of particular types of learners that they cannot obtain from other IHEs or an educational experience that is similar to what is offered by other IHEs but for a much lower cost. Finally, the opposite of the institutional strategy should not be stupid to ensure that it is clearly a strategy. This makes many student success strategies not truly strategies.

The Five Choices

As noted above, Lafley and Martin identify five choices linked to five questions that are central to developing a real strategy. The last two questions are often associated with the implementation of strategy, but Lafley and Martin believe that developing a strategy without identifying the capabilities and systems needed to implement it may result in adopting a strategy that is impossible to implement. Although there are some aspects of the questions that are relevant only to corporations, the questions can be employed by IHEs seeking to develop strategy. The sections below include a discussion about each question and why Lafley and Martin think it is important and then an example of a choice by an IHE that reflects the types of choices IHEs need to make related to each question.

What is Our Winning Aspiration?

The first question focuses on the aspirations of the company and the importance of ensuring its aspirations are focused on helping it win in the market. This choice will set the parameters for the responses to the other four questions. Regarding winning, Lafley and Martin note that "Winning is what matters – and it is the ultimate criterion of a successful strategy" (Lafley and Martin, 2013, p. 36). Winning is so important because it is essential for a business's survival. They write, "When a company sets out to participate, rather than win, it will inevitably fail to make the tough choices and the significant investments that would make winning even a remote possibility. A too-modest aspiration is far more dangerous than a too-lofty one. Too many companies eventually die a death of modest aspirations" (Lafley and Martin, 2013, p. 36). They describe the experience of Proctor and Gamble's (P&G) Olay brand that thrived due to a proper strategy. Its winning aspirations were positioning "skin care as a strong pillar for beauty along with hair care," and creating and becoming a leader in a "new masstige segment, positioned between mass and prestige" (Lafley and Martin, 2013, p. 19). These aspirations, especially the second, distinguish the Olay brand from others and the opposite of this choice is not stupid (e.g., some skin care products might focus on the prestige segment). These aspirations are focused on the consumer, and Lafley and Martin emphasize the importance of this: "Winning aspirations should be crafted with the consumer explicitly in mind. The most powerful aspirations will always have the consumer, rather than the project, at the heart of them" (Lafley and Martin, 2013, p. 45). Martin does note that winning aspiration can be thought of as "what an organization is in operation to accomplish," which many organizations, including IHEs, will see as their institutional mission or a key component of their institutional mission (Martin, 2022).

The language of winning is not typically used in higher education, but it can be adapted if the focus is on learners and what they need as well as providing an educational experience not available elsewhere. One example in higher education of what could be seen as a winning aspiration can be found in the Sweet Briar College strategic plan. The plan includes the following in its introduction: "The plan parlays two structural and immutable features of the College: the reality of it being a single-sex institution that is creating a new type of leadership for our society—women's leadership; and its physical presence as a place of uncommon beauty and architectural significance. These comparative advantages drive every facet of the plan" (Sweet Briar College, 2023). The first point focuses the institution not only on educating women, which is itself unique, but on leader development for women, and this aspiration is reflected in its general education curriculum. The plan points out: "While many institutions of higher education have leadership programs, only a few of them— the nation's service academies and Sweet Briar—deploy a liberal arts general education program for this purpose" (Sweet Briar College, 2023). Sweet Briar seeks to be the only non-service academy that offers a leadership general education program. The second point is related to sustainability, which is discussed later in the plan: "Sweet Briar's 2,840-acre campus, with its unique natural and built environment and agricultural enterprises (greenhouse, vineyards and apiary), make it an ideal place for hands-on, immersive learning about the environment, conservation and sustainability" (Sweet Briar College, 2023).

The plan's aspirations related to women's leadership and sustainability leverage Sweet Briar's unique characteristics and the opposite of these choices is not stupid. It is reasonable for an institution to choose not to focus on single-sex education, women's leadership, or sustainability. It is also important to recognize that the statement notes that women's leadership and sustainability drive other elements of the plan, which is what winning aspirations should do. Finally, although it does not mention winning, the plan clearly seeks to provide a unique experience unavailable elsewhere, and it is focused on the student. It is not focused on participating by being similar to other IHEs; it seeks to win by offering an education program that offers a unique experience.

Where Will We Play?

The where to play choice follows from the winning aspiration choice and asks, “how to meet user needs in a way that creates value for both the company and the consumer” (Lafley and Martin, 2013, p. 54). Associated questions to ask are: “Who is the consumer? What is the job to be done? Why do consumers choose what they do, relative to the job to be done” (Lafley and Martin, 2013, p. 54)? Lafley and Martin highlight different domains related to where to play decisions. The most relevant include: geography, product type, consumer segment, and distribution channels (Lafley and Martin, 2013, p. 57). Also, an implicit choice is where you choose not to play. As an example, they highlight how General Electric shifted from entertainment holdings and material businesses to “focus more on infrastructure, energy, and transportation” (Lafley and Martin, 2013, p. 58). In the Olay brand example above, we see that P&G identified a certain type of consumer who sought a skin care product of higher quality than the mass-produced products, but who were not willing to pay the high cost associated with the prestige brand.

How might the where to play choice apply to an IHE? Institutions should identify the type of learners they can best serve and identify what these learners want in terms of an educational experience. Associated questions to help with this include: Is the institution seeking learners who just graduated high school, or are they seeking working adults? Are these learners seeking undergraduate, graduate, or continuing education programming? What do learners hope to gain in terms of development by pursuing higher education? Is the IHE seeking to support students in its region, across the country, and around the world? One example of a where to play decision is Paul Quinn College’s decision to end its football program and turn its football field into a farm (Paul Quinn College, 2023, Me/We Farm). Intercollegiate sports teams, especially popular sports like football and baseball, benefit IHEs in many ways to include attracting students and promoting awareness of their institutions. Paul Quinn’s choice focused it on students who were not seeking a school with a football program, but who are interested in Paul Quinn’s winning aspiration, which is to be the only urban work college in the United States (Paul Quinn, 2023, Who We Are). This choice also signals to external audiences that Paul Quinn College has decided to embrace its identity as an urban work college by choosing to convert its football field into a farm. It has chosen to do one thing (be an urban work college) and not another (be a college with a football team).

How Will We Win?

Once the winning aspiration is identified, and the company chooses where to play, the decision must be made regarding how it will win. Lafley and Martin write that, “Where to play selects the playing field; how to win defines the choices for winning on that field” (Lafley and Martin, 2013, p. 24). The where to play and how to win choices are closely connected, and Lafley and Martin provide multiple examples of companies’ choices regarding how they will win. They distinguish Olive Garden with Mario Batali restaurants to illustrate the different ways these two restaurants have chosen to win. Olive Garden seeks to meet “the needs of average diners and focus on achieving reliable, consistent outcomes” regardless of where the restaurant is located (24). Mario Batali has far fewer restaurants and seeks high-end clients who want unique food.

Lafley and Martin offer this explanation about this question: “To determine how to win, an organization must decide what will enable it to create unique value and sustainably deliver that value to customers in a way that is distinct from the firm's competitors" (Lafley and Martin, 2013, p. 25). Olive Garden delivers unique value by providing consistently decent food for a reasonable price at many locations around the world. P&G's choice for Olay on how to win sought "to formulate genuinely better skin-care products that could actually fight the signs of aging, to create a powerful marketing campaign that clearly articulated the brand promise, and to establish a masstige channel, working with mass retailers to compete directly with prestige brands" (Lafley and Martin, 2013, p. 25). Returning to the discussion above on value proposition, the how to win questions concerns deciding to adopt the differentiation or cost leadership approach.

One example of a higher education how to win choice can be seen in Western Governors University's (WGU) ambition "to be the world's most student-centric university" (Western Governor's University, 2023, WGU's Mission). This is its winning aspiration, and it seeks "to help working professionals fit an online university education into their busy lives," which is its where to play (Western Governor's University, 2023, Online Degrees). WGU's how to win choice is through its use of competency-based education (Western Governor's University, 2023, Learning at WGU: Different by Design). Competency-based education is well suited for the learners WGU serves. It allows them to move through the curriculum by completing assessments to demonstrate relevant skills rather than requiring a certain time (e.g., credit hour) to receive credit for the course. This provides flexibility for the working professionals who enroll in WGU's programs, but it also allows learners to get credit for what they already know from work or previous education. Therefore, rather than being based on time, which they have little of, WGU learners are able to complete courses as soon as they have mastered what is required of the course. This how to win approach effectively supports WGU's winning aspiration and where to play choices and enables WGU to deliver unique value in higher education.

What Capabilities Must Be in Place?

The next question focuses on an organization's core capabilities, which are "those activities that, when performed at the highest level, enable the organization to bring its where-to-play and how-to-win choices to life." These capabilities must reinforce one another so that together they enable the organization to execute its strategy (Lafley and Martin, 2013, p. 112). Identifying core capabilities necessary for supporting where-to-play and how-to-win choices is essential for making resource decisions. Lafley and Martin highlight this when they write, "Identifying the capabilities required to deliver on the where-to-play and how-to-win choices crystallizes the area of focus and investment for the company. It enables a firm to continue to invest in its current capabilities, to build up others, and to reduce the investment in capabilities that are not essential to the strategy" (Lafley and Martin, 2013, p. 113). Returning to the P&G example, they note how key leaders gathered together to identify the core capabilities needed to support their where-to-play and how-to-win choices, which were focused on advancing its winning aspiration. The group settled on the following five core capabilities: "Understanding consumers, Creating and building brands, Innovating (in the broadest sense), Partnering and going to market with customers and suppliers, and Leveraging global scale" (Lafley and Martin, 2013, p. 115). These core capabilities informed resource decisions as P&G significantly invested in each capability.

One example of a HEI asking what capabilities must be in place to support its where-to-play and how-to-win choices is Minerva University. Minerva University is a newly formed university that employs a unique learning model. It is highly selective as it seeks to "educate an international body of superb students who will work together to make the world a better place" (Kosslyn and Nelson, 2017, p. 6). A second part of its winning aspiration is to "demonstrate a host of best practices that will change higher education, writ large" (Kosslyn and Nelson, 2017, p. 6).

Minerva students learn mostly online while living in seven different cities during their four-year undergraduate experience. To educate its students, Minerva sought to "design a learning experience that far exceeded what students imagine takes place in a traditional university (Kosslyn and Nelson, 2017, p. 203). Establishing the conditions that promoted a high level of engagement for students each day is one aspect of this learning experience, which is why Minerva offers seminars rather than lectures, and why the "seminars rely on active learning: all students are expected to be actively involved in every class" (Kosslyn and Nelson, 2017, p. 8). Yet existing online learning platforms did not provide the capabilities Minerva needed to provide this experience, so it developed the Active Learning Forum (ALF) because it "needed very student to feel as though he or she were sitting next to the professor in every class…needed the technology to fade so far into the background that it virtually disappeared…[and] needed to ensure that the seminar experience didn't disappear into the ether after the class ended but was recorded so that it could be replayed for individualized feedback and improvement" (Kosslyn and Nelson, 2017, p. 204). The ALF is an important aspect of the core capability Minerva needed to educate superb students through a learning experience with active learning as its foundation. This capability supports its winning aspiration, where to play, and how to win choices.

What Management Systems Are Required?

The last question concerns putting a management system and organizational structure in place that enables achievement of the previous four choices. Lafley and Martin write: "To truly win in the marketplace, a company needs a robust process for creating, reviewing, and communicating about strategy; it needs structures to support its core capabilities; and it needs specific measures to ensure that the strategy is working" (Lafley and Martin, 2013, p. 129). One example of a management system is how P&G "invested aggressively in new consumer-research methodologies, striving to lead the industry with real in-house consumer and market research capability" (Lafley and Martin, 2013, p. 145). These methodologies helped it understand consumers, which was one of the core capabilities it sought to develop. Without establishing these methodologies, it would not be able to develop and sustain this core capability.

It is helpful to return to Minerva University to see an example of a management system put in place to support the employment of required core capabilities. Minerva utilizes a much more collaborative approach to developing courses and lesson plans than seen at other IHEs. "Syllabi, learning objectives, pedagogy, and assessment practices for the first-year cornerstone courses were developed and refined iteratively over a period of three years by a team that included the chief academic officer, deans of the four arts and sciences colleges, the associate dean of the faculty, the associate dean of institutional and educational research, the director of curriculum development, and a number of people who would later serve as development and instructional faculty" (Kosslyn and Nelson, 2017, p. 180). This high-level of administrator involvement is necessary for ensuring courses are high quality and support the high level of active learning that Minerva seeks. Faculty teaching courses meet weekly to discuss strengths and opportunities for improvement from the past week as well as the next two weeks of lessons (Kosslyn and Nelson, 2017, p. 182). The schedule is intentionally designed to not have classes on Fridays, which allows students to explore the cities in which they live and to provide faculty members and administrators opportunities to meet. The careful development of courses and lesson plans, along with setting aside time through the structure of the schedule for faculty to discuss teaching and learning, supports Minerva University's winning aspirations related to developing students and creating best practices that will change higher education.

Conclusion

Developing a real strategy is difficult, especially at an IHE. The Playing to Win framework offers IHE leaders an effective approach for developing these types of strategies and avoiding the mistakes that many make with their strategic plans. Although it is designed for the corporate world, the choices it requires are relevant for the types of decisions IHEs need to make to develop real strategies. These choices will enable IHEs to determine their identities and the learners they want to serve. The IHE examples for each of the five questions demonstrate the relevance of the framework and highlight the choices that some IHEs have made that could have been in response to the questions. An added benefit of the Playing to Win framework is that it addresses implementation of the strategy through the last two questions, making it more likely that the strategy will be successfully implemented.

The views in this article are those of the author and not the views of the United States Military Academy, United States Army, or United States Department of Defense.

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Next-Generation EdD Programs: Student-Centered and Faculty-Supported

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The Education Doctorate (Ed.D.), the foundational degree for research, practice, and leadership in U.S. educational systems, is undergoing transformational change. Associations representing Ed.D.-granting institutions such as the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) are contributing to a re-conceptualization of doctoral programs. But independent of such initiatives, new Ed.D. programs that focus on students rather than the program or the faculty are emerging. Innovations in program delivery, the transformation of the faculty role, and systems of support for dissertation research make next-generation doctoral programs accessible and achievable for well-qualified doctoral students who may not have had access to or found success within doctoral programs in the past.

For two decades, the number of colleges and universities offering Ed.D. programs has been exploding (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Institutions without a history of doctoral-level studies chose to offer such programs for a variety of reasons, including a desire to expand their footprint in the education community, an affirmation of transition from college to university status, and a desire to increase enrollment and improve their bottom line (Storey, 2020). To better understand the current state of educational leadership programs , it is necessary to review how new Ed.D. offerings are evolving.

Generally indistinguishable from the Ph.D., the Ed.D. "... prepares educators to become Scholarly Practitioners who can apply appropriate and specific practices, generate new knowledge, and steward the profession (CPED, 2023)." Persons who attain the Ed.D. may wield influence in how educational systems operate, what they hold as values, how resources are allocated, who is employed by such systems, and who benefits from them. But graduates of traditional Ed.D. programs do not mirror the demographics of students or educators in the U.S. (Abiola, 2014).

In a qualitative study employing content analysis, the researcher examined emerging data on new Ed.D. programs. Social justice requires that when education policy is being made, persons from under-resourced populations, typically under-represented among graduates of doctoral programs, have a voice in deliberations and a seat at decision-making tables (Martin et al. 2021). Thus, particular attention must be paid to innovative programs that give access to and support throughout the program to students who are members of under-resourced demographics such as racial/ethnic minorities, economically disadvantaged persons, rural dwellers, first generation graduate students, and single parents. Core consistencies and meanings were identified and organized thematically. In conclusion, a model for innovative doctoral programs that places the student at the center of focus is posited.

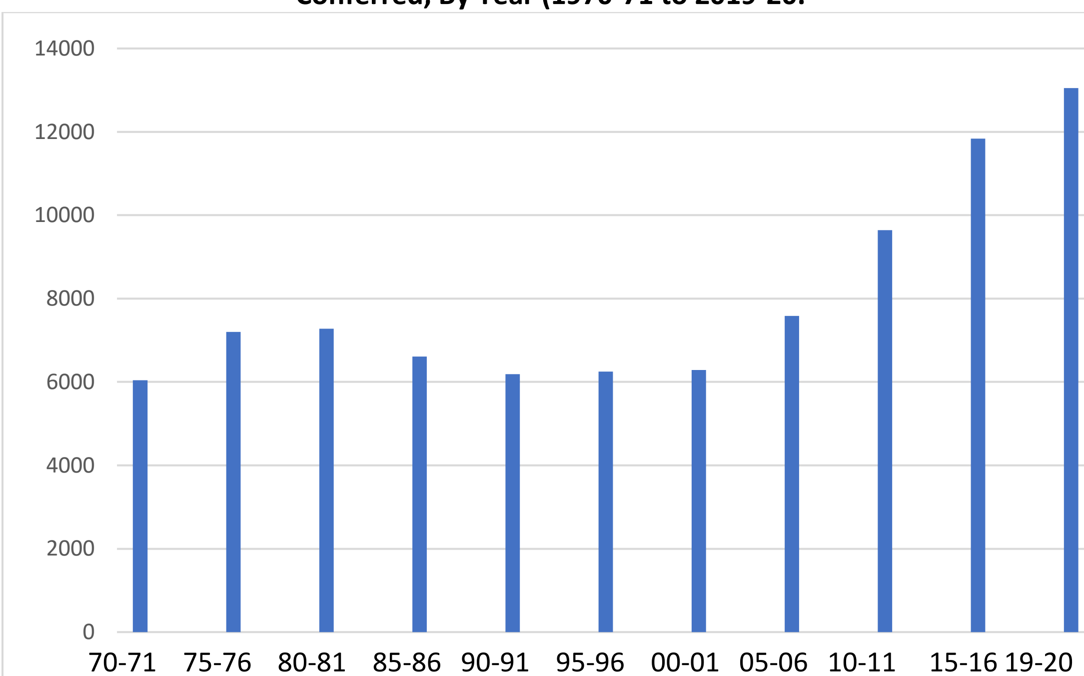
Growth in Ed.D. Programs

In recent decades, numerous colleges and universities have expanded their offerings in graduate-level disciplines. Education, business, and health professions constitute the lion's share of this expansion (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). However, unlike health professions, no specialized facilities or research laboratories are required for graduate programs in education. Requiring low investment, education may continue to be a strong field for graduate program expansion into the immediate future (Shin, Kehm, & Jones, 2018).

In 1958, only 92 U.S. colleges and universities offered the doctorate in education. Using 1958 as a baseline, there were decades of stability in doctoral-level education until about 2000, whereupon exponential growth began. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2022) listed 315 institutions that conferred the Ed.D. in that year, an increase of more than 300% over the baseline.

Just as the number of institutions offering the Ed.D. has grown rapidly, so has the number of Ed.D. degrees awarded. Between 2000 and 2019, the number of doctorates in education conferred increased from 6,284 to 13,051, more than doubling, as depicted in Table 1.

Table 1. U.S. Education Doctorates (Ph.D.s and Ed.D.s) Conferred, By Year (1970-71 to 2019-20.



Caruth and Caruth (2013) noted that today, most every university has access to an unlimited number of potential students and to the databases they need for scholarly research. EBSCO, ProQuest, ERIC, PsychINFO, Professional Development Collection, Academic Search Premier, Scopus, Sage Research Methods Online, Google Scholar, and many other databases crucial to scholarly research may be available to all doctoral students at one's home or workplace through university subscription, university student accounts, and open access. The internet makes the delivery of doctoral programs in education accessible to persons who previously could not consider such a program for reasons of distance, employment, finance, or family obligations. Modes of delivery vary, but online and hybrid modes dominate in newly constituted programs (Allen, Seaman, & Sloan Consortium, 2011; Buss & Wolf, 2021).

