The Ambivalence of Access:

Tuition-Free Public Policy and College Access for Low-Income Students

A Dissertation

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Kelly Collins

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Dr. Rashné Jehangir, PhD, Advisor

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ABSTRACT

The higher education access of poor, low-income, and working-class students is a powerful lever in combating poverty, promoting social mobility, and enhancing quality of life across socioeconomic strata. The college access of low-income students has been studied primarily through examinations of support infrastructures and the college-going cultures of socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. Insufficient attention has been paid to the influence of public policies aimed at increasing access and completion, such as tuition-free public policy. This multisite case study of TRIO programs is designed to provide additional insight into the influence of tuition-free public policy on the college access of low-income students.

Key words: Low-income and first-generation students, college access, tuition-free public policy

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Negotiating College Access in the Context of Tuition-Free Public Policy

Being poor in college is often an invisible identity, but I quickly learned how to find my people. The students in the reserve section of the library using the textbooks you check out by the hour. The coworkers at my work-study cafeteria job who clocked the maximum weekly hours so they could send money home to their families. The floormates who posted signs in the computer labs offering to split gas money for a ride home. We laughed at our shared relief that in college, the electricity never gets shut off for lack of payment. We shared hopes that our absence at home would help stretch the family food stamp allowance. We paid our way thanks to a rickety configuration of work study, student loans, and government grants, often registering late for class as we raced to pay off our account balances each semester. One thing was certain: our primary concern and orienting dilemma was our low-income status. How we spent our time, where we lived, our choices regarding schools and majors; all of these decisions pivoted on our financial and material conditions.

My experience as a low-income college student shapes my understanding of the complex intersections of class identity, college access, and public policy. I was initially exposed to the idea of “free college” as an AmeriCorps volunteer, working with 40 low-income and first-generation high school students as they navigated the college-going process. When the state community college system announced a tuition-free program for low-income students, guaranteeing two years of free college for income eligible students, I observed a surge in my students shifting away from their four-year college plans and towards a “two-year to transfer” intention. The students and their parents cited concerns about student loans and living expenses. My nudges about applying to a variety of institutional types were met with a common refrain: "Why would I go to a college that charges so much money when I can get two years for free?"

Situating the Study

bell hooks (1984) said, "Being oppressed means the absence of choices" (p. 5). Does tuition-free college policy expand or constrain the choices of low-income students? How do low-income communities perceive and respond to the idea of free college? In recent years, the once seemingly outlandish idea of tuition-free college is gaining broad bipartisan support within several state and local governments (Chen, 2017; Glum, 2017; Vine, 2015), predicated on the belief that removing financial barriers will result in a rapid increase in the enrollment of poor and low-income students. Concurrently, the college access and persistence of low-income students in higher education has become a critical issue in the fields of higher education and public policy (Gamoran, 2001; Karen, 2002; Roksa, Grodsky, Arum, & Gamoran, 2007). Low-income student access and tuition-free public policy are said to go together like peas and carrots, but their relationship has mainly been examined from an economic perspective with college access assumed to be an automatic outcome of free college policies. The question is: Does this connection withstand close scrutiny?

The experiences of other countries with tuition-free higher education demonstrate the persistence of complex barriers inhibiting college access and persistence (French, 1994; Gayardon, 2018; Robles, 2017; Williams, 1997). The question of whether low-income students can access and persist in a tuition-free context has rarely been investigated through empirical analysis, particularly through qualitative studies. While

U.S. educational advocates agree the escalation of tuition and student debt contributes to the disenfranchisement of low-income students in higher education (Goldrick-Rab, 2017; O'Connor, Hammack, & Scott, 2011; Perna, 2006; St. John & Bowman, 2005), the influence of college access public policy on the holistic access and persistence of low-income students is poorly understood.

It is critical to acknowledge tuition-free public policy is not a panacea for all low-income students and in fact, is inaccessible for the majority of low-income students based on current state higher education policy. It is critical for educators and policy makers to understand the complexity of low-income and first-generation student identity and how this identity is framed in higher education literature (Jehangir, 2010; Kezar, 2011; O'Shea, 2016). Low-income students are not a homogeneous group and do not face a uniform set of barriers or opportunities. They represent a broad range of nontraditional student identities including students who are first-generation, students from minority ethnic and racial groups, adult learners, non-native English speakers, and students with disabilities, and students from refugee and immigrant communities (Bastedo & Ozan, 2011; Kezar, 2011; Kiyama & Rios-Aguilar, 2018; Tierney & Venegas, 2009). As more states and communities introduce tuition-free policy models, it is imperative to examine the influence of such policies on the lived experiences and choices of low-income students and their communities. Critical educators and policy makers must examine who these policies are for, and how they are designed and implemented.

Research Questions

Different from other studies which focus on the admissions process and academic acumen of low-income students, this study sought to construct a tableau of the experiences of low-income students as they navigate institutional choice and enrollment decisions in a tuition-free context. By privileging the voices, perceptions, understandings and values of students themselves, the study constructed a qualitative analysis of the influence of public policy on their daily pursuit of higher education. The primary research question guiding this study sought to discern how tuition-free public policy influences the ways low-income students and community members navigate college access.

- How will tuition-free public-policy influence the college access of low-income, first-generation college students?
- How do access counselors make sense of how tuition-free public policy will influence the college choice, directions, and trajectory of low-income, first-generation (LIFG) students?

Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I first preview the critical terms related to the college access experiences of low-income students and their communities, as well as the analytical connections to educational and state systems. I then focus on the significance of my study by overviewing the barriers encountered by low-income students as they navigate the college access process and proceed to briefly introduce a potential site in which to situation my study. After that, I describe my positionality related to the study, as well as expand upon the methodological approaches and limitations of this study. Finally, I preview the remaining content of this paper and highlight the potential impact of this work.

Defining Access: Critical Terms

The language related to low-income student access, so focused on status and eligibility, can often feel clinical and procedural. For this study, I worked from a consensus definition of low-income status while acknowledging the nuance and intersectionality of poor, working-class, and low-income identities and experiences. My own identity as a first-generation scholar who grew up poor and comes from a poor community influences my decision to use the words “low-income” and “poor” interchangeably, regardless of federal income definitions. When I reflect on my community and how we navigate resources, I think of the word “poor.” This is how we define ourselves and our conditions.

Low-Income College Student

Low-income college students are adult students enrolled in a degree-granting postsecondary institutions. Low-income is defined as the bottom quintile by family income, such as family incomes below about $40,000, by Pell Grant eligibility, or families with incomes below 200% of the poverty line.

Federal TRIO Programs

Federal TRIO programs include Pre-college access programs including Gear Up!; Talent Search; Upward Bound; Upward Bound Math/Science; Veterans' Upward Bound; and academic retention programs including student support services, educational opportunity centers, and the Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program. Federal TRIO programs are federally funded Title IV grant programs charged by the Higher Education Act with assisting students in overcoming class, social, academic, and cultural barriers to higher education.

College-Going Culture

College-going culture are defined as school and community contexts characterized by strong college-going expectations, college-linking resources, and college opportunity structures that promote and normalize college enrollment (Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011).

Tuition-Free Public Policy

Tuition-free public policies are largely adjudicated on the state and local levels in the U.S. context, tuition-free public policy aims to eliminate higher education tuition through an implicit contract between the state and the student, usually with a set of eligibility conditions such as income status, public service requirements, and academic performance and progress (American Association of State Colleges and Universities Public Policy Agenda [AASCU], 2018; Samuels, 2013).

Significance of the Study

The cost of higher education presents a significant obstacle to the college enrollment of poor and low-income students (Cabrera & Casteda, 1992; Curs & Singell, 2010; Ornstein, 2007). Various interventions are employed by states and higher education institutions to increase affordability and decrease costs for low-income students (McPherson & Schapiro, 1991; Samuels, 2013). Higher education finance scholars debate whether the U.S. system of federal grants, student loans, and state aid programs is sufficient in ameliorating the affordability concerns of economically disadvantaged students (Archibald, 2002; Hartlep, Eckrich, & Hensley, 2017). Cost and affordability shape the institutional stratification of higher education, including the overrepresentation of low-income students in community colleges and the concentration of financially privileged students at selective, private institutions (Bastedo & Jacquette, 2011). There is increasing consensus among scholars that policy reform is necessary to address the class stratification of higher education (Shavit, Arum, Gamoran, & Menachem, 2007).

Beyond financial barriers, low-income students encounter hegemonic structures that hinder the college access and success. One of the primary modes of marginalization experiences by low-income students is the subjugation of the myriad social, cultural, and intersectional aspects of poor and working-class identity (Bastedo & Jacquette, 2011; Kezar, 2011; Mehan, Chang, Jones, & Mussey, 2012; St. John, Paulsen, & Carter, 2005). Although these studies have examined the financial and sociocultural aspects of socioeconomic stratification, there has been little attention paid to the influence of tuition-free policy on the college access and completion of low-income students. The study of tuition-free and open access public policy is emerging as a critical issue in the field of higher education because it is crucial to understand how these policy initiatives influence the college access process and persistence of socioeconomically disenfranchised students.

The sociology of education tradition explores educational institutions as sites that reproduce social inequality (Coleman, 1998; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Perna & Titus, 2005; Plank & Jordan, 2001), but limited research exists on the intersections of public policy and higher education access for low-income students. The void of research compels an exploration of the topic in the context of class identity formation and negotiation, social capital, and institutional hegemony. The sociocultural characteristics and campus climate experienced by low-income students in open access institutions illuminates how public policy directly impacts students and institutions. In the higher education context, this research contributes to an understanding of campus climate and cultural barriers for low-income students (Perna et al., 2008; Roderick et al., 2011). This approach is inclusive of the intersectional marginalized identities encompassed by most low-income students, constructing a complex perspective on identity formation at the intersections of class, race, gender, and a range of ability and citizenship statuses

(Collins, 2013; Espinoza, 2012; Jenkins, 2011; Kezar, 2011; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008; Mehan, Chang, Jones, & Mussey, 2012; Ornstein, 2007). These studies examine the cultivation of a college-going culture in low-income communities alongside questions of cultural capital, identity negotiation, and school segregation in the context of neoliberal forces in higher education (Bourdieu, 1986; Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Giroux, 2014; Košutic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Mehan et al., 2012).

Most significantly, the implications of this problem for low-income students is the continued disenfranchisement of low-income students in higher education. The public discourse surrounding college access and retention for low-income students reflects an increasing skepticism regarding the benefits and value of a college credential (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). For the first time in recent history, low-income communities are divesting from the idea that college will secure economic mobility (Boatman, Perna, & Hillman, 2017; Hershbein & Hollenbeck, 2015; Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Students are increasingly loan-adverse and express reticence to sacrifice current earnings for future opportunities (St. John & Bowman, 2005). Despite legitimate skepticism about the value of higher education, educational attainment proliferates socioeconomic equity, civic engagement, and access to optimal quality of life. According to the UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1998), “The importance of education is not just practical: a well-educated, enlightened and active mind, able to wander freely and widely, is one of the joys and rewards of human existence” (p. 1).

Poor and Powerful: My Positionality in the Study

The literature on low-income students in higher education is replete with deficit narratives. While it is crucial to acknowledge the sociocultural and systemic barriers encountered by low-income students, it is equally as important to recognize the funds of knowledge and cultural wealth low-income students bring to academe (Kiyama & Rios-Aguilar, 2018; O'Shea, 2016). As higher education scholarship seeks to accurately represent the intersectional identities and experiences of low-income students, poor students continue to do as they have always done: a lot with a little. According to Gupta (2016),

> Students from marginalized communities, or "nontraditional" students, as they are often referred to, continue today to negotiate and maneuver their existence in the proverbial ivory tower, seeking out supportive mentors, carefully choosing courses that are of interest to them, sifting through their readings, taking back skills and theories that they deem to be useful in their own lives and their community lives. Although they may be marginalized in the process and many are unable to withstand the exclusions they encounter, they exercise their agency to steer through the corridors of higher learning, hoping to take back something of value to themselves and their communities (p. 191).

My lived experience as a poor, first-generation college student shapes my positionality and motivation in this inquiry. I frequently turn to the wisdom of my grandmother and her admonition to "Turn your pain into power." My scholarly focus on public policy is shaped by my cultural indigenous identity and my connection to Indian Country, where the legacies of broken treaties continue to foster a vigilant skepticism regarding institutions and legislation. This project compels me to reckon with two seemingly disparate beliefs: my confidence in the promise of college to foster social uplift, and my lived understanding of higher education as an exploitative and victimizing system for poor students. At the heart of this tension is where I situate my study.

The Case of The Tennessee Promise

The higher education landscape of Tennessee offers an ideal opportunity to examine and contextualize the debate surrounding tuition-free college as a policy intervention aimed at combating poverty and securing economic mobility. Many states reference Tennessee's statewide tuition-free program as an exemplar in designing and implementing their own tuition-free policy platforms, and the standard by which to model such initiatives. Tennessee's higher education system remains deeply stratified by socioeconomic class, despite tuition-free community colleges and a network of college access programs (Adams, 2015; Carruthers & Fox, 2016). Such disparities indicate the persistence of complex barriers inhibiting the college access of low-income students. Tennessee has comparable social stratification challenges to the broader United States (US), with 16.9% of the Tennessee's population and 14.5% of the US population being at-risk of poverty and unemployment rates of 6.4% and 4.3% respectively (Carruthers & Fox, 2016). Tennessee documents recent declines in the college enrollment of low-income, immigrant, and disabled students (Adams, 2015; Carruthers & Fox, 2016; Campaign for Free College Tuition [CFCT], 2018). These economic challenges prompted Tennessee to establish state policy agendas aimed at addressing college enrollment disparities, focusing on narrowing the opportunity gap and increasing social mobility through access to higher education (CFCT, 2018). The Tennessee Promise program, which provides two years of tuition-free attendance at a state community or technical college, made Tennessee the first state in the U.S. to offer tuition-free community college to all of its high school graduates (Adams, 2015; Carruthers & Fox, 2016; Vines, 2015). Widely regarded as a popular "bipartisan" policy program and a blueprint for other states in developing tuition-free higher education programs (Adams, 2015; Chen, 2017; CFCT, 2018), the Tennessee Promise program requires participants to complete eight hours of community service per term enrolled and maintain satisfactory academic progress (2.0 GPA) at their respective institutions ("Tennessee Promise," n.d.). In its first year of implementation, approximately 80% of all public and private high school seniors across the state applied for the Tennessee Promise, and that percentage has increased in subsequent years (CFTC, 2018; Tennessee Promise Annual Report, 2017). While there is no income eligibility for the Tennessee Promise, 53% of all program participants meet Pell Grant low-income eligibility (Tennessee Promise Annual Report, 2017). The scale and design of the Tennessee Promise program, coupled with the national attention the policy has garnered, illustrates the complex dynamics surrounding tuition-free public policy, and how it may influence the college access of low-income, first generation students.

Modes of Inquiry

Richardson (1990) asserted if research is to accurately reflect the lived experiences of people, then it is critical to center their stories. This study employed qualitative methods to create a tableau of the perspectives and recommendations of college access professionals regarding the needs and experiences of low-income, first-generation college students, and the college-going culture of low-income communities. I conducted a qualitative case study of a college access program, utilizing interviews with TRIO professionals across the state of Minnesota to illuminate the primary factors influencing their college access experience and the potential influence of tuition-free public policy on the college-going culture of low-income, first-generation communities. In-depth narratives of the college-going culture of a college access program situated at four different institutional types, alongside an exploration of the TRIO professionals' analysis of tuition-free public policy, provides an understanding of ways that the college access process is perceived, negotiated and navigated by low-income students in the tuition-free context. According to Merriam (1988), the primary focus of qualitative researchers is to discern meaning or knowledge as constructed by individuals themselves, the way people make sense of their world and their experiences in the world. This community-centered approach aligns with my epistemological perspective because it centers and privileges the voices and needs of the low-income, first-generation community itself.

My study was conducted in the context of a federal college access program serving low-income, first-generation college students. I sought site access through my affiliation with localized TRIO college access programs, as well as low-income student support programs at colleges and universities. I established connections in the local college access communities for a deep understanding of local/community-based approaches to supporting low-income student access within the site and conducted site observations at TRIO program at four institutional types: public universities, public regional universities, private colleges, and community colleges. These modes of inquiry are woven together to construct a multidimensional tapestry of the stories of college access programs serving low-income, first-generation students.

Impact of the Study

Around the world, students are mobilizing to advocate for tuition-free higher education and student loan forgiveness (Gayardon, 2018). At a 2017 rally in London, thousands of college students took to the streets to demand the reinstatement of tuition-free institutions in Britain (Jones, 2017). In Puerto Rico, universities shuttered in the face of student protests aimed at dismantling tuition and student fees (Robles, 2017). In 2015, the Million Student March across 115 US campuses demanded free public higher education and student loan cancellation (Ross, 2015). Student activism surrounding tuition-free higher education is echoed in political discourses, with campaign platforms regularly featuring free college policy reform. In recent years, several states have implemented tuition-free public policy aimed at stemming the enrollment decline of low-income students (Chen, 2017). The study of tuition-free public policy reform is emerging as a critical issue in the field of higher education because of the legacies of socioeconomic stratification of higher education, fueled by the student debt crisis and disenfranchisement of low-income students (Goldrick-Rab, 2017).

This issue matters today because of increasing concerns that the value of a college credential is undermined by spiraling tuition and student debt escalation (Goldrick-Rab, 2017). According to Geiger (2016), "For American higher education as a whole, rising prices have been accompanied by increasing social stratification" (p. 29). As a result, low-income students are becoming increasingly loan averse and divesting of higher education (Boatman, Perna, & Hillman, 2017; St. John & Bowman, 2005; Zhou & Mendoza, 2017). The increase of low-income divestment from higher education contributes to the socioeconomic and social stratification of US society, reinforcing a two-tiered workforce and reproducing generational poverty (DeFreitas & Duffy, 2004). For this reason, my research was designed to apply a critical lens to the of role of tuition-free public policy, examining the potential for the idea of free college to operate as a foreclosure on the academic ambitions of low-income students.

The higher education access of poor and underrepresented students is a powerful lever in combating poverty, promoting social mobility, and enhancing the quality of life across socioeconomic strata (DeFreitas & Duffy, 2004; Leslie & Brinkman, 1988; McMahon, 2009; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2004; Schultz, 1961). College attainment has a significant ability to increase the social capital and economic capital mobility of individuals and contribute to the human capital development of the state (Baum & Payea, 2004; Becker, 1967; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Coleman, 1998; Conlon & Chevalier, 2002). Research indicates individuals with college degrees have higher income earning potential, exhibit higher levels of civic engagement, are healthier, and have higher potential for socioeconomic stability and mobility (Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Hossler & Vesper, 1999; Karen, 2002; Perna et al., 2008). While the benefit of college access for low-income students and their communities is widely acknowledged, the college access of low-income students has been studied primarily through examinations of support infrastructures and the deficit-framed barriers of socioeconomically disadvantaged communities (Bastedo & Ozan, 2011; Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Kiyama & Rios-Aguilar, 2018; Lucas, 1994; Perna & Titus, 2005). Insufficient attention has been paid to the influence of public policies aimed at increasing access, such as national access initiatives and tuition-free public policy. A closer examination of the ways low-income students articulate and navigate their college enrollment choices related to concerns regarding financial support and student debt is critical in cultivating an understanding of truly equitable college access. This inquiry, then, sought to nuance and destabilize the discourses at the intersections of tuition-free public policy, low-income student access, and the college-going culture of poor communities.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Broadly speaking, this chapter explores three bodies of scholarly work that have examined different aspects of the relationship between low-income student access and public policy. The first can be described as studies that trace the history of US public policy related to college access interventions. Although these studies have added to overall understanding of the influence of public policy on low-income student enrollment, they have not addressed the sociocultural aspects of the low-income student experience. The second body of relevant literature is united by its focus on social and cultural factors influencing low-income student access and higher education stratification. This work has great relevance for my study because institutional stratification must be analyzed through sociocultural lenses, with a focus on how class and capital influence access. However, it still does not delve into the histories of low-income student exclusion at the intersections of power, exclusion, and oppression. The third body of literature on academic capitalism and social contract theory, in contrast, addresses the dynamic economic and political relationships between students, institutions, and the state. In these studies, one finds a more complex perspective on the influence of capitalism and neoliberal forces in higher education on the college access of poor and low-income students.

Defining Moments of Access in Public Policy History

Historians of higher education trace 10 generations of American higher education, from the Reformation Beginnings and the founding of Harvard in 1636 to the Privatization era of today and the corresponding consequences of the 2008 economic recession (Geiger, 2016). For the purpose of this study, I explore four influential access interventions for low-income students in U.S. public policy: the GI Bill, the Truman Report, the Higher Education Act, and the formation of the TRIO programs. As I trace significant higher education public policy interventions, I hope to complicate the narratives of college access in U.S. higher education and demonstrate the power of policy in creating surges of access for underrepresented students. According to higher education historian Christopher Lucas (1994), "The extent to which higher education has been an elitist phenomenon, the exclusive preserve of the rich and the privileged is historically problematic" (p. 311). The history of college access activism by disenfranchised and marginalized communities challenged the dominant narrative of who higher education is for, and how public policy shaped access and affordability across the generations.

Historically, American educational public policy interventions consistently coincide with regimes of US economic expansion and national defense. The first significant federal policy that shaped the American higher education landscape was the Morrill Act of 1890 (Mumper, Gladieux, King, & Coorigan, 2016). Fueled by US economic and colonial interests,

> The Morrill Act was part of a federal effort to encourage Americans to migrate west and develop the nation's public lands. Rather than embracing the classical liberal arts curriculum, the Morrill Act encouraged the creation of new institutions focused on the study of disciplines critical to westward expansion, including agriculture, engineering, mechanics, and mining. (Mumper et al., 2016, p. 212)

The Morrill Act set the stage for subsequent federal public policy focused on securing the economic and capitalist interests of the nation.

The GI Bill

The scope and influence of the GI Bill on higher education took everyone by surprise. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Congress conceived of the bill during World War II to address two imminent wartime concerns: “first, how to adjust wartime production to a peacetime economy, and second, how to avert the civil strife of military veterans who arrived home without jobs or good prospects” (Thelin, 2004, p. 262). The bill was passed in 1944 and soon “American colleges became unwitting partners in postwar federal policies almost as an accident and afterthought” (Thelin, 2004, p. 262). Skeptics of the bill asserted newly returned veterans would prefer to seek employment over education, while proponents conjectured 8-10% of GIs would use the program to avail themselves of higher education (Thelin, 2004). Surpassing all expectations, more than two million GIs, or 16% of the eligible veterans, opted to enroll in college as part of the GI Bill by 1950, and the federal government disbursed $5.5 billion towards tuition benefits for participants (Lucas, 1994).

> While the GI Bill was not intended to be a higher education policy, its impact on American colleges and universities is difficult to overstate. The GI Bill provided returning veterans with a wide variety of benefits, but to the general public it became synonymous with tuition assistance in attending college. (Mumper et al., 2016, p. 214)

A significant component of the accessibility and influence of the GI bill was the implementation strategy of the legislation. The bill provided full tuition coverage and paid benefits directly to the institution chosen by the student (Lucas, 1994).

> The 1944 bill guaranteed tuition, fees, books, and supplies up to $500 a year would be paid directly to the college or university (at a time when private universities charged about $300 per year tuition and state universities considerably less). (Thelin, 2004, p. 263)

Rather than utilizing a reimbursement or scholarship scheme, eligible GIs were able to enroll in the program and enter the university of their choice without encountering structural barriers. This was important because “many of these students were first-generation college enrollees who came from families that had little experience of or expectation for a college education” (Thelin, 2004, p. 266). The GI Bill is a critical example of the transformation potential of policy in facilitating college access. “The social transformation of higher education set into motion by the GI Bill had a differential impact in that it enhanced the opportunities across lines of economic class” (Thelin, 2004, p. 267). The unexpected scope of participation by low-income students signified an important shift in higher education access. “The GI Bill furnished compelling data for advocates who wished to alter American higher education permanently by using government financial aid as a means to promote affordable universal access to undergraduate programs” (Thelin, 2004, p. 268). The unprecedented low-income student college access facilitated by the GI Bill had such a significant influence on U.S. economic growth that it compelled subsequent administrations to investigate the potential of expanded tuition-free policy interventions.

The Truman Report

In 1946, one year after the conclusion of WWII, President Harry Truman established a Commission on Higher Education (Heller, 2011). As GIs surged into undergraduate degree programs, the commission was charged with "examining the functions of higher education in our democracy and the means by which they can best be performed" (Thelin, 2004, p. 268). Truman encouraged the commission to pay particular attention to the "ways and means of expanding educational opportunities for all able young people" (Thelin, 2004, p. 268). Thelin (2004) argued the implicit charge of the commission was to investigate the question of whether a model of the GI Bill could and should be extended. This was the first time a U.S. president initiated national policy interventions aimed at educational access, a topic typically reserved for the states by the Tenth Amendment (Heller, 2011).

The Truman Report presented a multifaceted policy blueprint for expanding higher education access as a means of securing US economic interests and global ascendancy. The report asserted the public community college is an "institution crucial to ensuring universally accessible postsecondary education" (Thelin, 2004, p. 269) and argued federal government spending on higher education was grossly inadequate. Despite the strong stance and detailed recommendations of the report, Thelin (2004) attributed its failure to influence national policy to an overly ambitious scope and hostile congressional relations. Heller (2011) suggested the Truman Report was ultimately too controversial because it demanded educational access funding and policy initiatives be shifted from the states to the federal government, a departure from the entrenched paradigm of state-based US educational policy. However, the Truman Report is an important moment in educational access because it suggests the momentum of a successful policy intervention (such as the GI Bill) can compel policymakers to advocate for systemic shifts in how access is adjudicated and implemented. Despite the limited policy outcomes of the report, federal involvement and investment in higher education accelerated through the Cold War years of the 50s, 60s, and 70s as “Congress sought ensure the nation’s economic and military hegemony by encouraging more students to pursue higher education and making substantial investments in programs to boost scientific research” (Mumper et al., 2016, p, 215).

The Higher Education Act and Federal Student Aid Programs

The Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965 introduced highly influential public policy aimed at mitigating the cost of higher education (Heller, 2011; Lucas, 1994; Tierney, 2015; Zhou & Mendoza, 2017). The HEA created 3 types of federal student aid programs: need based grants, the Guaranteed Student Loan Program, and campus-based financial aid resources such as the federal work study program and Perkins Loans (Lucas, 1994; Tierney, 2015; Mumper et al., 2016). The Guaranteed Loan Program was originally designed to facilitate federally guaranteed and subsidized student loans from private banks. Intended to provide secondary support for those students who did not qualify for the need-based grant program, the Guaranteed Student Loan Program was expected to remain much smaller than the federal grant program (Lucas, 1994; Tierney, 2015; Mumper et al., 2016).

Congress amended the Higher Education Act in 1972 to provide grant funding to encourage the college enrollment of low-income students (Heller, 2011; Lucas, 1994; Thelin, 2004). Like the GI Bill, Pell Grants provided guaranteed funding to eligible students enrolled as full-time undergraduates (Heller, 2011; Thelin, 2004).

> Using a calculation based on a student’s estimated family resources and the cost of college to be attended, the student would receive a grant directly from the

> federal government to reduce his or her cost of attendance. Pell grants were designed to target awards to students with the greatest financial aid. (Mumper et al., 2016, p. 218)

Unlike the G.I. Bill, which covered the bulk of tuition and fees, the Pell Grant was designed to be combined with federal work study and modest loans to make college an affordable option for the most financially underprivileged students.

Upon the inception of the Pell Grant in 1972, policymakers and university administrators noted the funding "made many parents and voters happy" and "was a lifesaver" for colleges in fear of rising operational costs and declining enrollment (Thelin, 2004, p. 325). It also promoted increases in college access for low-income students, particularly because the receipt of the Pell Grant made college significantly more affordable. The Pell program influenced the access of low-income students across racial and ethnic groups, as "Access to and support of undergraduate education had been quickly transformed to show substantial commitments to incentives and choice" (Thelin, 2004, p. 325). Thelin (2004) argued "Perhaps the most significant legacy was that the Pell Grants positioned the federal government to give serious attention and resources to civil rights and social justice" (p. 326). However, the stagnancy of the Pell Grant amount and the shift towards federal spending on student loans has rendered the Pell Grant program largely defunct in its ability to promote affordable college access for low-income students (Hartlep, Eckrich, & Hensley, 2017).

The Federal TRIO Programs (1965-Present)

The TRIO programs were founded in 1965 as a component of President Lyndon B. Johnson administration's Great Society program and the War on Poverty. According to the Council for Opportunity in Education (2016), the TRIO programs "were the first national college access and retention programs to address the serious social and cultural barriers to education in America" (TRIO section, para. 2). When President Johnson announced the creation of the Upward Bound program to Congress in his 1965 State of the Union Address, he cited his experience teaching low-income Mexican-American students as the inspiration for expanding collegiate access for students being raised in poverty (House Budget Committee Majority Staff [HBCMS], 2014). The Educational Opportunity Act of 1964 commissioned a pilot college access program called Upward Bound, dedicated to promoting college access for low-income high school students. In 1968, the Higher Education Act expanded to include the Special Services for Disadvantaged Students (known today as Student Support Services or SSS), which provided college retention programming and services for low-income, first-generation college students receiving federal student aid (Federal TRIO Programs, 2017).

Johnson's urgency in creating Upward Bound evoked the pervasive poverty and prejudice of the era (HBCMS, 2014). The War on Poverty programs were Johnson administration's attempts to mitigate the 19% poverty rate in the United States in 1964. The Great Society ideology prompted Johnson to focus the legislation on alleviating poverty and racial inequities through the expansion of the federal government's role in educational and employment enrichment programs while also stabilizing the US economy.