Earlier iterations of innovative doctoral programs, emerging in the later decades of the twentieth century, brought the program to students by offering courses through branch campuses, intensive weekends, or locations closer to where students work or live. However, the current generation of innovative programs flips the paradigm. Online programs join the student to the university's faculty, library, and other resources without either leaving their home base (Aldowah et al, 2017; Kosleski & Proffitt, 2020). While many new doctoral programs merely imitate existing ones, the proliferation of programs inevitably results in greater variation and accelerates change as the competition for students takes a harder turn.

Dismal Graduation Rates Continue to Be the Norm

About half of all doctoral students who complete all coursework do not earn the doctoral degree (Di Pierro, 2007; Lovitts, 2005; Sowell, Bell, & Mahler, 2008, Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012) because they do not finish the culminating project required of the degree program (Golde, 2005; Van der Haert, Ortiz, Emplit, Halloin, & Dehon, 2014). Furthermore, students in online degree programs are 15-20% less likely to complete their programs compared to students in face-to-face programs (Varney, 2009), with attrition rates being 10-20% higher in online doctoral programs than face-to-face programs (Allen, Seaman, & Sloan Consortium, 2011; Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007).

However, enrollment in distance education programs has grown at a much faster annual rate (10%) than traditional, face-to-face programs (1%) (Allen, Seaman, & Sloan Consortium, 2011), making the detrimental economic, social, and personal effects of low doctoral program completion rates increasingly problematic (Burkholder, 2012; Gardner, 2009). Though doctoral programs may be considered of benefit to institutions financially, it is costly to recruit and retain students (Gardner, 2009). Programs that do not graduate most of their students may be wasting students' time and money and may be wasting the institution's time and money as well. Furthermore, students who are left in ABD status may feel defeated, failed, and depressed (Burkholder, 2012; Ball, 2022).

An Emerging, Student-Centered Model

What do programs that shift the paradigm look like? Table 2 offers some insights regarding the components of student-centered programs. It also notes value they add to a doctoral program and to the doctoral student. Each component may add value individually; together, they comprise a new model for student-centered doctoral programs.

Components of student-centered practice in doctoral programs together comprise an innovative model. The foundation of this model is a culture wherein doctoral students find a more student-centered experience, one that includes social, emotional, and professional support and encourages

Table 2. Components of Student-Centered Ed.D. Programs

Student-Centered Component	*Descriptors of Value-Added Properties*	*Sample of Related Literature*
Asynchronous online delivery	• Delivering content through courses designed by subject matter experts and instructional designers. • Making program available to students in any location. • Providing students with flexibility in time on task.	Thompson & Ballenger, 2018 Allen & Seaman, 2013 Lee, Recker, & Yuan, 2020 McNaught, 2021 Swan, 2003 Jorissen, Keen, & Riedel, 2015 Sull, 2013
Program-embedded dissertation research	• Scheduling research courses early in the coursework. • Starting the dissertation early in the coursework. • Participating in dissertation courses throughout coursework, not after.	Cresswell-Yeager & Bandlow, 2020 Ewing et al., 2012 Willis & Willis, 2020 Ames, Berman, & Castle, 2018 Hanson, Loose, & Reveles, 2020 Teal, 2019
In-person residencies with enduring shared experiences	• Personalizing experience. • Connecting students to university, faculty, and each other. • Motivating students for retention and persistence. • Overcoming imposter syndrome.	Sowell & Mahler, 2008 Allen, Seaman & Sloan, 2011 Angelino, Wiliams, & Natvig, 2007 Vesisenaho et al., 2015 Williams, Simpson, & Cunningham, 2010
Cohort structure with community-building strategies	• Personalizing experience. • Fostering social/professional connections to build professional networks. • Efficiently scheduling courses by cohort. • Retaining 85% or more students. • Fostering climate of continuous progress. • Overcoming imposter syndrome.	Bista & Cox, 2014 Seifert & Mandzuk, 2006 Hyatt & Williams, 2011 Williams, Simpson, & Cunningham, 2010 Nimer, 2009 Brill et al., 2014 Seifert & Mandzuk, 2006 Trespalacios & Perkins, 2016
Ratio of dissertation chair/advisor to advisee = or < 5 to 1	• Personalizing experience. • Regularly contacting, guiding, and supporting students. • Motivating retention and persistence. • Building a caring relationship.	Bagaka's, et al., 2015 Bair & Haworth, 1999 Gardner, 2009 Grady, 2016 Hoffman, 2014 Kumar, Johnson, & Hardemon, 2013

Viewing doctoral students as scholars-in-the-making	• Fostering professional learning communities. • Providing access to editing services. • Providing access to methodologist. • Respecting doctoral students as emerging scholars. • Providing opportunities for students to present their research.	Brill et al., 2014 Christensen & Lund, 2014 Cochran et al., 2014 Kriner et al., 2015 Lovitts, 2008
Emphasis on theory- to-practice solutions	• Teaching coursework by both scholars and practitioners. • Creating future-focused courses. • Encouraging research that informs practice.	Paulfler et al., 2020 Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012 DiPierro, 2007 Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012
Advocacy for diversity, equity, and inclusion	• Reaching under-resourced populations. • Employing multi-faceted admission criteria. • Modeling diversity in faculty. • Structuring mentorship. • Personalizing research skill development. • Fostering a student-centered culture.	Paulfler et al., 2020 Stallone, 2004 Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Spaulding, 2016 Hatcher & Ginn, 2020 Almond, Hall, & Devore, 2020
Ethical commitment to fulfill promises to students	• Maintaining a high retention rate. • Personalizing support. • Graduating 75% + students. • Graduating 75% + students in 3-4 years.	Shapiro, 2016 Holmes, Robinson, & Seay, 2010 Newberry & DeLuca, 2013 Wellington & Sykes, 2006 Neal, Justice, & Barron, 2019

retention and persistence. Student-centered practices contribute to accessibility and may be especially of value for students from under-resourced populations. Students from minority groups, economically disadvantaged, residents of rural communities, and other under-resourced populations tend to experience “imposter syndrome,” harboring deep-seated doubts about whether they belong in a doctoral program (Puckett & Lewis, 2022; Ball, 2022). In student-centered programs, all students feel welcome and valued.

Conclusions and Recommends for Further Research

The challenge of our generation is to make higher education accessible to under-represented, under-resourced student populations. We are further challenged to create cultures and support systems that level the playing field and give all students a genuine opportunity to graduate. A student-centered model for doctoral programs in education has the potential to meet this challenge by creating an equitable learning environment and affirming the disposition, knowledge, skills, and background of experience each doctoral student brings.

Findings from this study invite further research. Student-centeredness is a continuum, not an absolute. It may be of particular value to conduct a correlational study of programs that adopt more student-centered strategies and components and learn which of these components, if any, predict a higher graduation rate. We know from research how important is the relationship between doctoral student and dissertation chair, but there may be other professionals such as a methodologist that also contribute to student success. It may also be of value to look for correlation between student-centered practice and indicators of success such as retention, attendance, and grades. There may also be value in following graduates over time in a longitudinal study that considers career trajectories, choices they make, and changes in leadership practice that can be attributed to the changing nature of doctoral programs.

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Power, Privilege and Listening/Engaging in Academia

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Justice, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (JEDI) in universities now makes news headlines. Behind the scenes of media coverage are the realities of power and privilege which, acknowledged or not, impact all levels in an organization. In academic administration such realities are seldom researched, but the evidence base to support the required focus and commitment to respond effectively to the consequences of power and privilege is still nascent. University leaders help shape contemporary society. Thus, the question that must be asked is 'What are universities and colleges doing to provide leadership experiences for our next generation of academic administrators' (Gmelch, 2013, p. 26), given these critical leadership responsibilities.

Awareness of these new emerging needs led to the authors being tasked with creating a workshop to change how senior administrators within a small Canadian university could address gaps in their knowledge of engaging with a university community to address ongoing challenges. We come from a mix of experience with decades of various academic and community-based experiences in action and community led initiatives. United in a passion for social justice and promoting underserved voices, we hoped this workshop would help identify ideas for highlighting the dynamics of power and privilege within university administrative structures while creating knowledge for constructive engagement. Relying on experiential learning, and content expertise in educational theories, community engagement, and advocacy work, we identified some of the barriers that should be addressed to shift administrative thinking from efficiency and cost considerations first, to embracing many of the competencies articulated by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2021) as core competencies for contemporary professionals: a commitment to Career & Self-development, Leadership, Communication, Professionalism, Critical Thinking, Teamwork, and Equity & Inclusion.

The workshop was intended as a safe space to explore new approaches and to support the professional development of administrators, both new and established. Learning to engage others in participating constructively in new initiatives or ongoing processes takes a supportive environment that values the work force: 'Truly effective leadership development and enactment needs to promote individuals working at the interface of their personal goals and skills and the needs of the unit or institution' (Montgomery, 2020, p. 3). Finding ways to deepen the engagement for the workshop remained core to the selection of activities and its careful architecture of progression. Our planning focused on the sustainability of new knowledge and behaviours, creating ongoing support for taking new risks as both brand new and well-established administrators. In order to realize this objective, recognizing that developing the necessary trust would take time, the design focused on the opportunities to foster interaction between participants. Each activity built stronger connections amongst the workshop attendees while creating a longer-term relationship for peer-to-peer mentoring, drawing upon the theories in the Universal Design for Learning framework emerging from learning science research (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014). In keeping with the norms of Action Research, we envisioned iterative cycles where participants generated, validated, and practiced the new knowledge they had created with the infrastructure support of the workshop design.

Here we share the background and motivations for creating this workshop while discussing the structural architecture of the workshop aimed at creating an administration able to meaningfully engage with and support a university community while understanding and deconstructing the impediments of power and privilege. (The authors would be pleased to mentor interested parties in offering such a workshop at their institutions.)

As mentioned, we situate this work within an action research framework, as many of the attributes of current action research initiatives are necessary to support this work. Coghlan (2022, p.9) summarizes action research thusly:

> Action research is an approach…which aims at both taking action and creating knowledge or theory about that action as the action unfolds. It starts with everyday experience and is concerned with the development of living knowledge. Its characteristics are that it generates practical knowledge in the pursuit of worthwhile purposes; … action research can be understood as a social science of the possible as the collective action is focused on creating a desired future in whatever context the action research is located.

Our workshop design, as discussed later, fit well within the context of this approach, particularly in seeking to initiate action at our university that could create a collectively designed vision of future leadership approaches that would address extant challenges through creating living and evolving knowledge and skill. Indeed, other work on action research posits the utility of the approach, both for understanding "transformative" service work (Elg et al., 2020), as well as a critical (if underused) tool in addressing challenges in management fields (Erro-Garces & Alfaro-Tanco, 2020). Erro-Garces & Alfaro-Tanco (2020, p. 2) note that in this case, the researcher is an agent of change (our explicit goal as researchers) while the practitioner participates in all stages of the process (in this case we also served as practitioners along with the administrators we were engaging with).

Ollila & Yström (2020, p. 396) argue that action research "is a suitable research approach for enabling a continued exploration of current issues in innovation management (IM), such as new organizing forms, changing managerial and governance structures," precisely our focus and expectation for our work on changing administration culture. They note that "new collaborative organizational constructs" are required to create change and new models of management and governance. The purpose of our work is supported by Gilbertson and Nicolaides' (2023, p. 81) assertion that, "action research has incredible potential to help leaders address persistent problems and implement context-specific, sustainable solutions. Just as powerful, the action research process can be transformative for the individuals, groups, and organization involved."

Finally, our work reflects Glenzer's (2021) assessment of the utility of Action Research for Transformations (ART) for addressing issues of power and addressing oppression. He notes that ART "must create opportunities for disenfranchised groups to understand and exercise the power they already possess. Second, it must create opportunities for dominant groups to grasp the power they need to distribute, and do it" (p. 510). While our work addresses the latter role formally, our underlying expectation is that our proposed workshop would subsequently address the former goal, facilitating the opportunity for disenfranchised groups to find the opening to exercise power as it is available for them to so do. In part this is through all community members (administrators and non-administrators) coming to identify and grapple with the social norms and values of an institutional culture that re-enforce and perpetuate who has power and who does not and the impacts of that social arrangement.

> ART requires us to influence two shifts in organizational behavior. First, it must investigate and explicitly confront both the normative and cognitive forces that impinge upon organizational decision-making and decision avoidance (much organizational change occurs through non-decision!). Second, it must connect—even modestly—to shaping organizational fields and not simply single organizations (Glemzer, 2020, p. 602).

Our work and workshop fit precisely within that context, and we believe it also adds a necessary precursor to successful Action Research in the requirement to take the time to build relationships and confidence with the tools.

The Challenges and Consequences of Academic Administration and Leadership

Unhappy university administrators often describe working with faculty as being like 'herding cats.' Any cat owner will understand the depth of the challenge. However, if the cats refuse to follow the directed path, perhaps the administrator has failed to convey its utility, or the cats were not meaningfully engaged in its choice. The COVID years have witnessed turmoil at North American universities, with many universities losing tenure-track positions (Chowdhury, 2021), while new PhDs are deciding to avoid academia (Thon, 2019). The latter is related to an increasing frustration around the cost of surviving - never mind thriving in - the institution (Vican et al., 2020), a consequence of the choices of administration and their approach to management. A bureaucratic style of administration, rather than an engaged/engaging style of leadership, affects almost all faculty, staff, and students. Using strategic ambiguity (Cate, Ward, & Ford, 2022), academic leaders avoid commitments while gaining centralized control, creating a growing 'two solitudes' of 'faculty staff' and 'administrators.' However, it is also clear from extant research that engaged academic administrators are valued, ideally placed to enable success in faculty and staff careers, for their institution and, by extension, for the students. Such community development benefits all (Betts, 2009). Engaged administrators can 'create a culture in which faculty members can be creative and find self-motivation to be high performing' (Miller et al., 2016, p. 1), if they exist in an institution's leadership:

> Where have all the leaders gone? Have they ever been here? … Institutions of higher education *may still be in the Dark Ages* [of leadership]. Some estimate that only 3% of

> universities and colleges invest in developing their academic leaders (Gmelch, 2013, p. 26; emphasis in the original).

Poor leadership qualities lead to 'toxic leadership' where leaders become actual agents of harm to staff and faculty reliant upon them for governance (Klein, 2010), through use of their authority to bully, demean and hinder the constructive progression of careers and as, a consequence, of lives. A leader who understands the importance of meaningfully engaging with staff and faculty is moving away from an approach to administration that encourages the drift towards toxic leadership.

Most academic leaders rise through the ranks of professorship, but rather than grounding administrators in the shared experience of faculty and staff, this creates a multiplicity of challenges. This "natural" progression can screen out women, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) individuals and those on the gender/sexuality spectrum, as typical faculty tenure and promotion routes often screen these marginalized and minoritized groups out of faculty positions, thus further reducing the pool for administrative roles (Montgomery, 2020).

Second, being former faculty does not necessarily translate into bridging the divide been faculty and staff and the administration: the sort of skill sets that make a strong research/teaching faculty member are not the sort of skill sets that make a good academic administrator. The roles in academia are complex and unique from business, yet increasingly business management approaches are applied to academic leadership roles.

> The transformation from faculty to academic leadership takes time and dedication, and not all academics successfully make the complete transition to leadership … Deans and department chairs [and more senior positions] typically come to the position without leadership training, without prior executive experience, without a clear understanding of the ambiguity and complexity of their roles, without recognition of the metamorphic changes that occur as they transform from an academic to a leader (Gmelch, 2013; p. 26).

Gmelch (2013, p. 27) identifies key abilities that are required by successful administrators (that are rarely encouraged or sought in up and comers), including a set of skills to address their new responsibilities and roles through inclusively working with staff, faculty, students, colleagues, and other key constituencies, while having the ability/willingness to clearly reflect upon their own efforts and initiatives to learn from past successes and, more importantly in our view, failures to inform their work going forward. Good administrators also recognize their role as 'groundskeeping,' or working to ensure that the academic faculty/staff can pursue their aspirations while meeting institutional goals and needs (Montgomery, 2020). This requires recognizing and addressing barriers and systemic inequities preventing groups or individuals from reaching their goals or meeting their needs, in our experience, an exceptional action rather than the rule in university settings.

While the roots and development of poor leadership are diverse and complex, we posit that one key source is an inability to see, or lack of awareness of, the need for administrators to meaningfully engage with the faculty and staff they oversee. Rather, as we have seen, administrators assume that if there are real problems 'out there' those with concerns will let administration know, leading to losses of disenfranchised staff/faculty. The loss of any individual faculty/staff may be seen as inconsequential or even a cost savings, but losing many who might otherwise be desirable assets to the institution, or who bring the necessary Justice, Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity (JEDI) perspectives, is not a sustainable approach to long term institutional health and growth. Worse, staff and faculty may follow a similar model in their own activities, replicating behaviours detrimental to many in vulnerable positions, including students and equity-seeking staff and faculty (Pittman and Tobin, 2022).

A portion of talented faculty/staff loss is due to a failure to engage meaningfully with any discrimination and/or harassment felt by marginalized academic groups. BIPOC faculty/staff, those identifying as women, LGBTQ++ or non-Christian faculty are identifying overtly hostile working environments (Eslen-Zeya & Yildirim 2022; Montgomery 2020). Eslen-Zeya & Yildirim (2022, p. 306) argue that when women's input is not acknowledged, is devalued, or is not accepted, it results in lost confidence and creates highly marginalized faculty, staff and students, whose ideas are discounted and whose needs remain unmet. This is, we argue, equally true for other marginalized groups (Morley, 2021). This creates considerable risk to the institution, but also risks to other faculty/staff, who cease to better the institution, thus doing violence to their own personal well-being, and who end up opposing or resisting university plans and directions through governance exercises or through labor action. Such failures create risks to an institution's raison d'etre, students, who inherit the consequences of hostile or unengaged faculty/staff. Post-Covid the "quiet resignation" sees valuable employees 'slip away'. A shift in values sees people less invested in a 60-hour work week and wanting more balance in their lives. Without work that is purposeful and linked to the mandate and mission of the organization, and that is appreciated and valued, the most valuable asset of an organization, the people, are diminished. Losing such valuable resources, and the costs associated with these losses is not a cost-effective success strategy (Gartner, 2022). The work of enhancing experiences within workplaces around JEDI are part of this emerging opportunity.

Identifying and addressing such concerns early on is not only less disruptive but the same processes can lead to greater positive engagement with the university. That said, meaningfully engaging with faculty and staff is not something most administrators recognize as requiring attention or particular skills and tools, nor do they learn this in most leadership training modules. As those of us who do professional engagement are too well aware, successful engagement, particularly where there are power differentials and hierarchical barriers, cannot be done off-the-cuff. Rather it requires knowledge, skill, and careful planning. Administrators are not accustomed to seeking help to develop their skills sets to meet requirements they cannot recognize or understand. Our workshop addresses these challenges, and the action research approach of this work enables highly qualified individuals to recognize themselves as learners, together.

Workshop Premises

As we have observed over our decades in academia, change rests on the shoulders of a few willing and passionate people committed to the cause. These individuals often do the "glue work" (Granella, 2020; Reilly, 2019) without credit. Also, known as 'quiet promotion', returning only to the same few high producing individuals leads to burnout, withdraw, and stagnation for progress. In thinking this through, we similarly recognized the role that unacknowledged power and privilege plays in both creating these circumstances and ensuring that senior administration fails to recognize them. In discussing these challenges, we identified 14 points on which power and privilege needed to be measured through participant recognition and reflection, documented in Table 1.

Table 1. Elements of Power and Privilege

Discussion Point	Lower Privilege/Power	Mid-Range	Significant Privilege/Power
Ability	Circumstances affect ability	Health Issues	Able-bodied
Skin Colour	Persons of Colour	Others' Perceptions	White
Age	Elderly	Youth	Middle-aged
Seniority	No professional position, contract, sessional	Junior position, Limited terms	Tenure/tenure track faculty
Experience	New	5 years in the academic setting	University 'old timer'
University Position	Staff	Faculty	Executive/ Administrator
Formal Education	No formal education	Limited education	Degrees, professional accreditation
Academic Education	Bachelor	Master	PhD
Academic Position	Lab Instructor, Lecturer, Assistant or Associate Professor	Tenured Full Professor, Chair	Dean, Director
Sexuality	LGBTQ++	Not out	Heterosexual
Gender	Trans, Intersex, Non-binary	Cisgender women	Cisgender men
Citizenship	No Status	Permanent Resident	Citizen
Indigenous	Non status/urban Indigenous	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous, Dominant settler culture
Language (in a Canadian context)	Traditional languages / Other languages	French-speaking	English-speaking

This workshop was designed to make visible the elements in Table 1, to allow all participants to gain awareness of their own power and privilege.

Originally planned as a 4-hour event, it became clear that more time was needed in the hope of building the interpersonal connections that might create sustained knowledge and practice. Creating a space of trust and fostering a community of practice that might continue beyond the workshop became paramount in workshop design. Trust emerges as foundational to any leadership activity: Jachowicz (2016) argues that realizing interpersonal trust is an important foundation to leadership, while Kosonen and Ikonen (2022) specifically flag trust building in higher education as an essential task for leaders, as do Yildiz and Simsek (2016). Finally, developing a healthier communication style, based on willingness to learn together, can improve both discussions and decisions within the group. Thus, learning to perceive challenges to the status quo (Kouzes & Posner, 2012) enables the academic organization to adapt in challenging and dynamic times. When conflict does arise, if it is swept 'under the rug' and there is no transparency to decision making, conflict worsens.

Another issue we needed to address is *de facto* skill assumption. University hiring committees assume candidates have the skills they will need for a leadership position. Unfortunately, though designed to birth independent and self-sufficient scholars, the process of pursuing a PhD and a faculty position does not facilitate collaborative, collegial or collaborative working environments. Rather, the academic journey sharpens competitive scholars, not collaborative agents, which has little relevance to administration roles. Further, despite training academic independence, in many PhD programs there is little mentorship and academic explorations may be limited by the interests of the supervisor. However academic administration roles usually require a PhD. New administrators are launched from the teaching and research milieu into administrative expectations with little support, outside of a one-time course, for the dynamic shift into assuming greater management roles from their former focus on guiding research and teaching (Lizier, Brooks, & Bizo, 2022). Creating a space to promote the development of collegial relationships among the participants became crucial to our workshop architecture.

Design Elements - Evidence Based Experiential Learning of a Workshop

Many of the problems facing administrators and managers are complex; 'wicked problems' that require complex solutions. 'Wicked problems' (Rittel and Webber, 1973), refers to the multiplicity of players, influences and other interconnected factors that render an issue beyond the reach of a simple decision-making matrix and into a conundrum of social, cultural, and environmental challenges. It is not just the complexity of these problems that is the challenging facet within a university but the demand for collaborative and multidisciplinary approachs if they are to be addressed effectively (Zellner & Campbell 2015). As noted, however, university administrators are not trained to recognize, nor respond appropriately to, such challenges. We designed our workshop to help leaders understand the need to find solutions not just within what they already know as individuals, but in what an academic community can know in common, a collective body of knowledge that can be as complex and rich as the problems being faced. The challenge is removing a leader from the mind set of 'this is how we have always done it' and, instead, facilitate them embracing ideas and insights that challenge the inherent power and privilege structures embedded in universities since the establishment of the University of Bologna in 1088. To shift power and privilege within the university is to embrace a new learning space that includes creativity and the courage to be creative, and to support each other to be able to make the space for internally generated solutions to local and everyday experiences that need redress.

Thus, the workshop fosters a space where university administrators could find the confidence and trust to share the issues they live with daily, in the expectation that someone in the group has experienced a challenge and found a solution to the issue plaguing someone else. This exchange of learned knowledge - often hard won - provides a self-generated curriculum for the participants in the group. This notion of a shared and safe place to explore solutions is not new. What is needed, however, are some theories and approaches that support the creation of that shared space. Appreciative Inquiry is a theory and approach founded on the premise that how a question is framed in the moment it is asked will shape the answers. Thus, allowing participants to frame questions within a curious and non-judgmental way enables creative and effective collaborative work to become a real force in the group. (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2020; Priest, et al., 2013).

In order to support these 'curious' spaces, the Community of Practice, (CoP) (Li et al., 2009; Wenger, 2000) has emerged as a structure that supports systems of informal learning as creations of those who develop and share new knowledge, sharing a passion to find ways to learn, do, and act through focusing on the issues of their shared workplace. Our workshop was designed to intentionally create a space for an academic CoP to emerge and flourish. Action research allows the community of practice to flourish as a learning and growth opportunity.

What is most relevant for our workshop, however, is the *process*, not the structure, of the CoP Concept. The principle behind the workshop design was to engage administrators as practitioners in the preliminary 'space-making' exercises in the workshop and, through a subsequent university-supported process, to continue to work together. Action research fundamentals create an equity of curiosity, of working together as a team to explore mutual concerns. Voluntarily subsequent reuniting as a CoP allows practitioners to field test and then reflect on their own experiences and solutions. This ongoing support to practitioners in the front lines of the university's daily and demanding workload will, we believe, improve processes and productivity. The resulting, heightened, collegial relationships will be important in the growing and increasingly urgent demands associated with justice, equity, inclusion and diversity on campus.

Selling the Need for Building Collaborative Solutions

Universities are generally a centre point of a fiercely independent and competitive creation of knowledge. To shift those within this form of culture to a more collaborative stance is challenging. Assumptions that professional development is 'touchy-feely' is to signal its doom. To imply highly educated individuals require ongoing training and education will not necessarily be well received. However, with our evidence-based approach we expected to get a fair hearing. We thought that our university, still relatively new, is attracting a new breed of administrators, who are willing to seek innovation to solve problems. Our offer to meaningfully engage administrators in their role as administrators seeking to direct their approach to their work into a more collaborative style was initially accepted and signaled the University's new drive for a more structured approach to support the learning and teaching mission of the organization.

Our workshop design was promoted in order to attract busy administrators with an attractive description: 'what's in it for me?' The promise was that there would be knowledge and skills offered that could reduce the amount of time administrators spent on resolving workplace communication and conflict. As roughly between 15% and 40% of administrator's time is spent in conflict resolution, (Birkinshaw & Cohen, 2013), often the most thankless of work, we felt this promise to help resolve such issues would catch attention.

Finally, The Workshop

As we examined structural needs: facilitating trust between and among the participants, allowing time for reflection on their learning and creating opportunities to build peer mentoring opportunities that would allow them to continue the work with support from each other (creating a CoP), we felt we needed time. We expanded the workshop from four hours to two full days and included an evening session prior to the workshop itself, to begin to build that collaborative environment. We also wanted a process that would help break down power structures amongst direct reports, so we agreed to develop a separate workshop for chairs and second-level directors. Both of these design choices facilitated Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, and created authentic and meaningful safe spaces. Building on Action Research also heightened the attraction and usefulness for administrators at a university too overworked to conduct the research themselves.

In the opening of the agenda design, and woven throughout, were activities where the capacity of forging and deepening relationships and trust would enable frank and realistic dialogue. Without this ongoing commitment to support each other in effective discourse, there would be no capacity to accurately 'lay bare' the complex challenges of managing shrinking budgets, increasingly vociferous student bodies, and irritable faculty who see administrative expectations as a fetter to their academic freedom. We structured the agenda to uncover, and put into practice, relationships of deepening trust through carefully selected exercises and tools that would match the desired outcomes, community engagement techniques including Conversation Cafe, Open Space and Most Significant Change which are relatively well known. These techniques are widely used within the professional facilitator world of community engagement because of their capacity to fuel meaningful dialogue, collegial relationships, and effective action. Table 2 presents our two-plus days workshop agenda.

Table 2. Workshop agenda, by day

INTRODUCTORY EVENT - EVENING 5:30 -7:30 Introductions. Conversation Café Guidelines. Role Play: In pairs share a case study, a situation that in retrospect you wish you had handled differently. What was the perspective telling you about what happened, how does a different perspective change your understanding? Develop alternative responses from what you learned in both roles.

DAY ONE Generate data for remainder of the day; Learning to listen; Learning to communicate differently.
Check in. Conversational Café: 20 minutes. Grounding, debrief the evening before learnings; ask what are you here for? (Bookend to closing round); opportunity to reflect and invite to share any further thinking; Readiness to listen and learn may be greater also; Observations on process & reactions shape changes to agenda if needed
Technique mission prep: 10 minutes on the how to of the Tool & its application.
Writestorm: 10 minutes to write; 15 minutes to respond. Question: Name one challenge you have faced in your role as administrator in engaging people; Pass it around, others respond with ideas for response; Return. (Allows a degree of privacy; establishes a wider range of concerns and issues.)
Traffic lights - think, write, analysis: 30 minutes Draw on question from Writestorm, their own or another's. (Individual then group red (barriers), yellow (vision), green (action) post it notes generate data; literally has people facing in the same direction & divorced from their interests.)
Technical Debrief: 10 minutes. (Traffic lights gives a strategy/action plan.)
Open Space: 1 hour. (Allows prioritization of issues generated by Traffic Lights session by the group; people propose the topics, from the place of passionate engagement.)
Communication Strategies and Open Space report outs: 1.5 hour. Develop a communication/reporting back; Presentation; Peer Feedback. How do we communicate to different audiences? In the open space process include a challenge to present innovatively. (Participants will experience communication as engagement versus verbal report out in the material vs simple verbal; What is going to pique the other groups; how can your fabulous, exciting ideas be translated.)
Technical Debrief: 10 minutes.
Check out: Most Significant Change: 20 minutes. (What is the most significant change in your thinking since last night?)
Homework assignment: What was your most important takeaways? Were there any omissions? Things you need more of? Something overlooked, but expected?
DAY TWO *Reflect and learn on impact of poor and better communication.*
Check in & Overview: 30 minutes. Homework report backs; Learnings from yesterday.

Introduction to Design - StoryTime from the Front Lines: 45 minutes. Break open the process of design and development - Why did we choose things; Ordering; Joint planning; Stories of our experiences in public engagement; Do people want to share their own?
Fish Bowl: 30 min. Things that went horribly wrong for you in trying to engage? What was my problem? Then, others come in and share ideas. (Learn from witnessing other communicators.)
25/10**:** 30 min. Question - what to we need to make the change – THINK BIG
Technical Debrief: 10 minutes.
Tactical Plans: 30 minutes. Swim lane; Individual & group tactics (To surface ideas and solutions from 25/10; specific things that they will do in their day-to-day activities with their publics; open discussion. An important step in having the confidence to actually act.)
What's next: 30 minutes. Post Office (Each writes their idea for a solution/idea; Puts in envelope; Next person adds their response; Hand it on; At the end, it can be shared.)
Closing round: 15 minutes. Did you get what you came for?

Table Three presents information on the tools we wanted to both teach and use to teach.

Table 3. Potential Engagement Tools and Facilitation skills

Technique	Source	Description and Comments
Conversation Cafe	http://www.conversationcafe.org/wp-content/docsPDF/docHostQuickHowTo.pdf	Intended to support people in making sense of shared experiences. We anticipated university administrators might not be at ease talking about challenges with their peers. A more relaxed evening reception (with food) with semi-structured conversations would help bring administrators into a shared space ready for the work of the next day. (World Café, with similar features, is a technique

		to ‘host’ a survey using predetermined questions.)
Open Space	http://openspaceworld.org/wp2/	A way to host a gathering where the agenda is generated by the interests, passions and expertise of those attending on a specific topic of urgency. This technique helps a group of people united in a common issue to set the agenda for themselves about what matters and what must be discussed and acted on, structuring a meeting that is uniquely suited to their needs.
Swim Lanes	https://archive.ahrq.gov/professionals/systems/hospital/red/swimlane.html	Creates visual or process maps of multiple processes that are embedded within a group or organization’s practices. Developing swim lanes or journey mapping enables a group’s ability to discern and discuss across multiple and complex layers.
Most Significant Change	http://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/most_significant_change	This evaluation process is based within storytelling. In sessions such as this it supports an Appreciative Enquiry approach to reflection and shared learning.
Fishbowl	http://www.betterevaluation.org/en/evaluation-options/fishbowltechnique	A way of hosting discussion that allows people to contribute to a discussion on a contentious issue. It is paced by the participants' ownership of the discussion. When they are comfortable, or an issue arises that they want to speak about, they join the inner circle. Interactions on specifics where there is disagreement are defused and a collective understanding emerges.
25/10	https://www.liberatingstructures.com/12-2510-crowd-sourcing/	A method that generates ideas from a group in a fun and enlightening way. Within 30 minutes the group will have generated and scored the bank of ideas they created.

Story telling	http://thebrieflab.com/the-narrative-map-what-it-is-and-how-to-us-it/	Taps into the universal familiarity with stories. There are many different ways to elicit storytelling, including narrative mapping,

Many of these tools develop the capacity to be able to say, and hear, difficult things, with some important caveats. A great deal of the success in these techniques is embedded in the skills of the facilitator, and the leadership and commitment of those in the room. The facilitator will need a great deal of confidence and unless participants are willing to participate fully there can be no real progress.

Other workshop constraints exist. For example, the time commitment and workload must be clear (and permitted by their superiors as accepted professional development) if people are to commit to participating. In designing our agenda, as mentioned, we planned an evening session on a Friday evening followed by Saturday all day and Sunday morning. This combination appeared to have the most draw for busy university administrators, allowing a retreat in which to focus without interruption. However, the reality of scaling an agenda to the specific issues of an audience meets some unique challenges when the audience is academic. Expectation of rigor, a critical lens and appropriate references are necessities if an academic audience is to ‘buy in’ to the experiential learning of workshop activities. Further, the collection of evaluative data would enable refinement and further development of the workshop design. (Note: Skilled facilitators who are familiar with academic culture and structures are essential.)

Conclusions

This article emerged in response to a request from our university’s senior administration to develop a workshop for senior administrators that could provide an initial introductory knowledge and skill set in the art of meaningful engagement within the context of a public, unionized university setting. Given our collective decades of university experience and too much experience of questionable decision making that mirrored all the issues we have identified as challenges in this article, along with the identified consequences of such decisions, we were pleased to develop such a workshop. We strongly believe that a commitment to improving engagement and constructive communication across the silos of administration, faculty/staff and students, while simultaneously creating awareness of the issues of unacknowledged power and privilege and the need for justice, equity, diversity and inclusion, can assist any university in addressing a variety of concerns. For example, critical personnel resignations, so called ‘quiet quitting’ where people collect a paycheck but stop stepping up (Masterson, 2022; Thapa, 2022), and generalized or specific resistance to institutional goals and initiatives (Vican et al., 2020), are a growing institutional challenge. We also believe that many universities cannot afford to leave such challenges unaddressed. For example, our university has gone through two general strikes in the past decade which, we believe, stem from the challenges we have identified, challenges that could have been more effectively addressed had senior administrators been invested in, and skilled in, the principles of effective community engagement. Other institutions have likely experienced similar circumstances.

We return to the statement posed by one researcher: why is university administration leadership still stuck in the Dark Ages (Gmelch, 2013, p. 26) in the sense of failing to invest in training for senior administrators, while failing to encourage administrators to both get out of their 'echo chamber' and to admit when they don't know how to do something. We hope to offset some of these challenges by sharing one learning opportunity for administrators around effectively reengaging with their institution. This falls within the framework of action research, which, "is well placed to contribute to transformative change because of its emphasis on relationality that invites us all to experiment as we build new futures together" (Apgar, 2022, p. 221). Action research had the added value of attracting university personnel who do not, usually, have an opportunity to participate in or lead research.

Our workshop was developed at the invitation of our university administration in response to yet another comment from one of the authors on the administration's failure to meaningfully engage with the university's staff and faculty. We targeted our workshop to focus on building trust to enable change in the organizational culture through processes designed to foster a community of practice that could allow administrators to support each other in facing new challenges. Unfortunately, we never had a chance to offer the workshop. First, there were delays due to COVID and then due to new administrators coming onboard; in the end, after a year of delay, our university administrators' priorities changed, and they 'became too busy' to learn to engage. We find this occurrence telling, if unsurprising, as it confirmed our impression that true engagement was not a long-term priority among administration but rather, only considered when circumstances warranted action. However, we hope that learning to engage effectively with their institutions' community is a priority in other institutions. We close with a parable illustrating the challenge of being an administrator in modern academia.

Sharpening your saw:

> A woodcutter strained to saw down a tree. A young man watching asked 'What are you doing?' 'Are you blind?' the woodcutter replied. 'I'm cutting down this tree.' The young man was unabashed. 'You look exhausted! Take a break. Sharpen your saw.' The woodcutter explained that he had been sawing for hours and did not have time to take a break. The young man pushed back … 'If you sharpen the saw, you would cut down the tree much faster.' The woodcutter said 'I don't have time to sharpen the saw. Don't you see I'm too busy?' (Adapted from https://www.livingontherealworld.org/habit-7-sharpen-the-saw/)

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Support Services Assessment: Influence on Change and Improvement

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In these times of constant change, every organization is looking for contemporary method(s) to carry out ongoing change transformation in the hopes of minimizing costs and gaining a competitive advantage (Bartz, 2020; Blanchard, 2019; Chrusciel, 2008; Ciancio, 2018; Diamond, 2002; Elkomy *et al*., 2019; Kok & McDonald, 2017; Kuntz, 2012). Change in the public sector, higher education, can be just as complex, if not more so, given the checks and balances, shared power, divergent interest, and politics (Bartz, 2020; Diamond, 2002; Steppacher, *et al.,* 2021; Tafere Gedifew & Shimelis Muluneh, 2021; Van der Voet et al., 2015).

It is recognized that there are many change methods, challenges, and ways to overcome the complexity of change (Ciancio, 2018; Jacobs, 2013; Jannson, 2013; Tafere Gedifew & Shimelis Muluneh, 2021), and to consider the impact of external influences (Albright, 2004). Literature offers a plethora of process measures that track different attributes of the specific change process (Ciancio, 2018; Gonzalez, et al., 2010), but none that measure the overall impact of change along with the influencing factors affecting the organization. What is offered for consideration is an approach to measure the effect of any and/or all change initiatives and/or interventions on the operation. The purpose of this manuscript is to address this need by examining the use of an internal *support services assessment* (SSA) that provides overall feedback independent of the intervention(s) and that considers the potential impact of all influencing factors on the organization's support services.

It is being recommended that organizational leaders in higher education (HE) having oversight of organizational support services, regardless of methods used to carry out change initiatives, would find benefit in using the *SSA*. The *SSA* is developed to encompass the full array of support services. *SSA* assists management in planning the future course of action considering the influence of external forces and can impact the strategy of the organization (Albright, 2004; Choo, 2001; Han & Zhong, 2015; Okumus, 2004). The *SSA* will allow the HE organization to be proactive in determining the effect of an intervention (change) as well as aid in managing resources effectively as set forth in an appropriate strategy for all support services (Arena *et al*., 2009; Han & Zhong, 2015; Hanka *et al*., 2015; Mestry & Bodalina, 2015; Sigurðardóttir, et al., 2022).