> The logic behind the first equal opportunity programs was that by bringing higher education within the financial reach of all Americans, lower-income students

> would enroll in greater numbers. This would result in their finding better jobs, earning higher wages, and moving out of poverty. (Mumper et al., 2016, p. 215)

Alongside the TRIO programs, the War on Poverty programs included the federal Head Start, AmeriCorps, Teacher Corps, and Job Corps initiatives. The War on Poverty's focus on higher education access as a means of mitigating poverty is evidenced by the implementation of the Higher Education Act as a component of a suite of policy reforms.

Historical and Contemporary Models of Tuition-Free Public Policy

Historically, tuition-free public policy emanated from state economic and political agendas (Gayardon, 2018; Goldrick-Rab, 2017; Wiener, 2015). There are several notable examples of state-adjudicated tuition-free public policies. In the 1960s, the City University of New York (CUNY) system initiated a merit-based tuition-fee model which waived tuition for students who graduated from high school with at least a B average (Connor, 2015). The tuition waiver and accompanying Open Admissions resulted in a surge of enrollment of first-generation and working-class students in the city colleges. One CUNY professor, reflecting on his experience as an instructor during this era, wrote, "I understood that the liberatory process could be a window and a road to the students, to see their own conditions and to envision a different destiny" (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 24). When CUNY ended the free-tuition policy in 1976 amid a city-wide fiscal crisis, student and faculty activism included a 3-day boycott of classes and a hunger strike (Connor, 2015). The city has proposed several reinstatements of the tuition waiver program in subsequent years, but the legislation has thus far been unsuccessful.

A significant reference point in tuition-free public policy history is the Master Plan for Higher Education in California, a sweeping 1960 policy intervention that consolidated the state postsecondary system with the goal of nurturing "competing demands of fostering excellence and guaranteeing educational access for all" (Douglass, 2011, p. 11). The Master Plan maintained tuition at all UC campuses and state colleges should be free, but that fees are necessary to help cover non-instructional costs (Douglass, 2011). The exacting policy rubric resulted in almost immediate and widespread access expansion.

> California's higher education system had perhaps its highest performance around 1968 … In 1960, and in the decade before, California led the nation or was among the top five states in access from high school to higher education, and in degree attainment rates for the Associate of Arts and Bachelor's degree among the state's youth (18 to 24 year olds). (Douglass, 2011, p. 20)

Despite the access gains, the California Master Plan policy was difficult to scale and vulnerable to partisan shifts in government leadership. The Reagan administration cut state funding for higher education, increased student fees, and laid the foundation for a tuition-based system (Douglass, 2011; Keller, 2009). The Master Plan's original focus on economic access diminished as tuition and fees increased. Today, the landscape of California higher education has shifted, as evidenced by "large-scale decreases in public funding, rising tuition and fees, dramatic changes in demography, and uneven quality at the economically challenged community colleges and four-year public institutions" (Douglass, 2011, p. 24). Once an exemplar of the promise of access reform, today California ranks among the bottom 10 in the proportion of its youth who achieve a bachelor's or associate of arts degree (Douglass, 2011; Keller, 2009).

Today, states are implementing tuition-free public policy with particular attention to scale and reciprocity, often following a “promise” model in which students are mandated to meet eligibility and participation conditions (Fredman, 2018). Promise programs are typically designed to fund two-year associate’s and technical degrees and require students to participate in community service and/or mentoring programs while maintaining satisfactory academic progress. Including the Tennessee Promise, 10 states (Rhode Island, Oregon, Arkansas, California, Delaware, Kentucky, Michigan, Missouri, and Nevada) have passed promise-model tuition-free legislation since 2015. Maryland and New Jersey are expected to pass promise policies in 2019-2020 (CFCT, 2018).

Beyond the two-year model, three states (New York, Wyoming, and New Mexico) have passed tuition-free public policy that funds four-year degrees to public colleges and universities for income-eligible students (AASCU, 2018; CFCT, 2018). The New York Excelsior Scholarship grants full-time students with a combined federal adjusted gross income of $100,000 or less to attend college tuition-free at all CUNY and SUNY two- and four-year colleges in New York State. The New Mexico Legislative Lottery Scholarship Programs allocates state lottery windfalls to a scholarship that funds up to 60-90% of tuition to any of the New Mexico public institutions including four-year universities. Finally, the Wyoming Hathaway Scholarship funds eligible Wyoming students with both merit- and need-based scholarships to attend the University of Wyoming or a Wyoming community college (AASCU, 2018). The promise and four-year scholarship models are instructive in determining where and how tuition-free public policy is being legislated and implemented. It is important to note all of the current tuition-free state models require legal residency or citizenship, excluding undocumented students who have no access to federal student aid from participating in such programs (AASCU, 2018; CFCT, 2018).

While states move to pass tuition-free legislation, individual institutions are introducing and implementing tuition-free policies on their campuses and in their communities. Noted examples include the Kalamazoo Promise, an anonymously funded commitment to pay up to 100 percent of tuition at any Michigan state college or university for graduates of Kalamazoo's public high schools (Collier & Parnther, 2018) and the University of Wisconsin Madison, which recently introduced a tuition-free program for transfer and first-generation students and students whose families make $56,000 or less annually (Herzog, 2018; Seltzer, 2018). These institutional commitments echo a burgeoning national focus on locally constructed policymaking targeted at higher education access.

While the US higher education system is currently adjudicated at the state level, there are increasing calls by national political candidates and policymakers to consider federal tuition-free models (Fredman, 2018; Weiner, 2015). The federal government already disperses $47 billion in grants, $101 billion in loans, and $20 billion in tax credits towards student financial aid (College Board, 2014). Therefore, one alternative model calls for abdication of Pell grants and tax credits and advocates for offering a federally-funded entitlement college scholarship to every academically qualified student whose family makes less than $160,000 a year (Fredman, 2018; Weiner, 2015). The current policy landscape demonstrates the escalation and innovation surrounding tuition-free policies at state, local, and federal levels.

Low-Income Students and College Access

Today, low-income students experience significant barriers in accessing college. Despite the growth of college access programs, significant enrollment disparities persist by socioeconomic status, stratifying higher education by class. Recent data reports 45.5% of low-income students enroll in college (Hartle & Nellum, 2015). In contrast, 78.5% of high-income students and 63.8% of middle-income students enroll in college. National Center for Education Statistics data demonstrate low-income students are significantly less likely to enroll in and complete college in comparison to their middle- and high-income peers (Kezar, 2011). In one study of 100,000 students, researchers found low-income students, across all racial and ethnic groups, are less likely to enroll in college (Kezar, 201l).

While enrollment in two- and four-year colleges has declined across socioeconomic strata since 2008, it is important to note the enrollment of low-income students has fallen faster and at a greater rate than middle- and high-income students. The percent of low-income high school graduates who enroll in college has dropped from 55.9% in 2008 to 45.5% in 2013 (Hartle & Nellum, 2015). By contrast, enrollment among high-income students has fallen from 82% to 79%, signifying the college participation gap between high- and low-income students is growing (Hartle & Nellum, 2015). Kezar (2011) asserted a significant void in the research on low-income students is its focus on student deficiencies rather than institutional and systemic barriers. The literature on college access for low-income students has traditionally focused on four aspects of the low-income student experience: academic preparation, parental and peer influence, financial aid and student debt, and institutional choice.

Academic Preparation

The literature on low-income student access is frequently focused on the question of academic preparation, specifically the question of whether low-income students are sufficiently academically prepared for college. Several scholars (Bastedo & Ozan, 2011; Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Kezar, 2011) argued the preoccupation with low-income students' academic preparation obscures systemic aspects of education inequality.

> Low-income students are less likely to attend college, in part because our current admissions systems work to disadvantage low-income students in many ways. The way in which merit is constructed privileges high-income students because it places weight on access to rigorous coursework, grades, and test scores. (Kezar, 2011, p. x)

Low-income students consistently do not have access to rigorous coursework because their high schools are more likely to be in low-income communities, which are poorly funded, and the allocation of resources may not prioritize advanced placement courses. Abedi (2015) demonstrated the detriment of using test scores to measure academic aptitude, citing a study which found "poverty strongly influences student academic achievement particularly when achievement is measured by the standardized tests that are mandated by states...even when low-SES students showed positive attitude and interest in learning" (p. 44).

Recent college access interventions have sought to provide college readiness curriculum for low-income students, but enrollment disparities persist. This has led scholars to attribute enrollment disparities to lower aspirations and diminished community support. However, Kezar (2011) pointed out an important contradiction in this narrative. While school quality and test preparation is an important aspect of low-income student access, the focus on academic preparation oversimplifies the problem.

> In fact, low-income students are less likely to enter college than high income students, even with high test scores, rigorous academic programs, advanced coursework, and Algebra I in eighth grade...Even when controlling for test scores, low-income students are still less likely to attend college than high-income students. (Kezar, 2011, p. x)

Why do low-income students access college at a lesser rate than their middle- and high-income peers, regardless of academic preparation? This question has compelled scholars to examine the role of the family and peer culture in the college access of low-income students.

Parental and Peer Influence

A central theme in the literature on low-income students is the void of college-going information available to low-income students in their school, family, and peer cultures. While the higher education literature has established the first-generation student is handicapped by a lack of parental knowledge of college access and persistence (Jehangir, 2010), it is important to acknowledge the peer culture has a pivotal influence on low-income student access and enrollment (Ceja, 2006). According to a study by Bedworth (1997), “low-income students need more information about academic requirements, and that while parental involvement was important, having a peer group that was planning on attending college was more important than parental encouragement” (Kezar, 2011, p. xi). This research on peer influence and college-going cultures has encouraged the development of cohort-based college access programming, such as TRIO and the Gear Up programs (Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Jehangir, 2010).

> Mentoring and related social support reinforce the development of higher education and career goals and also provide students with new information that they can share with their families. Easing family concerns about college costs is integral to promote student and family willingness to engage in the extracurricular programs provided (access and success) interventions. (St. John & Bowman, 2015, p. 255)

The significance of a community of support on low-income student success continues beyond college enrollment and extends into the limited research on campus experiences of low-income students (Ceja, 2006).

The prospect of social uplift through higher education constitutes a dilemma for many low-income families. The trajectory to college can represent a shift in identity and culture (Kiyama & Rios-Aguilar, 2018). Coupled with material concerns regarding the cost of tuition and fees, the prospect of changes in the family survival structure influences the college access process of low-income students. St. John and Bowman (2015) argued this dilemma “may alter the patterns of cultural maintenance in families” (p. 254). Higher education is framed as both an opportunity for social mobility and a loss of primary identity and material stability.

> It may be difficult to integrate understanding of advanced educational pathways with deep cultural patterns of class reproduction … When parents aspire for a better life for their children *and* they can envision this as a realistic possibility, uplift is easier to actualize. (St. John & Bowman, 2015, p. 255)

The tension at the heart of college access and enrollment for low-income students can be mediated by the availability of material resources and the proliferation of student/family agency in the process.

Financial Aid and Student Debt

Financial aid is the most significant factor influencing low-income student enrollment and institutional choice throughout the college access process (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). The financial barriers presented by college enrollment are both material and perceptual for low-income students. In the current higher education system, financial aid availability in the forms of grants, scholarships, and student loans is critical for low-income students to attend college (Boatman et al., 2017; Hossler & Vesper, 1999; Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Low-income students need more information and may believe a college education is not financially possible (Boatman et al., 2017; Davies & Guppy, 1997; Tierney & Venegas, 2009). One of the primary causes of low-income student skepticism about college affordability is the difficulty of deciphering the nuance of the financial aid system (Goldrick-Rab, 2017; Tierney & Venegas, 2009). Financial aid awards are packaged by individual institutions and consist of an amalgamation of federal and state grants, institutional merit and need based aid, and student loans. The cultural capital required to navigate this process is significant (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1998; Tierney, 2015) and the complexity of the system renders low-income students vulnerable to being confused by perceived versus actual cost.

A report by the American Council on Education attributed the recent drop in low-income student enrollment to the idea of perceived cost despite the availability of financial aid (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Hartle & Nellum, 2015). "The rapid price increases in recent years, especially in the public college sector, may have led many students, particularly low-income students, to think that college is out of reach financially" (Hartle & Nellum, 2015, p. 1). Indeed, Tierney and Venegas (2009) found low-income students may not realize tuition may be covered by financial aid at a more expensive institution because they are overwhelmed by the college's quoted sticker price.

The navigation of the financial aid system is a preoccupying and stressful process for low-income students and families and does not conclude upon enrollment (Kezar, 2011). The complex financial aid system does not consistently ensure low-income students, the most financially vulnerable students within higher education, will be able to afford to enroll in college. "Even when receiving aid, low-income students are more likely than their peers to have financial need that is unmet by aid" (Kezar, 2011, p. xi). The combination of stressors and inadequate aid continues to affect low-income students' college persistence. Paulsen and St. John (2005) found low-income students were less likely to persist if they were cost-conscious when choosing a college and low-income students attrition increased when tuition increased. The influence of both material and perceptual financial barriers affects every aspect of the low-income student experience, from their college choice to their ability to complete their degree.

College Choice and Loan Aversion

Academic preparation, family and peer dynamics, and the financial aid process have a significant influence on the types of colleges low-income students choose to attend (Hossler & Vesper, 1999). One philosophical approach that undergirds college access for systematically marginalized students in the US is while not all students will graduate from high school and go to college, "All students should have the opportunity to go to college, and every effort should be made to enable participation in college" (Tierney, 2015, p. 144). While college access initiatives abound in public education and non-profit spheres, little attention is paid to the forces that limit college choice for low-income students. The complexity of institutional types in the US higher education landscape increases the ambivalence experienced by low-income students navigating the college-going process (Davies & Guppy, 1997; Kezar, 2011). Rather than promoting increased options for students, Lucas (1994) argued the diversity of institutions prompts low-income students to enroll in less selective, lesser resourced institutional types. "In America … the picture grows more complicated with the advent of the so-called booster colleges and comprehensive land-grant institutions, most of which attracted an ever-increasing percentage of lower-class and middle-class students" (p. 311). According to Paulsen and St. John (2005), financial factors affect the types and locations of the institutions low-income students attended. Low-income students attended less expensive community colleges and regional institutions where tuitions were lower to reduce debt or perceived debt (Goldrick-Rab, 2017). Similarly, Bailey, Jenkins, and Leinback (2005) demonstrated controlling for academic aptitude or achievement, low-income students are more likely to attend less selective, less costly institutions than their peers, and are less likely to enroll full-time, live on campus, and to enroll continuously.

A major influence on low-income students' institutional choices is student loan and debt aversion. The word "crisis" is often invoked to describe the levels of debt US students are expected to incur in order to obtain a college degree (Goldrick-Rab, 2017). Zhou and Mendoza (2017) identified a trifecta of shifts that instigated the student debt crisis: the increase of federal higher education spending on student loans over federal grants, the stagnancy of the amount of the Pell Grant, and the sharp increases in college tuition fees. The prospect of loan debt is a deterrent to low-income students (Goldrick-Rab, 2017). As argued by Heller (2008), "Low-income students are more sensitive to tuition and financial aid change and the increasing net-price of college tuition has been shown to lead to unequal access of students from low-income families" (Hartlep et al., 2017, p. 14). Zhou and Mendoza (2017) pointed out despite being academically prepared and motivated to obtain a college credential, low-income students are more likely to enroll in two-year colleges, less likely to obtain a Bachelor's degree, and less likely to be eligible for educational tax benefits.

Loan aversion influences not only low-income students' college decisions, but also their families and communities as well. According to St. John and Bowman (2005),

> The transition to obtaining some education beyond high school (e.g., technical postsecondary education) is easier for many working-class families to consider than the excessive borrowing that would be needed to pay for four-year degrees to enter teaching, nursing, or other middle-class professions. (p. 255)

The propensity for low-income students to choose a college based solely on financial factors limits their agency and calls into questions the true definition of access.

The Ambivalence of Access

Ahmed's (2012) work advances our understanding of access by examining the role of higher education practitioners in student recruitment and the process of recruitment itself. The quest to enroll "diverse" students, or students with identities historically excluded or marginalized in higher education, takes on an ethos of welcoming, including, or incorporating students of color and low-income students into the university. Ahmed (2012) framed this within the logic of "conditional hospitality," a function of recruitment as the correction of an image of the organization as "white, elite, male, old-fashioned … diversity becomes about changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of organizations" (p. 34). The conditional hospitality logic requires a dynamic in which the university, and by extension the dominant identities of whiteness and class privilege, are framed as the host while those who embody diverse identities are received as guests who must give something back in return for being hosted (Ahmed, 2012). Reflecting the operations of the multicultural nation, university recruitment requires historically marginalized students "are welcomed on condition that they return that hospitality by integrating into a common organizational culture, or by 'being' diverse, and allowing institutions to celebrate their diversity" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 43). In this manner, Ahmed reported, "recruitment functions as a technology for the reproduction of whiteness" as organizations "tend to recruit in their own image" (p. 39). Universities grant access to students of color and low-income students on an implicit condition they assimilate into the dominant campus culture and become exemplars of the institutional diversity mission.

The college access of low-income students is complex and dynamic terrain within the landscape of higher education equity reform. As Kezar (2011) pointed out,

> Much of the struggle for equality over the last 50 years has focused on race and gender, which are extremely important to address. However, campuses have spent much less time in the recent past examining their underlying structures related to the way that low-income students are or are not served. (p. 8)

The motivations for understanding institutional barriers to low-income student access and persistence are multifaceted. According to Tierney (2015), "The United States is losing ground with regard to participation in higher education when we look at comparable countries" and "A great deal of research has pointed out how the earnings of individuals and, of consequence, the United States increases when our citizens are able to attend a postsecondary institution" (p. 3). Perhaps most importantly, access to higher education can have a critical influence on the lives of low-income students themselves and their communities. "We know that the lifetime earnings of someone who has a college degree is significantly higher than someone with a high school degree" (Tierney, 2015, p. 138). The promise of economic and sociocultural benefits associated with higher education access has instigated a network of nonprofit and federal intervention programs, among them Upward Bound and Gear Up (Jehangir, 2010), but Kezar (2011) pointed out such interventions are limited in their transformational potential. "Typical interventions have been external intervention and policy making. But these changes are short-lived and as external policymakers moved on to different priorities, colleges and universities returned to traditional practices and devolved back into serving middle-income and high-income students" (Kezar, 2011, p. 8). It is important to examine the low-income student experience in the context of the greater institutional and national climate.

Academic Capitalism and The Myth of Meritocracy

The organizational structure and financial policy of US universities is predicated on the imperial, capitalist foundation of the US economy, rooted in slavery and settler colonialism (Wilder, 2013). Adrienne Rich (1974) critiqued power structures in US higher education, describing universities as "above all, a hierarchy built on exploitation," using research to advance the interests of the state, “consulting for industry and government, conducting classified military research, acting as a recruiting center for the military-industrial and intelligence communities” (p. 152). The prevailing utopian vision of higher education as society’s meritocratic equalizer is challenged by Freire (1987), who reminded us, “We know that it’s not education which shapes society, but on the contrary, it is society which shapes education according to the interests of those who have power” (p. 35). An examination of academic capitalism and neoliberal ideology in contemporary academe must begin by recognizing the hierarchical power structures and capitalist, imperialist interests of US higher education.

Several scholars analyze the US higher education climate in the context of contemporary capitalist economic systems (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Hossler & Vesper, 1999). Kezar (2011) noted, “We live in a capitalist society and live with the meritocratic myth that anyone can be successful” (p. 4). This myth fuels a capitalist economy rooted in the inevitability of socioeconomic class stratification. There is a long-established “pattern of episodic progressive tendencies to support low-income students through novel social and institutional structures such as financial aid” (Kezar, 2005, p. 5) but these interventions are based on the economic and institutional interests of the state and rarely constitute systemic transformation for low-income students (Tierney, 2015). Kezar (2011) stated “The structures that do not support low-income students are part of a larger system of prestige that supports the garnering of money and privilege in the academy” (p. 23). The subordination of low-income students in higher education is intangible due to social class taboos on campuses and society at large, “bifurcating and invisibilizing social class … [an identity] that has not been integrated into diversity initiatives on college campuses" (Kezar, 2011, p. 4). The invisibility and estrangement experienced by low-income students on college campuses echoes the disenfranchisement of poor communities in the contemporary capitalist, neoliberal context.

Capitalist logic operates on a condition of continual wealth accrual and expansion (Harvey, 2005). Coupled with neoliberal forces, this logic requires the class stratification of the higher education system, with low-income students clustered at non-elite institutions while power is commodified at prestigious and expensive institutions (Karabel, 2005). The meritocracy myth continues to compel low-income students to seek access to higher education (Kezar, 2011), but at what cost and to what benefit? The higher education system operates on an implicit social contract, one that currently serves to indebt low-income students to the state in return for social mobility (Harvey, 2005). However, the current decline in enrollment suggests low-income students are beginning to divest of the idea of education as the great equalizer (Boatman, Perna, & Hillman, 2017; Goldrick-Rab, 2017; Hartle & Nellum, 2015).

Slaughter and Rhoads (2004) examined higher education in the context of academic capitalism. "The theory of academic capitalism moves beyond thinking of the student as consumer to considering the institution as the marketer … Colleges and universities compete vigorously to market their institutions to high-ability students able to assume high debt loads" (Slaughter & Rhoads, 2004, p. 1). The focus on profit and prestige in higher education is exemplified by admissions practices that "pay immediate and long-term dividends to the prestige and revenue interests of the institution" including several admissions and financial practices that characterize the academic capitalist regime of higher education (Slaughter & Rhoads, 2004, p. 293). These practices include need conscious admissions policies and financial aid allocation strategies aimed at leveraging an enrollment decision regardless of students' financial solvency (Boatman et al., 2017; Goldrick-Rab, 2017; Slaughter & Rhoads, 2004). Such policies of academic capitalism promote the socioeconomic stratification of higher education as low-income students divest of selective higher education access in favor of loan aversion and job-focused access routes. Slaughter and Rhoads (2004) argued academic capitalist policy reflects contemporary neoliberal forces in higher education.

Neoliberalism in Higher Education

Critical education scholars and educational sociologists point to neoliberalism as the pivotal political and cultural force shaping hegemonic struggle and domination in higher education today (Bottrell & Manathunga, 2019; Hartlep, Eckrich, & Hensley, 2017; Lather, 2018; Shear, Hyatt, & Wright, 2015). The influence of neoliberalism on higher education institutional life is vast, characterized by the commodification of knowledge production, diminishment of dedicated resources for faculty and graduate education, the relegation of research to private enterprise, and an emphasis on practices that secure the profitability of speculative capitalism (Cannella & Koro-Ljungberg, 2017; Barringer, Taylor, & Slaughter, 2019). In the realm of financial aid public policy, neoliberalism mandates a departure from financial aid as a mechanism of educational equity towards the ideal of financial aid as a private good. This entails a shift from equal opportunity for traditionally underrepresented populations to equitable access education for all, with the goal of serving the workforce needs of the prevailing capitalist economy (Burt & Lorenzo, 2018). This shift paved the way for tuition-free public policy (TFPP), with its need-blind eligibility and concentration on open access as opposed to expanding access for marginalized and underrepresented students.

Rather than promoting free college as an opportunity to expand social mobility and increase access for low-income students, the political discourse on higher education access extols the economic benefit of expanding the labor force (Giroux, 2014). This reflects a primary tenant of neoliberalism in higher education: the goal of higher education credentialing is labor market participation, financial profit, and economic benefit. Slaughter and Rhoads (2004) argued this mandate is foundational to the construction of policy neoliberal reform,

> To provide funds to reshape the economy, the neoliberal state instituted processes of deregulation, commercialization, and privatization, reregulating to create a state that no longer provided "entitlements" such as welfare, or that restructured and reduced general services such as health care and social security. The benefits of the neoliberal state tended to accrue less to the broad citizenry and more to large corporations, the wealthy, and upper middle class closely associated with the growth of the new economy (p. 310).

In the neoliberal context, social entitlement programs such as federal student aid and free college policy are enacted due to the promise of hegemonic economic expansion.

Neoliberal Multiculturalism

The work of Melamed (2011) tracked the strategic formation of such limiting discourses in three stages of shifting hegemonic discourses in contemporary US society: Racial liberalism (1930s-1970s), liberal multiculturalism (1980s and 1990s), and neoliberal multiculturalism (mid 1990s-current). The public policy created in each of these distinct stages reflects the political and ideological agendas of the time period and indicates the extent to which the public is willing to allocate resources to support accordant policy initiatives and endeavors. This study was conducted in the context of neoliberal multiculturalism, the existing dominant discourse within educational systems, and encourages us to appraise TFPP as a neoliberal technology of power.

Neoliberalism multiculturalism began to take root in higher education systems during the mid-1990's as a reflection of the dominant neoliberal economy, with its emphasis on free trade, open markets, financial liberalization, and the privatization of land and resources (Melamed, 2011). This political and cultural shift coincided with a rise in multicultural programming and recruitment on college campuses. In higher education, neoliberal ideology led to an increased focus on labor and vocational preparation to meet the needs of the economic preoccupation with capitalist accumulation (Gill, 2018; Lincoln, 2018). In the public policy domain, this ethos led to a focus on the potential for social engineering, and a belief in the practice of "differentiated citizenship" within hierarchical systems and institutions (Ong, 2006). Neoliberal multiculturalism "helps to make the internalization/externalization procedures Ong describes appear fair by innovating new systems of ascribing privilege and stigma and laying these over previous racial and class subjugation logics" (Melamed, 2011, p. 138). Those individuals who have been historically underrepresented and subjugated within the system may be rendered valuable according to their capacity to generate or sustain capital, particularly at levels of the system that facilitate labor development (such as community, vocational, and technical colleges).

The expansion of higher education's academic capitalism coincides with the era of neoliberal multiculturalism characterized by Melamed (2011) as an era which serves to "endorse certain economic arrangements to being an attribute of global capitalism itself" (p. 42). Melamed (2011) traced neoliberal multiculturalism as an ideological politic stemming from economic shifts of the 1990s, including an emphasis on free trade, open markets, stocks, credit, and the privatization of land and resources. Melamed (2011) argued neoliberal sovereignty requires practices that facilitate the extraction of resources and secure the profitability of speculative capitalism, such as lending and privatization. A central justification of neoliberal domination is the representation of those disenfranchised individuals and communities as handicapped by their own deficiencies (Ferguson, 2012). In the context of higher education, this justification is inherent to the meritocracy myth of access and retention for underrepresented students (Ferguson, 2012). Melamed (2011) argued higher education institutions play a significant role in propagating neoliberal multiculturalism by training students both as egotistic individuals and as "global citizens" who are responsible for perpetuating hegemonic colonial projects.

Neoliberal multiculturalism normalizes the economic subordination of low-income students in higher education and portrays student loan participation as a necessary evil in securing social mobility for low-income students. Institutions of higher education are complicit in this agenda by facilitating the indebtedness of low-income students as part of a larger social contract (Giroux, 2014; Goldrick-Rab, 2017; Melamed, 2011). Students are resisting this structural coercion at multiple levels, from personal divestment from higher education to political activism and campus reform advocacy. In her treatise on contemporary modes of activism, Angela Davis (2016) noted the efficacy of the students who are leading the charge in dismantling neoliberal policies and practices on US campuses, “I think now that students who challenge the border of the university and the attempt to establish universities as a stronghold of neoliberal elitism, those challenges are extremely important” (p. 43).

Conceptions of Justice in Higher Education Public Policy

In *Theory of Justice* (1971), Rawls engaged a theory of justice rooted in social cooperation and reciprocity as the bases for political and economic justice. Expanding upon the work of classical social contract theorists Rousseau and Hobbes, who argued the social contract is rooted in a natural state of human rights, Rawls (1971) argued the ideal of basic human rights does not provide an adequate foundation for ensuring justice. Rather, Rawls based his theory of justice on the concept of the “original position,” a conception of the totality of conditions which govern the conduct of humanity and is based upon the intrinsically social nature of human relationships. In this framework, “justice as fairness assigns a certain primacy to the social and the original position provides a basis for a series of principles to examine and assess the justice of political, institutional, and social conventions” (p. 339). Rawls’ (1971) theory of justice envisions a moral and just society that adheres to a principle of distributive justice in which the allocation of material and natural resources does not disproportionately advantage one society over another. This theory of justice stands in stark opposition to the contemporary meritocratic and capitalistic approach to higher education access.

Miksch and Gupton (2016) applied Rawls’ theory of justice to the historical and legal contexts of college access for low-income students. They traced the shifts in US policy from a Distributive Era (characterized by the Truman Report and Higher Education Act), in which the college access of low-income students was supported by federal policy, to the contemporary Regressive Era (1980-Present), characterized by a focus on merit-based admissions and the decline of access and affordability policy interventions. Miksch and Gupton (2016) made the argument that today's social contract has "shifted away from distributive justice and towards a focus on competition and merit" (p. 50). This shift has limited the public discourse and awareness of inequality in higher education, as evidenced by the failure of the state and higher education institutions to make college accessible and affordable for low-income students.

Charles Mills' (1997) *The Racial Contract* explored how social contract theory operates to subordinate and exploit groups of people considered "less than" in the social order. Mills (1997) argued structurally racialized discrimination and exclusion provides the foundation of the contemporary political system, a system built upon a social contract of educational and economic subordination. Influenced by feminist critiques of social contract theory (Pateman, 1988) and determined to pull back the contractarian veil described by Rawls (1971), Mills (1997) began by asserting the existence of the Racial Contract and defining it thus:

> "The Racial Contract is that set of formal or informal agree-ments or meta-agreements between the members of one subset of humans, henceforth designated as "white, " and coextensive (making due allowance for gender differentiation) with the class of full persons, to categorize the remaining sub persons, so that they have a subordinate civil standing in the white or white-ruled polities...in any case the general purpose of the Contract is always the differential privileging of the

whites as a group with respect to the nonwhites as a group, the exploitation of their bodies, land, and resources, and the denial of equal socioeconomic opportunities to them. All whites are benefi-ciaries of the Contract, though some whites are not signatories to it" (p. 11).