Support Services

Support services are those units within the HE organization often referred to as the back office, the infrastructure, and/or the business-processing group. They are the people who dedicate their time and effort to make sure the organization/business entity functions properly (Dossani & Kenney, 2003; Lacity, *et al*., 2004; Mestry & Bodalina, 2015), and they play a vital role warranting aggressive management (Basu & Nair, 2012; Lacity, *et al*., 2004; Mestry & Bodalina, 2015; Sigurðardóttir, et al., 2022). These operations are the groups of individuals responsible for the tasks necessary for the organization to function (Dossani & Kenney, 2003; Mestry & Bodalina, 2015). They are the groups that carry out the business functions and processes, which support the people in the HE organization who directly interact with the customers (Caldwell, 2022).

Support services deal with all the bureaucracy (Caldwell, 2022; Van der Voet *et al.,* 2015). In the public sector, these operations often have to deal with contested performance measures and complex implementation processes setting up ambiguous objectives in an environment with distributed power and authority heavily influenced by external politics (Han & Zhong, 2015; Kok & McDonald, 2017; Tafere Gedifew & Shimelis Muluneh, 2021; Van der Voet et al., 2015).

In many cases, these support services can also be candidates to be contracted out to an external source when and if it is deemed appropriate (Basu & Nair, 2012; Elkomy *et al*., 2019; Lacity, *et al*., 2004). Therefore, measuring the efficiency and effectiveness of these units merits ongoing monitoring to determine the ideal levels of support services needed for the organization/business entity (Arena *et al*., 2009; Basu & Nair, 2012; Dossani & Kenney, 2003; Steppacher, *et al.,* 2021).

Tracking Impact

There is an understanding, and it is recognized as being imperative that the support services of a HE organization be able to demonstrate value-added services (Arena *et al*., 2009; Ciancio, 2018; Steppacher, *et al.,* 2021). It then becomes the role of the organization's leadership to track this performance and demonstrate value added (Bartz, 2020; Plummer, et al., 2021). Performance measurements in fulfilling service obligations provide valuable information for both decision-making and the opportunity to track trends (Kok & McDonald, 2017; Plummer, et al., 2021).

Measurements that include customer input help the service organization obtain feedback to address gaps between expectations and the actual service delivery (Aldehayyat, 2015; Steppacher, *et al.,* 2021). The value to measure and track performance is best summed up by Doerr (2018, p. 184), 'If you don't know how well you're performing, how can you possibly get better?'

The *SSA* is identified and recommended as a tool to measure whether any interventions have had an impact on the performance of the support services operation.

Support Services Assessment

Chrusciel (2011) presented an approach and a method, the environmental scan, upon which to assess the multiple operating functions/units of the HE organization's facilities operations. It is from this study that the question is posed as to whether this approach/method could be extended to evaluate all support services within the HE organization beyond just the facilities division. With this in mind, the *SSA* is offered as the process of utilizing a survey instrument to obtain feedback from an organization's leadership to evaluate both current services as well as provide insight into potential future interventions. Based on feedback from the leadership via a simple survey instrument, the data allows the organization to then evaluate services for both priority needs and quality of service. The actual survey instrument solicits feedback on the full range of support services currently being provided, those being contemplated, and any other pertinent issues that would aid the HE organization in carrying out its charge.

The group of respondents can include all decision-makers of the HE organization starting with the president and down into the ranks of the other departments as deemed appropriate. The intent is to allow all decision makers who influence the support services, the opportunity to comment about these services as it pertains to their specific area of responsibilities. The value of this input is best recognized by Sheryl Sandberg's (2013, p. 184) comment that, 'feedback is opinion, grounded in observation and experience, which allows us to know what impressions we make on others.'

Data from the *SSA* is then compared to the information obtained from the HE organization's support services leadership/management with regard to what change interventions were initiated and measured between the surveys. The information/data can also provide leadership/management insights on where there might be a mismatch of resources to service expectations allowing the organization to examine all support services more thoroughly.

Some of these interventions may include a change in personnel, policies, and other resources (human, informational technology, physical, and financial). This also includes actions such as outsourcing and any changes to implement value-added best practices to improve efficiency and effectiveness. This case study also looks at how the pandemic may have influenced the operations and the respondent's perceptions.

Approach & Methodology

Like the environmental scan used by Chrusciel (2011), the *SSA* is the process of utilizing a survey instrument to obtain feedback from a HE organization's leadership to evaluate both current services as well as provide insight into potential future expectations (Albright, 2004; Aldehayyat, 2015; Choo, 2001; Rathi, *et al.,* 2017). The *SSA* is offered as a means for organizations to assess services based on customer expectations and allow the organization to be proactive in managing resources and setting forth an appropriate strategic direction (Choo, 2001; Hanka *et al*., 2015; Rathi, *et al.,* 2017; Sigurðardóttir, *et al*., 2022).

When dealing with ongoing change, one must realize that a comprehensive and reliable understanding may not always be obtainable (Okumus, 2004) and that the climate of change, along with the method showing accountability is paramount; this then provides evidence of effectiveness and evaluation (Kok & McDonald, 2017). The *SSA* can be at least one method to gain a better understanding of how external factors may influence an organization's future (Albright, 2004; Aldehayyat, 2015; Choo, 2001; Hanka *et al*., 2015).

The *SSA* may help to develop effective responses to change and support the belief that knowledge about the environment can be utilized for analysis and planning (Albright, 2004; Arena *et al*., 2009; Choo, 2001; Rathi, *et al.,* 2017). It is through these types of discoveries that one can initiate a value-added practice to become a fundamental component of the strategic planning process (Albright, 2004; Aldehayyat, 2015; Choo, 2001; Hanka *et al*., 2015; Rathi, *et al.,* 2017).

The empirical data was obtained from an in-depth examination of practices for a single-subject case study. This allows the research to be a more narrowly focused investigation rather than a broad overview of multiple subjects (Isaac & Michael, 1997; Merriam & Associates, 2002). The HE organization under study is the comprehensive support services of a large community college located in the Midwest region of the United States. For this study, the support services include the following areas: financial services (accounting, treasury, payroll, budget); procurement; auxiliary services (bookstore, food services, print, and copy); facilities (maintenance, custodial, grounds, capital projects); and human resources. These services do not usually have internal competition. However, they are subject to potential outsourcing opportunities.

Information and data for the organization go back several years, and for the purpose of this study, the *SSA* was conducted on a biennial basis spanning the past three years (2019-2021). This allows the organization to do a comparative longitudinal trend analysis for at least two cycles (2018-2019 and 2020-2021). By examining multiple cycles, the researcher was able to watch for any anomalies and/or radical deviations. The biennial survey was decided upon to allow any interventions ample time to have influence and to diminish overwhelming potential respondents with ongoing survey requests. This approach allows for both a periodic and continuous system, which then permits leadership to use the collected information for both long-term problems solving and to identify potential opportunities (Elkomy *et al.,* 2019; Okumus, 2004).

By examining a single organization, the unique attributes of the HE organization's culture can be identified and considered. With this in mind, the determination was made to use a fieldwork single case study to address the what, how, and why while focusing on behavioral incidents for a single organization (Hayes, 2020; Yin, 2017). It allows the researcher to probe into the depths of the primary research entity (McCutcheon & Meredith 1993; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). The fieldwork case study design allows the researcher to present the problem and propose a strategy (Hayes, 2020) and provide new insights (Field 2020). In this study, accepted practices and continuity were identified along with what was controllable by the organization and what was not. The process of identifying these practices was enhanced by what Glesne (1999) suggests as increased time spent by the researcher in the areas under review. This aids in overcoming the outsider effect and allows the researcher to identify as well as observe actual practices used by the organization, thus enhancing the trustworthiness of the analysis. The information gleaned regarding change interventions could then be tracked against possible impacts on the operating units.

The *SSA* process starts with a survey instrument, which was distributed electronically by an independent service group, not in the study to a prescribed institutional leadership group via an e-mail list. To minimize biases, the essence of the instrument asks the respondent to rank all the support services individually for quality on a Likert scale from 1 (poor) to 4 (excellent) (see Table 1). This is then followed by a question asking respondents to rank each support service for importance, which again uses the Likert scale from 1 (unimportant) to 4 (critical) (see Table 2). Percentages are calculated to normalize the numbers and accommodate the comparison between years when the number of respondents differs. The tables show the actual questions converted into a structured format with corresponding response percentages for each year.

Information about changes and attempted interventions were captured for the same time period (survey cycles). These changes included but were not limited to changes in resources and the implementation of value-added best practices. Some of these actions included procedure changes, customer training, refinement and updating of documents, making available timely and vital information, more communications to patrons, and outsourcing some functions with the intent to achieve efficiency and effectiveness improvements.

Results

In 2019 the survey population of leaders in the organization was 161 with 74 responses but only 62 completed surveys that were usable for analysis. In 2021 the survey population was expanded to 286 leaders with 84 responses and 76 usable for analysis.

The results can be presented in a combination of a narrative, table, and/or graphics. The narrative can be an elaborate analysis to a succinct executive summary of the findings based on the audience's interests. Tables allow for the longitudinal results tally comparison (see Tables 1 and 2), and graphics can include service(s) evaluations and/or a graphic wave-scatter plots which show the comparison of all institutional support services based on importance and quality (see Figures 1 and 2). A descriptive statistical analysis of the available data provided standard deviations which are incorporated into the figures providing an informative graphic presentation.

With the initial survey done in 2019, the information/data sets the baseline and allowed the data to be used to identify areas that may need attention. Figure 1 provides a graphic that gives immediate insight allowing for a quick examination by operations leadership/management. More specifically, the data provides insight into every unit's perceived importance and quality in the organization. Both comprehensive and detailed analyses can be conducted on the numbers for each specific support services unit to determine the impact of any change interventions. The information can also be utilized to conduct simple capability and capacity analysis whereby management can identify possible mismatches between importance and quality which could lead to scrutinizing the assigned resources alignment. This then allows the organization to strategize on appropriate actions and determines what changes and/or interventions may need to be considered for each unit and/or the entire organization.

From the 2019 data (Table 1 and Figure 1) units 7 (PeopleSoft System), 10 (Purchasing Acquisition Process), 11 (Purchasing Solicitations), 31 (HR Talent Acquisition), and 33 (HR Classification and Compensation) are all identified as outliers falling outside the ideal range of importance/quality by being at least 2 standard deviations from the preferred centerline. This can be seen as a signal for management to focus attention on these specific operating units. A note of caution is offered that being an outlier does not necessarily indicate major concerns in and of itself, but rather an indication warranting investigation for a specific area(s).

In particular, over the two years following the 2019 survey, Purchasing was able to become fully staffed and publish new policies and procedures. This then allowed them to start down the path to train community patrons on the new protocols and provide published timelines with expectations. A change in some of the management personnel was viewed as a minor disruption from which the team was able to rebound. This aided in bringing on board an experienced leader with good skills and abilities, who further assisted with the change initiatives implementation. A new leader armed

Table 1. Overall Quality

Rate the overall quality of the following services you have experienced in the last 12 months, or your perception of quality if you have not used the service.

	Service Quality 2019				Service Quality 2021			
Services Rating	4	3	2	1	4	3	2	1
1 Financial Services ➔ Accounting	24%	54%	18%	4%	26%	60%	14%	0%
2 Financial Services ➔ Travel Services	33%	51%	12%	4%	23%	62%	15%	0%
3 Financial Services ➔ Grants Management (post-award)	23%	53%	23%	2%	24%	54%	20%	1%
4 Financial Services ➔ Treasury (financials)	20%	57%	20%	2%	26%	60%	14%	0%
5 Financial Services ➔ Solution Center	27%	46%	23%	4%	30%	54%	15%	1%
6 Financial Services ➔ Payroll	53%	36%	8%	3%	52%	43%	5%	0%
7 Financial Services ➔ PeopleSoft System	19%	46%	28%	7%	19%	60%	15%	5%
8 Budget & Planning ➔ Budget Planning	25%	39%	28%	8%	28%	55%	16%	1%
9 Budget & Planning ➔ Budget Tracking	25%	43%	26%	6%	28%	55%	12%	4%
10 Procurement ➔ Purchasing Acquisition Process (eReq)	8%	31%	27%	34%	17%	49%	23%	10%
11 Procurement ➔ Purchasing Solicitations (RFPs, Bids, Quotes, etc.)	8%	33%	34%	25%	12%	58%	24%	7%
12 Procurement ➔ Procurement Card	19%	34%	35%	11%	21%	53%	25%	1%
13 Procurement ➔ Accounts Payable (invoice & payment)	23%	32%	23%	22%	22%	48%	27%	3%
14 Procurement ➔ Contract Management (multi-year agreements)	13%	41%	27%	20%	23%	52%	22%	3%
15 Procurement ➔ Auxiliary Services Bookstore	11%	55%	23%	11%	7%	55%	31%	7%
16 Procurement ➔ Auxiliary Services Food Services	10%	42%	31%	17%	7%	56%	27%	10%
17 Facilities ➔ District Guidance/Support	15%	42%	28%	15%	20%	60%	17%	3%
18 Facilities ➔ Project Management	12%	47%	22%	19%	25%	56%	17%	3%
19 Facilities ➔ Auxiliary Services PRINTING & COPYING	31%	52%	13%	3%	30%	55%	14%	0%
20 Facilities ➔ Auxiliary Services MAIL	28%	52%	12%	7%	27%	56%	15%	1%
21 Facilities ➔ Campus Operations CUSTODIAL	18%	37%	27%	18%	27%	47%	22%	4%
22 Facilities ➔ Campus Operations GROUNDS	14%	46%	23%	17%	32%	53%	12%	4%
23 Facilities ➔ Campus Operations MAINTENACE	18%	42%	29%	11%	33%	54%	10%	3%
24 Facilities ➔ Campus Operations In-House RENOVATIONS	19%	47%	24%	10%	32%	48%	14%	5%
25 Facilities ➔ Work Order System	15%	34%	31%	20%	23%	52%	21%	4%
26 Facilities ➔ Recycling	20%	40%	22%	18%	16%	57%	16%	12%
27 Facilities ➔ Property Management (Leases & Rentals)	4%	60%	28%	8%	24%	59%	17%	0%
28 Interactions with the Finance & Administrative Services Leadership	20%	53%	18%	8%	24%	54%	22%	0%
29 Website Information of Finance & Administrative Services	5%	53%	36%	6%	19%	57%	23%	1%
30 HR ➔ Benefits Administration	36%	47%	13%	4%	34%	54%	13%	0%
31 HR ➔ Talent Acquisition (hiring process)	10%	28%	46%	16%	15%	37%	33%	15%
32 HR ➔ Employee Relations	23%	36%	32%	9%	26%	47%	21%	6%
33 HR ➔ Classification/Compensation	6%	26%	27%	41%	11%	39%	31%	19%
34 HR ➔ Internal Website	7%	46%	43%	4%	14%	49%	35%	1%
35 HR ➔ Training & Development Programs	12%	50%	29%	9%	17%	38%	36%	9%
36 Interactions with HR Leadership	27%	40%	19%	13%	22%	53%	22%	4%
37 HR Website Information	9%	52%	32%	6%	14%	54%	28%	4%

Likert scale (4 = Excellent, 3 = Good, 2 = Fair, 1= Poor)

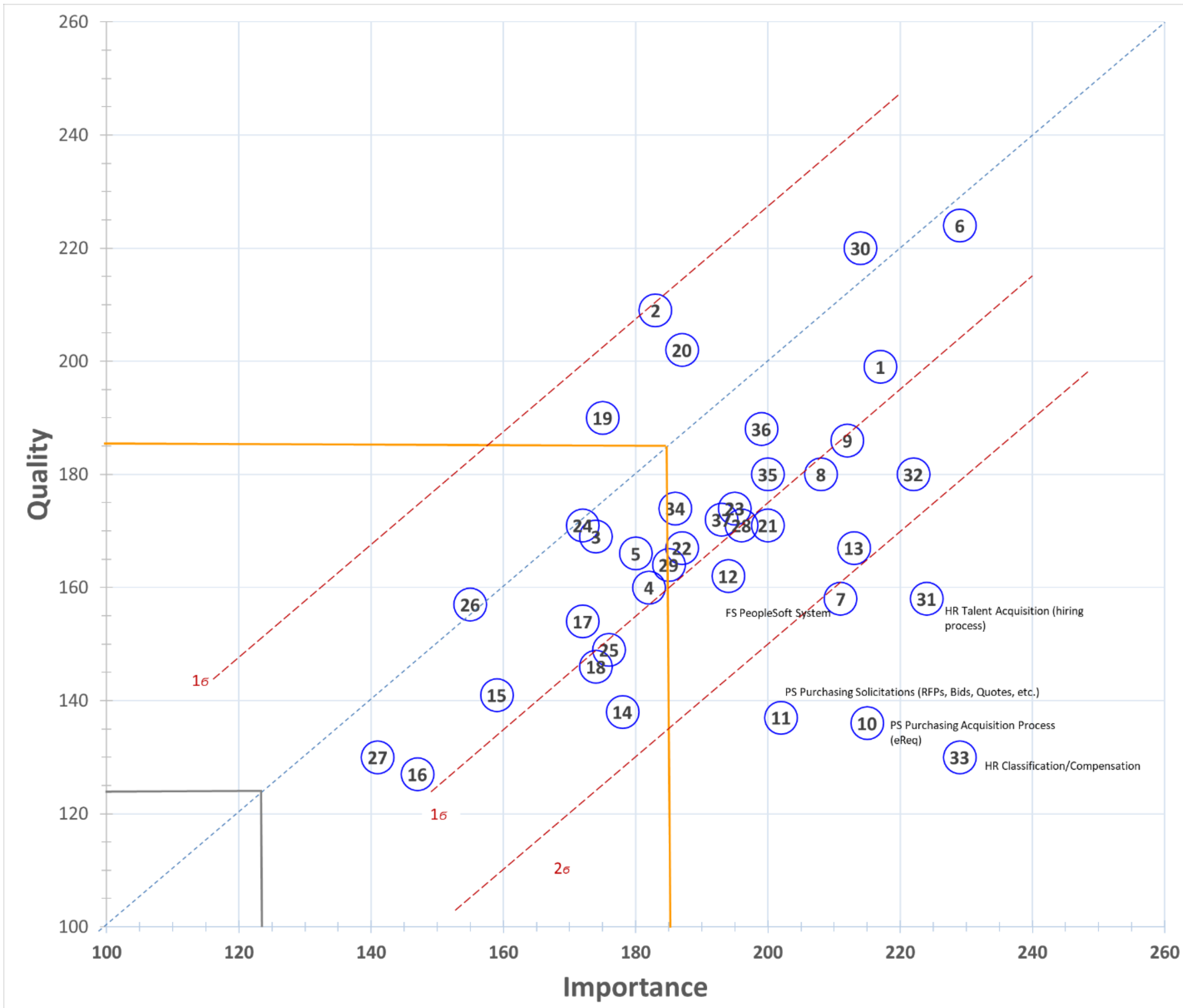
Table 2. Overall Importance

Rate how important the following services will be in supporting the vision and goals of your work unit in the next 12 months, or your perception of importance if you have not used the service.

	Service Importance 2019				Service Importance 2021			
Services Rating	4	3	2	1	4	3	2	1
1 Financial Services ➔ Accounting	59%	38%	3%	0%	53%	38%	7%	1%
2 Financial Services ➔ Travel Services	25%	41%	32%	2%	4%	40%	42%	14%
3 Financial Services ➔ Grants Management (post-award)	35%	32%	22%	12%	36%	36%	21%	8%
4 Financial Services ➔ Treasury (financials)	28%	50%	18%	3%	37%	44%	14%	6%
5 Financial Services ➔ Solution Center	33%	47%	19%	2%	36%	43%	19%	1%
6 Financial Services ➔ Payroll	70%	24%	6%	0%	64%	28%	8%	0%
7 Financial Services ➔ PeopleSoft System	57%	38%	5%	0%	55%	41%	3%	1%
8 Budget & Planning ➔ Budget Planning	44%	48%	8%	0%	44%	42%	8%	6%
9 Budget & Planning ➔ Budget Tracking	46%	44%	10%	0%	46%	42%	7%	6%
10 Procurement ➔ Purchasing Acquisition Process (eReq)	56%	32%	11%	2%	45%	43%	8%	4%
11 Procurement ➔ Purchasing Solicitations (RFPs, Bids, Quotes, etc.)	46%	33%	16%	5%	32%	49%	15%	4%
12 Procurement ➔ Procurement Card	35%	40%	24%	2%	34%	44%	18%	4%
13 Procurement ➔ Accounts Payable (invoice & payment)	49%	40%	11%	0%	43%	46%	8%	3%
14 Procurement ➔ Contract Management (multi-year agreements)	35%	33%	25%	7%	32%	40%	21%	7%
15 Procurement ➔ Auxiliary Services Bookstore	24%	31%	37%	8%	26%	34%	28%	12%
16 Procurement ➔ Auxiliary Services Food Services	13%	38%	28%	20%	11%	30%	38%	22%
17 Facilities ➔ District Guidance/Support	25%	45%	22%	8%	28%	51%	17%	4%
18 Facilities ➔ Project Management	25%	52%	12%	12%	29%	44%	18%	8%
19 Facilities ➔ Auxiliary Services PRINTING & COPYING	18%	53%	23%	6%	30%	41%	27%	1%
20 Facilities ➔ Auxiliary Services MAIL	21%	56%	24%	0%	29%	52%	18%	1%
21 Facilities ➔ Campus Operations CUSTODIAL	37%	50%	11%	2%	49%	37%	11%	3%
22 Facilities ➔ Campus Operations GROUNDS	34%	41%	21%	3%	26%	49%	22%	4%
23 Facilities ➔ Campus Operations MAINTENACE	38%	48%	11%	3%	42%	47%	7%	4%
24 Facilities ➔ Campus Operations In-House RENOVATIONS	16%	56%	21%	7%	25%	51%	21%	4%
25 Facilities ➔ Work Order System	24%	54%	19%	3%	26%	52%	18%	4%
26 Facilities ➔ Recycling	10%	44%	36%	10%	10%	49%	34%	7%
27 Facilities ➔ Property Management (Leases & Rentals)	12%	32%	37%	20%	11%	44%	33%	12%
28 Interactions with the Finance & Administrative Services Leadership	42%	34%	23%	2%	26%	46%	22%	6%
29 Website Information of Finance & Administrative Services	28%	48%	25%	0%	32%	44%	17%	7%
30 HR ➔ Benefits Administration	37%	55%	8%	0%	46%	43%	9%	1%
31 HR ➔ Talent Acquisition (hiring process)	60%	25%	15%	0%	49%	42%	8%	1%
32 HR ➔ Employee Relations	46%	49%	5%	0%	48%	38%	14%	0%
33 HR ➔ Classification/Compensation	53%	41%	6%	0%	49%	46%	5%	0%
34 HR ➔ Internal Website	17%	58%	23%	2%	19%	51%	27%	3%
35 HR ➔ Training & Development Programs	25%	60%	14%	2%	30%	51%	16%	3%
36 Interactions with HR Leadership	33%	47%	19%	2%	26%	54%	18%	3%
37 HR Website Information	20%	63%	16%	2%	23%	54%	19%	4%

Likert scale (4 = Critical, 3 = High, 2 = Low, 1= Unimportant)

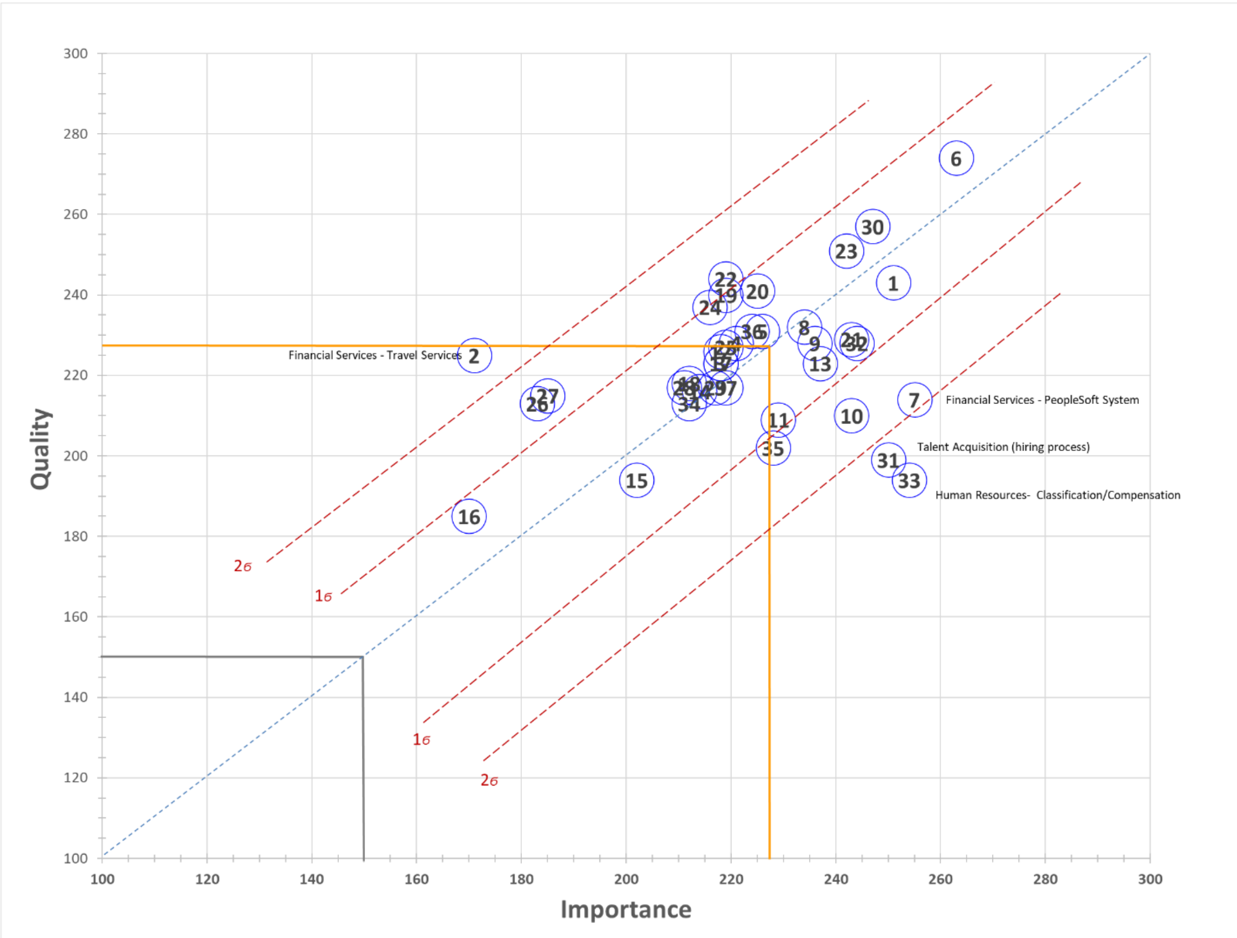
Figure 1. Wave – Scatter Plot (*Support Services Assessment* Results 2019)



with a new policy and procedures, allowed this service unit team to recover more quickly in providing customer-responsive services.

HR on the other hand experienced a change in leadership followed a year later by some significant changes in personnel at the management level. HR was also carrying into the current mode of

Figure 2. Wave – Scatter Plot (*Support Services Assessment* Results 2021)



operations flawed classification/compensation study data which immediately warranted a new study. This was an impetus to make changes to an existing system that was already under significant suspicion. This confusion along with a change in personnel exacerbated the interface and output of services from the HR services group.

Implementing change interventions is slow in normal conditions, but under these disruptive circumstances due to the pandemic, service delivery was impacted unfavorably.

Both units, as well as other service units, did undertake some change initiatives to influence operations. The outcomes and the impact of these interventions can be further examined based on the data collected for the 2021 support services environment scan (Table 2). Upon examination of the data for quality, if one combines the excellent and good scores, one can compare the favorable reviews between the two cycles. The data then reveals that only two units (Procurement → Auxiliary Services Bookstores and HR → Training & Development Programs) dropped in the quality rating from 2019 to 2021.

When examining the data for importance in the same manner, one finds that 16 of the 37 units showed a decrease in importance from 2019 to 2021. Focusing on the identified outliers, comparing 2019 with the 2021 data, the Purchasing service units appear to have been able to influence their service performance (perception) favorably. Comparing 2019 (Figure 1) to 2021 data (Figure 2) shows a migration of the primary outliers 7 (PeopleSoft System), 10 (Purchasing Acquisition Process), 11 (Purchasing Solicitations), 31 (HR Talent Acquisition), and 33 (HR Classification and Compensation) moving from unfavorable being outside the second standard deviation to within the boundaries between one and two standard deviations.

Even the HR services units showed some improvement by shifting from well beyond the 2nd standard deviation (Figure 1) to a much closer position to the 2nd standard deviation (Figure 2).

Another mitigating factor that could influence the ratings is the potential for grateful/sympathetic sentiments in receiving services during the pandemic. When many services both personal and professional were curtailed due to the pandemic protocol, receiving any services during the pandemic could be interpreted as higher-than-normal quality. It is also noted that other than the restrictive, yet demanding conditions brought forth by the pandemic, these support services did not necessarily experience normal operations during the 2020-2021 cycle.

Limitations

It is recognized that there could be a bias when the researcher is a member of the HE organization under examination and the possibility to direct the interpretation of the results (Isaac & Michael, 1997). To address these concerns, the value of the researcher immersed in the fieldwork is emphasized as being a valued contribution and enhances the credibility of the research (Field, 2020).

The emphasis on using the *SSA* instrument versus the actual instrument provides an opportunity and additional exploration to modify and adapt the actual instrument and incorporate unique cultural issues into the survey instrument and investigation. This allows for future research to consider other influencing factors like organization culture, geographic demographics, etc. which can be a limitation in generalizing the findings not only outside the Midwest region of the continental U.S. but worldwide.

The reader is cautioned that because the methodology is a single case study, care should be exercised in freely generalizing these findings. Possible transferability should consider these factors and utilize logic with reality where it is justifiable. This case study is presented in the spirit of responsible research and innovation (Hansen, *et al*., 2020) whereby the intent is to be responsible for carrying out the analysis and presenting the findings from the research project.

Discussion & Conclusions

The results from using the proposed *SSA* instrument provide the HE organization's leadership with valuable feedback for not only evaluating the impact of any change interventions but also to strategically plan. The longitudinal (2-year cycle) provided two years of data with a one-year interval between measurements allowing the organization to recognize the effects of any intervention and helps to provide assurance that ample time was experienced before any impact was evaluated.

As a potential tool in the HE leadership toolbox, the *SSA* helps one to understand the situation and context before taking any immediate action. It can provide guidance to align resources with expectations (importance), and aid to inform the decision-making process. It can identify possible noteworthy trends as well as provide some discoveries to unknowns.

The comparison of the two sets of data shows that in some areas where interventions have been executed, an impact has been realized. Overall, there does appear to be some movement of matching quality with importance, where both parameters tend toward the centerline. This movement to the centerline helps to provide evidence in support of the appropriate resource allocations to carry out the desired functions.

Recognizing that the ideal is to have importance and quality measurements intersect on the center line (Figures 1 and 2), the multi-year data allows one to see what impact any change interventions may have had on the support services unit's performance. Considering the evaluations of some of the designated outliers, those units outside of 2 standard deviations do appear to be making some progress from 2019 to 2021. The overall information allows the leadership to examine more closely what has had a favorable influence on both the quality and importance of the service unit. This information allows leadership to identify which units may need further attention, what interventions may or may not have had an impact, and what new strategies if warranted may be required.

The initial analysis critiquing quality and importance provides insight into what the organization needs to discontinue, do better, and consider doing. The outcome not only measures the impacts of the intervention(s), but it can also become a contributing critical factor for change as part of the empirical data supporting a rationale for a change initiative (Blanchard, 2019; Chrusciel, 2008; Diamond, 2002).

In essence, the *SSA* captures the important theme in what Klein (2004, p. 350) suggests, 'Finding the 'right' answers require asking the 'right' questions' but goes beyond to include also asking the 'right' people. Metric information enables the organization to learn from the past to improve performance and achieve better future performance (Bartz, 2020; Choo, 2001; Gonzalez, *et al*., 2010; Rathi, *et al.,* 2017).

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Clarity or Continuing Ambiguity Regarding the Tenure and Promotion Process in Community Colleges

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Promotion and tenure for community college faculty are critical milestones of professional development and for the college itself. In addition to pay raises, promotions signal to faculty that they are progressing professionally in their field and making meaningful contributions to the institution (Shattuck et al, 2018). Faculty earning tenure gain significant protections and enhanced prestige from both within and outside of the institution (Hammons & Orf, 2016). Institutions, likewise, accrue benefits from faculty promotion and tenure, including higher faculty retention rates and better engagement with shared governance (American Association of University Professors, 2021; Maxey & Kezar, 2015). For these reasons, and others, examining faculty assumptions about promotion and tenure are important at both the individual and institutional level.

Despite this importance, the promotion and tenure processes constitute a source of great uncertainty for many community college faculty members. Both promotion and tenure decisions represent significant milestones in the career of community college faculty members, and, especially in the case of tenure, the professional ramifications can be profound (Miller & Hickey, 2018). The three pillars of faculty work—service to the institution, teaching, and research—stand consistent across most community colleges, but the weight given to each in promotion and tenure systems and the criteria used in the assessment of these three pillars are oftentimes inconsistent and opaque (Prottas et al., 2017). Unclear expectations, shifting institutional priorities, capricious student teaching evaluations, weighting of different service commitments, and ambiguous parameters surrounding research and scholarships, especially in the community college context, all contribute to uncertainty in the process (Martinez, 2019; Prottas et al., 2017).

Tenure decisions usually center attention on the previously delineated three pillars of faculty work—campus service, teaching, and research. All three receive some attention in the awarding of tenure, with teaching and service to the institution being of primary importance in community colleges (Morest, 2015). Put differently, the needs of the institution as well as the achievements of the faculty candidate receive consideration in tenure decisions. In contrast to tenure, colleges sometimes opt to focus more heavily on the merit of the faculty member's performance in one of the three pillars in decisions about promotion in academic rank thereby using a narrower range of criteria. In either case, provosts and academic deans should be mindful of establishing clear promotion and tenure criteria and communicating those criteria to faculty with certainty and clarity.

Related Literature

Research and publication records have especially been fraught with uncertainty in the evaluation of community college faculty promotion and tenure portfolios. Traditionally, deans and senior academic affairs leadership at community colleges have privileged teaching and service over research and publication records in promotion and tenure decisions, and faculty members, likewise, have devoted most of their attention to teaching rather than research and publications (Braxton & Lyken-Segosebe, 2015; Schimanski & Alperin, 2018). Increasingly, however, senior leadership is expecting some scholarship from tenure-track community college faculty, but what kinds of scholarship and how much of it are oftentimes unclear and vary significantly from institution to institution (Martinez, 2019). A related concern is what type of scholarship is the most useful and meaningful for tenure-track community college faculty members, given the mission of community colleges that is focused significantly more on teaching and student learning as compared to research universities that are more dedicated to generating research and publications for the consumption of peers in the field (Hammons & Orf, 2016; Schimanski & Alperin, 2018).

The allocation of rewards such as promotion and tenure to individual faculty members constitutes the primary function of the academic reward system for both community colleges and universities. As such, academic reward systems center their attention on the faculty roles of teaching, research and scholarship, and service (O'Meara, 2017). With regards to research and scholarship, such aspects as the breadth of the criteria used in the assessment of the various forms of research and scholarship produced by faculty members and the weight accorded these various forms of research and scholarship should be considered.

Values or beliefs undergird both the breadth of the criteria used and the weight given to the various forms of scholarship. These values or beliefs flow from both the prevailing values and beliefs of faculty members, individually and collectively, within departments and across units, the values and beliefs of administrative leaders, and the values and beliefs of external stakeholders such as professional associations, federal agencies and private donors (Burkhardt, 2002; Fox, 2015; O'Meara, 2015; Stephan, 2012). These underlying values or beliefs shape the allocation of such academic rewards as tenure, promotion and annual salary adjustments. When these values and beliefs of faculty and academic affairs leadership around tenure and promotion do not align or, worse, are at loggerheads, confusion and ambiguity in the promotion and tenure processes follow.

Conceptual Framework

Given the differing priorities of community colleges and their faculty members, Boyer's model of scholarship offers greater latitude in defining scholarship more broadly, which in turn allows community college faculty members to simultaneously participate in research more and to both honor and contribute to the mission of their institutions. Boyer (1990) delineated four domains of scholarship. The first domain category is the scholarship of discovery which centers attention on the acquisition of new knowledge for a given academic discipline (Boyer, 1990). Faculty contributions to this first category have been dominated by 4-year faculty members especially in research and doctoral granting universities (Braxton et al., 2002). This scholarship of discovery category has not been typically required of community college faculty members (Townsend & Twombly, 2007). To this more traditional category of scholarship, Boyer (1990) added three more domains: integration, application, and teaching. The scholarship of integration seeks to synthesize intra- or interdisciplinary works into a larger, coherent narrative. Put differently, it seeks to derive meaning from the research findings of other researchers. Application-based scholarship focuses on the application of disciplinary knowledge and skill to address to real world problems, both on campus and in the surrounding community. The last category, the scholarship of teaching, strives to develop or refine pedagogical practices, effectively moving scholarship beyond strictly disciplinary matters towards an examination of appropriate teaching and learning practices (Braxton et al., 2002). All three of these latter domains of scholarship align better with the mission of community colleges and the work that tenure-track community college faculty members engage in on a daily basis (Braxton & Lyken-Segosebe, 2015).

Boyer's expansion of the definitions of scholarship beyond discovery to include the scholarships of application, integration and teaching also entails an associated call to broaden the criteria used to appraise faculty research and scholarship for promotion and tenure decisions in order to account for the full range of professional activities performed by faculty members (Boyer, 1990; Braxton et al., 2002). Unlike the research of Braxton & Segosebe (2015) that focused empirical attention on the engagement of community college faculty members in each of Boyer's four domains of scholarship, this study centers attention on community college faculty members' perceptions of the criteria for promotion and tenure and the weighting of various forms of scholarship in these decisions at their community college.

Study Purpose: The following research questions flow from the formulations of this conceptual framework. These three questions guided this study:

1. How do faculty members' beliefs about tenure being broad in nature compare to their beliefs about promotion criteria being broad in nature at their institution?

2. How do faculty members' beliefs about tenure criteria being broad in nature compare to their perception of the weighting of various scholarship in awarding tenure at their institution?

3. How do faculty members' beliefs about promotion criteria being broad in nature compare to their perception of the weighting of various scholarship in promotion decisions at their institution?

As evident by these questions, this study reflects the values or beliefs held by the leadership of a community college rather than that of individual faculty members. We do so through the perceptions of individual community college faculty members concerning their institution.

The findings of this study will shed some light on the breadth of criteria and the weighting of various forms of scholarship in the promotion and tenure process at community colleges. Hopefully, a reduction in the uncertainty surrounding these important faculty personnel issues will result. In addition, rudiments of an academic reward system centered on the research and publication activities of community college faculty members may also materialize.