To apply Mills' (1997) analysis of social contract theory dynamics of power and subjugation, all higher education institutions are beneficiaries of the social contract with low-income students and the vast majority are signatories to it. Despite historical moments of access instigated by public policy interventions, higher education institutions continue to fail to address the socioeconomic stratification of academe. Low-income students enter into an implicit and explicit social contract when they enter higher education. Most low-income students become indebted to the state through the student loan program, a transaction facilitated by higher education institutions in return for a college degree and entrance into a social opportunity structure (Goldrick-Rab, 2017). However, this contract is often broken for low-income students, who access college at lower rates than their peers (Kezar, 2011), leave college without a credential at higher rates than their middle- and high-income peers (St. John & Bowman, 2015), and are encumbered with student loan balances that prohibit financial stability (Hartlep et al., 2017; Tierney, 2016). Higher education operates as an exploitation contract for low-income students, foreclosing on their future labor by indebting them to the state and fortifying the capitalist state by limiting their educational access and success.

Summary

While policymakers and college access advocates champion the economic and equalization promise of free college, concerns persist regarding the potential for deepening socioeconomic stratification and furthering institutional segregation. This qualitative study of tuition-free policy and low-income student postsecondary access and persistence provides critical insight into the ways such policy influences the access and experiences of marginalized and disenfranchised students. An examination of higher education policy agendas in the context of academic capitalism and neoliberal forces make tuition-free college policy a critical focus of study in higher education.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Vignette: You Can Go

It is a crisp fall afternoon at Johnson High, an urban public high school in a low-income neighborhood of Minneapolis. The end of day bell rings and students flood into the hallways, grabbing athletic gear and heading to practice or walking a few blocks to catch the train to go to work. The Upward Bound (UB) program counselors, Aaron and Katy, have already arrived for after school sessions, proceeding through the metal detectors and greeting the police officers at the front door of the school. There is a cluster of UB students outside the door as the counselors unlock the classroom the Arabic teacher allows them to use after school. The students, all high school seniors, are excitedly showing each other their safety/middle/reach lists in their UB binders, an assignment designed to help students identify the colleges they will apply to this fall (the program requires students to apply to colleges at three tiers of selectivity). The UB counselors write the session agenda on the whiteboard and announce each student will meet with Aaron to review and approve their lists while Katy helps the rest of the students fill out the school's college recommendation request form.

Yasmin eagerly volunteers to be the first student to have her college list reviewed and approved. She never misses UB sessions and brought her ACT score from a baseline of 17 to a 21 over the course of the four full-length practice exams administered by UB. Yasmin was even elected as a posse leader during UB's eight-week residential summer program. She sits aside Aaron, takes out her binder, and nervously details the conversation with her parents about her list. Yasmin needs to go to a college in the city so she can live at home and continue to babysit her younger siblings while her mother *works the night shift as a custodian at the hospital. Aaron nods empathetically but encourages her to add one or two non-local colleges to her list. "Who knows," Aaron says, "maybe the family circumstances will be different a year from now."*

Aaron also suggests adding a selective small private college that will be a reach based on Yasmin's ACT score but is known for giving good financial aid to underrepresented students. Aaron also nudges Yasmin towards a regional state university that is affordable and has strong retention for UB students but is located two hours north of the city. Yasmin is dubious her parents would permit her to attend either school if she is admitted, but she reasons she might be able to convince them if the financial aid covers her housing. As they wrap up, Aaron reminds her to add a community college to her safety list. Yasmin is surprised and wonders aloud why the four-year state university is not an adequate safety option. She has spent the last four years attending the UB summer program there and her admission counselor assured her she will be admitted now that her ACT score meets the admission algorithm. Aaron responds, "You need a You Can Go option."

You Can Go (YCG) is a tuition-free program for low-income students to enroll in the state network of community and vocational colleges. Yasmin had not seriously considered attending a community college. She aspires to be a journalist and thanks to UB, she knows how important internships and undergraduate professional enrichment opportunities are in securing a job in the field or going on to graduate school. Yasmin wonders why her UB counselor thinks she should go to a community college. Aaron hands her a YCG eligibility form and says, "Just fill this out for as a backup in case it's your only financial option." Yasmin is now surprised and worried about her financial *aid. She feels guilty for telling her parents she would likely be able to afford the university because of the FAFSA. She feels stupid for thinking her grades, ACT score, and leadership would be enough to help her family afford a four-year college. Yasmin fills out the YCG form and hands it to her counselor.*

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore the ways TRIO counselors perceive and respond to tuition-free public policy in the context of the college access of poor, low-income, and working-class students. For this study, college access counselors are identified as TRIO Upward Bound (UB) counselors, professionals who work for the federal TRIO programs and are both insiders and outsiders within institutions of higher education. The particular public policy of interest in this study is tuition-free policy, which is increasing in significance as more than 14 states have enacted such policies with seven more in the process of advancing such legislation, including the state of Minnesota. While TRIO programs are typically hosted by grantee colleges and universities, the programs are largely funded and administered by grants from the federal Department of Education. Upward Bound counselors are usually assigned to specific high schools and tasked with increasing the college admission and enrollment of program participants, who must meet the federal eligibility requirements of being low-income (LI) and/or first-generation (FG) status. This study sought to discern how the college access counselors anticipated the influence of TFPP on the college access and college-going culture of low-income, first-generation students. Therefore, as discussed in previous chapters, this query was rooted in indigenous ways of knowing epistemology and critical policy analysis methods. This chapter overviews the methodological approach of this inquiry. Engaging a case study and narrative inquiry methodology, the study explored two central research questions:

- How will tuition-free public-policy influence the college access of low-income, first-generation college students?
- How do access counselors make sense of how tuition-free public policy will influence the college choice, directions, and trajectory of LIFG students?

This chapter demonstrates the appropriateness of case study and narrative inquiry in exploring these questions and offers illustrations of how the methodology has been taken up in similar inquiries. Next, the chapter maps out the design for the study including the research site, participant engagement, and data collection and analysis. Lastly, the chapter addresses ethical considerations, limitations, and community impact, including samples of interviews protocols and consent agreements.

Case Study Methodology

Case study was the ideal research design for this inquiry. Case studies focus on one site, bound by time and place (Stake, 2005), and the engagement of multiple methods. This allowed me to fully immerse in the practice of "following access around" as described in Ahmed's (2012) study. Because I was interested in how public policy contexts shape the praxis of access counselors, a bounded case provided a distinct setting and time frame with which to understand this phenomenon. The case study researcher endeavors to "explore a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information and reports a case description and case themes" (Creswell, 2013, p. 97). As with most qualitative methodologies, the process of conducting case study research requires distinct protocols alongside flexibility and responsiveness to the happenstance inherent to every research process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Case study research is ideally suited for policy analysis because it attempts to capture the nuanced realities of the here and now. As described by Yin (2009), "Case study research involves the study of a case within a real-life, contemporary setting" (p. 42). Policy is both enacted and resisted by actors at all levels within programs, organizations, institutions, and the state. The influence of policy in the life of an access program itself can be best captured by an examination of the ways the policy "shows up"—or does not show up—in the praxis of the counselors. Yin's (2014) definition of case study, "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (p. 16), highlights the potential for exploring an issue and its surrounding context. Case study research, with its narrow focus on a distinct case, offers a unique ability to reveal where and how a policy context "shows up" in the everyday workings of a college access program.

Case study requires a rigorous and comprehensive research strategy (Denzin & Lincoln 2005; Merriam 1998; Yin, 2009). At the outset, the researcher identifies a specific case in which to conduct the inquiry, one that meets the methodological imperatives of being "bound by time and place, real-life, contemporary" (Creswell, 2013, p. 96). The two types of cases described by Stake (2005) are intrinsic cases and instrumental cases. An intrinsic case is one that has unusual interest in and of itself and needs to be described and detailed, while an instrumental case is selected to understand a specific problem or issue and is chosen based upon its potential to best understand the problem (Stake, 2005). For my study, I believed the Upward Bound program was an instrumental case in which to explore the intersection of tuition-free public policy and the praxis of college access counselors.

The Upward Bound (UB) program is a bounded case and was the unit of study in this project (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Yin (2014), "the single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study: the case. The 'what' is a bounded system, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries" (p. 38). Upward Bound's program design made it ideal for case study inquiry as it is "bounded" within the institution and by multiple federal grant restrictions, including participant eligibility criteria, placement within a sponsoring organization or institution, and distinct restrictions on number of students served and academic calendar of the program. This consistency of practice and population supported a multisite (multi-institutional) design within the case of the Upward Bound program. Upward Bound is intrinsically bounded by the parameters of the grant in terms of who it can serve, how it utilizes resources, and its positionality straddling higher education institutions and community schools. These dynamics, coupled with the tenuous nature of grant funding cycles, makes UB a notoriously protective, strategically enclaved program. The insular nature of UB, and the TRIO world in general, made it both a fascinating case and a discreetly bounded system to explore for this study.

In addition to being a bounded system, the instrumental case must be ideally situated to explore the study's particular research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Because my research questions focused on uncovering the influence of policy on programmatic praxis, case study was an ideal approach for exploring how the stories of access counselors (the stories of their praxis) interact with the prevailing policy context within contemporary reality. Yin (2014) asserted this methodological approach provides an appropriate framework for examining contextual influence, "Case study is a design particularly suited to situations in which it is impossible to separate the phenomenon's variables from their context" (p. 38). The positionality and culture of the TRIO world is intrinsically commingled with political and policy spheres. As a federally funded program contingent on five-year grant cycles, UB participates in political lobbying and institutional advocacy in order to sustain the program. The majority of TRIO students are poor and low-income and therefore dependent on federal student aid to pay for college, making the FAFSA and financial aid process a major focus of counselors' roles. Indeed, the TRIO program is enacted and funded through a public statute, therefore it is a public policy program in and of itself. TRIO and public policy contexts are often indistinguishable, making case study the ideal methodology to understand the ways these worlds converge and diverge.

One of the reasons case study design had great appeal for my epistemological and methodological sensibilities is the insistence on multiple forms of data. Creswell's (2013) definition of case study contended multiplicity is required as the researcher engages in "detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports)" (p. 52). This appealed to my research approach because I hoped to capture the "culture of the case," the specific world of TRIO and the culture of access programs. I believed these data were crucial to understanding the stories of the program, and the ways TRIO interacts with policies at the community, institutional, and state level. According to Creswell (2013), the goal of case study is to have an in-depth understanding of the case. I interviewed 12 access counselors to learn the stories of their programs and their perspective of the structural influence of public policy on the college-going culture of low-income, first-generation students. Additionally, I conducted observations in TRIO programs across the state of Minnesota, as I endeavored to seek a dimensional understanding of TFPP across institutional types.

Case study and narrative inquiry go together like peas and carrots. The stories of the TRIO world, particularly the UB access counselors who served as participants in this study, reflect the holistic and divergent narratives of the program, or the case. Narrative inquiry's emphasis on individual stories as data texts corresponds with case study's narrow focus on a bounded system. I utilized case study as a methodological framework to identify the parameters of my research site, recruit participants and develop inquiry materials, and critical policy analysis approaches to explore the data and construct conclusions. Simultaneously, I utilized narrative inquiry methods to seek and explore the stories that comprised my data/knowledge texts. Narrative inquiry and case study share epistemological objectives in their united focus on the promise of the specific (in the case of the study, the TRIO site) and the story of a time and place (the TFPP proposal by the Minnesota state legislature). The synthesis of these methodologies is the foundation of my epistemological and methodological perspectives.

Narrative Inquiry

This study was explored through a case study of a college access program utilizing narrative inquiry to illuminate the meaning making and experiential perspectives of participants. How does one attempt to understand how a specific public policy influences the lived experiences of the individuals and communities it seeks to affect and uplift? One must turn to those who know the community, who are of the community, who have been working in the community to foster the ambition and access of young people before and after policies come and go. TRIO Upward Bound has been in low-income communities since 1964 and is the exemplar college access program for many who would seek to replicate its program model and services (COE, 2018). This made TRIO UB an ideal case study in which to explore the stories at the intersection of college access praxis and tuition-free public policy.

Narrative inquiry, rooted in social, cultural, historical, and economic contexts, offered an in-depth understanding of what the concept of access means and looks like in low-income communities themselves (Yin, 2018). I prompted the participants (UB access counselors) to engage in a retrospective analysis of their experiences accessing and navigating higher education to understand which experiences, resources, and interventions they believed had the greatest impact on the college access and persistence of low-income, first-generation students. In-depth portraits of the counselors' perspective and approach alongside a case study exploration of their programs enriched my understanding of ways college access and public policy is perceived, negotiated, and navigated in the context of a federal college access program.

The purpose of narrative inquiry is to embrace the wholeness of human experience through data collected in the form of stories (Crewell, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). The "oldest and most natural form of sense making" (Jonassen & Hernandez-Serrano, 2002, p. 66), narratives and stories are how we explore and make meaning of our experiences and how we connect and communicate with others (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Beyond our own sense making processes, stories provide the scaffolding through which we seek to understand the world around us (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The narratives we construct give our experiences shape and contour and allow us to make meaning of the phenomena we encounter in our day-to-day lives.

Narrative inquiry is an appropriate methodology for exploring the role and perspective of access counselors because it has the ability to hold space for the breadth of their experiences and the dimensionality of their role. TRIO access counselors are community workers, often negotiating and leveraging their insider/outsider status within higher education institutions to advance the social uplift of their assigned school or organization. They intersect daily with multiple actors (organizations, institutions, and individuals), all who may view and posit their role differently depending on the structure, positionality, and interests of the actors. TRIO access counselors often identify strongly with their professional identity, and their role in the community is highly symbolic and significant as change agents, resource facilitators, and gatekeepers. Narrative inquiry's focus on the intrinsically holistic and intersectional aspects of the human experience allows participants to construct a story, or multiple stories, to make meaning of their dynamic and shifting identities and experiences. According to Creswell (2013), this methodological approach is "well suited to identity studies because stories offer revealing glimpses into inner selves" (Riessman, 2002). Stories not only reveal, but also shape identity because identity stories are "told, revised, and retold throughout life. We know or discover ourselves, and reveal ourselves to others, by the stories we tell" (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 7). Narrative inquiry's focus on meaning making and identity exploration provides significant insight into the fullness of the experience of college access counselors as they intersect with students, institutional agents, community actors, policies and protocols, and themselves.

The stories of the college access counselors served as the data, or a "primary text" for this study. My perspective of stories as data is influenced by the approach of Sara Ahmed (2012), who studied the experience of campus diversity officers in the UK. Ahmed (2012) described her methodological approach as an "ethnography of narrative texts" and asserted the culmination of her connections with the diversity officers in the "diversity world"—scheduled interviews, conversations at conferences, observational interactions at campus programs, socializing at community gatherings—all coalesced to form the data of the study, or as Ahmed said, "the stories I collected are the texts of this study" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 11). The texts of the study are co-constructed alongside the participants, as Ahmed (2012) directly acknowledged to her participants, "My aim has been to retell the many stories you told me. This book is thus the product of our collective labor" (p. ix). The synergistic and collective process of translating stories into data or texts demonstrated by Ahmed (2012) aligns with my epistemology and positionality, which I explore further in this chapter.

In *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (2012), Ahmed turned to the familiar "diversity world" (p. 11) to seek the stories that formed the scaffolding of her inquiry, and described "following diversity around" (p. 2) to identify the programs and participants she would include in her study. In the same manner, I turned to the "TRIO world" to explore the stories that provide the texts of my study, and to "follow access around" to cultivate the narratives that comprised my data set. Indeed, there is a distinct TRIO world, as any TRIO student, staff member, or administrator will tell you, replete with organizational narratives featuring local heroes, federal foes, and tales of battles won and lost. These stories are collected and shared by TRIO community members, particularly within the praxis of the professional staff who administer the programs and serve the student participants. The cultivation of these narratives yielded a rich and recurrent landscape in which to situate this study. According to Merriam and Tidwell (2016), the key to narrative inquiry is "the use of stories as data, and more specifically, first-person accounts of experience told in story form having a beginning, middle, and end. Stories of experience are biography, life history, oral history, autoethnography, and autobiography" (p. 67). These stories of experience were collaboratively culled from the first-person, daily lived experiences of college access counselors serving students *in the trenches*, as we say in the TRIO world.

An important rationale for utilizing narrative inquiry in this study was to nuance and defy the "grand narratives" that dominate the literature or public perception of a social phenomenon (Thomas, 2012). Tierney and Rhoads (1993) argued a critical purpose of narrative research is the destabilization of grand narratives "because they ignore the influence of social, political, and cultural power in people's lives" (p. 315). As outlined in the previous chapter, a prevailing grand narrative in the study of poor, working class, low-income, and/or first-generation students is of the deficit narrative. This "grand narrative" dominates the literature and codifies the monolithic story of low-income and first-generation students as culturally maladjusted, academically unprepared, and inept at recognizing and acclimating to campus life (Kezar, 2011; Tierney, 2013). Narrative inquiry invites and affirms the multiplicity of experience and identity, thereby resisting and reforming these grand narratives. Stories leave space to witness the bodies of knowledge chronically unsaid or unrecognized, such as the emergent research on marginalized students' forms of cultural wealth (Yosso 2005) and funds of knowledge (Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2018). The collection and recognition of these forms of knowledge and capitals are voiced in the stories of our communities, resisting and deconstructing the erasure and bifurcation that too often prevails in academe.

The predominant narratives about college access for poor and low-income students clearly emphasizes their deficits, or inferiority, in the context of collegiate readiness, acclimation, and completion (Jehangir, 2010; Kezar, 2011). Narrative inquiry can play a role in challenging the legacies of epistemological violence that has plagued research in marginalized communities, in this case poor and low-income communities. According to Teo (2010), epistemological violence "refers to the interpretation of social-scientific data on the *Other* and is produced when empirical data are *interpreted* as showing the inferiority of or problematizes the *Other*" (p. 1). Postcolonial researchers have argued epistemological violence is enacted when subjects/participants are othered and subjugated by the data collection and interpretation processes (Spivak, 1988; Teo, 2010). By centering the voices and stories of community members themselves, narrative inquiry intentionally relocates power and privilege in the research process (Clandinin, 2007). The promise of narrative inquiry in defusing the threat of epistemological violence is echoed by Derrida (1984), who asserted by engaging the narrative voice, difference cannot be easily "dismantled" into "oppositional predicates" and is "neither this nor that; but rather this and that" (Kearney, 1984, p. 110). The rich and complicated process of using stories as data requires that "the text is analyzed for the meaning it has for its author" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Crucially, following the data collection phase of the research, participants were invited to co-construct the interpretation of the data in order to prevent the subjugation of their voices and stories in the analysis and dissemination process. This was accomplished through member checking and research shares (Maxwell, 2013), a process I detail later in this chapter. The privileging of participant voices and stories at all phases of narrative inquiry made it possible to minimize the threat of epistemological violence and refute and dismantle the grand narratives about low-income students and communities.

"We do not find stories, we make stories" (Mischler, 1995, p. 117). In the TRIO world, there is a rich tradition of sharing stories as a means of building community, establishing funds of knowledge, and sustaining the program culture and vitality. Students share stories of the ACT, parents share stories of the FAFSA, access counselors share stories of college enrollment and persistence. We lobby for our programs by sharing the powerful stories of our students and the results of the program. TRIO access counselors shape their perspective based upon their experiences and the stories of our students and communities. A narrative inquiry allowed me to co-construct a tableau of the experiences, perspectives, and practices of UB access counselors as they negotiate multiple organizations, institutions, community enclaves, and policies in their role promoting the access of low-income and first-generation students. Narrative inquiry was the ideal methodological approach for this study because it centered and privileged the voices of the counselors themselves while honoring the dimensionality of their identities and redressing the legacy of epistemological violence in poor and low-income communities.

Epistemological Roots

This research approach is grounded in an intertwined epistemology of constructivism and indigenous ways of knowing, which I feel is intrinsically connected to my research approaches and methods. Case study's emphasis on the real-life, bounded, contemporary tableau connects to constructivism's focus on the present context for meaning making (Yin, 2013). Concurrently, narrative inquiry is grounded in a constructivist theoretical framework, which assumes knowledge is mutually constructed between the researchers and participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This approach acknowledges what is instinctively evident to me culturally, spiritually, and communally: that multiple realities are constructed through our lived experiences and interactions with others (Creswell, 2013). Social constructivism holds "the goal of research is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation" (Creswell, 2013, p. 25). This epistemological tenant connects seamlessly with narrative inquiry and case study methodologies, with their focus on participant voices and real-life contexts.

Constructivism's emphasis on subjectivity—for the researcher, participants, and community—aligns with my belief that knowledge is discerned collectively and personally, as part of a process that is recursive, partial, and influenced by knowledge lineages both documented and undocumented. According to Creswell (2013), constructivist researchers develop subjective meanings of their experience, meanings that are varied and multiple, "leading the researchers to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas" (p. 4). Subjective meaning making is shaped by social and political contexts and negotiated through cultural and historical lenses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Constructivist perspectives, coupled with case study and narrative inquiry methods, allows the researcher to recognize the daily subjective reality of the self and the participants (Creswell, 2013). This creates an inherent reciprocity to the research process, as "researchers recognize that their own background shapes their interpretation; individual values are honored, and are negotiated among individuals" (p. 112). Constructivism's focus on the process of meaning making "through interactions with others and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives" unites my epistemological and methodological perspectives (Creswell, 2012, p. 112).

Indigenous Ways of Knowing and The Indigenization of Policy Research

As an indigenous scholar, I believe knowledge emerges from, and is connected to, ancient knowledge traditions and texts, knowledges historically subjugated and dismantled by colonial interests. This epistemological perspective influences my identity as a critical researcher and my commitment to conducting ethical, community-based research. Indigenized epistemology "requires that scholars respect the community in which they are conducting research, establish reciprocity by sharing their findings with the community from which it came, and conduct research in an ethical, culturally responsible manner" (Mackey, 2009, p. 3). Any knowledge shared from the process of research means findings or usefulness found must be given back to the community from which they came (Minthorn, 2014, p. 77)

Indigenous ways of knowing is an epistemological stance that acknowledges the relational dynamic of knowledge creation and requires a rigorous commitment to reflexivity by the researcher. According to Wilson (2009), indigenous knowledge is constructed through relationships between things in a macro context of interrelated cultural, spiritual, and physical elements. Indigenous researchers are held accountable to their relations and communities. In the indigenous worldview, there is a fundamental interconnectedness of indigenous ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology (Wilson 2009). This interconnected framework defined my praxis as an indigenous researcher, requiring me to engage reflexive and reflective practices as discussed by bell hooks (1984) and Paulo Freire (1998), for whom praxis involves critical reflection and contemplation on one's actions and using the reflection to inform practice.

As an indigenous researcher who is interested in exploring state and federal public policy contexts, my epistemology is shaped by my criticality in regard to the colonial and economic interests inherent to any public policy. This has been described by my elders as our way of being "suspicious" or "skeptical" when a new program or policy is introduced to the community. Egan (2000) argued the skepticism and mistrust in Native communities is connected to "the legacy of countless broken treaties between the state and indigenous peoples" (p. 1). Brayboy's (2005) TribalCrit framework, a sub-theory of critical race theory, offers nine tenants, or epistemological assumptions, to guide the work of indigenous methodologists. Four of Brayboy's (2005) tenants greatly influenced and indigenized my epistemological and methodological approach to this study:

> 2. U.S. policies are rooted in imperialism, white supremacy, and a desire for material gain …
>
> 6. Governmental and educational policies are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation …
>
> 8. Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being …

> 9. Theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways such that scholars must work towards social change. (p. 429-430)

Too often, policy is analyzed through the dominant lens and powerful institutions, obscuring the voices and stories of those communities most impacted by policy. This is why it is crucial to indigenize the study of public policy. I believe my skepticism about public policy is a strength in this study. As an indigenous researcher, I am naturally vigilant about the potential of policies to exacerbate assimilation, segregation, and stratification. My epistemology, methodology, and sense of self is intrinsically bound up in indigenous ways of knowing. While the public policies I intend to explore are not specifically geared toward Native communities, my identity as an indigenous researcher means I inevitably brought this awareness and criticality to the study of public policy and educational contexts.

Ethical Considerations and Community Care

The mandate of community reciprocity and social action in TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005) helps to partially assuage my ambivalence about conducting research on behalf of a predominantly white, settler colonial university system. Castrellon, Medina, and Oliva (2019), three graduate student researchers writing together about this state of ambivalence, began by acknowledging

> Research, regardless of what approach is taken, can be exploiting to participants and because of this we have to work through guilt. As a result of the colonizing history of research, our communities may perceive us as traitors or colonizers. We must come to terms with this. (p. 91)

Despite the good intentions of researchers to give back to the community, it is important to recognize “research ultimately benefits the researcher in more tangible ways” (Castrellon et al., 2019). For example, the material (i.e., grad student health insurance), intellectual (i.e., engaging in rigorous and fulfilling work), and spiritual (i.e., learning about the world and my purpose in it) benefits of my research were largely inaccessible to my participants. Still, I believe in the power of research and knowledge exploration to transform and uplift communities. As Castrellon et al. (2019) asserted from this place of ambivalence, “research is needed, not for our personal benefit or gain, but rather as a way to honor, acknowledge, and improve our communities” (p. 91). I placed myself alongside these scholars and aspired to make an epistemological and ethical commitment to care, “an approach comes from a place of care, from the heart, to rebuild and support our communities” (Castrellon et al., 2019, p. 92). The centering of care and social responsibility in the research process is integral to my positionality as a first-generation, low-income scholar who in many ways, “grew up” in the TRIO world.

The reflexive writing of Castrellon, Medina, and Oliva (2018) is particularly meaningful to this study as they are scholars of color, and indigenous scholars, who are currently in the field and making meaning of their experiences within a collective worldview. The scholars offered a helpful three-pronged epistemological practice to turn to in times of ambivalence or demoralization, one I used throughout my research process, conceptualized in three overlapping spheres (see Figure 1).

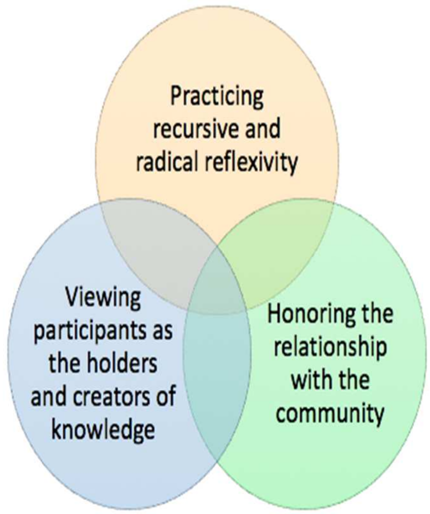

*Figure 1.*Three sphere epistemological practice. Source Castrellon et al. (2018)

This model is useful because it emphasizes the recursive, cyclical practices at the heart of applying an ethic of care to the practice of research. First, the practice of rigorous reflexivity is a critical tool for understanding ethics in research; as Guilleman and Gillam (2004) reminded us, reflexive practice demands a self-conscious awareness and the process of self-scrutiny on behalf of the researcher. The researcher engages in "an ongoing reflexive conversation on their own experiences and epistemologies in relation to how they are conducting and interpreting the research" (Chiseri-Strater, 1996 p. 178). This echoes the wisdom of the great education researcher Gloria Ladson-Billings (2000), who encouraged researchers to integrate our lives into our research and our research into our lives. This practice occurred in both writing and conversation with elders and mentors, as I describe further in this chapter.

Second, viewing the participants as the holders and creators of knowledge aligns with my methodology, in the form of narrative inquiry, and epistemology, in the form of indigenized constructivism. Third, honoring the community both within and apart from our research process, in "an ongoing and collective process; allowing us to connect with our communities spiritually and emotionally, infused with love, care, and cope" (Castrellon et al., 2018, p. 92). My selection of TRIO as my research site reflected the love, care, and hope I brought to my research process, as this is a community I identify deeply with and aspired to honor in my praxis. I set upon the research journey with the goal of "bringing the wisdom home" and letting it add to the ancient bodies of knowledge we have on education, policy, and social change. I was inspired to honor the community by the Native American author and activist Vine Deloria Jr., who said, "Every society needs educated people, but the primary responsibility of educated people is to bring wisdom back into the community and make it available to others so that the lives they are leading make sense" (Deloria, Deloria, Foehner & Scinta, 1999, p. 281). I believe this sense making, and correlated community benefit, is possible in the narrative research process and this served as the goal of my dissertation research.

Research Setting: The Upward Bound Project

The Federal TRIO Programs (TRIO) are federally funded access and retention programs designed to "identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds" in accessing and achieving college degrees ("Federal TRIO Programs," n.d.). There are currently more than 2,800 federal TRIO programs and 790,000 current program participants (COE, 2018). The TRIO programs are hosted at 947 American and Puerto Rican colleges and universities (COE, 2018). Within the broad community of TRIO students, 7,000 program participants are diagnosed with physical and/or learning disabilities and 6,000 participants are U.S. veterans (COE, 2018). It is federally mandated that two-thirds of the 790,000 TRIO students must meet both low-income and first-generation eligibility. The grantee community is required to demonstrate a sizeable low-income proportion of residents compared to state averages. According to the COE (2018), the most current ethnic demographics of the national TRIO community reflect the demography of the low-income, first-generation college going community. 35% of TRIO students are white, 35% are African-American, 19% are Hispanic, 4% are Native American, 3% are Asian-American, and 4% are listed as "Other," including multiracial students. The U.S. Department of Education estimates emerging populations of refugee and migrant worker families will further diversify the TRIO population (COE, 2018).

At the secondary level, TRIO Upward Bound (UB) prepares first-generation and low-income high school students for higher education by providing campus-based academic enrichment during the school year and summer, ACT preparation curriculum, and mentoring and support for students during the college application, enrollment, and financial aid processes (“Federal TRIO Programs,” 2018). More than 70,000 students are currently being served by 956 Upward Bound projects (“Federal TRIO Programs,” n.d.) and 86% of UB students enrolled immediately in college following high school graduation (COE, 2018). Upward Bound was authorized by the Higher Education Act of 1965 and most recently reauthorized in 2008 (COE, 2018).