Method

The data for this study comes from a national study of community college faculty members conducted by Braxton & Lyken-Segosebe (2015) that sought to investigate the nature and extent of their engagement in Boyer's four domains of scholarship.

Variables. The Faculty Professional Performance Survey (FPPS), developed by Braxton et al. (2002) for their research on faculty engagement in each of Boyer's four domains of scholarship in 4-year colleges and universities, was adapted for use with community college faculty by Braxton & Lyken-Segosebe (2015). The FPPS included statements that required faculty members to assess their institutions' approach to scholarship. Faculty members used the following four-point scale to register their responses: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, 4=strongly agree. The variables used in this study derived from four survey items related to faculty perceptions of institutional promotion and tenure procedures. These items were as follows:

1. "The criteria for tenure at my institution are broad enough to include the full range of activities in which faculty are engaged."

2. "The criteria for promotion in academic rank at my institution are broad enough to include the full range of activities in which faculty are engaged."

3. "At my institution, various forms of scholarship receive some weight in the awarding of tenure."

4. "At my institution, various forms of scholarship receive some weight in the promotion of faculty members."

Procedures. An online Faculty Professional Performance Survey (FPPS) was sent to 2,352 faculty members at 200 randomly selected community colleges. Responses were obtained from 348 full-time and 42 part-time community college faculty members holding tenured, tenure-track and non-tenure track positions within the four academic disciplines of biology, chemistry, history, and sociology. While the survey's overall response rate was low at 21%, a mailing wave analysis indicated that respondents were representative of the population of inference. Responses from the part-time faculty members were excluded from this study as these faculty members are not eligible for promotion and tenure. Further details on this sample can be found in Braxton & Lyken-Segosebe (2015).

Given the low response rate, a wave analysis using t-tests was conducted for the four administrations of our emailed survey in order to check for the possibility of response bias. This method of assessing the possibility of response bias is well documented in the literature and is consistent with the formulations of Goode & Hatt (1952) and Leslie (1972). As shown in Table 1, our results confirmed that, except for one instance, there were no significant differences in the mailing waves. Thus, little or no bias exist in our sample of community college faculty members despite the low response rate to the FPPS.

Table 1. T-tests Results for Wave (1= 1st wave, 0 = all subsequent waves) across Key Variables (Sample= Full-Time Faculty)

Variable Name	Mean Wave=1	Mean Wave=0	T
Independent Variables:			
Highest Earned Degree	3.36	3.36	0.01
Academic Rank	1.96	1.99	0.25
Tenure	1.49	1.33	-1.95
Dependent Variables:			
The criteria for tenure at my institution are broad enough to include the full range of activities in which faculty are engaged	2.66	2.77	1.14
The criteria for promotion in academic rank at my institution are broad enough to include the full range of activities in which faculty are engaged	2.62	2.61	-0.16
At my institution, various forms of scholarship receive some weight in the awarding of tenure	2.27	2.50	2.28*
At my institution, various forms of scholarship receive some weight in the promotion of faculty members	2.30	2.47	1.68

*p < .025
**p < .01

The response rates for full-time faculty are similar (not statistically different) across faculty characteristics (degree, rank, tenure,) and all faculty perception variables, except one. Community college faculty members who answered in the first wave were more likely to give lower ratings to the perception that various forms of scholarship receive the same weight in the awarding of tenure.

Paired sample or dependent t-tests were utilized to compare two sets of perceptions about scholarship relating to promotion and tenure for each of the study's three research questions. The use of the dependent t-test held constant highest earned degree, academic rank and tenure status as the responses individual faculty members were compared.

Participants. Faculty responding to the survey were asked to indicate their current rank and their academic appointment. As Table 2 indicates, the study sample consisted, on average, of tenured faculty members in the rank of Associate Professor.

Table 2. Sample Profile

Variable	Proportion
Academic Rank (n=348)	
Professor	0.04
Associate Professor	0.47
Assistant Professor	0.17
Instructor	0.11
Lecturer	0.21
Tenure Status (n=344)	
Tenured	0.75
Untenured, on tenure track	0.13
Untenured, not on tenure track	0.12

Findings

Research Question 1: *How do faculty members' beliefs about tenure being broad in nature compare to their beliefs about promotion criteria being broad in nature?*

A paired sample or dependent t-test that compared individual faculty member's responses to the following statement "The criteria for tenure at my institution are broad enough to include the full range of activities in which faculty are engaged" with their response to "The criteria for promotion in academic rank at my institution are broad enough to include the full range of activities in which faculty are engaged" was conducted. The result of this comparison indicated a statistically significant difference between faculty member's perception of tenure criteria being broad (M = 2.73; SD = .79) and their perception of promotion criteria being broad (M= 2.61; SD = .82), t (334) = 3.77, p <. 001. Community college faculty members tended to agree a bit more than they disagreed that the criteria for tenure at their college (M=2.73), as compared to the criteria for promotion (M=2.61), is more encompassing as to include the range of activities faculty members perform.

Research Question 2: *How do faculty beliefs about tenure criteria being broad in nature compare to their perception of the weighting of various scholarship in awarding tenure?*

A paired sample or dependent t-test that compared individual faculty member's responses to the following statement "The criteria for tenure at my institution are broad enough to include the full range of activities in which faculty are engaged" with their response to "At my institution, various forms of scholarship receive some weight in the awarding of tenure" was conducted. The paired t-test yielded a statistically significant difference between faculty member's perception of tenure criteria being broad (M = 2.73; SD = .79) and their perception that various forms of scholarship receive some weight in tenure awards at their college (M= 2.43; SD = .81), t (334) = 7.35, p < .001. Community college faculty members tended to agree somewhat more than they disagreed (M=2.73) with the statement that the tenure criteria at their college are broad enough to include the range of activities performed by faculty members while being less likely (M=2.43) to perceive that their institution allocated some weight to various forms of scholarship in tenure decisions.

Research Question 3: *How do faculty beliefs about promotion criteria being broad in nature compare to their perception of the weighting of various scholarship in promotion decisions?*

A paired sample or dependent t-test that compared individual faculty member's responses to "The criteria for promotion in academic rank at my institution are broad enough to include the full range of activities in which faculty are engaged" with their response to "At my institution, various forms of scholarship receive some weight in the promotion of faculty members" was conducted. A statistically significant difference between faculty member's perception of promotion criteria being broad (M = 2.60; SD = .82) and their perception that various forms of scholarship received some weight in promotion decisions at their college (M= 2.43; SD = .85), t (329) = 4.06, p < .001. Community college faculty members tended to agree somewhat more than they disagreed (M=2.60) that the criteria for promotion included the range of activities performed by faculty members while being less likely (M=2.43) to perceive that their institution allocated some weight to various forms of scholarship in promotion decisions.

Limitations to this Study

At least three limitations temper our conclusions. One limitation pertains to the low response rate to the online administration of the FPPS. However, our mailing wave analyses indicated mostly similar response rates across waves to faculty perception variables. The sole difference across the mailing waves related to the perceptions of community college faculty members of the weight given to forms of scholarship in the awarding of tenure. Community college faculty members who responded to the survey's first invitation were more likely to give lower ratings to the perception that various forms of scholarship receive the same weight in the awarding of tenure.

A second limitation lies with the fact that the study respondents were from only four disciplines: biology, chemistry, history, and sociology. Promotion and tenure criteria, especially as it relates to scholarship can vary across disciplines, particularly in career/technical fields. It is possible that faculty in other disciplines would have had different perceptions.

A third limitation relates to the similarity in the mean values of faculty members' perceptions on forms of scholarship receiving the same weight in the awarding of promotion and tenure at their colleges. It could be that community college faculty members are unable to distinguish the forms of scholarship that are critical to their successful application for promotion vis-à-vis tenure. This limitation is consistent with Braxton & Lyken-Segosebe's (2015) findings that the engagement in Boyer's four domains of scholarship by community college faculty members in the study sample did not differ by their academic rank or possession of a doctoral degree.

Discussion

As indicated above, individual community college faculty members used a four-point scale to respond to the four survey items of interest herein. Accordingly, we begin this discussion of our findings by highlighting that the means we report range from a low of 2.41 to a high of 2.73 with the low of 2.41 suggestive of more disagreement than agreement and the high of 2.73 suggestive of more agreement than disagreement with the focal statement. As a consequence, tepid or lukewarm best depicts the strength of the values or beliefs indexed.

Results of this study indicated that faculty are somewhat more likely to perceive tenure criteria as being broad in nature as compared to promotion criteria. Experts in the field of higher education have noted that the criteria for tenure and promotion are not always clear. Too often, written guidelines related to tenure and promotion are not shared with faculty and when they are, "they are frustratingly opaque" and "do not necessarily reflect what we value" (Lehfeldt, 2019, para 4). For instance, based on data from a national survey, Collins (n.d.) found that only 2% of faculty who completed the survey indicated that service-learning was valued during the promotion and tenure process despite the national emphasis on the importance of service-learning. In some cases, tenure is automatically awarded with years of service (Reed, 2017). Perhaps faculty members perceive more stringent criteria for promotion because there is not usually a specified period of time associated with promotion. In addition, the financial and prestige factors associated with promotion may also lead to the perception or reality of promotion criteria that are not as broad in nature as tenure criteria. Beyond these possibilities, an important distinction involves the perspective that the awarding of tenure represents a wide range of institutional needs beyond the merits of the individual faculty member's case for tenure and priorities whereas a promotion in rank pertains more narrowly to the merits of the individual faculty member. This perception that promotion and tenure criteria are not broad in scope is consistent with what others have found.

Implications for Institutional Policy and Practice

Greater recognition of the breadth of faculty members' activities could lead to greater scholarship generation from the community college faculty ranks. When senior-level academic affairs leadership endorses a broader range of faculty activities to include scholarly work qualifying as scholarship for promotion and tenure, this endorsement can signal to faculty members that this work is worth pursuing. Community college faculty members are already engaged in scholarship that falls into Boyer's other three categories of scholarship especially the scholarship of integration as found by Braxton & Lyken-Segosebe (2015), leading multiple scholars to advocate for a broader definition of scholarship such as Boyer's (Braxton & Lyken-Segosebe, 2015; Martinez, 2019).

Promotion and tenure guidelines crafted by senior academic affairs leaders should clearly communicate the various types of faculty activities and scholarship that are valued by the institution and count towards promotion and tenure. Faculty members would also benefit from guidance and support on how to incorporate scholarship into their teaching responsibilities. One potential way is through teaching-focused scholarship. Harrington et al. (2021) found that faculty perceived institutional value of scholarship of teaching to be higher than institutional value of scholarship related to discipline. Community colleges can communicate value by providing high levels of support and perhaps even professional development. Houdyshell et al. (2022) showed that a faculty learning community on Boyer's scholarship principles increased faculty members' familiarity with the various types of scholarship, but this intervention alone did not translate into increased scholarship activities.

The implications of this recalibration of promotion and tenure criteria and the perceptions thereof are significant. Community college faculty beliefs and perceptions about promotion and tenure criteria and their decisions based on those criteria could become better demystified due to increased clarity and transparency in the entire promotion and tenure process. A significant body of scholarship details how opaque and confusing the tenure process is for faculty members struggling to navigate it. An embracing of all four categories of scholarship as defined by Boyer (1990) by academic administration and faculty will facilitate greater understanding about what qualifies as scholarship, especially in the community college context. In a related vein, a multivalent appraisal of scholarship by senior academic affairs leadership can also better evaluate whether a faculty member is effective in the role as a community college educator.

Conclusion

We derived one primary conclusion from the configuration of findings of this study. A cloud of ambiguity remains regarding the promotion and tenure process at community colleges given the tepid or lukewarm responses to the four statements of institutional values regarding the breadth of criteria and the weighting of various types of scholarship in promotion and tenure awards. Put differently, the findings of this study failed to appreciably reduce the uncertainty over those aspects of promotion and tenure pertinent to the faculty role of research and scholarship. Moreover, rudiments of an academic reward system centered on the research and scholarship of community college faculty members also failed to clearly materialize.

Nevertheless, one glimmer of greater clarity emerged from the value placed on the inclusion of the various activities faculty members perform as a criterion for both promotion and tenure given that it leans more in the direction of an affirmation than a disavowal of it as a criterion for the academic reward system in community colleges. We close by positing that the ambiguity surrounding the research and scholarship of community college faculty members may prevail given the facet of the culture of the community college that views "scholarship as a personal and optional endeavor that faculty members can pursue if they wish and at worst as an abrogation of the institution's student focused values" unless senior leaders in academic affairs embrace broader criteria and communicate those criteria with greater clarity (Palmer, 2015 p. 38). Time will tell.

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Content Analysis of Community College Strategic Plans

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Elements of strategic planning include reviewing the community college mission statement, assessing institutional strengths and weaknesses, develop measurable goals and objectives that connect to organizational practice, link goals and objectives to funding, hold leaders accountable for achieving goals and objectives, integrate strategic enrollment management into the strategic plan, and provide professional development to help faculty and staff achieve the goals and objectives (Walters and McKay, 2005). Hamilton (2016) discussed visionary framing, step by step framing, and frame bridging as strategies for helping community college leaders achieve success of strategic plans. Hall and Lulich (2021) studied 52 US universities with high rankings from Times Higher Education or QS World rankings. Universities in the innovation group or middle group were more likely to use words like entrepreneur, innovation, and transformation than universities in the research or undergraduate education group, but less likely to use words like preservation or independence.

Selvitopu and Kaya (2020) analyzed strategic plans of Turkish public universities. Institutions were grouped into top institutions and bottom institutions based on criteria like citations and PhD students. Top institutions tended to be in larger cities whereas bottom institutions tended to be in smaller cities. The SWOT analysis for each institution was studied. Strengths of top universities included faculty collaboration and academic freedom, institutional culture, international collaborations, infrastructure, and alumni. Strengths of bottom universities included younger faculty members, support from the institution, and institutional communication. Weaknesses of top universities included lack of budget funds, too many students, and not enough faculty. Weaknesses of bottom universities included not enough faculty or staff, infrastructure, limited international collaborations, low enrollment, and limited alumni relations.

Williams (2021) proposed a model for strategic planning in higher education. In the brainstorming phase, leaders develop a long list of ideas. In the visioning phase, leaders take the list of ideas and reflect on where they would like to see the institution in the future. In the Action phase, stakeholders across the organization are engaged to extend the visioning ideas to develop proposals and ideas for new initiatives. In the results phase, a small strategy group takes the information collected in the previous stages and creates a strategic plan document that will be launched with the help of the institution's marketing department.

Özdem (2011) studied mission and vision statements of Turkish public universities and group them based on founding date. Mission and vision statements were analyzed using semantic content analysis. Four themes that emerged were the role of education and training, the role of research, the role of community service, and the importance of educating students to create a high-quality workforce. Developing a high-quality workforce was the most common theme in mission statements while education and training was the least common theme. Community service as well as training and education were more commonly found in the mission statements of newer universities while research was more commonly found in the mission statements of older universities. In vision statements, older universities emphasized research while newer universities emphasized training and education.

Bassa (2015) studied strategic plans of three colleges in Ethiopia. Respondents indicated low confidence in the presence of a strategic plan; stakeholder involvement in strategic plan development; identification of institutional strengths. weaknesses, opportunities, and threats; as well as activities that are aligned and prioritized based on institutional mission, vision, goals and objectives. Respondents indicated low confidence in communicating responsibility for strategic plan implementation to the staff, using systems for strategic plan implementation, operating in alignment with the strategic plan, assigning sufficient resources to strategic plan implementation, regularly updating the strategic plan at designated points in time.

Özdemir and Çakir (2021) focused on performance indicators of university strategic plans. Strategic plan dimensions studied included finance, stakeholders, learning and development, internal processes, education and research, and institutional image. Performance indicators for finance included ratios of project revenue to total income as well as the amount of income from student enrollment compared to total income. Performance indicators for stakeholders included alumni employment rates and stakeholder satisfaction survey data. Performance indicators for learning and development included international professional development activities for staff, students studying abroad, collaborations with other institutions, and entrepreneurship programs for students. Performance indicators for internal processes included student to faculty ratios, graduates per term, student participation in extracurricular activities, and accredited programs. Performance indicators for education and research included publications and other scholarly activities, university academic rankings, funded research projects, and research activities. Performance indicators for institutional image included faculty participating in international scholarly activities, international guest lecturers invited to campus, and international student population.

Statement of the Problem

The work of community colleges includes preparing traditional and adult students for universities and the workforce. Community colleges offer associate's degrees for students that plan to transfer to universities as well as associate's degrees and certificates for students that plan to enter the workforce.

Higher education institutions develop strategic plans to address challenges and improve. Community college leaders must consider the unique needs of the students and communities they serve. While there has been some research on university strategic plans, there is not as much research on the themes of community college strategic plans. This study seeks to address this gap in the literature.

Theoretical Frameworkand Methodology

This study utilized Lewin's (1947) Change Model as a theoretical framework. In this framework, unfreezing involves being inspired to change. Changing follows unfreezing. College strategic plans are typically frozen until institutions decide to update them (changing). After updates are made, colleges publish the strategic plans (refreezing). In order to create strategic plans that inspire people to make improvements, colleges need to be able to unfreeze, change, and then refreeze their strategic plans.

This sample includes community colleges in Texas. The method of analysis was content analysis of each institution's most recent strategic plan. The sample includes 50 public community colleges in Texas.

The following research questions were posed:

1. What are common themes in community college mission statements?
2. What are common themes in community college vision statements?
3. What are common themes in community college values?
4. What are common themes in community college goals?

Results

What are common themes in community college mission statements? Twelve (24%) of the community colleges mentioned student success in the mission statement. Eleven (22%) of the community colleges mentioned learning as a value. Thirteen (26%) of the community colleges mentioned quality in the mission statement. Eleven (22%) of the community colleges mentioned workforce development in the mission statement. Ten (20%) of the community colleges mentioned community engagement in the mission statement. Ten (20%) of the community colleges mentioned diversity, equity, and inclusion in the mission statement. Results are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Number and Percent of Texas Community Colleges Including Themes in Strategic Plan Mission Statements*

Theme	Number	Percent
Quality	13	26
Student Success	12	24
Workforce Development	11	22
Community Engagement	10	20
DEI	10	20
Affordability	5	10
Academic/Career Pathways	5	10
Affordability	5	10
Lifelong Learning	5	10
Access	4	8

Innovation	4	8
Student-Centered	4	8
Transfer	4	8
Economic Development	3	6
Learning	2	4
Efficiency	1	2
Financial Management	1	2
Institutional Excellence	1	2

What are common themes in community college vision statements? Eight (16%) of the community colleges mentioned student success in the vision statement. Eleven (22%) of the community colleges mentioned economic or workforce development in the vision statement. Nine (18%) of the community colleges mentioned community development in the vision statement. Results are shown in Figure 2.

What are common themes in community college value statements? Eleven (22%) of the community colleges mentioned respect as a value. Fourteen (28%) of the community colleges mentioned collaboration as a value. Twelve (24%) of the community colleges mentioned initiative/accountability as a value. Ten (20%) of the community colleges mentioned access as a value. Twenty-one (42%) of the community colleges

Figure 2. *Number and Percent of Texas Community Colleges Including Themes in Strategic Plan Vision Statements*

Theme	Number	Percent
Economic/Workforce Dewvelopment	11	22
Student Success	8	16
Community Development	9	18
Innovation	6	12
Quality	6	12
DEI	5	19
Completion	3	6
Lifelong Learning	3	6
Student Centered	3	6
Affordability/Value	2	4
Economic Mobility	2	4
Uman Resources	1	2
Leadership	1	2
Performance	1	1

mentioned diversity, equity, and inclusion as a value. Sixteen (32%) of the community colleges mentioned student success as a value. Sixteen (32%) of the community colleges mentioned innovation as a value. Thirteen (26%) of the community colleges mentioned excellence as a value. Eleven (22%) of the community colleges mentioned learning as a value. Sixteen (32%) of the community colleges mentioned integrity as a value. Results are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. *Number and Percent of Texas Community Colleges Including Themes in Strategic Plan Value Statements*

Theme	Number	Percent
DEI	21	42
Innovation	16	32
Integrity	16	32
Student Success	16	32
Collaboration	14	28
Excellence	13	26
Initiative/Accountability	12	24
Learning	11	22
Respect	11	22
Access	10	20
Community Engagement/Partnerships	8	16
Community	6	12
Quality	6	12
Service	6	12
Student Centered	6	12
Human Resources	4	8
Affordability	3	6
Stewardship	3	3
Commitment	2	4
Communication	2	4
Continuous Improvement	2	4
Financial Management	2	4
Performance Excellence/Effectiveness	2	4
Data-Driven Decision-Making	1	2
Dedication	1	2
Ethics	1	2
One College	1	2
Positivity	1	2
Trust	1	2

What are common themes in community college strategic plan goals? Thirty-eight (76%) of the community colleges mentioned student success as a goal. Nineteen (38%) of the community colleges mentioned completion as a goal. Thirteen (26%) of the community colleges mentioned enrollment as a goal. Eighteen (36%) of the community colleges mentioned financial management as a goal. Thirteen (26%) of the community colleges mentioned facilities as a goal. Twenty-eight

(56%) of the community colleges mentioned community engagement as a goal. Fifteen (30%) of the community colleges mentioned human resources as a goal. Twelve (24%) of the community colleges mentioned diversity, equity, and inclusion as a goal. Sixteen (32%) of the community colleges mentioned workforce or economic development as a goal. Twelve (24%) of the community colleges mentioned resource allocation as a goal. Results are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. *Number and Percent of Texas Community Colleges Including Themes in Strategic Plan Goals*

Theme	Number	Percent
Student Success	38	76
Community Engagement	28	56
Ompletion	19	38
Financial Management	18	36
Workforce/Economic Development	16	32
Human Resources	15	30
Nrollment	13	26
Facilities	13	26
DEI	12	24
Resource Allocation	12	24
Career Development	9	18
Instructional Innovation	9	18
Performance Excellemce	9	18
Access	8	16
Efficiency	8	16
Quality	8	16
New/Aligned Programs/Pathways	7	14
Transfer	7	14
Retention	5	10
Sustainability	5	10
Accreditation	4	8
Branding/Marketing	3	6
Continuous Improvement	3	6
Data-Driven	3	6
Advising	2	4
Economic Mobility	2	4
High Schools	2	4
Initiative/Accountability	2	4
Learning	2	4
One College	2	4
Studnt-Focused	2	4
Alumni Engagement	1	2
Bachelor’s Degrees	1	2

College Legacy	1	2
Community	1	2
Persistence	1	2
Strategic Enrollment Management	1	2

Conclusion

This study addresses a gap in the literature regarding community college strategic plans. Understanding what community colleges include in strategic plans increases knowledge of higher education leadership. The strategies mentioned above can help community colleges increase effectiveness of their strategic plans. Future studies might investigate the process of strategic plan development at community colleges and the perspectives of stakeholders involved in strategic plan development. Future studies might also examine the implementation of these strategic plans.

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Governing Board Composition and Comparison Across Member Institutions in the Southeastern Conference of the National Collegiate Athletics Association

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Higher education governing boards have historically been exclusive in membership and elusive in scholarship. Early American higher education governance shifted to external and lay board members, modeling a more corporate structure. The membership of these boards was entirely comprised of prominent and wealthy male members with some fiscal or influential connection to the institution or the appointing governor. With their abundant financial resources, these men also demonstrated a willingness to "bequeath large sums to establish foundations that benefit higher education and institutions to improve society" (Shapira, 2022, p. 19). We see examples ranging from the line of Rockefeller descendants serving the University of Chicago (Peter, 2017) to John Schnatter, the *John* of Papa John's Pizza and former namesake of the football stadium, who served the University of Louisville (Fornelli, 2018). These examples also extended into the southeastern region of the United States. Two board members, neither of which were white men, lost their University of Georgia System board seats after a redistricting decision was passed into law by Governor Kemp in early 2022. One was immediately replaced by a white man, described as one of the governor's "top supporters" who had "given tens of thousands of dollars to Kemp's campaigns for governor" (Stirgus, 2022, para. 5).

Recent studies have exemplified such governing boards (of *trustees*, *regents*, *supervisors,* or *curators*) with scholars' assertions that the present-day composition of governing boards overseeing American universities has frequently mirrored the early homogeny of the boards (Rall et al., 2022). In general, board membership has slowly exhibited more diversity. However, the number of women and people of color serving on the boards of the nation's largest campuses and highest research-producing universities was far from a representative sample of the student demographics at the institutions they were serving (Alexander, 2021; Thomas, 2020).

To examine board composition and trends in the southeastern United States, this study sought to identify similarities and differences in board composition across the 14 institutions holding membership in the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) Southeastern Conference (SEC). This institutional grouping was selected for several reasons. First, compiling this cross-section of universities by current membership status in an athletic conference resulted in a sampling of institutions that were similar in size and regionality. Additionally, the 12 southeastern states have consistently reported the largest share of full-time equivalent students of any geographic region in the United States, most recently constituting 24% of all enrollments in 2020-2021 (NCES, 2021b). Analyzing SEC governing board composition allowed an in-depth examination of various institutional and board member characteristics, including gender, level of degree attainment, and professional industry. These governing boards represented some of the nation's largest enrollments and oversaw some of the highest-producing research universities.

It is imperative that higher education governing boards are studied by academic scholars, particularly the boards that oversee large research universities. Some literature argued for the utilization of self-perpetuating boards, especially when the selection of members for their connections and networks was used to advance a university's prestige, status, and competitive position (Taylor et al., 2022). However, avoiding acknowledgment of the inequities of governing board service and its lack of requisite qualifications allows for the potential for dangerous political influence over institutions that utilize governor-appointed or internally self-nominating positions or for which the only qualifications for service are wealth and status. These institutions and systems cannot claim to be making progressive strides in inclusion and diversity while their actions fail to align with that narrative. Further, these actions call into question the sustainability of institutions that befall such practices in the modern higher education landscape and must consider board composition over time.

Literature Review

The limited amount of scholarly literature investigating governing boards has been frequently documented (Barringer & Riffe, 2018; Morgan et al., 2022; Rall, Dominguez, et al., 2022; Rall, Morgan, et al., 2022; Rall & Orué, 2020; Sims-Harris, 2019; Slaughter et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2022). Slaughter et al. (2014) spoke to this concern in very simply stating that "the literature on university trustees is not extensive" (p. 4). Sims-Harris (2019) referred to higher education governing board research as a "still a fairly young and underdeveloped area" (p. 37). A repetitive point in the literature was the authors' conclusion that the major gap in scholarly examination of governing boards contributed to the limited understanding of the interactions between each arm of university administration. These areas included institution or system-level governance (boards, chancellor, etc.), the institution president or chancellor, and high-level state government officials.

Selection Criteria and Resulting Board Composition. Descriptions of the composition and characteristics of boards varied in the literature, particularly in selection criteria and in board members' sought-after individual characteristics. As "members' paths and motivations to serve influence the way in which they engage with board work," it was essential to consider how board members are selected to serve (Commodore, 2018, p. 416). Board members dually functioned as internal and external stakeholders with a personal stake and a high level of influence in the operations of the institution(s) they oversaw (Barringer & Riffe, 2018). Although board members' external ties and personal characteristics were utilized as apparent selection criteria, those components also dictated their decision-making processes and prioritization of institutional or system needs (Taylor et al., 2021). Some of these characteristics led to consideration of members' values, which could not be separated from their governance and executive processes, and therefore continually influenced members' participation, views, and decision-making (Commodore, 2018).

Board member selection processes depended on several factors, including the type or classification of the institution or system, the state in which the institution was located, and the state constitution or other governing documents in place that dictated the roles and responsibilities of the various persons involved in the organizational structure. There were four main paths to board curation that most public institutions' governing boards utilized: direct appointment by the state governor, *ex-officio* appointment by holding a different recent or present role, gubernatorial appointment through or with approval by the state legislature, or in rare instances, an election by popular vote (Williams, 2011). Other literature identified six pathways to board membership, including appointment by group authority, invitation, official appointment, selection by current members, election, or a combination of two or more pathways (Sims-Harris, 2019, p. 12).

In the path of *selection by current members*, a subset of self-perpetuating boards, were most commonly (but not exclusively) utilized in private institutions. These instances included boards where outgoing or current members selected their own successors with the intention of expanding pools of resources. Rall, Dominguez, et al. (2022) explicitly stated that "board members are increasingly selected based on their financial, political, and business connections… not for their knowledge of higher education or interest in and conviction for the role" (p. 193). Most incoming board members' experience with higher education both started and ended with their personal experiences as undergraduate students. This limited experience resulted in shortcomings within trustees' repertoire of skills to understand higher education functions, operations, or issues (Eckel, 2019). Heaton et al. (2022) recognized the "dismal view… that boards' lack of expertise and heavy-handed controls leave little scope or time for strategic management activities" (p. 526).

Overall, considering the ways or reasons by which board members are selected to serve is a critical component, as the decision often boiled down to the needs of an institution or system. These needs ranged from fiduciary knowledge or a fiscal iron fist, political or economic connections, community distinction or status, or a willingness and ability to donate to the institution they would govern, to name a few considerations. The literature overall was consistent with the following summation of Rall, Dominguez, et al. (2022), who stated there is a "limited sense of whether the individuals on the board are qualified to serve in those roles... [and] less is known about whether (and how) trustees are equipped to fulfill their positions on the board" (p. 192).

Defaulting to Maleness and Whiteness. Board membership composed of "predominantly older White men" (Alexander, 2021, para. 2), was reflected in the body of literature itself: "not only are boards dominated by white men, but board scholarship is dominated by white male scholars… higher education governance has been undertheorized because there has not been a need to consider marginalized voices on boards" (Rall & Orué, 2020, p. 33). This exclusion of racially and ethnically minoritized members and women from boards does nothing to upend the status quo, where "maleness, Whiteness, and other affiliated identities" are the default (Rall, Dominguez, et al., 2022, p. 203). In practice, these men did not identify or self-categorized themselves in the context of their race or gender during board meetings, which implied "that it was 'only natural' for anyone (no matter what their gender category membership or race category membership) to see things the way that they did" (West & Fenstermaker, 2002, p. 548).

Self-selection of board member successors by members whose qualifications to serve have already been questioned further contributed to the cyclical and systemic nature of exclusionary practice in higher education governing boards. This sort of "operational machinery" reinforced inequitable practices to "perpetuate structural barriers to women's leadership… [as] arbitrary barriers to leadership" (Whitney, 2020, p. 118) in higher education. Rall, Morgan, et al. (2022) determined that "culturally sustaining governance practices remain inconsistently (or ineffectively) operationalized by those with the most institutional or system-wide power," and representation would continue to fall further and further behind, failing to encompass or convey "the rapidly evolving language and practice realities" (p. 7).

Although numerous obstacles existed and detracted from challenging the status quo, female leadership has been consistently documented in the literature as beneficial to governing boards. For example, a positive association was found between the percentage of women on a board of trustees and earning passing scores with the Office of Federal Student Aid (OFSA) at the U.S. Department of Education (Lenard et al., 2019). This finding "correspond[ed] with previous research that has shown that women take their monitoring or fiduciary role very seriously" (p. 64). Sims-Harris' (2019) findings asserted a similar sentiment in stating: "women are a valuable asset for public higher education governing boards" (p. 230). A trickle-down effect was also noted, where a positive association was identified between the number of female trustees and a more rapid increase in female faculty members employed at the institution (Ehrenberg et al., 2012).

Unfortunately, more highly qualified, perhaps even overqualified, female candidates are frequently overlooked or discounted when pursuing the same position as a male candidate, often due to embedded gender discrimination (Campbell & Hahl, 2022). The American Council on Education (ACE) projected 2030 as the year in which "gender parity in the presidency will occur" (ACE, 2023, para. 1). However, the highest level of administrative oversight for institutions lags alarmingly far behind. Recalling Rall and Orué (2020), this concern has persisted. They asserted: "the significance of this work is to disrupt the traditional narrative of white, male leaders who make decisions for an increasingly diverse population in academia" (p. 36).

Highlighting such disparities acts as the first step in seeking understanding to call for change and reform of these important positions. These decision-makers approve millions of dollars in budgetary allowances each year and oversee the hiring of key administrative players at their institutions. Considering the current fiscal circumstances of many states and institutions, paired with a verbal commitment to more inclusive practices, governors appointing board members or boards' self-selection of successors should be considering ways to strengthen these boards, uphold their stated commitments, and counteract states' declining investment in higher education.

Pipeline Theory and the Hidden Curriculum. Women have accounted for the majority of postsecondary degree earners "at every level except for professional degrees" at U.S. institutions for more than a decade (Hill et al., 2016, p. 16). In some higher education literature, the *pipeline theory* was often mentioned explicitly or implicitly where "over time, a larger number of women on lower rungs of organizational hierarchies will yield a larger number of women on higher ones" (Kellerman & Rhode, 2017, p. 11). Kellerman and Rhode (2017) determined that pipeline theory did not come to fruition in practice when specifically examining higher education spaces. Rall and Orué (2020) further specified that board membership selection is rooted in the unclear definition of qualifications and credentials, which varied between men and women.

Rall, Dominguez, et al. (2022) investigated the *hidden curriculum* of qualifying activities or achievements required to serve on governing boards. The authors analyzed 95 governing board bylaws in one of the most recent and comprehensive scholarly studies conducted. They asserted:

> Boards, governors, and other influential decision-makers should contemplate establishing and sharing requirements for board service, so that (a) boards enter into this position with a better understanding of what is required of them, and (b) there are more explicit guidelines to support why and how some groups are overrepresented on the board while others have been historically excluded. (p. 191)

Research Goals and Methodology

The selection of an athletic conference's member institutions allowed for a pre-determined and objective grouping that was not reliant on other interpretations of regionality, namely "Southern" or "Southeastern," which varied between researchers, regions, and other qualifiers. This cross-section of institutions organized by athletic conference membership has not been studied in governing board literature. At the time of this study, the SEC membership included 13 large public universities and one private university, most of which were assigned a Carnegie Classification of *doctoral universities: very high research activity* in 2022 (Institution Search, 2023). Ten universities have been members since the SEC was formed in 1933. The membership has expanded twice, from 10 to 12 members in 1991 and again to its current membership of 14 institutions in 2012. A third expansion has been announced to add two more institutions before 2026 (SEC History, 2022).

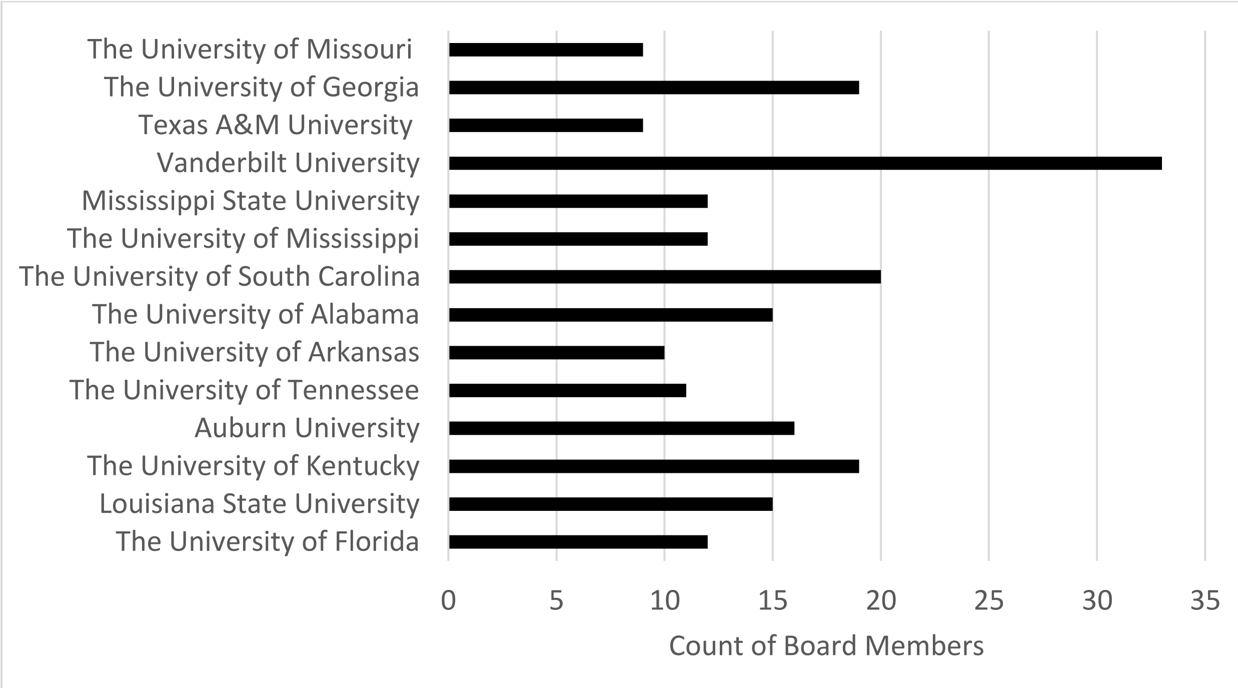
The 14 member institutions of the SEC at the time of this study were: Texas A&M University, The University of Florida, The University of Alabama, The University of Georgia, The University of South Carolina, The University of Missouri, Louisiana State University, The University of Kentucky, Auburn University, The University of Tennessee, The University of Arkansas, The University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University, and Vanderbilt University (NCAA Membership Directory, 2023).

Three research questions guided this study:

> RQ 1: What are the characteristics of current board members at SEC institutions or, where applicable, systems for institutions within the SEC?
>
> RQ 2: What are the differences in credentials between various groupings of individuals currently serving as board members for SEC institutions?
>
> RQ 3: What are the relationships between different institutional or board member characteristics?

Data Sources and Materials. The public website for each institution was examined for information pertaining to the structure and membership of their governing board. Institutional characteristics collected for this study included: public/private status, state, flagship status, land grant status, type of board, system membership status, and number of board positions. The initial collection of membership data compiled across all SEC institutions included specific information for each board member listed on the public website for the institution or system. This initial list included 212 board member names, with individual characteristics of board position, gender, highest degree earned and awarding institution, year appointed, method of appointment, professional career, and industry. Board member counts by institution from initial data collection is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Number of Board Members by SEC Institution



Biographies that referenced gender pronouns “he” or “his” or referred to a board member as “Mr.” were coded as “Male - He” board members, and biographies with “she,” “her,” “Ms.” or “Mrs.” were coded as “Female - She” board members. There were no biographies that referenced pronouns other than those listed. Degree types were assigned to one of three categories: “Bachelor’s” (N=82) for baccalaureate degrees, “Master’s” (N=37) to include master of arts, master of science, master of business administration, or other similarly named degrees, and “Doctorate” (N=88) was used to capture all awarded doctoral degrees including the juris doctorate, doctor of medicine, doctor of philosophy, and other similarly named degrees. If the highest degree earned could not be determined or identified through supplemental sources, “Unknown” (N=5) was used. All “Unknown” degree codes were associated with “Male – He” coded board members.