Beyond UB’s demography and enrollment outcomes, the experiences of UB students and staff are crucial to understanding the intricate goals and benefits of the program. *New Directions for Teaching & Learning* (2011) profiled the story of LaKresha Graham, a first-generation and low-income UB participant who attended St. Louis University. Graham reflected the benefits of her experiences in Upward Bound became apparent when she enrolled in college and ultimately pursued enrollment in graduate school with the support of continual enrollment in TRIO programs. Graham described the support she received as multidimensional, encompassing psychological, financial, and community benefits.

> Upward Bound allowed me to use an assertive accommodation strategy for success. Assertive accommodation strategy is when students use their first-generation status positively to achieve their academic goals. By using programs specified for (first-gen students), such as Upward Bound, Student Educational Support Services, and, eventually, McNair Scholars, this strategy enabled me to bond with other students based upon my status, especially other Upward Bound alumni. It was great having other students, who had similar experiences through TRIO, also working at being successful in college. It reinforced my belief that I could be successful, too. (Graham, 2011, p. 36)

These qualitative accounts of the impact of TRIO programs are underrepresented in the literature and attest to the compound affects the program has in the lives of students and their communities.

Upward Bound professionals are hired through the host university to staff the program and are typically assigned to service secondary schools as designated by the grant. The minimum qualification of an access counselor position is a bachelor’s degree, and many employees at the counselor level hold master’s degrees and have experience working with “at-risk” or communities “underrepresented” in higher education. Upward Bound professionals (access counselors, program directors, and administrative support specialists) are more likely to be educators of color who are also first-generation and/or from low-income backgrounds as compared to similar college access professional communities such as admissions or college recruiting professionals. Many UB professionals are alumni of TRIO programs or are connected to the program through their peer culture. The qualifications, experiences, and diversity represented by the TRIO professional community made it an optimal pool of participants for this inquiry.

Study Design

Creswell (2013) identified six procedures for case study research I utilized to design my study. First, I determined the appropriateness of the case for studying the research problem. Based upon my research questions and my epistemological approach, I focused my inquiry within the context of a college access program. My interest in how access counselors perceive the influence of tuition-free public policy compelled me to identify Upward Bound as an ideal site. My own experience as a UB participant and professional gave me a deep understanding of the ways the program worked to support the access of marginalized and underrepresented students in higher education, and how frequently the prevailing political and policy contexts shape the college-going culture of the program and surrounding community.

Second, I selected a case. I conducted a multisite study within my selected case, the Upward Bound program. I selected a mix of institutional types (public research universities, state regional universities, private four-year colleges, and community/vocational colleges) in order to reflect the breadth and depth of UB services and the variety of communities the program serves. This provided me with an "an array of options for purposeful sampling" (Creswell, 2013. p. 76). The institutional and regional diversity of the programs was critical to capturing different perspectives of my research topic within varying institutional and regional landscapes.

I leveraged my network of TRIO peers and colleagues to seek access at each site, using my program affiliation and contact network to secure participant programs. I worked with the state TRIO Association to identify campus contacts and partners for support and guidance during my study. Often the greatest advocates and allies of TRIO programs work elsewhere in the institution, having been former TRIO staff or program participants. Each state and regional TRIO association has a robust listserv community, and I utilized this virtual community to publicize my study in this space as a means of seeking collaboration and support from the TRIO community.

The rationale for employing purposeful homogenous sampling to target TRIO professionals at specific institutions is to seek participants who are bounded within the case but are serving students in various political and public policy contexts (Creswell, 2013). The pool of participants included TRIO directors, program coordinators, and academic counselors. While these professionals embody and enact distinct roles within their programs, they all work directly with students and are operating within a prevailing state and federal policy context. This purposeful selection approach was described by Maxwell (2013), "particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to your questions or goals, and that can't be gotten as well from other choices" (p. 97).

The next step in Creswell's (2013) case study design process is identifying multiple data collection sources. Yin (2018) recommended six types of information to collect to comprise an assemblage of potentially usable data: documents, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation, and physical artifacts.

Given my methodological approach of seeking stories within a bounded case, I focused my data collection on site observations and conducting participant interviews.

I conducted interviews with 12 access counselors representing each institutional type and at differing stages of the college access process. To secure interview participants, I emailed each TRIO director outlining the study in detail and prompting them to identify program professionals who would be the best fit to participate in the study, including themselves. The TRIO professionals were invited to participate in a 90 minute in-person interview. I conducted the interviews at the location of their choice, optimally at their high school office or sponsoring campus, in order to avoid exploiting the counselors' time or transportation resources. I also offered for participants to engage in the interview process via phone or video software. The participants received a copy of the question protocol in advance of the interview in order to provide time for them to reflect on the themes and foci of the interview. I invited all respondents to contact me in advance of the interview or afterwards if they had questions or feedback about the survey protocol or study. I designated a structured time frame for the respondents to participate in the interview from the initial outreach to interview collection, approximately 4-6 weeks. This generous time frame was based upon the typical "rhythm and flow" of the TRIO world, particularly during Upward Bound residential summer programs, when access counselors are engaged in round the clock student support. These parameters are guided by Smith's (1999) emphasis on asking critical questions when approaching study participants, including: "Is her spirit clear? Does he have a good heart? What other baggage are they carrying? Are they useful to us?" (p. 10). These questions encouraged me to choose my interviewee based on my values and goals for the project, as well as compelled me to strive for a mutually beneficial interview experience.

The use of interviews for data collection aligns with my methodological approach, to “create a container” for the sharing of stories and narratives on behalf of both myself and the participant (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 42). I paid close attention to the content of the questions, ensuring they focused on illuminating the ways policy and politics influence the day-to-day perspectives of the access counselors. The interview questions explored how the access counselors came to TRIO work and their perspective of access and financial aid public policy at both the state and federal levels. The choice of narrative inquiry methods, coupled with the container of a case study approach, compelled me to model the interview as an authentic conversation, as described by Maxwell, (2013), “ask your interviewees real questions, ones to which you are genuinely interested in the answer, rather than contrived questions designed to elicit particular sorts of data” (p. 101).

After inviting participants to sign a consent form (see Appendix B), I utilized an open-ended and semi-structured question protocol because it allowed me to prompt and extrapolate the narratives of the interview, while ensuring the interviewee’s resources of time and energy were honored in the process (see Appendix A). According to Creswell (2013), narrative inquiry ensures “Questions are broad and general so that participants can construct the meaning of a situation” (p. 84). I designed the question protocol to be shorter in length, with the intention of circling back to participants to conduct additional interviews over the course of the study if needed. The initial questions prompted respondents to share the story of their path to UB and how they defined and developed their approach to working with LIFG students. The questions asked respondents to share the story of their programs' relationship with the surrounding community and host institution. Next, the respondents were asked to reflect on how public policy, such as tuition-free programs, influences the college access process for LIFG students. Lastly, the interview invited the access counselors to share any salient or lingering narratives of their role working with students who are low-income, as well as the dominant discourses they encounter on campuses and in the community about how access is perceived and negotiated (see Appendix A for sample interview protocol).

I traveled across the state of Minnesota to conduct participants observations at multiple interview sites. In addition to facilitating a formal interview with one or more on-site TRIO professionals, I spent time in programmatic spaces observing the daily lived stories of the program and participants. I attended programs, assisted in financial literacy and FAFSA workshops, and even had the opportunity to serve as a chaperone on a college visit. These experiences allowed me to observe and immerse myself in the college-going culture of the program and surrounding community, and place the interview data in conversation with the observational ethos of the access world.

I am cognizant of the fact TRIO professionals are among the busiest support professionals working on campuses today, serving significant proportions of students with marginalized identities and ensuring federal and institutional program compliance. As such, I designed my study with significant flexibility in order to be responsive to the fluctuating demands of the access counselors. As a TRIO alum and former professional, this is a familiar aspect of the program culture and I anticipated my study could shift and evolve accordingly. As a means of promoting reciprocity, I offered to facilitate programming for the students as a UB volunteer, based on my five years of experience working in TRIO and advising students on financial aid and college acclimation. I currently volunteer with TRIO to assist student participants with the FAFSA each year and have completed the required volunteer background checks and training. In keeping with my commitment to ethical and care-based research, this practice sought to ensure reciprocity and community care.

Data Analysis

I aligned my data analysis methods with my epistemological approach, centering the inductive and reflexive practices that promote co-constructed interpretation, or meaning making. Constructivist research requires the acknowledgement of positionality at each phase of the study, as described by Creswell (2013), "Researchers recognize that their own background shapes their interpretation; the researcher's intent then is to make sense of or interpret the meanings others have about the world" (p. 12). As I analyzed my data, and endeavored to make meaning of the stories I collected, I utilized the case study analysis design originated by Lincoln and Guba (1985):

> Detailed description emerges when the researcher details aspects of the history of the case, chronology of events, or a day-by-day rendering of the activities of the case; then focuses on a few key issues or themes; analysis is rich in the context of the case; last, identify the lessons learned from the case (p. 38).

I utilized two primary analysis methods as described by Reismann (2008) as ideally suited for narrative inquiry: thematic/hermeneutic analysis and reflexive analysis.

The data analysis process began by transcribing the recorded in-person and telephone interviews. The transcription process consistently helped me to fully immerse myself in the interview data and to develop my intuitive meaning-making of the themes therein. Next, the responses were de-identified and extrapolated by question type into a spreadsheet, which were stored in a separate folder from the questionnaire transcripts. The thematic method of data analysis allowed me to compare questionnaire responses alongside interview transcripts and to document emerging themes (Patton, 2002). The responses and transcripts were coded to assist with the identification of themes and patterns across the data. The coding was conducted through a color-coded system devised to designate segments of the data as related to a specific theme (see Chapter 5, Table 2). The responses and transcripts were also coded using margin notes to indicate segments of data reflecting individualized student stories. After the responses were coded and margin notes inserted, the codes were grouped and ranked according to frequency and sorted into meta-themes (see Chapter 5, Table 3).

I engaged in reflexive note taking during the data collection and analysis process, creating analytic memos corresponding to each participant's responses and observation in the field. The construction of analytic memos entailed identifying initial commonalities among responses regarding the programmatic and policy landscape as described by the access counselors. I sought resonance and divergence among the stories shared about the influence of policy and politics in the praxis of the access counselors. Saldana (2013) asserted memo writing is an essential component of reflexive analysis, ensuring the researcher continually contends with their own perspective and positionality alongside that of their participants.

I utilized a hermeneutic style of data analysis aimed at discerning consensus and dissonance across the data (Creswell, 2013). This approach is cohesive with narrative inquiry data, as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016),

> Because the "text" of the story forms the data set for what is analyzed in this type of research, the hermeneutical philosophy, which is the study of written texts, is often cited as informing narrative inquiry. Hermeneutic philosophy focuses on interpretation. (p. 34)

Hermeneutics provides a theoretical framework for interpretive understanding, or meaning, with special attention to context or original purpose (Patton, 2015). This approach is as old as time, a way of making meaning of our localized legends and narratives, with particular emphasis on the historical and cultural context, making an ideal analytical approach for my study.

Ultimately, as I collected data and engaged in reflexive praxis, I developed an intuitive sense of the themes and lessons contained in the narratives, a process in which "Inquirers generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meaning (Crotty 1998; Lincoln & Guba 2000; Schwandt 2007). The process of discerning such patterns or themes is collaborative, a mutual endeavor "formed through interactions with others and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives" (Creswell, 2013). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), making meaning of the data is "focused on the process of interaction among individual … Individual values are honored, and are negotiated among individuals" (p. 48). This iterative, collaborative process allowed me to identify themes in the findings and ultimately, implications for policy and praxis.

Summary

Like the continual seasons of change in the US Congress, the TRIO programs are frequently sites of contestation and compliance, idealism, and defensiveness. Susceptible to the whims of legislators, lobbyists, campus administrators, and policymakers, the "TRIO world" rests at the intersection of federal, institutional, and community forces. In order to ensure adequate and impactful support of low-income and first-generation students, it is critical to understand the influence of policy on the access and persistence of LIFG students. A qualitative case study utilizing narrative inquiry and committed to the process of community care and reciprocity, enriched our understanding of ways the college access and public policy is perceived, negotiated, and navigated in the context of a TRIO program and beyond.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Narratives from the field, the stories that constitute the daily lived experiences of a policy and a program, are a critical tool for establishing a dimensional understanding of the barriers, opportunities, and interventions necessary to foster social uplift. TRIO professionals spend their days, months, and years “in the trenches” of college access for underrepresented students. They sit with students and their families as they navigate each step of the process, from preparing for standardized entrance exams to cultivating a list of reach, safety, and best-fit colleges, to applying for financial aid and determining affordability, and ultimately being in the first generation of students in their families and communities to enroll in higher education.

Over the course of this study, I spent eight months visiting campuses across the state of Minnesota, from community colleges on the northern Iron Range to small private colleges in rural towns and large urban research universities, and I had the opportunity to learn the stories of 12 TRIO professionals who do the daily labor of college access in low-income communities. Many shared their journey to the work of college access, and more than half shared their low-income, first-generation, and TRIO alumni experiences. As they described journeying alongside the students they serve, the participants shared their stories of overwork and inspiration, of strained resources and student success, of federal funding battles and institutional invisibility. It is often said in the TRIO world, “TRIO is family.” I observed this to be true repeatedly as my participants welcomed me into their classrooms and bridge programs and connected me with their colleagues and networks. As they shared their stories among a geographically vast yet intimately connected network of TRIO programs, I captured a deep resonance across institutional types and program structures.

We often talked about TRIO in the context of "the life of the program," and collectively envisioned TRIO as a living, evolving, and dynamic programmatic space, as well as a set of professional and political commitments for the practitioner. While college access discourses are uplifted in the media as the primary path to social mobility and security, the TRIO professionals I connected with expressed a constant vigilance regarding the influence of public policy on the ways low-income, first-generation students access and navigate the college-going process. While the idea of free college and tuition-free policy platforms are "trending" within political and educational discourses, there remain serious questions among political leaders, campus administrators, and local communities regarding the potential influence of such programs on the college access of historically underrepresented and marginalized students. Such questions include how tuition-free programs should be designed, implemented, and deployed. TRIO professionals are uniquely positioned to illuminate and contextualize the possibilities and limitations of tuition-free public policy.

My findings begin with an introduction to each participant and an insight into their story, institutional positionality, and TRIO history. The analysis yielded 10 themes which will be extrapolated below (see Figure 2), but for the purposes of addressing my research questions I will pay attention to three meta themes: ambivalence and affordability, persistence and completion, and finally stratification and agency for low-income students. These meta themes, or nodes of inequity, relate to how public policy interacts with the participants' perspectives as access counselors, and how they perceive and nuance TFPP related to the college access of low-income, first-generation students.

This section explores each of the meta themes: ambivalence and affordability, persistence and completion, and finally stratification and agency for low-income students. To unpack the ambivalence and affordability meta-theme, I examined data from the following themes: destabilizing the idea of free college and the impact of a local tuition-free initiative, the Power of You program. To explore the persistence and completion meta-theme, I examined data from the following themes: financial aid literacy and articulated support resources. Finally, to explore the stratification and agency meta-theme, I examined data from the following themes: college match, loan aversion, family disengagement, and class oppression/classism. These findings respond to the following research questions framing this study:

- How will tuition-free public-policy influence the college access of low-income, first-generation college students?
- How do access counselors make sense of how tuition-free public policy will influence the college choice, directions, and trajectory of LIFG students?

Participant Profiles

This dissertation study features 12 participants, each one of them a TRIO professional who serves or has served as a college access counselor. In keeping with the epistemological tenets of Indigenous Ways of Knowing, it is essential to honor both the collective and individual stories shared by each participant, and to refer to them by the pseudonyms and identities they shared. The following profiles of each participant seek to establish their expertise as access practitioners, as well as share their journey into the

TRIO world and positionality related to race, gender, ethnicity, and class as self-described by participants. Each brief profile offers a glimpse of the stories they shared from the daily lived experience of creating a college-going culture for low-income, first-generation students, reflecting their vast funds of knowledge about the strategies and policies that make access possible and sustainable for LIFG students.

The profiles are grouped into sections according to the institutional type in which their TRIO program is situated. The study included participants from four major institutional types: research university, community college, private liberal arts, and public regional university. A critical aspect of participant recruitment was ensuring a broad variety of institutional types were represented in the study. TRIO's vast network of programs across the postsecondary landscape makes it a unique case study in framing the "big picture" of factors influencing college access. The ability to explore the same foundational Upward Bound structure implemented at both an elite private college and a rural community college, for example, allowed the research process to account for access factors beyond the deficit-framed focus on academic aptitude and sticker price. The range of institutional type, coupled with the diversity of the participant pool, demonstrates the commonalities and complexities of college access across institutional types and geographic regions. I assured all participants identifying information would be removed and received their permission to disclose the type of their institution as it adds a dimensional context to the study.

All participants have worked in TRIO for a minimum of one year, and the majority have been in their role for more than five years. Several participants have served in their TRIO program for more than 15 years. The participants serve their programs in a variety of roles and tenures (see Table 1), which is typical of TRIO programs and an expressed characteristic of the "TRIO world." All of the participants have held multiple roles within the TRIO organization, and several have worked across multiple programs, including Upward Bound, Educational Talent Search (ETS), and TRIO Student Support Services. Of the 12 participants in this study, more than half had been trained in the year-long policy advocacy program Emerging Leaders Institute (ELI) and all but two participants had traveled to Washington D.C. to be trained at the annual TRIO legislation and regulations conference.

While the study was deemed exempt from IRB human research review, the participants divulged personal narratives and identities, as well as programmatic signifiers. I refer to their position as a generalized term, "access counselor," or "TRIO professional," to uphold confidentiality and protect the privacy of individuals and programs. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant and their affiliated institutions are referred to broadly as one of the varying institutional types, including research universities, community colleges, private liberal arts, and regional public schools (see Table 1). The participants lived and worked in programs across several regions of Minnesota, including Northwoods, mid-central rural, urban, suburban, and rural communities. The profiles feature an introduction of each TRIO professional participating in this study, a brief narrative of their journey to the TRIO world, and their values as a TRIO practitioner, and their policy experience and expertise.

Table 1

Participant Information: Pseudonyms, Role, Institutional Types, Size, Region, and Low-Income, First-Generation (LIFG) Status

Participant	**Role**	**Institutional**	**Size**	**Regional**	**Self-Disclosed**

Pseudonym		Type		Type	Demography
Marisol	Academic Coordinator & Access Counselor	Research university	35,000	Urban	Hmong woman, first-gen, low-income
Lucille	Director & Access Counselor	Research university	35,000	Urban	Asian woman
Drew	Academic Coordinator & Access Counselor	Research university	35,000	Urban	white male
Opal	Director & Access Counselor	Public regional university	9,000	Suburban	African American woman
Cliff	Director & Access Counselor	Public regional university	12,000	Suburban	Multiracial man, first-gen
Diana	Director & Access Counselor	Public regional university	12,000	Rural	African American woman, first-gen
Julia	Director & Access Counselor	Public regional	12,000	Rural	white woman
Jeanette	Director & Access Counselor	Community college	1,500	Rural	white woman, first-gen, low-income
Blong	Director & Access Counselor	Community college	11,000	Suburban	Hmong man, first-gen, low-income
Hugh	Access Counselor	Private liberal arts	4,000	Urban	white man, first-gen
Gao	Academic Coordinator & Access Counselor	Private liberal arts	4,000	Urban	Hmong woman, first-gen, low-income

Marta	Assistant Director & Access Counselor	Private liberal arts	3,000	Rural	Latina woman, first-gen, low-income

Research University Participant Profiles

The research university is defined for this study as a publicly funded institution characterized by high research activity, conferral of baccalaureate, master’s, and doctoral degrees, and a very large student body of undergraduate and graduate students. The research institution(s) represented in this study had a cumulative enrollment of over 50,000 students. Of the 12 participants, three TRIO professionals served at research universities. The following profiles feature an introduction of each TRIO research university professional (Marisol, Lucille, and Drew) and the narratives they shared in describing their praxis and perspective on college access public policy.

Marisol

Marisol is an access counselor at an urban research university TRIO program. As a TRIO alum, Marisol shared her history as a first-generation, low-income undergraduate when prompted to share her story of becoming a TRIO professional.

> I'm actually an Upward Bound alumni, I graduated in 2012 and then I went to college. And then, because of the people that I worked with an Upward Bound and the people that I work with my whole life as a youth, I was really interested in continuing to work with youth, and that's how I kind of found my way into the Youth Studies major at the university as well. And then, I always knew I wanted to work with kids, from my own community and others too.

Marisol described her experiences as a woman from a large, poor immigrant family as foundational to her sense of commitment and praxis in her work. Marisol was the first person in her family to attend and complete college. She majored in a youth-studies related discipline in order to seek employment opportunities within her community, as she believes education is a critical tool for overcoming poverty and seeking social mobility.

Lucille

Lucille is currently the director of a research university Upward Bound program and has served in this role for four years. Previously, Lucille served as the UB academic counselor for four years, teaching and developing UB curriculum and advising students on the college-going process. As she reflected on her TRIO tenure, Lucille shared experience in TRIO gives her expertise across broad sectors in education:

> I feel like I get the best in the worst of all of it, you know? You know, having to dabble in K12, higher ed, the students, the families, the community. I'm well equipped to holistically provide the best programming to these students, and to train my staff to do the same. It is about educating them on the hidden curriculum as much as is about the hardcore academic curriculum … College isn't just about getting a grade in class, you know? I think that is what is forgotten in all of this, it is a transition for students, specifically with this program, working with the Minneapolis District, a very urban district. The students are matriculating into predominantly white institutions, and of course that is very different for them, so … I would say the work that we do here is very much holistic and intrusive with

> our students. And I think all programs are very impactful, that is what is needed with this population of low-income, first-gen students.

Lucille identifies as a woman of color and shared one area of her praxis critical to her work is expertise in diversity and equity programming. To assume the director role, Lucille completed a year-long institute in public policy advocacy and community outreach and is widely viewed on her campus as an authority on educational legislation and regulations at the state and federal level.

Drew

Like many TRIO professionals, Drew has served in multiple roles in his Upward Bound program. He is currently the academic coordinator (AC) and is charged with developing all curriculum and instructional materials for the credited coursework situated within the program's UB service high schools. Before his AC role, Drew served as a college access advisor and residential coordinator for four years. Drew shared it was his experience working at a community college that inspired him to dedicate his career to TRIO:

> Once I finished my (master's) degree I actually started working for a test program over at the community college. And so it was a grant program, just a pilot, and it was a good experience. However, I kept thinking back to when I tutored at Upward Bound and how you can do more good for the students the earlier you start. So, you know, it was good to work with college students who are first-year community college students, who are placed in remedial classes, but I was thinking, how better it would be if to serve these kids like Upward Bound. Not

> kids, adults, when they were younger. So, the opportunity arose for me to come back to Upward Bound and I was like "Yes, please!"

Drew's current praxis is focused on fostering individualized academic support for TRIO students while anticipating the curricular shifts of the local public school district. In his role as an academic coordinator, he is responsible for facilitating credited coursework in the service high schools as well as tutoring services students based on students' academic needs.

Public Regional University Participant Profiles

The public regional university is defined for this study as a publicly funded state institution characterized by a diverse disciplinary field, typically emphasizing the arts and sciences, and in which baccalaureate degrees represent at least half of all degrees conferred. The public regional institutions in this study also award master's and doctoral degrees, which represent a significantly smaller proportion of degrees than the research university. The public regional institutions in this study featured an average enrollment of between 7,500-9,000 students. The state of Minnesota's regional college system, Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MNSCU) is composed of state-funded public regional universities, community colleges, and tribal colleges, culminating in a state-wide system of 37 campuses. Of the 12 participants in this study, four TRIO professionals (Opal, Cliff, Diana, and Julia) served at public regional universities across three regions of the state. The following profiles feature an introduction of each TRIO public regional professional and the narratives they shared in describing their praxis and perspective on college access public policy.

Opal

Opal is currently a TRIO director at a large, regional public institution in a mid-size industrial city. Like most other participants in this study, Opal has served in multiple roles within TRIO and other college access programs. Before her current leadership role within TRIO, she served as an access counselor and academic coordinator for four years. Opal shared her own experience in an access and retention program for underrepresented students of color motivated her desire to work in college access, and the history of TRIO continues to serve as a significant inspiration in her praxis.

> I was in a college access program primarily for students of color through the Saint Paul Public Schools called the Multicultural Excellence program. MEP really supported me at university, I really enjoyed being a part of that program. Then I started working in Upward Bound, where we really had the freedom to create the program based on what students wanted and I really loved that flexibility and creativity. And then too, TRIO's history and its roots in the Civil Rights Movement, you cannot deny that that's just … to be able to say that you do work that stems from the Civil Rights Movement is the coolest thing you could possibly ever say. You know, it's hard, feeling different, and knowing that everyone in your family, everyone back home, is looking up to you, watching you as you do this thing, it's so much pressure, and I hear that from students every day … college is hard for everyone, but especially for those of us that feel different or othered, we need spaces like TRIO to share and validate with each other.

Opal's identity as a woman of color plays a large role in her praxis as a TRIO advisor and director. She shared her experiences connecting with peers in MEP was a powerful aspect of her access and completion journey and illustrated the significance of enclave communities to enrich and support underrepresented students as they encounter hardships and setbacks in college.

Cliff

Cliff's journey to TRIO began as an undergraduate student when he served as a Math tutor and residential summer staff member at a large midwestern research university Upward Bound program. When reflecting on his TRIO path, Cliff proudly shared he has been with the program in a variety of roles for over 40 years. After serving as a student employee, Cliff became an access advisor and academic coordinator before being promoted to his current role as the director of Upward Bound. Cliff's current TRIO program is situated in a mid-sized city within the heart of Minnesota's agricultural region. Cliff self-identified as a multiracial man and shared he grew up low-income, which he identified as an important aspect of his praxis and approach to working with TRIO students.

> I'm pretty much a hands-on director. I still keep seeing students weekly during the school year and I still have that advising load. In the summer I still live in a residence hall. Pretty much everything we do with students in the program, and their parents, I'm there. You know, when students apply, I'm the first one they see. And they see me an awful lot! I laugh because I had to get my Master's to qualify for the director promotion. In reality, my degrees have nothing to do with what I'm doing here. A master's degree not going to make you a more empathetic and supportive quality TRIO staff member. It's all about walking alongside the

> students and their families, it's about meeting them in their schools and literally bringing them to the campus, showing them that it's possible.

In Cliff's perspective, TRIO provides a critical community engagement venue for the university. This echoes similar sentiments by several participants in this study, across institutional types. TRIO's benefit as a signifier of higher education's public good is particularly important for regional public institutions, which are emblematic of state higher education in local, rural communities.

Diana

TRIO played a significant role in Diana's life since her first undergraduate internship as an administrative assistant for TRIO Student Support Services. Thirty-three years later, Diana is still working for the same TRIO department at the same university. She described how experience as an undergraduate doing clerical work for the program shaped her future trajectory significantly.

> I just loved working with Upward Bound and the families, and the students. Even though it was more of a clerical position in the beginning, I mean, you know how TRIO is. You know, I did everything. I did the ropes course with them, I did the field training, I went to Chicago with a student on a scholarship interview, I took notes at the grant writing meetings. So, from the very beginning, I felt like I could really contribute to the program and the students, and I was learning the program every day, in all of the little and big things we did as a team.

As a first-generation student, Diana attributed her decision to commit her career to TRIO to an element of the TRIO world frequently mentioned by other participants in this study—the absence of hierarchy and an implicit embrace of an "all hands on deck" approach to the daily labor of TRIO programs. The highest-level TRIO administrator still works a student case list and helps pack the van for the annual pool party, and almost all the TRIO professionals in this study served in multiple official and unofficial roles within TRIO.

Julia

Julia's TRIO career began more than 25 years ago when she was recruited from the county workforce development program. Julia's experience in workforce development established her interest in working with low-income students, as she experienced reticence about the limited scope of educational and career options presented to low-income communities.

> I've been with TRIO for 28 years. Similar population but different end goals, and a much more comfortable goal for me. We all have the same mission and helping kids reach their greatest potential, ours just happens to have the focus on education instead of just getting kids into jobs. So you know, I just really take the federal regulations and say that we serve a population of low-income, first-gen students and we're the wind beneath the wings for the high school counselors. We work collaboratively with our target schools to help with those particular students who sometimes fall between the cracks, especially in Minnesota with our ratio of counselor to the student. I wish everyone could be in our program.

Julia began her tenure with TRIO as an access counselor and now serves as the academic coordinator of a regional, public institution Upward Bound program. She collaborates frequently with institutional partners and serves on the university equity and diversity coalition.

Community College Participant Profiles

Community colleges are defined for this study as publicly-funded state institutions in which the highest degree conferred is an associate's degree. They typically feature a mix of career, technical, and vocational programs, and a high proportion of students who are nontraditionally-aged. The Carnegie classification system notes community colleges are also defined by high transfer rates to other institutions compared to four-year colleges, and higher attrition rates than their four-year institutional peers (Carnegie Classifications, 2020). One of the community colleges in this study is considered large according to the classification system, with an average enrollment of 10,000-12,000 students, while the other is small, with an enrollment of just over 1,000 students. MNSCU's system includes 30 community and technical colleges, representing the vast majority of institutional types within the system. The two community colleges represented in this study are regionally distinct, with one located in a rural, remote northern Minnesota community and the other located in a low-income suburb of the state's major metropolis. Of the 12 participants in this study, two TRIO professionals (Jeanette and Blong) served at community colleges. The following profiles feature an introduction of each TRIO community college professional and the narratives they shared in describing their praxis and perspective on college access public policy.

Jeanette

Jeanette currently serves as a TRIO Upward Bound director at a community college on the Iron Range in northern Minnesota. The rurality of her program and her own experience as a first-generation, non-traditional, low-income student defines both her path to TRIO and her praxis as a TRIO professional.

> You know, we're up here in the mining areas. So some of our issues are the same but exacerbated up here because there are so few resources. The goal is always to look at the families individually, really look at each student situation. I really still feel like that's my role, it's really to make sure we're there for the students. We need to prepare students academically and then be involved in co-curricular things that will also prepare them … So, our focus is really academic and academic support, and it made a huge difference. We use an intrusive advising model. If there's a problem with a student, we're on it right away. We don't wait it out, we're really proactive with the students.

The limited resources at Jeannette's institution, coupled with the economic Depression and remoteness of the surrounding community have a direct influence on the level of engagement Jeanette affords to each student and the academic focus of her program. Upward Bound is the primary resource in Jeanette's rural working-class community for low-income, first-generation students who aspire to go to college.

Blong

Blong directs two TRIO Upward Bound grants at a community college located in a low-income suburb of a large urban center. Blong described the composition of the local community as "mostly the kids of refugees and immigrants," and shared the high schools served by the grants are "almost entirely free or reduced lunch kids." He has served as the access coordinator, academic coordinator, and now director of the UB program, a role he has been in for seven years. Blong himself is an Upward Bound alum and identifies as an immigrant Hmong man from a low-income, refugee community. His own experience navigating college access as a low-income immigrant and receiving the support of Upward Bound guided his professional path into college access for underrepresented students.

> If you would have told me when I was sixteen, goofing off with my friends in UB after school, that I would have a master's degree and be leading a program, I never would have believed you! And, if I go back to my high school years and without TRIO, I would not be here, and a lot of my peers wouldn't be where they are at. A lot of them are actually medical doctors, lawyers, professors, and engineers. I was like, "Wow!" And it's all because of TRIO … I was actually trained to become a high school math teacher. I had a choice to work at a charter school or work for TRIO, and I chose TRIO, and I never looked back. And I just love the work that we do here because it's meaningful. I'm very passionate about the work that I do because we impact students tremendously, I see it every day.

Blong described his current work as a TRIO director to be focused on program expansion and leadership development for his staff, and he still manages a caseload of advising students and participates in the policy advocacy institute.

Private Liberal Arts Participant Profiles

Private liberal arts (PLA) colleges are defined for this study as privately funded institutions that primarily focus on baccalaureate programs and have a smaller enrollment than public universities. They typically focus on the liberal arts, sciences, and diverse fields and disciplines. A distinction of private liberal arts colleges is higher tuition and cost of living rates, and a correlated focus on philanthropic development and alumni support. Both of the private liberal arts colleges in this study are considered small according to the classification system, with an average enrollment of 3,500 undergraduate students. Minnesota has 25 private liberal arts colleges. The two PLAs represented in this study are regionally distinct, with one located in a rural Minnesota community of 20,000 residents, and the other located in the urban center of the state's largest city. The rural institution is an elite college by selection standards, admitting 40% of applicants annually, while the urban institution is less selective, admitting 65% of applicants annually. Of the 12 participants in this study, three TRIO professionals (Hugh, Gao, and Marta) served at PLAs. The following profiles feature an introduction of each TRIO PLA professional and the narratives they shared in describing their experiences in the TRIO world.

Hugh

Hugh is an early career TRIO professional at an urban, private liberal arts college. Hugh has worked in college access and financial aid for over five years. He identifies as a white man from a rural community and low-income family, who is also a member of the LGBTQIA community. Hugh is also a proud TRIO alum and reflected his own experience as a low-income, first-generation college student influenced his path to TRIO.

> I myself was a TRIO participant in my undergrad experience, TRIO Student Support Services … they really kind of picked me up a couple times and I had stumbled and fallen. And so it was really good, to have TRIO as a support network while I was in college. My grad program came next and the program is heavily focused on social justice initiatives and trying to bring equity and inclusion and diversity into higher education. So that just kind of made my passion for all those kinds of things grow … So, I really got passionate about

> working with underrepresented students and I wanted to be a resource for folks who, like myself, I needed that.

Hugh conducts a one-on-one advising meeting with each of his caseload students weekly during the fall semester. Additionally, Hugh facilitates access and financial aid curriculum and programming for students and families. When asked to describe the unique ways TRIO supports low-income, first-generation students, Hugh shared, “There's an acronym that I use, it's SAFE. TRIO, in my opinion, focuses on helping students transition and be supported socially, academically, financially, and just kind of everything else.”

Gao

Gao is a TRIO assistant director and former academic coordinator and access counselor at an urban, private, liberal arts college. Gao is a first-generation, low-income student, a member of the Hmong community, and is the daughter of immigrants. These identities and experiences greatly shaped her own college access story, which Gao shared as an example of a typical first-gen, low-income student who does not have TRIO support.

> When I was looking for colleges, to be honest with you, I never thought college was a possibility. So, I kind of navigated that whole process by myself, and I didn't really know anything, I didn't really have anybody to help me through that. As I started college they started the TRIO Student Support Services Program. And I knew early on when I was in college that was what I wanted to do … I kind of want to work with students like me. And I want to be that resource to other

> students who really benefit from someone who believes in them and can help them along the way.

Gao attended the same private liberal arts institution at which she currently works. She has been in her leadership role for over five years and has served with her current TRIO program for almost 15 years.

Marta

Marta is a TRIO Upward Bound access counselor at a small, private, rural liberal arts college. She has served in her role for almost 10 years and has continuously been located in the private liberal arts sector. A unique aspect of Marta's TRIO experience is serving low-income public urban high schools while being hosted by an elite, rural institution. Her program delivers curriculum and counseling at the school sites in the city and then brings the students to live on campus during the residential summer bridge program. Like many of the TRIO professionals in this study, Marta was a first-generation, low-income student herself.

> I was raised by a single father and I was the first person in my very extended family to ever go to college. Unfortunately, I had no idea what college access was, and so I had to kind of, I navigated that whole process on my own. After I graduated from college, I was a teacher, and I thought I would get more experience. And as soon as I learned about TRIO and kind of what it was all about, I was hooked.

Marta shared her experience working with students in both rural and urban contexts is one of the aspects of TRIO she values the most.

> You know, so many of our kids haven't even explored much beyond their neighborhood. It's hard for them to imagine leaving for college, and so they naturally might resist that. But TRIO lets us take the kids on the road, get them on college campuses, and suddenly they are planning to apply to the University of Hawaii! (laughs)

Summary

The brief profiles provide an insight into their role in TRIO, the trajectory that led them to the program, and how their identities intersect with their praxis. The 12 participants who participated in the study reflected on their own lives and experiences in college access to contextualize how they view their work as TRIO professionals and their perspective of public policy. The participants' perspectives of the public policy sphere, and its influence on LIFG college access and completion, will be the focus of the next section.

Critical Policy Analysis

The focus of this study was public policy analysis "in the field." The TRIO professionals have strong policy expertise by merit of their experience writing federal education grants, engaging in policy advocacy and reform, and enacting policies set by their local school districts, higher education institutions, and the US Department of Education. The utility and potential of critical policy analysis in higher education are expressed perfectly by Ana Martinez-Aleman (2015), which provides the rationale for the approach to this study:

> The greatest challenge of critical higher education policymaking is to map the graph of causes and the valence of interactions (relationships) between causes.

> Each source of inequity, each cause or node, links, and networks in one or multiple ways to other causes. In this view, critical higher education policy's functionality is to attend to the nodal locations of social injustice as well as their structural interactions. (p. 17)

The analysis of data in this study adopts Martinez-Aleman's approach by mapping themes from the data into 3 meta themes, or nodes of inequity, that speak to the key questions raised in the study. The TRIO professionals' analysis of public policy aligns with the five pillars of critical policy analysis (CPA) as described by higher education scholars, in which public policy is evaluated according to its' potential to advance equity, efficiency, liberation, sustainability, and solidarity (Neumann & Pallas, 2015). This critical lens on policy is ideally constructed "in the field," or within the communities most impacted by the policy itself. Neumann and Pallas (2015) emphasized the goal of engaging the voices of community members to analyze public policy is to "juxtapose equity against other values (such as power) as justifications for government action" (p. 158). TRIO college access programs, and their access professionals, constitute the ideal case to analyze how tuition-free public policy will influence the equity, efficiency, liberation, sustainability, and solidarity of low-income, first-generation students as they seek higher education inclusion. As US campuses continue to rapidly diversify and espouse the values of representation and equity, it is critical to center TRIO programs and professionals in the discourses of higher education policymaking.

Emergent Themes Across Participants: Nodes of Inequity

In the process of conducting interviews with each participant across the higher education landscape of Minnesota, there were frequent commonalities in the stories and experiences they shared in working with first-generation, low-income students, as well as their perspectives on college access public policy. As the TRIO professionals shared their experiences and perspectives with public policy, they frequently connected the policy with their experiences working with students and their families, analyzing myriad access factors and institutional realities. Utilizing Martinez-Aleman's (2015) approach to critical policy analysis, I endeavored to "map the causes and the valence of interactions (relationships) between causes. Each source of inequity, each cause or node, links and networks in one or multiple ways to other causes" (p. 17). Using this lens of nodes as points of critical connection, I organized the data below with three overarching meta themes, or nodes: ambivalence and affordability, persistence and completion, and stratification and agency. These themes are explored in connection with correlated codes from other themes, including affordability, financial literacy, and institutional type.

After collecting the data, I consciously engaged in a period of reflection and refraction, as described by Saldana (2013) and O'Connor (2007). Given my history with Upward Bound and my affinity identity as a low-income, first-generation student, I hoped to acknowledge my pre-existing perspectives and biases before I analyzed the data. The period of refraction was particularly important as I approached the data, as it allowed me to consider both "the mirrored reality and the researcher's lens" (Saldana, 2013, p. 50), and to consider how my lens was "dimpled and broken, obscured in places, operating as a concave and convex lens (O'Connor, 2007, p. 8). Sitting with my data, listening to the interview audio while memoing, and engaging in reflection was a critical stage of the early analysis process and led me to delve into the data with a fresh perspective (Creswell, 2007; Seidman, 2006).

I engaged in Creswell's (2007) qualitative analysis procedures to establish codes and Saldana's (2014) strategy of "theming the data" to engage in a meta-theming process, in alignment with Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's (2013) strategy for case-oriented analysis. The analysis was done inductively to ensure the participants' stories and perspectives guided the process (Creswell, 2007). I initiated the process with thematic analysis, grouping significant statements, words, and ideas around common themes and creating an initial coding matrix (Creswell, 2007; see Figure 2). I then identified recurring codes and emergent themes within the individual interviews, and then across all participants. This initial thematic analysis aimed to elucidate the common experiences and perspectives of policy and access among TRIO professionals (Saldana, 2014). After establishing preliminary codes, I identified emergent categories to examine the resonance of specific codes and the connections between themes. Utilizing Saldana's (2014) meta-analytic theming process, I then winnowed down the number of emergent themes to develop several overarching or integrative themes, referred to in this study as "nodes," to construct a cohesive narrative that would respond to my research questions and aid in future interpretation.

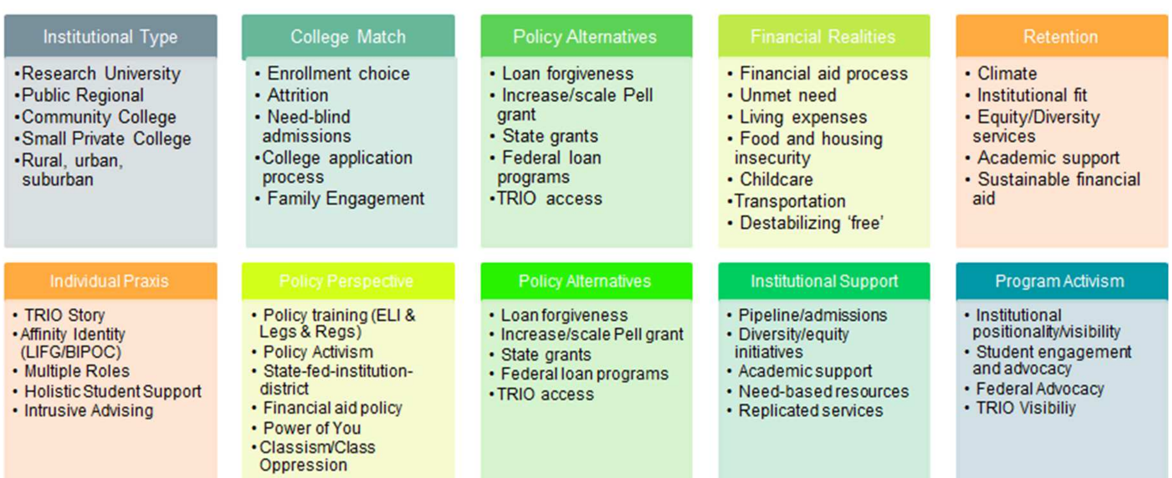

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Figure 2. Coding matrix and emerging themes.

After organizing the codes into emergent themes, I returned to the research questions and homed in on the codes and themes related to tuition-free public policy. I created a Venn diagram based on the frequency and specificity with which the participants related each emergent theme to TFPP (see Figure 3). Finally, I assigned each cluster of emergent themes an overarching meta-theme, or node: ambivalence and affordability, persistence and completion, and stratification and agency. These meta themes are developed from established conceptions of LIFG access and retention barriers from scholars and practitioners. The following Figure 3 illustrates the nodes (meta themes) and the connecting and overlapping themes:

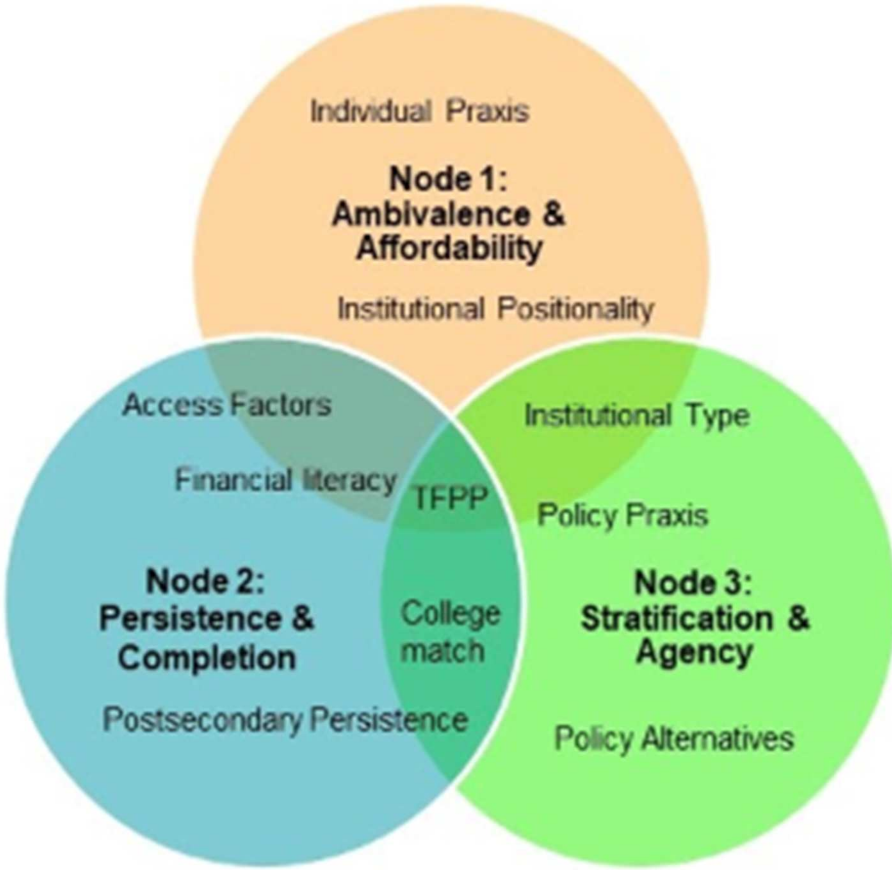

Figure 3.

Nodes of inequity meta-analysis.

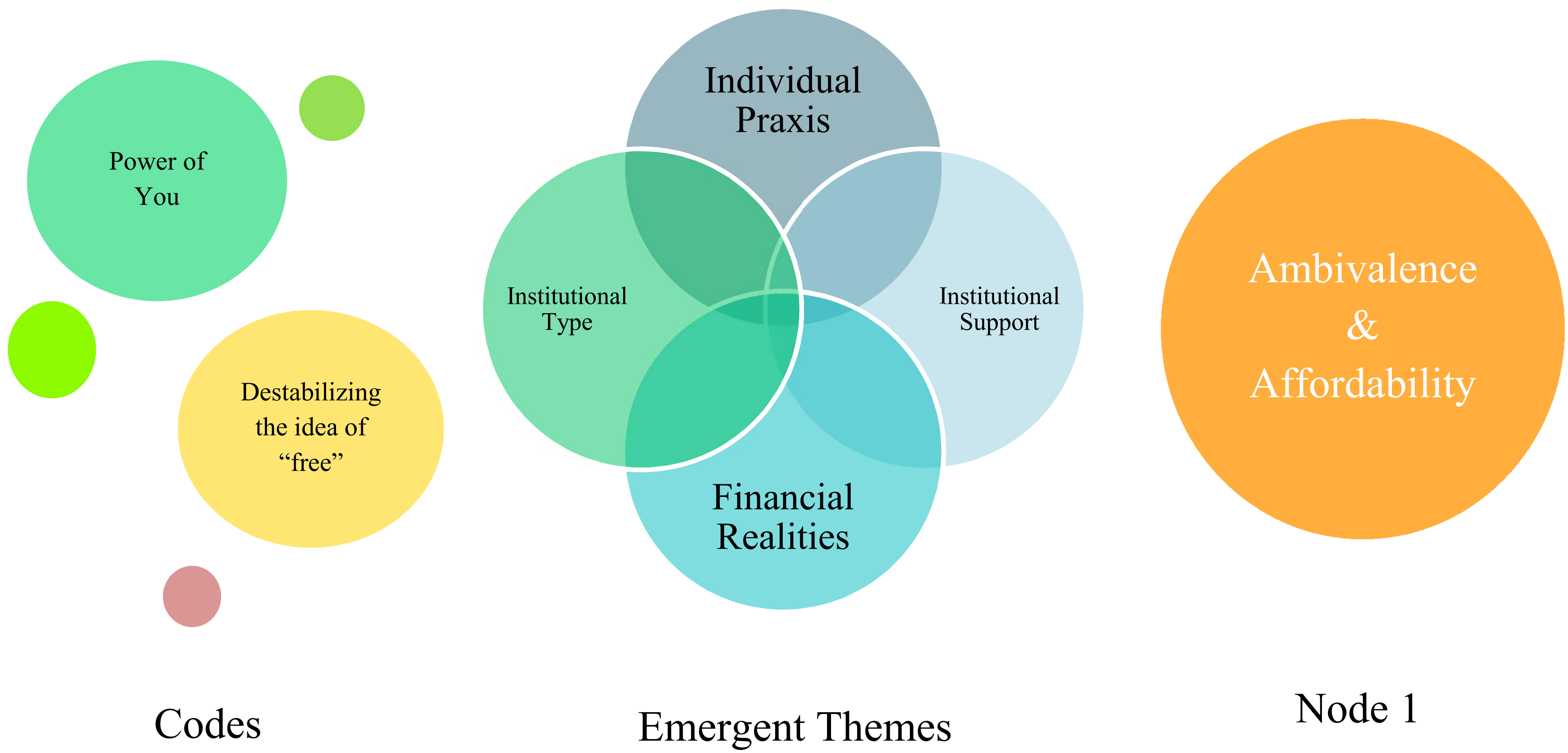

Figure 4. Ambivalence and affordability node.

Node One: Ambivalence & Affordability: "It's a Bundle of Barriers"

Figure 4 demonstrates how the ambivalence and affordability node is comprised of three emergent themes: access factors, financial literacy, and persistence. The codes that came up frequently with participants that I unpack in this section are: destabilizing the idea of free college and the local tuition-free initiative the Power of You program. The words "worry," "worried," "concerned," "cautious," and "skeptical" came up more than 60 times in the interview transcripts for this study concerning tuition-free public policy (TFPP), connected to whether TFPP actually addresses the affordability concerns of low-income students. As such, a frequent code in the dataset within the theme of tuition-free public policy was "ambivalence" about the definition, scope, and impact of TFPP. Some TRIO professionals regard TFPP as a possibility, while others view it as an inevitability for which they must prepare and adapt their praxis. One may assume TRIO professionals, who consistently cite affordability as the primary barrier to college access, would be in favor of the idea of "free college," but the findings overwhelmingly indicate they are apprehensive about the design, implementation, and impact of TFPP. To illustrate the ambivalence and affordability node, I explore two major ways ambivalence and affordability were coded in the participant narratives: destabilizing the idea of free college and the Power of You program, a local state tuition-free model. I will unpack each code with illustrative examples from the participants, and then connect these codes to the emergent themes that embody Node 1.

Destabilizing the idea of free college

Lucille's narrative includes one of the most consistent themes across participants: the concern tuition-free public policy will obscure the financial barriers low-income students face beyond tuition. All 12 participants expressed this concern in some form, and most detailed offhand the cumulative impact of a variety of fees and expenses related to college participation. TRIO professionals are well-versed in enumerating the comprehensive financial commitment of college enrollment and persistence, as demonstrated by Lucille's narrative:

> Even when a student can go to a tuition-free school, that still doesn't mean they don't still have financial barriers. Are they going to do housing? Are they a commuter? Because if they have a commuter status that also comes with barriers. Transportation, parking, cost, time, balancing other things, not being able to really be immersed and surrounded by like-minded students, and you're going to be less involved. So, I'm worrying and thinking about what kind of experience they are going to have.

Lucille's connection between TFPP's financial limits and the influence on college involvement is explored further in this chapter, as many of the TRIO professionals raised the concern that TFPP may cause students to settle for less than the "full college experience."

Like Lucille, Jeanette's analysis was focused on how TFPP may oversimplify the financial realities experienced by low-income students in college. As a TRIO professional at a community college on the Iron Range, Jeanette's policy advocacy is primarily concerned with the daily struggle to meet students' basic needs.

> … transportation, food, and work. … like I said, transportation is a big factor with students having to make a choice between paying for a bus fare or having lunch. Those are real choices. I've had students come to me and say "oh, I'm going to

> have to drop this college class if I have to pay the art fee." Nobody's going to cover those fees. So with the free tuition, and I know that they say books and stuff, but are they talking about the fees? You know, in a tech program, for example, some of our types of programs here, the fees can be up to $1,000 because the students are going to get all of their tools. Like, for auto repair programs, or whatever they go into. … are these programs set up in a way to really cover the gaps? To cover the whole wrap-around, daycare, transportation, food? Those actual hidden fees and the things that come up? We need to remember that there is a loss of income for every hour they're in school, they're not working. So we have to make sure it's sustainable for them, that they can actually persist.

Jeanette's perspective of TFPP is strongly rooted in her institutional type, the rural, vocation-focused community college.

At the other of the institutional spectrum, Marta connected her ambivalence about free college to her rural, elite, private liberal arts college, and the potential of TFPP to narrow LIFG students' sense of possibility:

> You know, I think free college for everyone would be amazing. But I think that just in the state of affairs that the United States is in right now, I don't know that it would be the best thing. You know, the data shows that low-income students do perform better at the small, selective schools. And so, our students have the ability to end up going to a lot of small private liberal arts colleges where they're more likely to be successful. And I worry about if it's free to just go to the state schools, they won't even look at a school like ours, even if we do our best to

> make it affordable … I think about the students that are not in a college access program who are getting those financial aid packages and not understanding them, and don't have a lot of guidance and support, and they are going to go with free. But you know, free college would be great, but it's all in the implementation and the education.

Marta's concern about how TFPP may influence college match is explored further in this chapter, as it was a consistent concern among TRIO professionals.

Diana's perspective of tuition-free public policy is directly shaped by her decades of TRIO service and her student-centered, collaborative praxis. She began her analysis by framing the affordability dilemma as central to her experience supporting students throughout the college-going process, but asserted affordability is a dimensional issue and not one that can be limited to tuition.

> I mean, overall, obviously for the students that we serve, the finances are such a burden. I mean, for so many of them, it often takes longer to graduate, because they have to take off time to work. So, I think tuition-free would certainly lessen the burden. But then I think … how does that affect everything else? How does that affect your financial aid? I mean, we see a lot of our students where financial concerns go well beyond the tuition, right? I mean, we have students who are full-time students and who are working to send money home, and … so it certainly wouldn't answer all of those problems.

Diana's nuancing of the affordability concerns of low-income, first-generation students exemplify the ambivalence of the TRIO professionals regarding the purpose and influence of TFPP. The participants frequently reiterated concerns that by framing college as ‘free’ in the TFPP context, there will be a flattening of understanding and support for the complex financial realities of low-income students. The participants’ ambivalence about free college was often connected to the local example of a TFPP program, the Power of You program at an urban community college.

Power of You

A primary source of ambivalence for many participants’ perspectives on TFPP was institutional free tuition programs, which are referred to as “local case studies” for how free college programs are operationalized and implemented. Similar to other states that eventually introduce tuition-free legislation, Minnesota’s initial cases of tuition-free programming is at the community college and private college levels. The participants in this study explored existing Minnesota models with a focus on the design and influence of the policy on college match, real versus perceived affordability and the limitations of persistence.

Ten out of twelve participants referenced the Power of You (POY) program as their primary reference point for tuition-free programs in the state of Minnesota. Power of You is an institutionally based tuition-free program at the city’s largest and most high profile community college. The mission of POY as stated on the community college’s website is: “We make your dream of attending college **tuition-free** a possibility. POY student tuition is covered through state and federal grants. A privately funded incentive program assists students with the cost of books, transportation, meal cards, and personal emergency use” (MCTC, 2019). It is important to note since most low-income students’ existing federal and state financial aid (primarily consisting of the Pell Grant and the Minnesota State Grant) exceeds the cost of attendance at the community college, the language of free college can be interpreted as a misnomer in this case. The students who are eligible for Pell and state grants could utilize that funding at any accredited institution of higher education, but the way POY is marketed often leads students to presume the community college is allocating them financial aid to make tuition-free. Drew, a TRIO professional at a research university, discussed the influence of POY on the overall college application and match experience for TRIO students:

> Well, I mean I can just talk about my experience with Power of You, is that we have had many seniors go through the College Planning class that we offer and they have to apply to at least five schools. We make sure that … they're applying to the research university, and then we do at least one reach, two matches, and at least one safety. What we have found is the vast majority of them chose the community college because of the Power of You. They say, "oh, that's the school where you can go for free, so that's going to be my safety." And they didn't think about match, they didn't think about programs, degrees, you know all of that just kind of went out the window. They just saw, "oh, that's just the school we can go for free." And Power of You markets themselves as that free option.

Drew explicitly stated his practitioner observation that the tuition-free program within the local higher education landscape influenced, and potentially constrained, low-income students' process of choosing where to apply for college and which college characteristics to consider when navigating this process.

Even within the context of the TRIO College Planning course, in which students engage in a research-based curriculum that explores college fit and selection criteria, Drew observed the tuition-free option can cause students' criteria to go "out the window." Drew also suggested the way POY is marketed, specifically as a "free" college choice, can be misleading or detrimental for low-income students.

> It's the way it's presented to them. … I think a lot of people at the schools are like, "well you know, you can always just go do Power of You." So, they're hearing in the schools and the way that it's being marketed out in the open is yeah, this is going to be free. You don't have to pay anything. But, we all know that there is no such thing as a free lunch. And, it's marketed as being free, but what we have found is that even some of our students who have gone to the community college … they realized very quickly, "oh, this is not one hundred percent free," and that there are hidden costs they encounter. And, if a student thinks, "oh, I don't need to apply for financial aid, I don't need to do the FAFSA, I can get the Power of You. … I can just go there for free." … that's not a good thing.

Drew's experience with a local tuition-free option cultivated his perspective that students' college search and financial processes may be inhibited by a "free" option and the ways colleges market tuition-free programs may have a misleading influence on low-income students and their families. Drew's experience in the field demonstrates the power even one tuition-free option has on the college-going process of low-income students. His example of students deciding not to apply for financial aid because they think they can go to community college for free shows a direct link between tuition-free programs and limiting student choice.

Jeanette's prior positions in the state higher education system gave her proximal influence on the development of several policy initiatives, including the Power of You.

Jeanette's ambivalence about the restrictiveness of tuition-free models stems from her professional experience on the POY committee. Her perspective on POY connects with an earlier participant who expressed concern about the way the program was marketed to students and how the program parameters inadvertently undermined low-income student persistence. Jeanette's positionality at a two-year community college, and her experience with POY, is important because community colleges typically are the initial sites for tuition-free interventions.

> So first of all, I'll just say that generally, many times tuition-free programs are too restrictive and underfunded. They're underfunded so they can't provide the level of services that are needed, and they're too restricted so that they don't meet all the student needs either. So, it's a bundle of barriers in my opinion … I didn't realize until I was on the Power of You committee for an entire year that it was only for two years. So, of course, I'm assuming that everyone was going to get an AA degree, but then they took required remedial courses, and they only got the funding for two years, but that would not necessarily complete a degree in 2 years if they had to take developmental courses. So now, you picked this college because it says it was free, but really now you've used your grants and you still have to figure out how to complete your degree, or you leave to go work because you can't afford not to.

Another participant, Gao, shared her experience with an institutional tuition-free program designed to provide four-year tuition-free scholarships to TRIO students who participate in the summer bridge program. This model is replicated at many TRIO host institutions, particularly private colleges seeking to compete with the "sticker price" of local public options. Gao shared this program has many benefits related to promoting campus acclimation and affordability, but she cautioned “tuition-free” does not always ensure an affordable option for low-income, first-generation students.

> Tuition-free is one of those things where there are a lot of variables that need to be considered. So for us, at our private liberal arts college, the institution has made a commitment to offer a four-year tuition scholarship for students that come through the summer bridge program. The only thing is that as part of that scholarship students are required to do a two-year residency for the first two years. Now, because it's only tuition, room and board is out of pocket right? So, this is something our program has struggled with because even though the tuition is covered, the remainder of expenses is out-of-pocket. And you know, we've seen a lot of students struggle to come up with the $10,000 per year for housing and fees. Even at $10,000 per year out of pocket it's still a big burden on students, so even after their aid goes in and they've taken out their loans and stuff, I think on average students are still looking at about $3,000 to $5,000 out of pocket, there’s that gap. And that gap does take a toll on students trying to pay that off every semester, and a struggle to register for classes. So, you know, we've seen that that has been a challenge for some students, even if they have a free tuition scholarship.