Some institutions did not provide any biographical data about the board members or provided varying amounts of information. Gaps in these data were primarily resolved through assessing implicit information, including *apparent* gender or race categories, modeled after West and Fenstermaker (2002) who denoted observations rather than personally provided descriptions. Other absent information was clarified through supplemental public materials, such as course or institutional catalogs to determine a degree type for a specific institution, news articles announcing board member selection dates for specific individuals, or other public websites (e.g., biographies on industry websites) to verify information such as highest degree earned or professional role.

Exclusions. Some cases in the initial dataset were excluded from the final analyses. First, student trustee positions were excluded prior to performing any preliminary descriptive analytics. Student representatives had not earned a postsecondary degree and were not working in their chosen field or industry. Further, not every listing of board membership included information about designated student positions or whether they utilized such a representative on their board. For example, board minutes from The University of Alabama System (UAS) showed student representation from all three institutions under its purview. However, those names were not included in the public listing of board members where the primary data were retrieved (UAS, 2022).

Second, duplications of members were removed, which resulted in a final dataset of only unique individuals. The largest example is The University of Mississippi and Mississippi State University, as these two institutions are within the same state system and are, therefore, under the jurisdiction of the same governing board. As these two institutions' information was duplicated, one instance of those 12 members was removed. Additionally, a seat is designated for the governor at both The University of Alabama System and Auburn University. This duplication of a single individual was removed. All other data were unique instances collected from public websites in May 2023, and the final data set resulted in 199 cases.

The final data set was reviewed for case counts and percentages of different personal characteristics (gender, education, age, etc.), calculated by institution and then collectively across all 14 SEC institutions. Next, institutional and personal demographics were analyzed with SPSS Statistics 29 software. Key significant findings related to gender, educational credentials, and industry will be noted, examined, and discussed in the following sections.

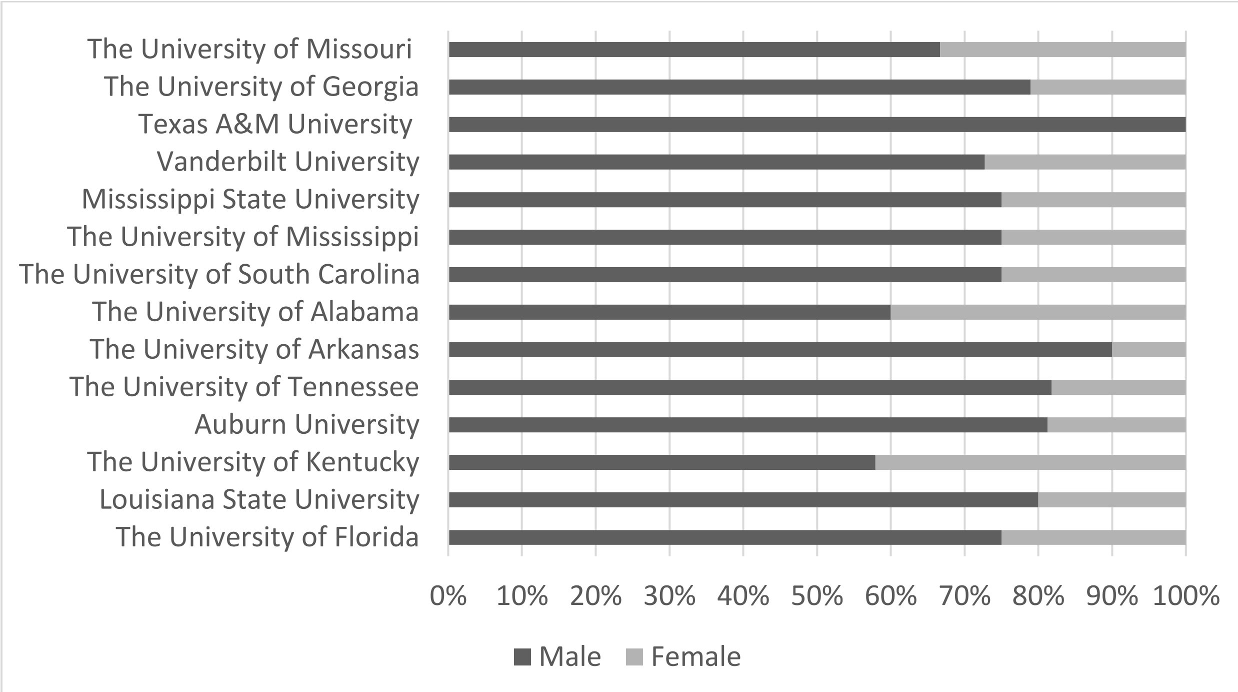
Findings

Across the 14 SEC institutions, 199 unique cases of board membership were recorded. This section details findings in gender, highest degree of attainment, and industry of board members.

Gender. There were variations identified across institutions regarding the number and percentage of male and female board members. Some institutions and systems, such as Texas A&M University System, were exclusively composed of male board members. On the contrary, The University of Kentucky was found to include the highest number and percentage of female board members (eight members, 40% of membership), followed by The University of Alabama System, which also had 40% female membership, but the count was lower at only six female members. The data showed that only 26% of all unique board members were female (N = 53), and the rest were male (N = 159, 74%). The percentage of male and female board members by institution after excluding student trustees, but prior to excluding duplicates, is detailed in Figure 2.

Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data showed that across degree-granting postsecondary institutions, 59% of all students were female, and 52% of all students self-identified as racial or ethnic minorities for Fall 2021 (NCES, 2021a). For degree-granting doctoral universities, 42% of students in the 2020-2021 academic year were female, and 50% of total student enrollments were white (NCES, 2021b). The Fall 2021 enrollment for each SEC institution followed similar patterns, and the percentage by gender is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 2*.* Percentage of Total Board Membership by Gender for SEC Institutions



After examining the descriptive results of the dataset, a series of t-tests were conducted. First, a single-sample t-test was conducted to examine the differences between pronoun cases. The results were found to be highly statistically significant ($t(198) = 40.704$, $p < .001$). The sample mean of 1.25 ($SD = .432$) was significantly greater than the test value. Next, an independent-samples t-test was calculated comparing the mean scores of the two pronoun groups. No significant difference was found ($t(197) = .075$, $p = .470$). The mean of the female pronoun group ($M = 2.0816$) was slightly lower than that of the male pronoun group ($M = 2.0933$). Finally, the board member pronouns were examined by calculating a paired samples t-test first with degree coding and then with year of appointment. The mean of pronouns used in the descriptions was 1.25 (SD = .432), and the mean of the highest degree of attainment was 2.091 (SD = .944). The pairing of pronouns and degree was found to be highly statistically significant ($t(198) = -11.451$, $p < .001$). The paring of pronouns and year of appointment was also found to be highly statistically significant (N = 153, $t(152) = -4399.42$, $p < .001$).

The final test utilized to examine board member gender was a one-sample binomial test, and the results were highly statistically significant (N = 199, $p < .001$) and are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 3. Percentage of Fall 2021 Enrollment by Gender for SEC Institutions

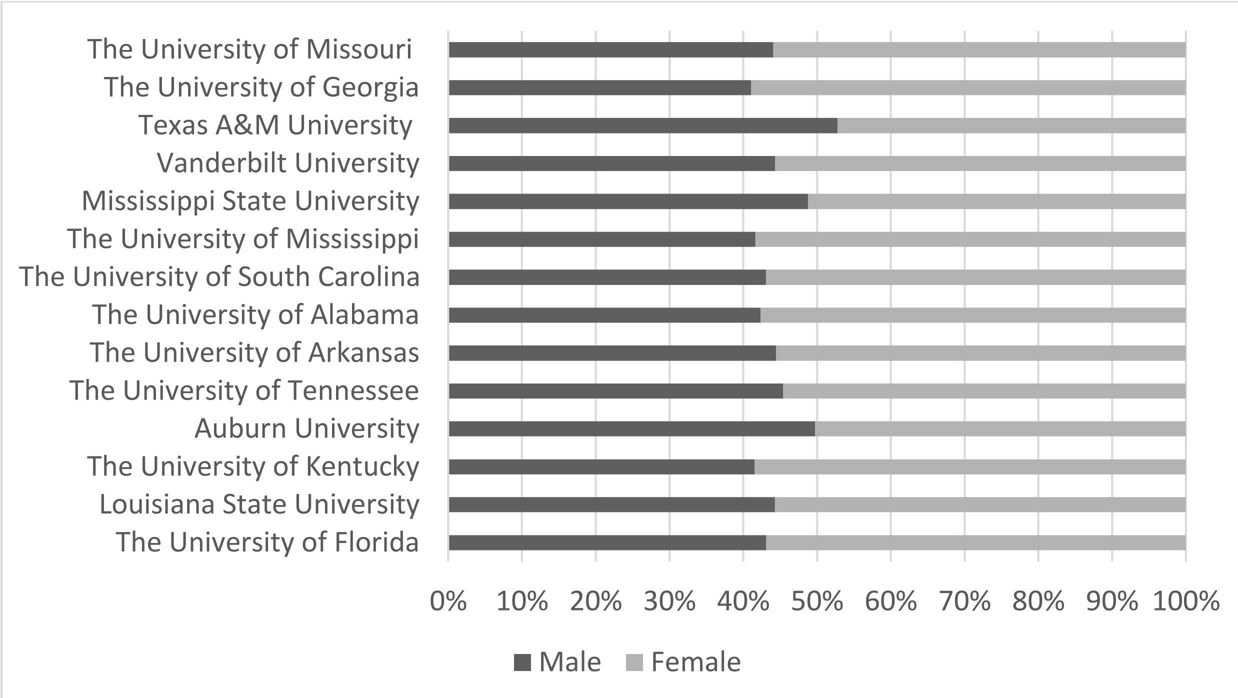
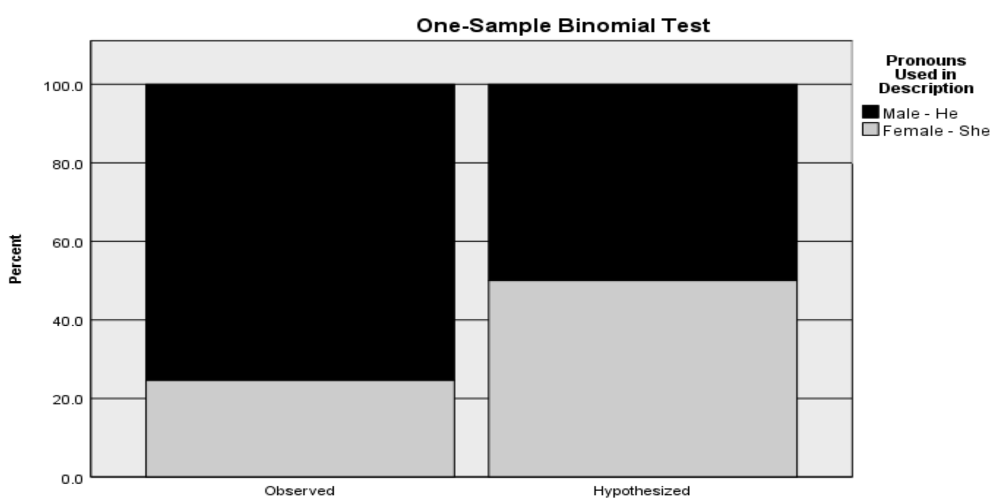


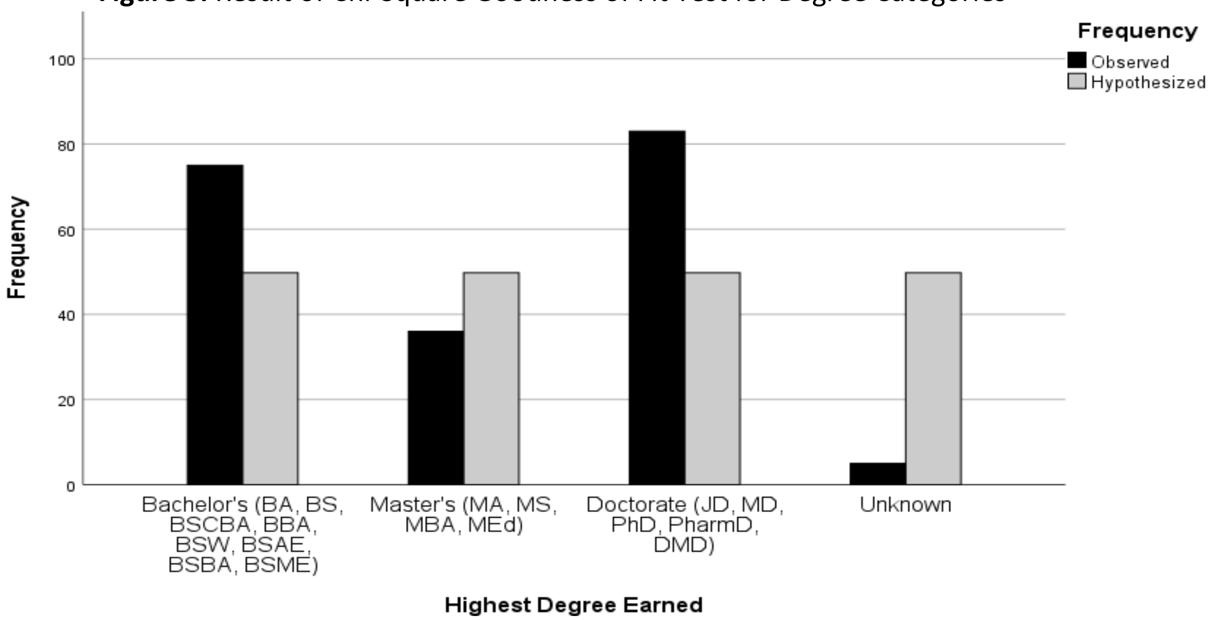
Figure 4. Results of One-Sample Binomial Test for Board Member Pronouns



Educational Credentials and Industry. Next, board members' educational history and credentialing were examined. Previous literature has noted the high volume of governing board members who had only earned a baccalaureate degree and had a limited, at best, understanding of university function. This previous finding was not supported in this study, as only 38% of board members' highest degree earned was at the undergraduate level. All others were earned at the graduate level. However, the majority of the bachelor's holders were male, and 42% of male board members had only earned a bachelor's degree (note: all five "Unknown" degree holders were male members), affirming such findings in the literature. More female board members by percentage had earned a graduate degree than their male counterparts, where less than 35% of female board members had not earned a graduate degree.

A chi-square goodness of fit test was conducted to compare the frequency of occurrence for each degree category after duplicates were removed (N = 199). A highly significant deviation from the hypothesized value was found ($\chi^2(3) = 79.090$, $p < .001$) and is shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Result of Chi-Square Goodness of Fit Test for Degree Categories



The five most common industries of the board member sample (N = 199) and the distribution of the industry categories by gender are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Most Frequent Professional Industries of SEC Board Members

Industry	Count	Percent	Male	Female
Law	38	19.1	32	6
Banking/Finance/Insurance	33	16.5	26	7
Healthcare	26	13.1	18	8
Real Estate/Construction/Development	20	10.1	15	5
Government	13	6.5	9	4

Discussion

The combination of board composition and individual characteristics of board members, paired with the evidence in the literature of the struggles in embracing diverse representation in these governing boards, were summed up concisely by Morgan et al. (2022) in saying: "the history and current demographic makeup (i.e., race, class, gender) of Boards renders them relatively less agentic in being effective in leading or strategically advising around complex DEI matters" (p. 190). Further, the changing demographics of the student body are directly impacted by the business proceedings, policy decisions, and recommendations made by these governing boards. However, these boards are not truly a representative sample.

Through the various t-tests conducted and the one-sample binomial, the data illustrated that a disproportionate number of men were found to be serving on governing boards at SEC member institutions. These results affirm recent literature that asserted that even with verbal commitments to embracing inclusive practices and increasing diverse representation at all levels of administration, the reality is that boards continue to be exclusive at SEC institutions. The results of this study indicated that SEC institution boards were comprised of more unique male board members than female board members (75% and 25%, respectively) and the majority of all board members held a doctoral degree (42%). The female board members held graduate degrees at a higher percentage (65%) than their male counterparts (58%). Findings confirmed the literature that women must generally be more qualified than their male counterparts for the same position. Further, the data show that 54% of female board members were appointed in the last 10 years compared to 45% of male board members whose year of appointment was known.

The percentage of male and female board members serving these institutions is a far cry from being a representative sample of the continually more diverse campuses they govern. The only SEC institution that did not have Fall 2021 enrollment of most female students was Texas A&M University, as shown in Figure 3. However, their board composition of 100% male members still does not accurately represent the student demographics of the institution. The University of Georgia had the smallest percentage of male students enrolled in Fall 2021, but nearly 80% of the board was male. Further studies of SEC institutions' boards should also consider racial and ethnic demographic information for board members compared to student body demographics. Such data should then be compared against the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) *Trustee Index* reports to determine how SEC boards stack up, particularly in whether they mirror the 84% white racial composition reported (*Trustee Index*, 2020, p. 3).

Another highly statistically significant finding was in the pairing of pronouns and year of appointment for a paired samples t-test. The mean year of appointment was 2017, with a range of 1982 to 2023. C. Edward Floyd, at nearly 90 years old, has served the University of South Carolina for 41 years as a board member, including four years as the board chairman (Board of Trustees, 2023; Monk, 2017). The *AGB 2020 Trustee Index* report indicated that 71% of board member respondents reported their age as 60 or older and that 30% had served 10 or more years on their current board (*Trustee Index*, 2020, p. 22). Seymour (2008) referenced previous AGB studies, including one published in 2004, where 65% of trustees were between 50 and 60 years old, a 9% increase from 1985. Adams (2021) stated "trustees are getting older, and tend to be retirees, which some argue leads to their desire to micromanage a campus" and leads to tensions and turmoil with institutional leadership (p. 47).

This study contributes to the shallow body of board literature by providing a cross-section of institutions that are similar in size and regionality but whose boards have not been examined. Additionally, most board literature is only descriptive and in line with the data points presented in the *Trustee Index* and similar reports. Other literature is prescriptive, attempting to fill the knowledge gap of board members to understand their roles better and fulfill their responsibilities (Slaughter et al., 2014). This study expands beyond strictly descriptive findings into further statistical analyses to more deeply examine board characteristics.

Thiele et al. (2012) determined a "significant, positive relationship between the percent of state legislators with public school degrees and the amount the state spends on public higher education" (p. 306). Their findings supported previously outlined expectations from theories of representation in the suggestion that "legislators might be directly advocating for such spending given their own educational profile" (p. 321). This concept could potentially extend to board members' connectedness with the institutions they govern and their characteristics functioning as decision-making impacts by examining a series of decisions made by board members with differing levels of degree attainment. Further, considering decisions in the context of the political leanings of a state or governor, particularly by the governor who initially appointed said members, could show further connection between educational attainment and decision-making.

The SEC will soon expand to include the University of Oklahoma and the University of Texas. With this expansion, the data could be revisited with the inclusion of the University of Oklahoma's seven-member Board of Regents and the University of Texas System's nine-member Board of Regents. Researchers may also consider studies that compare historical board membership across SEC institutions to today's data to confirm or contradict recent communications boasting improvements in diverse representation. Further, a comparison of board membership and makeup outside of SEC institutions would provide insights into the frequency of such representation. Replicating this study for other NCAA athletic conferences could provide further insight into the regional characteristics of governing boards. Further, if a future study were to compare groupings of institutions by region, the findings may inform if this overrepresentation and homogenization is widespread, higher, or lower in certain regions, dependent upon the political leanings of the state or governor in office, or other factors. Continuing to allow board membership to go undetected and make significant decisions for the nation's postsecondary institutions serves to both reinforce and perpetuate inequities.

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