Jeanette and Gao, both TRIO practitioners for over 10 years each, shared their firsthand experiences of how a tuition-free program can oversimplify or decontextualize the needs of low-income, first-generation students. Their shared ambivalence about TFPP and the potential for it to contribute to the narrowing or flattening of options for LIFG students is rooted in their long-standing experience as TRIO professionals. Their journeys as low-income, first-generation college students also shape their perspective and afford them a deep insight into the needs and interventions crucial to college success for the TRIO eligible population.

Summary

I opened these findings with the critical acknowledgment of the deep and multifaceted ambivalence of TRIO professionals regarding tuition-free public policy. One of the puzzles at the heart of how TFPP is perceived and engaged is this very ambivalence within the communities that is ostensibly the target audiences for such policies. This study sought to explore the causes and nuances of this ambivalence, which often emanates from the existing models in the local landscape, including Power of You and private college contingent tuition scholarships. The TRIO professionals consistently return to the concern that the transfixing idea of "free," predicated on the complexity and intimidation of the financial aid process, is ultimately a confusing misnomer that allows higher education systems to obscure and avoid the complexities and realities of authentic college access.

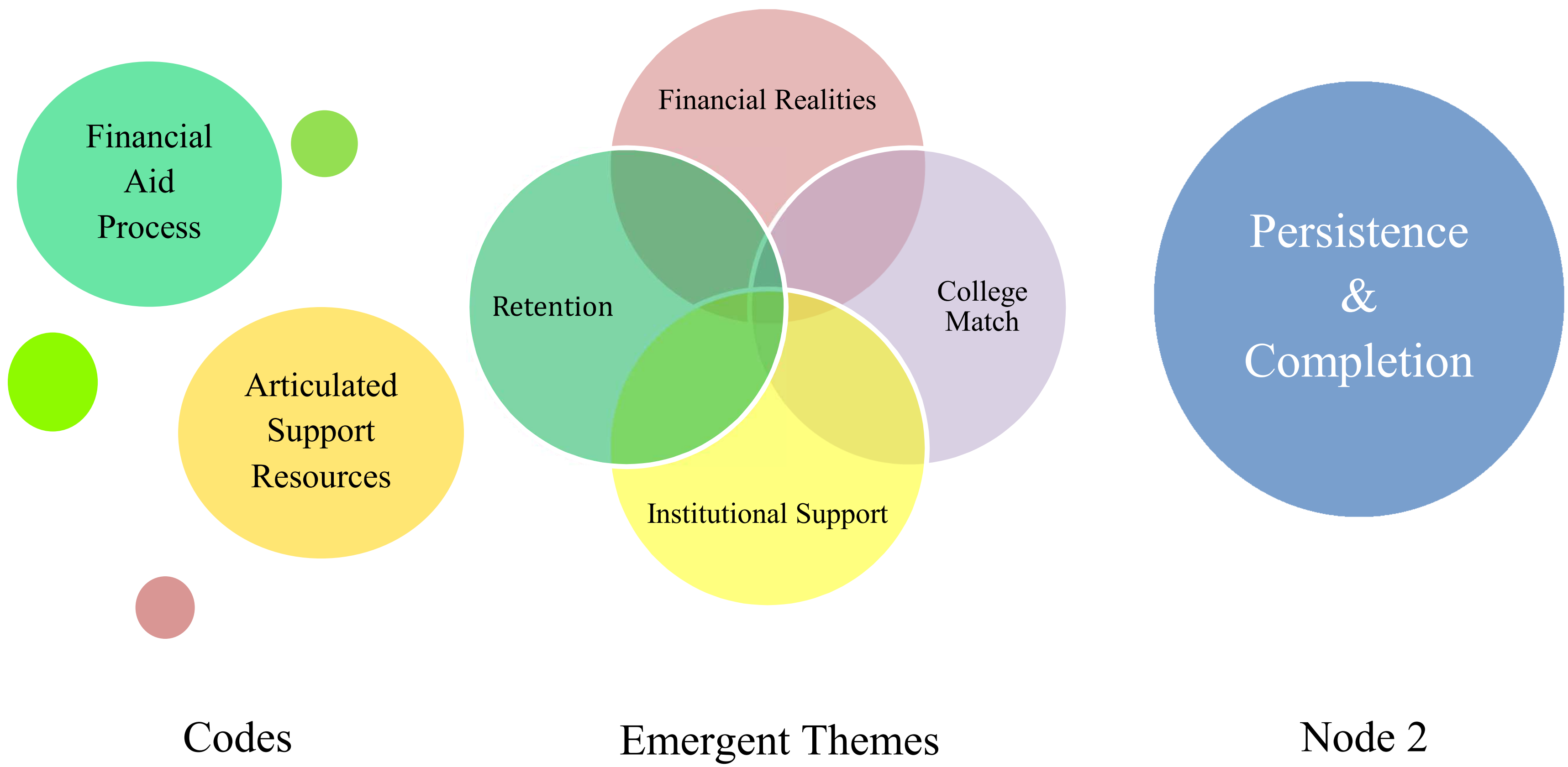

Figure 5. Persistence and completion node.

Node Two: Persistence and Completion

Figure 5 demonstrates how the persistence and completion node consists of three emergent themes: access factors, financial literacy, and persistence. The codes came up frequently with participants and unpacked in this section are the financial aid process and articulated support resources. The TRIO professionals were adamant degree attainment must be the aim of any public policy affecting LIFG students. Many of the participants addressed concerns about how tuition-free public policy may hinder persistence and completion for LIFG students. Specifically, the participants expressed consistent concerns that under TFPP, students will have diminished access to financial literacy, financial aid, and articulated support resources. This section unpacks these critical dimensions of retention and demonstrates how they underlie the primary completion concerns coded in the narratives.

Persistence concerns

As a UB director at a large research university, Lucille's positionality and perspective of TFPP is uniquely dimensional and illustrative of overall concerns about completion. She demonstrated a strong familiarity with the issue, citing her review of legislation and proposals from many other states, including Minnesota. While Lucille did acknowledge cost is the primary factor in TRIO students' college choice, she asserted tuition-free models leave her unconvinced the policy would substantially increase college-going for low-income students.

> I think there are … some advantages and disadvantages, depending on who's proposal you're looking at, because I think a lot of them are pretty different. Overall tuition-free is a great concept, I think it opens up access, but I don't

> necessarily think it's going to fix the problem. … I think it depends on where your objective is. Is it to really get low-income students access to higher ed, or is it to get them to have a college degree? Because those two are very different things. I tell my students right now, anyone, anyone, can get to college. Anybody can, you can apply to community college, you can take an accuplacer with your income status, and you probably won't pay anything because of your grants-in-aid. So I say, anyone can get to college, but the difference is, who will persist and actually obtain a degree?

Lucille's focus on completion echoes a concern several other participants shared related to the persistence of low-income students in higher education.

TRIO programs complete annual performance reports in which they are required to track and report where students enroll and how many complete their degrees within six years. Nine out twelve of the TRIO professionals who participated in this study shared concerns TFPP could have a negative influence on the persistence and degree completion of low-income, first-generation students. TRIO professionals are deeply invested in the "best fit" process while supporting students in applying to college because they view college choice as intrinsically related to persistence. The TRIO college-going curriculum reflects this programmatic praxis, requiring students to apply to multiple colleges (a minimum of five) and assess each school based on academic, social, vocational, and financial fit.

While alleviating affordability concerns is critical to supporting LIFG persistence, the TRIO professionals insisted without articulated completion plans, support resources, and financial literacy education, TFPP would only contribute to the enrollment of low-income, first-generation students. TRIO's emphasis on persistence is reflected by Drew, a research university TRIO professional who shared:

> Because ultimately we want students to have the intrinsic motivation to get them through college. I mean, college is not easy. And, we have multiple alumni come back and say, "Man, college is so hard." And, you know, burnout is real, and so they need something to keep them going, and we found that if students are undecided or, you know, they're going into college with no direction, and they're just like, "Oh, my parents want me to go to college, and you know this college is free, so I'm going to go" … They might go for a little bit, but if they don't have that motivation, once things start to get hard and they start to incur some of those hidden fees, the chances of them dropping out are pretty high.

Financial literacy and financial aid implications

Financial literacy is one of the primary learning and developmental outcomes of TRIO participation. Low-income students gain financial planning and budgeting skills, participate in extensive educational curriculum on navigating student debt and work study programs, and engage their families in the process of comparing financial aid awards. The words "empower" and "empowered" were used more than 20 times in the interviews with TRIO professionals, and it was almost always used in relation to the financial aid process. One of the most significant components of TRIO's approach to working with low-income, first-generation students is a multi-year, family engaged financial literacy curriculum. Programs host workshops and conduct weekly curriculum on everything from evaluating the cost of attendance, student loan interest rates, parent loan options, work-study, and college savings plans. As Gao described,

> You know, our goal is to work with the families so they feel empowered in the financial aid process. We want to help them see beyond the sticker price, not be scared of the FAFSA and financial aid stuff, and make the whole process supportive and a place where they can ask questions.

The influence of TFPP on the financial literacy and corresponding college-going culture of low-income communities came up across the interviews with the TRIO professionals.

A recurring critique of the tuition-free model that came up across several interviews is the requirement that low-income students use their federal and state financial aid to render it tuition-free, expending their federal aid and inhibiting the potential for continuous enrollment and completion. According to this model, which is used by Power of You and others, students are mandated to use their federal and state grant aid before the tuition-free or “last-dollar” program kicks in. Oftentimes, students’ cumulative aid exceeds the cost of attendance. While this is not an out-of-pocket cost, the students’ term-limited financial aid is being exhausted and limiting their ability to utilize financial aid at other institutions or for future schooling.

Lucille emphasized the issue of affordability and the fact many low-income students already have free or mostly free options by merit of their state and federal grant aid eligibility, coupled with the financial aid process they go through in Upward Bound. Lucille shared existing grant programs help address student loan aversion and defray concerns about cost: “But again, for low-income students in our program, a lot of them don't require a lot of debt anyways because of the scholarships that we have them do, and because of financial aid.” This calls into question the “for whom” question of tuition-free policy. The Minnesota Office of Higher Education (MOHE; 2018) published a report on free college initiatives demonstrating in most states with current tuition-free programs, the vast majority of participants are middle-income students who are not eligible for the Pell Grant and other state aid. Lucille's point regarding existing financial aid options speaks to the overall ambivalence many participants shared regarding the motivations of the program related explicitly to low-income students' participation and representation in higher education. Lucille shared,

> Even if they have good aid, they've got their grants and it's affordable, they might still hear that word "free" and say, "Oh, now I don't have to worry about financial aid every year, I'll just go to the free option," but then they use up their Pell and if they want to transfer or they take a break, then what?

Opal also joined her TRIO colleagues in expressing ambivalence about the word "free" and its influence on students' understanding of college financial literacy.

> Well, first of all, I don't think anything is ever free. There's always going to be something that you either have to do, or there will still probably be some fees you have to pay … I mean, and I'm thinking very specifically about TRIO students, the majority, not all, but the majority of students are going to have some kind of Pell eligibility, right? So, if they are actually going to go to a two-year college, and that is their choice to go, and maybe they have full Pell eligibility, the likelihood that they are going to have to pay a lot on their bills is likely pretty low already. And so, I think sometimes even just talking to student through … actually here's what it actually is with what you get with your Pell, versus what is actually going to cost … But I think that's where our role in TRIO comes in, is to really come in and say, "Hey, you know you don't lose anything by applying. You

> don't lose anything by sending your FAFSA and let's just see." Because sometimes, that four-year private school is going to be less money than going to the public state university. And so, let's just really identify options … I think that that's an important conversation too, that we sometimes have with a student is thinking about finances and thinking about, at the end of the day, I always say it's the students' decision.

Opal's observation that free college is already within reach for many low-income students based on their federal and state financial aid eligibility reinforces the narratives of almost all the other participants in this study. The participants frequently shared the concern TFPP will oversimplify or exempt low-income students and their families from really engaging in the holistic, empowering financial aid process. From Gao's positionality as a TRIO counselor at a private college, she asserted an impartial, neutral resource is crucial for low-income, first-generation students as they navigate financial decisions related to college access.

> We really sit down with each student and their parents and say okay, this is what the financial aid looks like, this is what the out-of-pocket cost looks like. So, are you going to able to do this? So we really compare the financial aid packages and say, "what would be the better financial situation for you?" And if some of them are already getting most of their stuff covered by financial aid at another institution, then we might say, "hey, it's not a good idea for you to go here. And you can still be in TRIO in the fall, and we'll help connect you with TRIO there. You'll still get all the same services that we provide, but then you won't be $5,000 or $10,000 in debt." So yeah, that's what we've been doing, we want to be as

> transparent as possible, we want to be honest and transparent, we want the student to make the decision based on what's best for them.

Gao’s approach to financial literacy reflects a rare and remarkable aspect of TRIO’s work in low-income, first-generation communities: TRIO’s charge to be completely impartial and operate on behalf of the students’ best interest.

While they are institutionally affiliated, TRIO programs are explicitly prohibited from recruiting or serving as a pipeline to their host institutions. Many participants shared this charge is an important element of their ability to build trust and transparency with the students and their families, resulting in an empowering financial aid process. The role of financial aid education and financial literacy is a foundational element of all the professionals’ praxis and their first line of defense in ensuring new policy interventions are analyzed according to the needs of low-income students.

Articulated support resources

Many TRIO professionals expressed the concern that low-income, first-generation students may not have adequate support services, or prioritize the availability of such resources, as a result of TFPP, leading to higher attrition. As Hugh shared,

> You know, we track everything, and we can clearly see that the students who have a program, like a TRIO or multicultural services or even like, LGBT or first-gen clubs, some kind of consistent support place, they do better and they are more likely to graduate.

While the professionals are cautious not to reinforce deficit narratives about LIFG academic preparedness, they each shared the importance of holistic academic, social, and financial support for postsecondary persistence. When prompted to reflect on tuition-free public policy, Cliff shared his familiarity with multiple policy formats in other states and emphasized the importance of academic readiness and support:

> Well, I'm not enamored of many of the free policies that are out there, the ones that I've seen, because they don't seem very well-thought-out. And … maybe I shouldn't hold this opinion working in a college access program, but I think throwing that idea out there, of free tuition, may not serve all students well. In many ways, just as PSEO has done. Parents see it as a way to reduce college costs and forget about what a college experience should be, and the importance of preparing an adult. And, I think there are many students who are not ready, even though they may be in programs, like college readiness programs, they're not ready to be college students when they finish high school. … I know that's against what our goal is, we're supposed to get them to go right away after they graduate, but once you start working with that student you might find that he or she is just not ready. So, you have to make sure they have some sort of bridge resources, especially academic support from what we have seen.

Cliff’s primary concern is the design and implementation of the policy, and the potential of tuition-free higher education to place all the emphasis on cost over college fit.

Cliff also anticipates tuition-free models may encourage students who are not yet academically or socially prepared to go to college immediately after high school, making the role of accessible support services even more crucial to persistence. His praxis in working with students and their parents is rooted in this ethical commitment to preparedness and persistence, which he views as the ultimate goal of college access.

> And I think some of those tuition-free plans … Parents will push kids to do it when they aren't ready and then once you have that bad experience, if you have a bad first semester, you carry it with you forever …You know, the idea of a student waiting and preparing at a community college, or doing remedial work, for the first two years of school can go a long way in helping students navigate that first-year successfully. There is some sense that, "well, if it's free" … I see it already in the program. Over time, students will be like, "I don't have to make any personal commitment, I can take what I want and then leave." They do that with tuition dollars. … I've been working the program for 40 years, but I definitely see the value in the government putting money to help to get students prepared, and that's why there should be income limitations on tuition-free programs. So, I would like to see, when they start discussing free tuition, we need to talk about the hard stuff. We need to talk about actual completion and the support it takes to get them across the finish line.

Summary

The TRIO professionals, while ambivalent about tuition-free models, also engaged in a thorough analysis of the ways impartial financial literacy education and support resources can foster persistence and completion. These are critical elements of any access model and can have a profound impact on LIFG college participation beyond enrollment. Higher education access discourses are replete with concerns regarding "maximizing the investment" of state and federal aid programs. The TRIO professionals' emphasis on the crucial role of financial literacy and support resources in LIFG access and completion is a practitioner-based rationale for any new or existing access model to incorporate these elements.

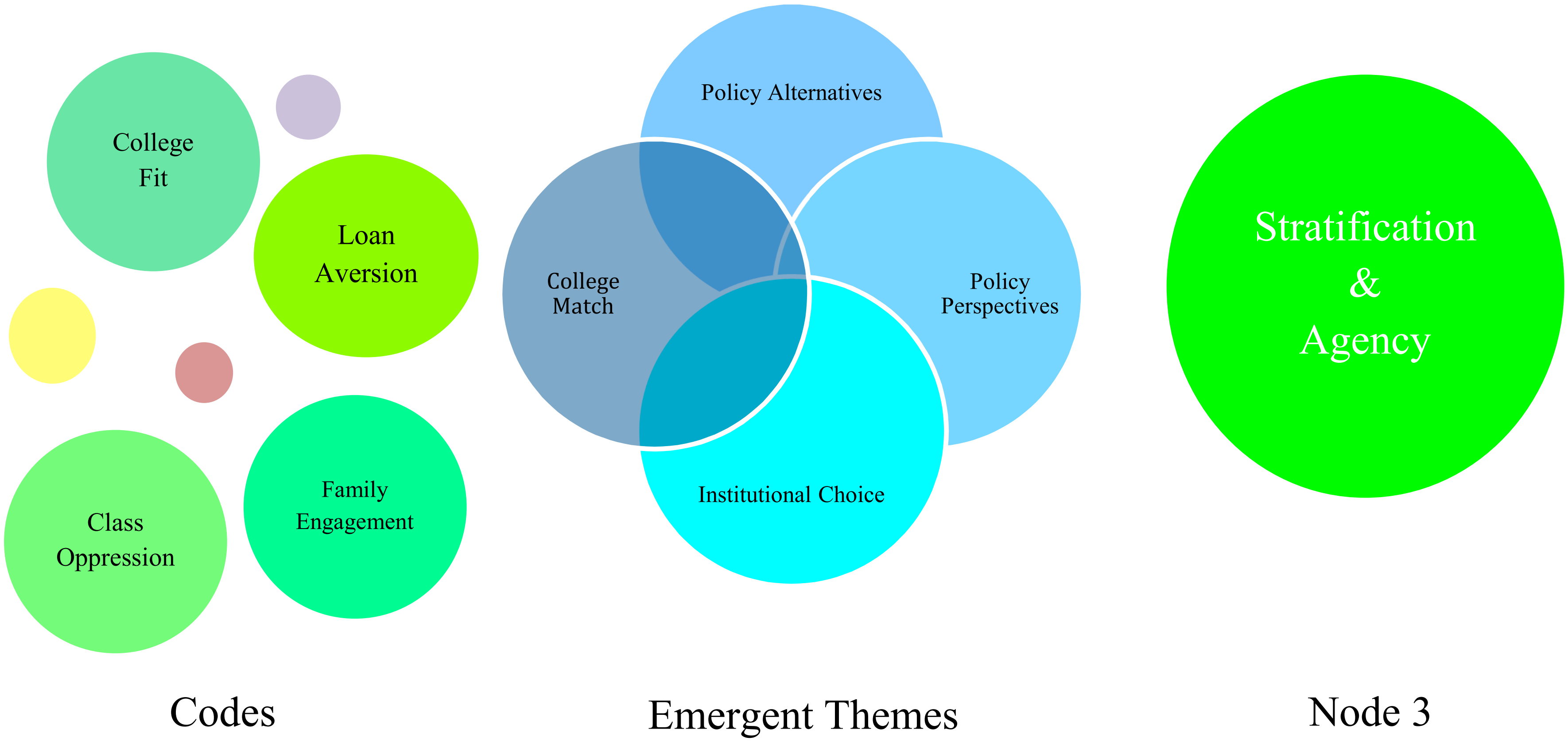

Figure 6. Stratification *and* agency.

Node Three: Stratification and Agency

Figure 6 demonstrates how the stratification and agency node consists of three emergent themes: institutional type, financial literacy, and access factors. The codes that came up frequently with participants I unpack in this section are college match, loan aversion, family engagement, and classism and class oppression. Critical policy analysis (CPA) is the process of destabilizing immediate impressions of a policy and considering the structural forces that shape the policy's formation, design, and implementation. As the TRIO professionals analyzed TFPP, they repeatedly brought up structural concerns about the impact of the policy, specifically how it may contribute to and exacerbate the larger stratification of higher education, including issues of loan aversion, college match, family/community distancing, and classism and class oppression. This section unpacks these codes and explores them as dimensions of higher education stratification.

The TRIO professionals in this study were eager to engage in structural analysis of TFPP, and consistently framed their analysis with the foundational questions that undergird CPA: Who benefits from this policy?; Who is excluded?; Who is harmed or disenfranchised?; and How does this policy shape the college access and persistence of those students most marginalized and underrepresented in higher education? Martinez-Aleman (2015) described this process with a specific and lofty focus:

> The goal of critical approaches, then, is to emancipate individuals and communities from repressive and hegemonic ideas and policies by identifying how these "technologies of power" regulate subjectivity and behavior and by identifying and analyzing power relations that generate social stratification and compulsory segregation. (p. 16)

The TRIO counselors in this study analyzed TFPP as a “technology of power” and a probable mechanism of stratification and segregation in higher education. This section explores this aspect of their analysis. I begin with some of the underlying components of stratification described by the participants, including loan aversion and family distancing, and then pivot to an exploration of the effects of stratification, namely college match mitigation and class oppression within higher education structures.

Loan aversion

The theme of loan aversion, lending intimidation, and various forms of predatory lending came up over 20 times across the interviews and was discussed by all the participants as a major concern of students and families. Several TRIO professionals reflected on their ambivalence in facilitating loan participation. As Opal shared,

> I do feel weird or reluctant sometimes, telling students to take out loans, even the good ones. You know, I think about their age and the idea of being indebted for a long time, and just hoping that they can get a good job and pay it off. … I have student debt and it’s hard.

Federal student loans are simultaneously framed by the TRIO professionals as both an inevitable and important element of the financial aid process, and as a technology of power and financial subjugation. Such a duality reflects the complexity of the issue within the college access world, but one thing is clear across the data: TRIO professionals expect loan aversion will be a primal factor in free college participation.

Julia’s ambivalence about the influence of free college stems from her experience in workforce development and TRIO, watching students navigate the financial aid and career discernment process.

> … obviously the fear of debt is huge for our population, and it makes them more focused on jobs than school. Especially the families, when they hear about job placement or the military, and they are already worried about loans. So, tuition-free could be a huge benefit for some, but it doesn't change a lot of things in our landscape because … nothing changes from high school. High school is tuition-free. And, we still see that classism affecting students. And so I don't know, I haven't seen it work … I continue to feel that if we don't realize that (low-income, first-generation students) are a special segment of the population, it becomes more blended and we lose everything we tried to do. It's just, if everybody goes … I don't know that we have the support services, nor would we see that as much. It's free, what do you expect?

Julia suggested tuition-free public policy may benefit affordability, but she argued it will not diminish classism nor ensure students will have adequate support services to guarantee persistence. Hugh also described the influence of loan aversion on the process of students and parents, noting loans present a significant barrier to student's sense of family support in the process.

> I definitely run into loan concerns a lot. … there are even some students who, they're like, "I don't want to take out loans, no way, no how. … I will figure out some other way, or I'll just go somewhere as long as I don't have to do loans." There's some students who are already enrolled who are like, "I don't want to take out loans but I don't have any other way of staying here. And so, if it's like taking out loans or leaving, I'm going to go with taking out loans." But yeah, they're definitely students that say, "I'm scared of loans, I don't want to take this out and

> be paying it back forever" … Parents, I've seen, are especially very worried about doing the Parent Plus Loan. And the majority of them will just outright refuse to apply. And I think, trying to explain to them, it's not going to affect your credit, even if you get denied it's not going to affect your credit. You don't have to take it if you get accepted, you know, just kind of demystifying it for them. But even then, some parents are like, "nope, I'm not doing it, I'm not putting my name on that." Those conversations are hard. Because students are kind of between a rock and a hard place, they say, "I can't afford to pay this off and my parents are stonewalling me."

The ability of parents to participate in educational borrowing is limited in many ways, including financial, cultural, and community-based realities.

Sarah, a research university TRIO professional, shared TFPP could benefit students for whom student loans are not an option.

> In our program, we have Somali students, and this is something I just learned recently, that Somali families don't believe in interest, or loans. So, our students will struggle with that piece, "well, I can't take out loans and I don't know how to pay for college." And then we say, "well, what do you want to do? How are you going to pay for college? You have to take out loans. If you don't take out loans, right now is the time, especially for our seniors, right now is the time for you to apply for scholarships. And if you don't apply for scholarships, or you don't get any, then I don't know what else to say."

The role of loan aversion in encouraging students to seek alternative funding, enrollment, and career options is a primary concern for the TRIO professionals. They frequently connected TFPP with loan aversion, primarily because they have immediate experience of students limiting their top five college list based on avoiding student loans. The contextualization of loan aversion as being "between a rock and a hard place," as described by Hugh, is an apt summation of the way the fear and intimidation of student loans limit students' and families' sense of autonomy and options in the access journey.

Institutional Choice

All the TRIO professionals acknowledged the importance of higher education affordability and advocated for policy reform and alternatives. As they imagined the influence of TFPP on the higher education landscape of their state, the majority formed a fundamental critique emanating from the concern that low-income students will be disenfranchised from the full college experience if their options are limited by the idea of free college. Their narratives point to a great concern about the potential of tuition-free public policy to further stratify higher education by narrowing where low-income students enroll, and what type of college experiences they have access to. The college search and selection process is a powerful praxis that TRIO facilitates with low-income students and their families to help them feel financially empowered to explore fit and choice in the college access journey, as described by Drew:

> We push all of our students to apply to get financial aid, we just did it this Monday. And, we make it mandatory. You know, every single one of them has to apply for financial aid because we want them to be able to compare the cost of college, with the estimated award letters, and you know, work with the students because, you know, there's no such thing as "oh, it's going to cost $0." So … you're looking at, "Okay, this school might be more expensive, but is the school a

> better fit all in all? … does it have a program that specializes in what your passion is? Can you see yourself being successful here?" … that's more important than the cost.

As Lucille reflected on her years of practitioner expertise, from access counselor to program director, she placed the overall student collegiate experience at the heart of her ambivalence about tuition-free public policy.

> … if there was tuition-free, absolutely this would impact our students and they would be prepared and they could go debt-free and not have to worry about that, but then there's all of the other things to think about. The cost of living, commuting, dorms … it wouldn't be completely, their schooling wouldn't be completely free, and what about their experience, and their entire college education. So it would be you know, letting them know that … it would naturally change the way you do programming or advising for students, it would be educating them on what that means. Like, "okay, tuition-free, yes, but you should still be living on campus, you should still be doing these other experiences, and that does still cost money."

Lucille's narrative explored the broad public discourse of diversification and inclusion in higher education and society at large. If low-income students are tracked into certain types of institutions, the critical college experiences Lucille named such as living on campus and participating in collegiate enrichment may not be accessible to them. The research demonstrates college persistence and completion are increased by accessing these experiences, such as being a resident student, doing internships, studying abroad, and seeking campus engagement opportunities (Gupton, Castelo-Rodriguez, Martinez, & Quintanar, 2009; Matthys, 2013).

When discussing tuition-free public policy, Opal's experience working in college access at both the community college and regional university levels profoundly influences her perspective. She immediately expressed her concern about the possibility it will compromise the college match process for low-income students. As an advocate for the community college experience, especially for students who are unsure of their career path and/or primarily concerned about affordability, Opal drew on her experience advising TRIO students as they navigated which college system is "for them."

> I really think that community college is, for so many students, a great choice. But I have an issue with this idea, where, I feel like, the discourse or the rhetoric I've heard is, we're correlating poor students with the two-year schools. And the idea that, well, what if we raised our expectations? And we had students who were ready for a four-year institution, then what is our commitment to that student? I don't want students to think, well, since I'm low-income or I'm poor, if you will, I can only go to the two-year school. I want the student to go to the two-year school because, you know what, Hennepin Tech has this great fluid power program and I really want to do this and I know what job I want, and if that's what a student wants, then I want to help you get there. But if a student says, you know, I want to go to St. Ben's and I want to study this, then I think we should also have the same level of commitment to that student. And so, I think that's my biggest hold up with the tuition-free model because it feels so much like for tracking poor students. Then, when you think about intersecting identities, who those students

> are, mostly students of color. We're saying like, "well, you have to go here." It's like, "well, why?"

Opal explicitly named the concern tuition-free models will increase tracking in higher education systems and asserted this institutional stratification has inherent implications for tracking by both race and class. Her concern that low-income students will decide to enroll in a two-year tuition-free program is supported by research that indicates poor and working-class students name cost and affordability as the primary determinant of college choice (Kezar, 2011; Tierney & Venegas, 2009). Opal's analysis of the intersectional impact of tracking is a crucially significant aspect of the potential of tuition-free public policy to deepen institutional disenfranchisement for historically underrepresented groups. If low-income student enrollment in two-year programs increases because of the promise of free college, poor students and students of color will continue to be concentrated primarily at community colleges, where attrition is high and support resources are under-resourced (Carales, Garcia, Crystal & Mardock□Uman, 2016; Schuetz, 2005). As an adamant supporter of two-year schools, Opal's nuanced perspective of how the institutional landscape affects college choice is rooted in her vigilance about how policy is constructed, and for whom.

> … I love the two-year school, and I think for a student who really wants a career, that a two-year school is going to equip them for that and then yes, they should go for that. But, I don't like the idea, of like, "well, students of a certain income level should go here," because the people who are making these policies are not going to send their kids to a two-year school. I promise, they ain't going there. So, why do you want that for some students and not your own?

Opal explicitly centered the question of “for whom?” in her analysis of TFPP, and positioned the policy as a “technology of power” aimed at stratifying institutions by type and socioeconomic class. Similarly, Jeanette compared TFPP to other stratification policies that further disenfranchise low-income students.

> It always seems like a good idea at first, but it can really make things harder for low-income students. You know, it's like the ACT retesting. You know you can retest by subject now. I think that's a huge disadvantage to our low-income kids. I think it created a greater disparity because if you're a person of wealth you can take that subject test eight times and increase your score. For our kids, even if it's less money, you can't retake it, there's a limitation. So again, I think it becomes an issue of segregated experiences. I think that's my idea behind free college but I have a lot to learn about it … it does worry me a little.

Finally, all the private liberal arts college TRIO professionals predicted TFPP would significantly deter low-income, first-generation enrollment in those institutional types. As Gao shared in her reflection of the financial literacy of TRIO students,

> At the end of the day, they are not just making these choices for themselves, where they want to go. They are thinking about their families and their community. If there is a free choice, it’s hard to imagine that they would still pursue a private college, even with financial aid.

Gao and Marta both expressed a connection between college match and familial stability, and the prospect of TFPP in diverting students from a small, private college option. Hugh, also a private college TRIO professional, captured this sentiment:

> I think, how would that affect places like this, the small private colleges? Because it would just be for public institutions, from the way that I read the policy. … we would still have tuition, and people have to pay to come here, and so I just think, what if our population of first-gen, low-income students dries up because it's not … I mean, free is not, you know, students see the sticker price of like $40,000 per year, and they're probably going to go towards free. You know, I was a TRIO student and I get it. Even if the private college might be your first choice, I have to go free.

Family Distancing

Cliff's analysis of tuition-free public policy draws on his experience working with low-income students and families to shape his perspective on how the policy may influence college planning and saving. Cliff shared his concern TFPP may hinder the college planning engagement of TRIO families, which he identified as central to TRIO's approach to a college-going culture within low-income communities.

> You know, this could be a huge societal change element, this free tuition, because you will see, people will … It's already hard enough to get us citizens to get on board with the concept of savings, of planning ahead financially, financial literacy, you know. Especially for our low-income communities, where we never felt like it was possible. And there's now going to be less incentive for families, and the parents, to get involved and learn about the process, and try to make good choices about college … so yeah, so I don't know.

Cliff's ambivalence about the broad social influence of tuition-free policy reflects a concern such programs may further discourage parents and families from being financially invested in the college planning process. His years of experience in TRIO taught him low-income families want to be invested in the college-going process, and feel they have something to offer in terms of financial support. Cliff's anticipation tuition-free college may serve as a deterrent to parental and familial involvement is an important insight from a father and long-standing TRIO professional.

Classism and Class Oppression

Jeanette approached the topic of tuition-free public policy with pragmatism and ambivalence based on her experiences working with low-income, first-generation students for over 20 years. Her perspective of TFPP is focused on its potential to exacerbate socioeconomic class differentiation and disproportionately benefit middle-class students while purporting to serve low-income students.

> Is it really for low-income students? That is the question. I really feel like the money goes to the middle-class because the middle-class students are going to have the support, the wrap-around support services in place to be able to deal with the things that are complete barriers for other really low-income students. With Power of You, when they said they were going to roll it out, I said, "well, you can pay tuition but that's just not enough if our goal is low-income student access." So, in my opinion, of course you're going to have middle-class students be able to still go to college because they probably have more reliable transportation, more income, more support to pay for the extra things like that. They can afford to absorb the $40 fee for a class, they can afford to do maybe 20 hours of service unpaid.

Recognizing the potential of free college to advantage middle-income students, Blong's position at an urban community college emphasizes the importance of the policy design and implementation to ensure low-income students are the primary beneficiaries of the program.

> I think the implementation is a crucial piece here. And I think if it does not include the low-income population, then it is misleading and it does not do any service to really lift up this community. Oftentimes in the community, especially the low-income community, they are usually not the first one to really rush in and take advantage of those programs because there are so many things going on in their communities, in their family. And I think that if we are creating free college and not tapping into this community, then I think it's not the right policy as well.

Marta's experience at an elite, rural private college gives her experiential insight to the othering experiences of students at more selective institutions. She raised the common classist misconception and assumption that "all unrepresented students have tons of financial aid," which contributes to class-based prejudice.

> Yeah, I mean, I think it would stratify students … unless it's free college for everyone, but … it would make low-income students look differently because they're getting it for free, So that's, yeah, that already happens on our campus and it's really hard for students. So I don't really know how I feel about it …

The TRIO professionals frequently shared students experienced marginalization on campus based on their class status, feeling self-conscious about their financial aid and "specialized" resources as markers of being poor and low-income. A common experience of class-based prejudice in higher education is questioning and resentment related to assumed or comparative financial aid advantages for low-income students. Cliff contended if free college policy is tuition-based, meaning students would qualify based on income restrictions, it has the potential to amplify classism and class-based prejudice.

Diana pivots her reflection on tuition-free public policy to explore the policy design, asserting income eligibility should not be a requirement. While it may be surprising a TRIO professional would not be opposed to low-income eligibility, Diana's position expands upon the fear of further stigmatization of low-income students, as shared by Cliff, another public regional TRIO professional. Diana explained if implemented, it is important tuition-free policy is accessible to students of all socioeconomic classes, as she shared her belief tuition-free program could "put a target on the back" of low-income students.

> So, yeah, I mean, my thought is always first, "how are we going to pay for it?" Of course, which is going to be everybody's question. To a point that if it applies to everybody, I think on some level of maybe that's better, because it could take away some of that divisiveness that we see everywhere. … it doesn't put a target on the back of low-income students for people to say, "oh, you're getting it free because my taxes are paying for it." I mean, you know, maybe it takes away some of that stigma, that goes along with being low-income sometimes.

Diana sees the potential for tuition-free policy to become yet another source of stigma for low-income students. From her decades of experience working at every level of the TRIO program, Diana identified inherent othering or exclusion that "goes along with being low-income," and shared this stigma stems from the idea that "someone has to pay for it," often related to financial aid policy.

The idea of public entitlement programs in higher education has always been a source of social resistance, as college participation is viewed as a means of establishing, credentialing, and reinforcing social class status (Karabel, 2005; Matthys, 2013). Higher education has always been a mechanism of delineating class and labor stratification in the US (Hutcheson, 2020; Melamed, 2011), causing access initiatives to prompt such questions as if everyone can go to college, who will constitute the working class? How will class-privileged sectors of society differentiate themselves without higher education credentialing as a marker of elitism? Access initiatives such as the GI Bill, TRIO, and the Pell grant program have historically posed a threat to this social organization mechanism and caused a reinvigoration of policies. Such emerging policies are often framed under the auspices of building the labor class, stimulating vocational job entry, and optimizing federal investment in higher education (Hutcheson, 2020; Slaughter & Taylor, 2016). Diana's anticipation of the "who will pay for it?" critique of tuition-free public policy is a powerful example of the ways academic capitalism intersects with and shapes access initiatives.

Summary

The TRIO professionals in this study constructed a compelling tableau of issues and barriers that contribute to the socio-economic and institutional stratification of higher education systems. This tableau is framed by their anticipation of tuition-free public policy as "technology of power" and stratification mechanism affecting the college access of low-income, first-generation students. From the material dilemmas posed by loan aversion and family distancing to the structural challenges of college match and class oppression, this multifaceted tableau crystallizes the participants' ambivalence into strategic resistance. Not unsurprisingly, the TRIO professionals immediately jumped into solution-seeking and policy reform, advocating for a suite of policy alternatives that address the urgent needs of increased affordability and interrupt the impact of academic capitalism. As we pivot to policy alternatives, Jeannette reflected on the lessons of the survival structure of her rural, isolated community:

> You know, what they need to do is start with the foundational things, in my opinion. You know, what makes a healthy student? Food security, alleviation of stress, nutrition, physical health, academic skills, so these are all the things that we address on-site with our students. If we really care about access for these students, this is where the policy should begin.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

What does it mean to say no to these things, or to wait until your terms have been met for agreement, for a reversal of recognition, or a conferral of rights? What happens when we refuse what all the (presumably) "sensible" people perceive as good things? What does this refusal do to politics, to sense, to reason? When we add Indigenous people to this question, the assumptions and histories that structure what is perceived to be "good" (and utilitarian goods themselves) shift … (refusal) may seem reasoned, sensible, and in fact deeply correct. Indeed, from this perspective, we see that a good is not good for everyone.

- Audra Simpson, Mohawk Interruptus (Grande, 2018, p. 169).

"Free has always been a strategy. They said the blankets were free." - Wilma Mankiller

I begin my analysis with these quotes because my critique of free college is deeply rooted in my indigenous worldview. We are taught from a young age to always question, always pause, always "look under the hood" when presented with the easy olive branches of the colonizer. Too often, public policy is shaped by discourses that fail to recognize the structural barriers and capitalist interests that undergird seemingly equitable policy interventions. Indigenous Ways of Knowing requires us to approach any new policy, especially ones with words like "free" and "development" with cautious resistance, and critical policy analysis provides a framework with how to do just that. We turn to the community, the folks who are working alongside those most marginalized and disenfranchised, to seek guidance and perspectives on how to proceed.

The findings of this dissertation study suggest TFPP, as an example of a policy that appears to promote access has minimal buy-in from access counselors in low-income and poor communities. This resistance is because TFPP intersects with academic capitalism and neoliberal mechanisms of power. To orient this analysis chapter, I reiterate the findings of this study:

- Finding/Node 1: College access counselors are ambivalent about TFPP and its influence on affordability for low-income students
- Finding/Node 2: College access counselors are concerned that TFPP will harm the persistence and completion of low-income students
- Finding/Node 3: College access counselors anticipate that TFPP will increase socioeconomic stratification of higher education and constrain low-income student agency

As the findings demonstrate, TRIO professionals, those access counselors working in closest proximity to poor and low-income students across a vast network of institutional types, are deeply ambivalent about tuition-free public policy's liberatory potential. Many participants predicted TFPP will further stratify higher education, tracking low-income students into specific institutional types and creating concentrations of poor and working-class individuals within certain professions and sectors of society. Some participants shared concerns TFPP will inadvertently stunt degree completion because low-income students' engagement in the college match and financial aid processes will be sidelined in favor of a free option. Among all these nuanced reservations based on a cumulative 200 years of working with low-income and first-generation students, each TRIO professional asserted affordability is a major higher education barrier that needs to be addressed through public policy reform. Their conceptions of policy interventions that will promote structural shifts towards agency and access form the foundation for the implications section of this chapter.

In this analysis chapter, I construct three critical examinations of the potential impact of TFPP on low-income students in higher education: redefining ambivalence and affordability, reframing persistence and completion, and naming stratification and agency. Next, I suggest three policy alternatives and practitioner approaches to promote access and affordability for low-income students: expanded federal funding, targeted state funding programs, and an institutional ethic of care for low-income students. These policy and practitioner approaches emanate from my findings and come directly from my participants in the field. Finally, I conclude by placing TFPP within the context of neoliberalism, focusing on the ways such policies reinforce class subordination and labor stratification.

Reclaiming Access for Low-Income Students

I approached this study utilizing a “broken treaties” critical policy analysis (CPA) framework as a way to understand and acknowledge the unfolding policy shifts in higher education, to “engage in critique, interrogate the policy process, and the epistemological roots of policy work, examine the players involved in the policy process, reveal policy constructions” (Diem & Young, 2015). This critical policy analysis was conducted alongside, and in community with, the TRIO professionals, who explored their dimensional experiences in the low-income, first-generation access world, their perspectives of TFPP, and their preferred policy and advocacy interventions. They were encouraged by the anonymity of the study and their buffered institutional positionality to delve into the subjugating and exclusionary experiences of low-income, first-generation students and their families as they navigate higher education access. The participants were also ready and willing to propose and analyze a multitude of access reforms and interventions at the state, federal, and institutional levels.

As an indigenous scholar, my public policy vigilance and criticality is deeply rooted in the long legacies of deceptive and ensnaring policies that hegemonize the lives and sovereignty of Native peoples. The ambivalence expressed by all the TRIO professionals in this study was profoundly recognizable to me as a low-income person from a poor community and as an Indigenous researcher. My positionality as a poor, indigenous woman and TRIO community member allowed me to "go there" with the participants, to explicitly name and share the ways institutions and policies have intersected to construct marginality and exclusion in my own higher education journey. As I met with my participants, engaged in reflective memoing, coded my data, and crystallized the findings, I viewed the process through the lens of "broken treaty" CPA, attending to the tensions between affordability and agency, access and equity. One of the insurgent rallying cries in movements for indigenous sovereignty is "We are still here!" This credo resists structural erasure eacted by policies and institutions and seeks to relocate agency and self-governance to Native peoples and communities. Throughout my conversations with TRIO professionals, I continually heard a call for visibility and agency, a radical, holistic, care-based representation of poor, low-income, first-generation, and working-class peoples on our campuses. This reclamation goes beyond institutional demography and job placement and makes way for visible and vibrant low-income, first-generation participation at all levels of higher education institutions and systems at large.

Redefining Ambivalence and Affordability: LIFG Financial Realities

The first critical examination of the potential impact of TFPP on low-income students in higher education is redefining ambivalence and affordability. One of the most salient and recurring themes discussed by participants was the need to reappraise and recognize the holistic financial struggles and barriers faced by low-income, first-generation students. The TRIO professionals consistently drew a picture of a vastly differentiated college experience for low-income, first-generation students emanating from their class status and lack of material and financial resources. Emerging research and praxis in higher education reform point to the proliferation of housing and food insecurity on campuses, the need for childcare and transportation, and the adverse influence of employment on the academic performance of students who need to work and contribute to their family financially. Additionally, studies demonstrate low-income students are more likely to live off-campus and have a correlated sense of a diminished, isolated higher education experience than their financially secure peers. They also have an increased likelihood to experience exclusion from important socialization and professionalization experiences such as seeking internships, studying abroad, engaging in service-learning, and attending networking experiences. These are the very socialization experiences that constitute and propel social class mobility.

The material realities of low-income students are often bifurcated and compartmentalized by policies such as TFPP, which reduce/flatten the financial needs of low-income students to tuition dollars and fail to address or alleviate the daily expenses associated with college enrollment. As Evelyn, a TRIO director at a rural community college shared, it is the cumulative effect of fees, expenses, and loss of full-time income that creates financial distress and unmet need for low-income students.

> … are these programs set up in a way to really cover the gaps? And in my opinion … giving you 75% of what it costs for daycare means that you still have to come

> up with 25%. So with the free tuition, and I know that they say books and stuff, but are they talking about the fees? … So, it's those kind of things where it's like, are they really going to provide gap funding? To cover the whole wrap-around, daycare, transportation, food?

Lucille, a TRIO director at the large research university, echoed the need for an increased understanding that college enrollment represents a significant financial loss for students beyond tuition. She expressed concern that TFPP would serve to exempt institutions from making a holistic commitment to low-income students' financial wellbeing. She shared,

> … we work with students and their admission counselors to really advocate and let them know that their full expenses are if they want to go full-time … sure, it would be great it tuition was free and they would not have to worry about that, but then there are all of the other things to think about. The cost of living, commuting, dorms … their schooling wouldn't be completely free, and their experience, and their entire college education. And I think if they waive tuition, they won't be as willing to work with students on those bigger expenses of putting your life on hold and being a full-time college student, which is why we see many students who have to take a break and work, they can't really afford to be continuously enrolled because of all of those other expenses.

Lucille connected the holistic cost of attendance and the lack of access to basic needs to interruption in low-income students' enrollment.

The prevalence of non-tuition expenses driving enrollment cessation was brought up by several TRIO professionals and speaks to the dynamic complexity of affordability for this student population. Blong, a TRIO director at a suburban community college, advocated at his institution for an emergency fund to be established to respond to the high levels of situational poverty and crisis threatening students' enrollment.

> I think there are things and situations that students experience that are really stressful. So a couple years ago we applied for a grant and we got an emergency grant program going. That was a two-year grant but now our institution is finding ways to keep it going because … the idea there is that one major car repair can mean the difference of the students staying or leaving. If you don't have a car to get to work, you can't pay your tuition, and you can't stay in school. So, we have that where students can get, up to $1,000 for medical bills or car repairs or whatever it might be, because it can be that one unexpected thing that can be catastrophic.

A full appreciation of the complex financial realities facing low-income, first-generation students is a critical component of the TRIO professional's ambivalence about TFPP. Making affordability a one-dimensional concern, focused solely on tuition, exempts institutions from attending to the holistic needs of low-income students. These needs include robust retention and support services, which are critical to advancing persistence and completion of this student population (Choroszy & Meek, 2019; Gupton et al., 2009; Landers, 2018).

Reframing Persistence and Completion

The second critical examination of the potential impact of TFPP on low-income students in higher education is reframing persistence and completion for LIFG students. Recognizing and ameliorating the disenfranchisement of low-income, first-generation students entails a commitment to an ethic of care in the policies and praxis of the individuals and institution. The TRIO professionals consistently reflected on critical support structures essential to low-income, first-generation persistence and completion. As Blong shared:

> Getting them here is one thing. Once they arrive on campus, they have a bunch more challenges. That's why we try to get them on campuses as soon as possible, so they can start unpacking all these challenges. They might have culture shock, they might have serious anxieties about finances and fitting in. They definitely have academic challenges and learning how to manage their time and stay organized. I remember getting a call from a student, it was her first week on campus, and she didn't realize that just the basic college schedule is totally different. She thought she would be going to the same classes every day, like in high school, from 8am-3:30pm. Once she got there and saw her schedule, she was too embarrassed to ask anyone what she was supposed to do all day. So yeah, that's why we try to get them into a support program from the very beginning. Bottom line, they need a lot of support and visibility and we have to keep that in mind in terms of where they enroll.

The ethic of care, as described by the TRIO professionals, encompasses a multifaceted approach to support low-income, first-generation students' optimal wellbeing and persistence. It includes distinct, wrap-around support infrastructures aimed at increasing the agency, capital, and sense of care and belonging for historically marginalized students (Gupton et al., 2009; Kezar, 2011; Strayhorn, 2017). An ethic of care approach to policy formation is distinguishable from the ethic of justice that predominates many campus cultures today. According to Botes (2000),

> the ethics of justice constitutes a perspective of universal principles and rules. The ethics of care, on the other hand, constitutes an ethical approach in terms of which involvement, harmonious relations, and the needs of others play an important part in decision-making. (p. 1071)

According to Brighouse and McPherson (2015), the ethic of justice is more predominant in today's higher education landscape as the aims of higher education shifts towards the neoliberal economic rationales of postsecondary completion. Brighouse and McPherson argued this ethic of justice must be challenged by frameworks of morality and care for students. In this framework, institutions are responsible for accessing the holistic needs of individual students and tailoring the mission, policies, and culture of the institution to serve those needs. The authors also asserted institutions have a responsibility to contribute to corrective justice by providing appropriate support and care for students who inhabit intersectional marginalized identities (Brighouse & McPherson, 2015). Gao's narrative reflects the ethic of care in action:

> It is so important just looking at the student as a whole person, right? Because there are so many different identities that they bring with them. And when you're working with a student, at least here in TRIO, we do look at the whole student. So … we want to make sure that yeah, their academics is important, but if they're not getting their basic needs then obviously they're not going to do well academically. So, just trying to look at that, the student is a whole person, instead of just being like, "Oh, just look at this academics" … but there are other things in their lives

> that matter. So many of our students have so many other responsibilities beyond school. And especially with our first-generation college students right? Because they are coming and with so many different things, in terms of their family responsibilities, so that brings on a whole other layer of the struggles that they face on a day-to-day basis. So like I said, in our work we try to make sure that we're hitting upon all the different pieces that make our students who they are.

In emphasizing an ethic of care informed by an understanding of the legacies of higher education exclusion and marginalization, there is a transformative potential for institutions to create policies and practices that align with equity and liberation. A quote from Opal epitomizes this ideal:

> You care so much about these students, because it's not just about them, it's about their family, their whole community. They are trailblazing this new path and everyone is watching them, wanting to emulate them. It's so important that they make it, not just for them, but for so many others like them.

Suggested care-based practices and policies are enumerated in the implications for the practice section of this chapter.

Naming Stratification and Agency

The third critical examination focuses on naming the role of stratification and agency in the LIFG college-going culture. One of the primary concerns of TRIO professionals in appraising TFPP as a neoliberal mechanism of power is its ability to contribute to the concentration of low-income students at specific institutional types. Notably, this study features TRIO professionals from every primary type of institution, from rural community colleges to elite private universities, and each one raised the concern TFPP would disproportionately track low-income, first-generation students into free college programs, which are typically housed at public, two-year institutions. Marta, a TRIO professional from an elite private college, shared,

> It feels tricky because like I said, if you use the word "free" and you've got a kid who is scared of debt and worried about how to pay for college, she will probably hear free and think it's her best option, or her only option. She might not apply here even though she did summer bridge, because of the price and the location is far from home, so it doesn't feel like a real option.

Educational tracking is proven to contribute to overall social class stratification and the disenfranchisement of low-income communities from social mobility structures (Blossfeld, Buchholz, Skopek, Triventi, 2016; Engberg, 2012; Hanushek & Wößmann, 2006; Lucas, 1999). TRIO's college application and financial aid processes are designed to give students multiple options and a sense of agency as they navigate the access world, but many TRIO professionals raised the concern TFPP may foreclose on this process for low-income, first-generation students who are not able to access a college readiness program. Gao, a TRIO professional from an urban private college, shared her TRIO program is only funded to serve a small proportion of eligible students in her district.

> More than 60% of students actually qualify for our program, but because we can only serve 160 students, we have to turn a lot of students away. So, I mean I guess that that is a good thing and a bad thing, the good thing being that we're able to have more of that one-on-one ratio with our students, so we really get to know our students on an individual level compared to our colleagues, where they each have like 300-500 students each. So, they don't get that opportunity to really know the

students on that level and provide that level of support in the process. So I can say again, it's great that we can do that, but then the downfall is that there are a lot of students who really do need our services and we just can't serve them.

It is important to note several TRIO professionals from multiple institutional types praised the role of community colleges in expanding college access, particularly for low-income, first-generation students. The community college system is vital to providing academic and job preparation, career exploration, and a connection between the local community and higher education (Ardoin, 2017; Wang, Lee, & Wickersham, 2019). Margaret, a TRIO director, and consultant at the public regional university, recognized the strong sense of community in the two-year system.

I have to say, when I look at an institution of our size, compared to some of my colleagues to work at the two-year institutions, and even talk to students who come here who transferred from a two-year school from a TRIO program, I think it feels like it's easier for them to have a really tight TRIO community in your program, and really focus in on student success … so I think the two-year program it's beneficial and those institutions are addressing those underrepresented populations.

Blong, a community college TRIO director, also reflected on the unique opportunities and resources two-year programs afford to underrepresented and nontraditional students who may be exploring options in an affordable, accessible program.

I think that community college is a wonderful place, not only for traditional high school students to come in and then take the courses that they need, and really

> explore more what kind of careers they will move into and perhaps, this might be the stepping stone to their career path. But, on the other hand, it's also another opportunity for the community, in general, a person who might have been in the workforce for a while, but decide to come back to go to school. And this will open so many opportunities to the whole community, not just the traditional students, but working adults and everybody.

Blong's reflection of the important role of community colleges as a beacon of accessible higher education in local community contexts cannot be overstated. The TRIO counselors' critique of TFPP should not be interpreted as a condemnation of two-year institutions, but rather as an endorsement of the ideal of "best fit" and ideal college match. All the counselors asserted in a truly equitable system, low-income, first-generation students will have a breadth and depth of institutional options, and not let their income status determine or limit their access journey.

Another critical area of concern related to institutional stratification is the influence of TFPP on historically minority-serving institutions (MSIs). Research demonstrates MSIs expand access, increase persistence and completion, and contribute to the wellbeing of historically underrepresented students in higher education, and ultimately serve as engines of social and economic mobility for communities of color (US Congress Subcommittee on Higher Education Workforce, 2020). The formation and legacy of MSIs in fostering cultural pride and community vitalization is an enduring symbol of resilience and self-determination within communities that have been systematically excluded from higher education (Conrad & Gasman, 2015; Samayoa & Gasman, 2019). While there is only one MSI represented in this study, there is empirical evidence TFPP and promise programs inhibit enrollment and growth of public minority-serving institutions. A study of a Tennessee lottery-funded tuition-free program indicated all of the state institutions, particularly regional public institutions, saw increased enrollment and institutional growth as high as 59.4%, with the exception of one institution: the historically Black university, which saw a 5.2% decrease in enrollment (Menifield, 2012). This is attributed to the trend of TFPP recipients disproportionately enrolling in community colleges and public institutions, a process often facilitated by high school guidance counselors who are the local administrators of the state TFPP program (Menifield, 2012). The prospective influence of TFPP on narrowing institutional choice, and adversely affecting MSIs, is reflected in this study by the narratives of Gao and Hugh, who are both TRIO professionals at an urban, private MSI. While this institution is not historically minority-serving, its current demography boasts a nearly 60% proportion of enrolled undergraduates who are students of color. Hugh’s narrative illustrates TFPP could contribute to diminished enrollment at his MSI.

> [This institution] is also very unique in that it has a very high low-income population of students, because we count ourselves as so inclusive, we're so diverse, I mean, and we are. But like, how are we continuing to support the students, at our institutional level, with our changing populations. Like, [this institution] is going to have to step up to the plate and offer more to those students if we want to keep those students from transferring at semester or not even enrolling and depositing, and going somewhere that is more affordable … I have a student who is dealing with this right now. He had a lot of scholarships his first year but those high school ones don't carry over to the sophomore year, so they're

> really struggling, and they were like, “Gosh, I hope Bernie wins the election because I could go do free college.” And I was like, “Well, yeah, a public institution. You'd have to leave here.” And they were like, “Yeah, it sucks, but I can't afford this. I can't afford to be here. I can't pay my bill.”

Hugh’s example demonstrates a central concern about the ways TFPP may inhibit low-income, first-generation, and historically underrepresented students’ sense of agency in the college match process.

A recent study on the Tennessee TFPP program evaluated retention of program participants across four levels of matriculation and concluded while TFPP programs promoted access, “they are insufficient for academic success for certain populations,” noting low-income African Americans and students who score low on the ACT are the most likely to lose program eligibility and depart higher education without a degree (Menifield, 2012, p. 1). Conversely, a specific student profile emerged reflecting the students most likely to persist and graduate in the TFPP program: “white females from economically affluent families who score in the upper quartile on their ACT and maintain greater than a 3.24 high school GPA” (Menifeld, 2012, p. 14). Students who fit this profile, at the nexus of racial, economic, and academic privilege, are already at significantly increased likelihood to both access college and persist to completion. The study concluded, “Thus, if state and higher education institutions want to maintain higher levels of retention and a diverse student body, they should do much more than simply provide lottery scholarship funding” (Menifield, 2012, p. 15). In this case, and as demonstrated by the concerns of the TRIO professionals in this study, TFPP obscured and undermined the success of low-income, underrepresented students by foreclosing on their college match process.

Similarly, a longitudinal study of a state-wide, privately funded aid program in Wisconsin providing “grants to selected University of Wisconsin four-year college students to help make higher education more accessible and affordable and degree completion more achievable” found over multiple cohorts, the program failed to increase degree completion and graduate school enrollment up to 10 years after matriculation (Anderson, Broton, Goldrick□Rab, & Kelchen, 2019). “The lack of robust effects raises important questions about the conditions necessary for financial aid to benefit students” (Anderson et al., 2019, p. 720). While affordability concerns are primal considerations in the access formula for “certain populations,” as described in the Tennessee study to refer to historically marginalized and underrepresented students, the role of college choice and institutional fit is crucial in fostering retention and completion for low-income, first-generation students.

The TRIO professionals in this study shared repeatedly beyond college application and enrollment navigation, the most critically important component of college access is empowering students and families with financial aid and financial literacy skills. Low-income students and their families experience significant financial anxiety and intimidation in these processes, exacerbated by the escalating cost of college and the stagnancy of existing financial aid (Kezar, 2011). TRIO facilitates a comprehensive financial aid process as a key component of program’s curriculum. According to a national TRIO survey, parents rated the financial aid support provided by TRIO as the most impactful service provided by the program. One TRIO parent shared,

> I didn't know how to help my daughter understand where she could go to college, where she could afford to go. I relied on TRIO to help her understand the FAFSA, and how to read the financial aid letters. We went to a program about calculating the out-of-pocket cost, which helped me understand too. Without this program on how to do financial aid, I would not know how to help my daughter go to college. (COE, 2017)

Diana reflected on decades of experience at a regional public university TRIO program and her experiences walking alongside students and families as they navigate the opaque financial aid and enrollment policies of higher education.

> I sat here last summer with two parents and their daughter, who were just here going to orientation, and they just showed up in our office and the parents were just in a panic because they were like, "We don't get this. We apply for financial aid and we know there's an award letter out there, but how do we know what she's going to owe?" … the bill isn't out there, the bill shows up in August and here's this family and they're like, "How and when we get the bill? When will we know have to pay? Can we pay it all at once, can we play the parts?" I mean, how many of us know how to make big financial decisions like this? We wouldn't go out and buy a car not knowing how much is going to cost, or when the loan payments are due. So I think there are things like that, that are really stressful because they don't understand the system.

Diana's experience illustrates the fact many families engage in the financial aid process as a unit, countering the sense of alienation and family estrangement Cliff anticipated in the TFPP context. Several TRIO professionals related their ambivalence about TFPP to concerns that the presence of free college will exempt students from engaging fully in the financial aid process, a process aimed at illuminating several affordable college options for low-income students. While low-income, first-generation families and students experience financial intimidation and loan aversion related to college affordability, the process of completing the FAFSA, applying for financial aid, and comparing award packages is typically an empowering one. Marta shared:

> We work really hard with our students and families on not taking out lots of money in student debt. You know, I see financial aid packages all day, every day from different schools. We have all of our students bring them in and we do a review of every schools' financial aid package … I think about the students that are not in a college access program, who are getting those financial aid packages and not understanding them. This is where we really get to know the parents, at FAFSA nights and the award letter meetings … it becomes a collective process, and by the end the students know so much! They can tell you the difference between a subsidized and unsubsidized loan, they can tell you how many hours of work study they need to do. It's amazing, the financial literacy that happens from going through the process.

Marta shared the financial aid process also prompts students proactively consider the "big picture" of affordability, calculating anticipated expenses such as childcare, commuting, and work study allocations. Tuition-free public policy's (TFPP) potential to exempt students and families from comparing financial aid packages and conducting a holistic determination of cost of attendance inhibits their financial literacy and sense of empowerment.

The final barrier to financial empowerment presented by TFPP is the confusing and misleading design of "last-dollar" TFPP programs. As discussed previously with Power of You and several other state TFPP programs, these initiatives require low-income students to apply their Pell Grants and state grants to the bill before waiving any remaining tuition charge. This is one of the more insidious deceptions of TFPP programs, as oftentimes the students' existing aid already covers tuition for low-income students. Under the guise of free college, low-income students exhaust their term-limited Pell and state grants aid, inhibiting future enrollment and transfer options. The students who benefit the most from last-dollar TFPP programs are middle- and high-income students. As Opal shared,

> You know, for our students, they don't feel like they have a lot to offer financially but at least with the Pell, they're bringing something to the table. So when Power of You says, oh, first give us your Pell and Minnesota State Grant, they're taking that away and telling them it's free when it's not.

The TRIO professionals' concern about the misnomer of the idea of free college, and the disillusionment about who actually benefits from TFPP, illustrates the importance of financial literacy and resisting the capitalist scarcity mindset at the heart of neoliberal multicultural interventions.

Implications for Policy and Praxis

TRIO professionals are, first and foremost, problem solvers and solution seekers. By the very merit of their work and praxis, they all came to the table ready to not only analyze TFPP, but to also offer multifaceted policy interventions aimed at increasing affordability, promoting college choice, expanding financial literacy, and dismantling class-based exclusion and prejudice. Despite their ambivalence and resistance to TFPP, the TRIO professionals were all resolute in their consensus the existing landscape of higher education financial aid is insufficient in the face of rising college costs and declining low-income student participation. The professionals argued for a multifaceted policy reform, one that retains specific interventions that have historically promoted access and adding innovative, research- and practice-based elements specifically targeted at low-income, first-generation students. While their proposals are more complex and policy-laden than TFPP, this reflects their strong expertise at policy advocacy and financial aid navigation within the communities most disenfranchised by higher education hierarchies. They constructed layered, interwoven interventions that combine federal, state, institutional, and community components.

Policy Intervention #1: Federal Funding

An important aspect of critical policy analysis is seeking alternatives from individuals within the community. Soliciting policy recommendations from practitioners and community members ensures the highest potential to increase impact while honoring the complexities of local systems. The research university professionals offered myriad innovative ideas on how to expand college affordability, persistence, and completion from a policy lens. Their readiness and skill in constructing policy alternatives reflects their training as policy experts, a role they all described with detail and passion, but which is rarely acknowledged within the higher education institutions they serve.

Scale and expand grants for low-income students

The TRIO professionals advocated resoundingly for a federal increase in financial aid funding levels, to keep in pace with the escalating costs of higher education for low-income students. Several professionals noted the stagnancy of the Pell and Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant (FSEOG) significantly limited low-income students' college options. Hugh, a former university financial aid advisor and current TRIO professional and alum, echoed the call for a major effort to scale financial aid specifically designed for low-income students.

> I think that expanding Pell programs, or like FSEOG. I think the fact that they took away the Perkins Loan and like all of these kinds of things is a real issue. I worked in financial aid and I think I have a good grasp on financial aid policy, just like seeing all of these programs stay stagnant or getting discontinued, that were originally created for reducing barriers to higher education for low-income students. Instead of giving money to new things, I think we can look at the things that have worked historically and actually make sure they are still effective.

Gao also reflected on the necessity of federal interventions and the expediency of building upon existing equity infrastructures. She joined several TRIO colleagues in witnessing the slow demise of the once-robust federal suite of financial aid programs for low-income students.

> I'm just trying to think of the difference from like when I was a low-income college student, and students nowadays. I feel like there have been quite a few Federal Loan options or even just like grants, they have been taken away since I was a student. Because I feel like even just thinking back to when I was a student they had like the FSEOG Grant and even the Perkins Loan. So yeah, if they did have more loan options and grants from the federal and state government that could really help subsidize that gap. I think it would probably make it a lot more

affordable for students. I really think that would be something, because I do notice that a lot of things seem to be missing from the award letter these days, you know?

Gao's observation that there are missing elements of the award letters reflects the steady stagnancy or diminishment of financial aid options compared to the rise in college costs. The following Minnesota enrollment and grant data (see Figures 7 and 8) demonstrate the extent to which grant aid is insufficient in significantly defraying college costs for low-income, first-generation students.

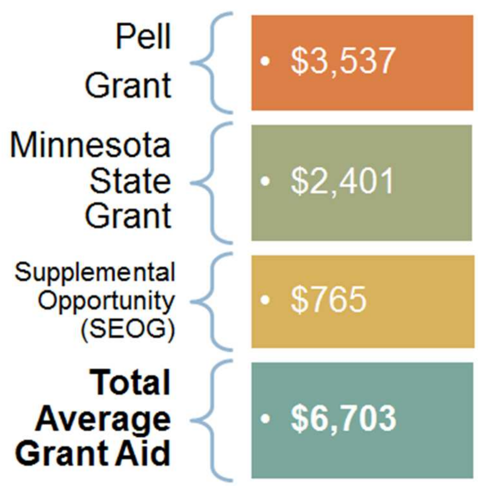

Figure 7. Average 2018 award amount of federal and state financial aid programs.

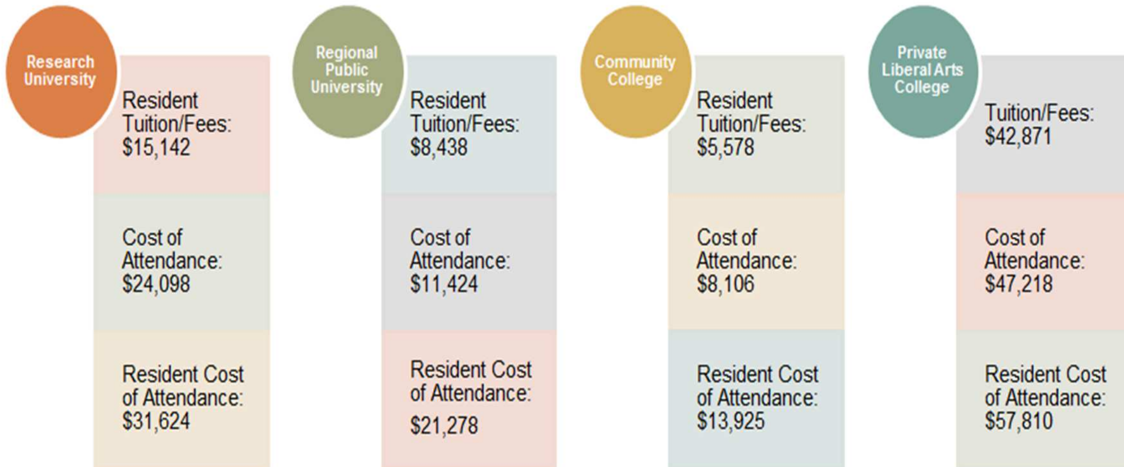

Figure 8. Average 2018 tuition/fees and cost of attendance for all institutional types in this study.

As illustrated in Figures 7 and 8, the average grant aid covers approximately 20% of the cost of attendance of the research university, 14% of the private liberal arts institution, 34% of the regional public university, and 50% of the community college cost of attendance. The gaps in funding observed by the TRIO professionals demonstrate the urgency of scaling grant aid for low-income, first-generation students. Countering common stereotypes of remunerative federal and state aid programs, the TRIO professionals and data reveal the realities of limited financial aid and its potential to thwart the enrollment of low-income, first-generation students.

Introduce loan forgiveness for low-income, first-generation students

Several TRIO professionals argued instead of implementing tuition-free state programs, an expansion and revision of loan forgiveness programs would better support low-income, first-generation investment in higher education. Drew asserted accessible and trustworthy loan forgiveness could serve as a motivation for students and increase persistence.

> I think policy-wise if I could have it any way, I would much rather prefer to see … federal loan forgiveness. I think that … would be a motivator for students to finish … And … we could message that through our program as … here's just one more reason to persist and get that degree. So that … you don't have to pay anything and you have a degree, and you can get more money, and you can get a job you like, and all that stuff. I feel like that would be better than just promising free college.

Julia's long experience as a TRIO professional has given her wide-ranging insight into policy possibilities for TRIO programs and educational access interventions. Her main concern, repeated consistently throughout her interview, was college affordability and financial literacy for low-income, first-generation students and families. As she discussed policy alternatives, Julia was eager to explore student loan forgiveness. In Julia's perspective, student loan aversion forces many students to divest of four-year options, even at the public regional level.

> Certainly loan forgiveness … obviously, that's number one. Students don't trust it now because there are so many examples of it not working, but I think if they created a loan forgiveness program with clear guidelines … maybe a public service component, it would really incentivize completion and encourage students to stay on track, and give them some good experience to take into the workforce.

TRIO Alumni Tax Credits for Career Readiness

The TRIO professionals advocated strongly for strategies that incentivize higher education participation beyond access. Low-income, first-generation students are looking for more than a college degree, they are seeking sustainable social mobility for themselves and their families. Several TRIO professionals proposed an incentive program aimed at the hiring and professional socialization of TRIO alumni, an intervention that could replicate/counter the systemic advantage continuing-generation students have by merit of their social and professional networks. Xia, TRIO alum and professional at the research university, shared her perspective about the possibilities of supporting students through the class mobility process.

> … it would be great to have a program to help bridge TRIO students into professional life, like we have McNair for graduate school. Because … it's very intimidating getting a professional job and a lot of TRIO kids don't have the same connections, and they can't take a summer off from working to get those unpaid internships that will lead to a job. So, I really think if there was a program to help companies hire our TRIO kids, they would want to hire them because they know a lot and they add diversity to the company … And then our TRIO students don't worry so much about, is all of this worth it? Am I even going to get a job?

Julia's pre-TRIO experience working for workforce development shaped her overall perspective on college access and persistence for the TRIO population, and her advocacy for policy that addresses students' ambivalence about the future and what to pursue in college. She suggested a program that would provide a clear pathway for students from their interests and abilities to their academic discipline to a career field.

> I think something in the labor market, some kind of kickback to the labor market for getting low-income students into jobs that are in need. Like, a point system for hiring TRIO kids, and then they get a tax break, something like that. For TRIO kids to have some connections. If you finish this program there are points in the

> labor market system that you could get. … like we have for our veterans. … a veteran comes in and they get more points. If there was something like that, it said this person worked harder to get there. … their dad didn't know somebody who knows somebody so the vice president says, “yeah, our dads are golfing buddies, you get the job.” No. I want it to be … you’re TRIO, you had to fight your way through this, you sacrificed, you did this, your family did this, you have a lot of skills, so some kind of kickback to get them into a career. Off the top of my head, that's my vision.

Julia’s policy intervention is focused not only on access but also on completion and career development. Her years of working in workforce development with low-income students demonstrated the limited options they faced, as she described, “Mostly jobs like welding or electrician, or the military.” The point-system example she offered is The Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) program, a provision of the Internal Revenue Code that allows employers who hire individuals with certain personal characteristics to claim a tax credit equal to a portion of the wages paid to those individuals (WOTC, 2020). The WOTC can be amended to enhance the workforce participation of any special population and could be designated for specific appointment types such as temporary internships and diversity enrichment programs. Julia shared the cost of college, and the prospect of student loans, exacerbated the narrowing sense of options for low-income students in particular. Without a sense of social capital, such as the one Julia described that benefits middle- and upper-class students, low-income students are more likely to divest of four-year higher education without a step-up into a career field. Alongside student loan forgiveness, a policy program offering businesses and organizations incentives to hire TRIO alumni would address the sense of ambivalence and exclusion low-income, first-generation students experience when faced with future planning.

> To me, it's about mindset and feeling like they have options out there in the real world. It's not even really truly the deep information, it's the hope. It’s that there's something there, there's a person that's going to help them, not a person, but a program that will help them navigate this.

Policy Intervention #2: Increase Need-Based State Grant Funding

Many TRIO professionals used the success and impact of the Minnesota State Grant as an example of the power of state grant funding in reinforcing college choice and agency for low-income, first-generation students. As Blong shared, “We count on the state grant a lot, to help cover unmet need. I just wish it stretched more.” Despite the positives of this program, state funding has failed to adjust to meet the current needs of low-income, first-generation students. According to the Minnesota Office of Higher Education, the average state grant amount in 2018 was $2,401. The state grant was repeatedly cited by TRIO professionals as a critical affordability element of the holistic financial aid awards, but many professionals advocated the amount be increased for low-income students.

Cliff’s policy perspective was focused on the stagnancy of both state and federal financial aid. As he shared his experiences over his 30-year TRIO career, Cliff reflected on the growing gap between escalating public tuition and financial aid for low-income students, particularly the relationship between the Pell program and state-funded grant aid. He acknowledged the Pell grant’s stagnancy has significantly decreased its ability to defray the cost of attendance, and asserted the state should step in to commit more grant-based aid for their low-income population.

> I think the Pell Grant has, much as our minimum wage, just stayed way behind what it costs to attend college, or to make a decent wage to support your family. And so if the federal government hasn't stepped up, I think the states should. I think the Pell Grant has allowed states to get lazy and cut funding, so they can shift it elsewhere. But … maybe that was effective in the early days of the Pell Grant … when $1,000 went a long way on a $2,400 tuition bill. … today, at my institution, the cost of attendance is about $20,000 per year. … even the highest $6,000 Pell Grant isn't doing much … If states were to choose not to do free tuition, but instead increase aid for the Minnesota state scholarship … the financial aid grants and scholarships, that would help.

Several other TRIO professionals endorsed the idea of a higher need-based maximum Minnesota State Grant for low-income students. Hugh, a former financial aid advisor, said:

> It would be great to see the state grant expanded, that would make a huge difference. Right now … it doesn't quite match the Pell, although every little bit helps. I think you take the funds for something like tuition-free, and designate it for Pell-eligible students. When we do the FAFSA workshops, the students know they will probably qualify for a state grant and that is encouraging for them, they count on it. And the fact that they can use it anywhere in Minnesota, that helps too.

Hugh's suggestion of a policy alternative to TFPP funding, designated for low-income students and adjudicated at the state level was consistently brought up by participants. "… with the feds, it takes forever for things to change, and especially for a funding increase to go through," Gao shared, "State budgets tend to be a little more flexible." To illustrate this point, several states responded to decreasing low-income student enrollment during the Coronavirus pandemic by increasing college aid grant programs including Nebraska, which increased the Nebraska Promise to ensure cover the entire cost of tuition for Pell-eligible students (Murakami, 2020). This reflects a general and significant recent increase in state investment in need-based grant aid, with recent funding data showing an 8.62% increase during the 2017-18 academic year compared to a previous annual growth rate of 1 to 6%, adjusted for inflation, representing more growth in one year than in the previous decade (Anderson, 2019). While it is urgent to address Pell grant stagnancy, the ability and commitment of states to scale need-based funding for low-income students is a promising policy alternative to TFPP. While such policies are not new, their historical effectiveness and practitioner support merit an invigoration of their scope and influence on LIFG college access and persistence (Choroszy & Meek, 2019; Murakami, 2020).

Policy Intervention #3: An Institutional Ethic of Care

All the TRIO professionals went beyond affordability in their analysis of TFPP and encouraged an institutional reckoning with the financial, emotional, material, cultural, academic, and mental health needs of low-income, first-generation students. Their interactional approach to this population frequently made me recall the wise words of poet and activist Staceyann Chin, "All oppressions are connected" (2014). The first step in disrupting the neoliberal stronghold on higher education policy is making a commitment to the whole person, a commitment rooted in an ethic of care. As Nancy reflected,

> I continue to feel that if we don't realize that [low-income, first-gen students] are a special segment of the population, we lose everything we tried to do these past 60 years. I mean, there’s been so much progress in getting institutions to realize that being poor in college, being from a poor community, is so hard. You always feel like you’re on your own, like you're leaving everyone behind, and you don’t have that safety net underneath you. I don’t think the goal is to make our [low-income, first-gen students] look like everyone else, I think the goal is to help make them more visible and part of the big picture when the institution is making decisions and deciding what to prioritize.

Basic needs support and emergency funding

Recently, higher education institutions have invested in making basic needs accessible to housing and food insecure students (Shipley & Christopher, 2018; Stebleton, Lee, & Diamond, 2020). This is a critical intervention that should be urgently replicated across all institutional types and levels of prestige. Research demonstrates the simple presence of food and housing services on campus alleviates low-income students’ sense of material vulnerability and increases overall wellbeing (Gupton, Trost, & Collins, 2018). Campus practitioners across institutional departments share the presence of campus food pantries helps them to feel empowered to connect and support low-income students and students who are experiencing basic needs insecurity, as it gives them a service to refer them to and a way to express care and concern for the student (Gupton et al., 2018). Beyond basic needs services as a logistical remediation strategy, their presence contributes to an overall culture of care and visibility for low-income students.

In addition to basic needs services, the TRIO professionals specifically named the importance of tuition and unexpected expense emergency funds. Such programs assist students in being able to pay their student accounts and register for class, or to provide funding for students who have significant unexpected expenses such as a family emergency. Some campuses have implemented such programs as grant or institutional loan initiatives. Research shows a small amount of emergency funding, on average of $100-2000, can significantly enhance a low-income students' ability to maintain continuous enrollment, as well as mental health benefits correlated with a sense of security afforded by the awareness that an unexpected expense could imperil their persistence. Providing emergency funding also fosters the ability to do basic needs assessments with students and utilize an ethic of care approach to support their persistence beyond the circumstantial emergency. Margaret expressed this sentiment as she described her experience serving on an institutional committee tasked with creating a food pantry and emergency fund for students.

> Yeah, it was really eye-opening as to what our students actually go through. You know? And just financially, what they face. And it has allowed us to, because we require them to meet with someone on the committee to approve and apply for it, because that's where the conversations happen about food insecurity and needing assistance, you know? All of those things that it doesn't feel good to go to somebody and say, "I haven't eaten in 3 days." But if they have the conversation

about something else, and now we can connect them with all those resources, it's been really beneficial that way.

Institutional need-based/unmet need grants

While the TRIO professionals argued most ardently for federal and state policy interventions such as expansions of the Pell, SEOG, and Minnesota State grants, they also advocated for institutions to implement systemic grant funding specifically for low-income students. One TRIO professional and alumni, Hugh, shared he had been a recipient of an institutionally-funded grant at his regional public university, which implemented a tuition increase and funding reallocation to increase affordability for low-income students. Hugh shared this grant increased his financial stability, especially over the course of his later years of enrollment, when financial aid oftentimes plateaus or decreases. This institutional equity policy helped remediate Hugh’s loan aversion and increase his persistence, though it did make him and other low-income students susceptible to classist resistance amongst his peers.

Something that my undergrad did that I thought was really awesome was, they call it the Greensilver Grant, because those are our school colors. And it was like they increased tuition for everybody across the board but then they took that additional increase and gave that back to low-income students who … were Pell-eligible. So my last couple years I didn't have to take out as many loans because I got that grant. Of course, I had some friends who are like, “I can't believe I'm having to pay for all these poor kids to come.” And I was like, “Oh, yeah,” and silently knowing that I was getting that grant. And now I know that we threw

> money at so many garbage things, as a TRIO person now, but at the time I was like "shhh, I need this grant."

Hugh referred to feeling self-silenced and rendered invisible by the vocal classism of his peers.

There are concerns institutional affordability interventions may inadvertently contribute to the prejudice and oppression experienced by low-income students. However, Gao shared the priority of material funding is critical, and spaces such as TRIO assist students in processing poverty stigma.

> … that's why we're here, because the reality is that students already feel different when they can't go on the pricey spring break trip or out to eat with friends every night. We are there to help them deal with that, and TRIO students can share with each other what it's like to be in college and have your class experience feel so othering for the first time.

Hugh echoed this experience and shared the financial wellbeing afforded by the grant made a significant difference in his undergraduate persistence. Participating in institutional grant programs ultimately helps low-income students feel seen, prioritized, and valued at the institutional level.

It is not sufficient to wait for federal and state programs to meet the urgent financial needs of low-income, first generation students. Several institutions have stepped up to create robust financial aid programs to guarantee the access of low-income students and address their full cost of attendance. Such programs, most common at private, selective colleges and universities, are referred to as "unmet need scholarships" and/or "need-blind admissions" commitments, and are frequently modeled to subsidize low-income students off their endowment and annual fundraising capital (Long & Riley, 2007). Recent examples include the University of Pittsburgh, which announced they will match Pell Grants (Amour, 2019), and the University of Southern California, which announced, in light of state cost of living increases, it will offer free tuition to any family who makes less than $80,000 annually (Hartocollis, 2020). In Minnesota, elite colleges Macalester College and St. Olaf College are among the few institutions in the state that have an espoused commitment to meeting the unmet need of all Pell-eligible students. It is important to note the institutional type that enables such policy interventions. While it is imperative to provide low-income students with gap funding and grants to cover unmet need, in the existing structure of higher education, very few institutions have implemented strategies to enact gift aid at this scale. The example provided by Hugh of his regional, public, accessible institution creating a tuition-funded grant program for Pell-eligible students is a model many institutions could enact, especially if they are provided state funds in lieu of TFPP funding.

TRIO works! College access and persistence programs for all LIFG students

The policy intervention most frequently advocated for by TRIO professionals is not explicitly an alternative, but rather a policy recommendation: the expansion and replication of TRIO programs and services. Each professional analyzed tuition-free public policy through the lens of college access practitioners whose praxis is designed to serve and support low-income students in particular. The professionals asserted the prospect of tuition-free public policy makes the financial aid advising and programming facilitated by TRIO programs more crucial than at any other point in their 60-year history. Each expressed ambivalence about the influence of tuition-free public policy, and the potential of such programs to further entrench the socioeconomic stratification of higher education. While policy alternatives and interventions are necessary to increase access and persistence for low-income students, it is important that new initiatives do not divert resources and advocacy from existing programs that support the education and empowerment of historically marginalized and excluded students. Lucille reflected on the historical precedence of TRIO programs:

> … we're not shiny, we're not new, but we know that what we do with students works. All of these new ideas, it's good that people are asking how to get students into college, but we know what works in terms of what promotes access and helps them actually get a degree, and it's this type of support.

Evelyn's description of her praxis reflects the TRIO ethos of holistic, care-centered support characteristic of college readiness and persistence programs. Academic success, approachability, and accessibility, she asserted, are crucial elements of access and persistence for the student population her program serves.

> … we're up here in the mining areas. So some of our issues are the same but exacerbated up here because there are so few resources. The goal is always to look at the families individually, really look at each student situation. I really still feel like that's my role, it's really to make sure we're there for the students. I work many more hours than 40 hours per week. I bring my work home with me, I'm available to students just like the staff here are, pretty much 24/7. And so, I think that for me, one of the things that is a main focus is, we're a college readiness program. We need to prepare students academically and then be involved in co-curricular things that will also prepare them. Our focus is heavily academic, and

> academic support, and then the wrap-around services that come with that. We don't do as much enrichment as they used to do anymore. And when it comes to mental health services, we refer students either to the support that we have in-house or externally. So, our focus is really academic and academic support, and it made a huge difference. We use an intrusive advising model. So, if there's a problem with a student, we're on it right away. We don't wait it out, we're really proactive with the students.

Cliff's institutional history and policy expertise makes him a resource to campus administrators. Cliff distinguishes his praxis as a director by sharing his four decades of experience advocating for the TRIO programs within his regional university setting. He described the program as being well-supported and highly visible as a component of the university's diversity and equity mission, as well as community engagement. Cliff reflected on the cycle of new diversity and inclusion initiatives during his TRIO tenure, "Yeah, we've been there long enough that we can guess how those new endeavors will... how long they'll persist. If they are long-term." Several participants in this study shared similar observations of the short-term viability of new diversity initiatives on their campuses, including programs like TFPP.

Diana shared her perspective that TRIO is at a crossroads. She observed TRIO is increasingly being used as a model for other campus initiatives, which is ultimately a goal of the program. Diana acknowledged while it is unlikely all institutions can seek a TRIO grant, she sees a trend towards the replication of services at the local institutional level.

> I think we're kind of at a point of almost redefining our role. We're at a point where we're seeing our campus embrace and expand and take on some of the things that we always did. … just how they are redesigning their advising, we have a new advising office on our campus, and now they're reaching out to students who are on probation warning, and all over the place, so we're just seeing so many things and we're sort of like, this is what we've always done. We've always been that office on campus, you know? But I think overall, even with those changes, people see SSS and Upward Bound and TRIO and they still think of us as at home base for students. So, serving our students who are a little more at-risk, a little less comfortable in the environment here, who really need that all-around support system, right? So, we are that one place you can go and say, I'm debating my major, I don't understand my FAFSA, I don't know how I'm going to pay my bill. You know, one place, even though we work with all of these other offices on campus, we are a good place to start. And I think also for those students who just really, really need more support, more encouragement, than a lot of the other offices can provide. Because those offices are serving thousands of students, and we are serving 175.

Diana observed the university is using TRIO as a model to replicate access and retention services, but ultimately is unable to provide the holistic, one-stop support structure needed by “more at-risk” students. When Diana used the term “at-risk,” she was referring to TRIO students’ low-income, first-generation status. She also specified TRIO’S limited number of program participants, as established by the grant, allows the program to provide an integrated, tailored support system for this student population. For example, Diana shared her capacity to increase the frequency of advising sessions based on the needs of individual students, "I meet with students literally every week, because they need that, where other offices can't do that." The specialization of services reflected in Diana's praxis is dictated by the grant participation caps, and it is important to note, at 175 participants, her public regional university is able to serve less than 20% of the campus low-income, first-generation population.

There is an inherent dilemma in offering specialized services that cannot possibly accommodate all eligible students. On one hand, the presence of a TRIO program acknowledges the presence and needs of low-income, first-generation students, but on the other hand, this acknowledgement compels the university to recognize and meet the needs of the broad low-income, first-generation student population. Diana's description of her university illustrates this evolution, as she shared the university's increasing allocation of institutional resources towards advising and outreach prompts her TRIO program to redefine their role on campus. Diana views the implementation of new services as a compliment to TRIO, and a recognition of the historical impact of TRIO's singular support of this student population:

> We're a fairly large institution, but I have heard recently at different gatherings, people talking about these new initiative on campus, and … people still acknowledge TRIO. They need to acknowledge, "hey, we're trying to do what TRIO has done and has been doing for years," so I appreciate that, especially because after being here for so many years, you kind of wonder, do people even know we're here? So, yeah. It's great to see people on our campus not only

acknowledge what we've been doing, but trying to make changes to serve all students better.

Summary

TRIO history and praxis is instructive as institutions and higher education policymakers seek to construct access and retention interventions aimed at low-income, first-generation students. There are no "quick fixes" and no easy answers when it comes to remediating the structural exclusion and capitalist aims of higher education systems, but a collective, liberatory approach characterized by an ethic of care was advocated for most frequently by the TRIO professionals in this study. This entails an initial redefinition of how we conceptualize and imagine affordability, college choice, and the financial empowerment of low-income, first-generation students. We also need to wrestle with the realities that neoliberal policies will not "save us," or secure the higher education participation and social mobility of low-income, first-generation students. Rather, multifaceted policy interventions consisting of the remunerative scaling of federal and state grant programs and care-based institutional policy measures (basic care provision, emergency funding, and access and retention programs) will be more effective in advancing affordability and completion for LIFG students.

5 Critical Questions: Analyzing TFPP with Critical Policy Analysis Values

Critical Policy Analysis is rooted in 5 essential values, asking the question: Does the policy promote (1) equity, (2) effectiveness, (3) liberation, (4) security, and (5) community or solidarity (Neumann & Pallas, 2015; Winkle-Wagner, Lee-Johnson, Gaskew, 2018)? Critically assessing public policy requires us "(1) to surface the power of values to contravene leaders' policy choices and (2) to juxtapose equity against other values as justifications for government actions" (Neumann & Pallas, 2015, p. 158). This policy lens echoes the research approach of Linda Tuwhali Smith (1999), who prompts us with critical questions about people and policies: "Is the spirit clear? Does it have a good heart? Are they useful to us?" (p. 10). In this section, I apply the five values of CPA to the question of how TFPP may influence the college access of low-income students, as explored by my participants.

Does TFPP advance equity for low-income students?

In CPA, equity is broadly defined as the fair distribution of resources (Neumann & Pallas, 2015), but given the structural inequities facing low-income students, it is essential to complicate the definition of fairness in relation to resources and access. Poor, low-income, and working-class students navigate the college-going process with a deficit of resources and capital compared to their peers (Kezar, 2011; Bastedo & Ozan, 2011; Hartle & Nellum, 2015; Landers, 2018). Therefore, an equity-minded approach to LI students emphasizes "the *process* by which the distribution of resources is determined" (Neumann & Pallas, 2015, p. 159). The great indigenous scholar Vine DeLoria Jr. (1999) advocated for critical attention to systems of resource allocation:

> With the distribution of funds, will come the drug dealers, bootleggers, used car dealers, and appliance salesmen who would normally cross the street to avoid saying hello to an Indian. One great spasm of spending will occur and then the people, as poor as they ever were, will return to normal lives.

The participants of this study consistently expressed concern that TFPP will flatten and obscure this process of resource administration and undermine efforts to distribute resources specifically allocated for low-income students.

Utilizing the CPA lens of equity as fair resource allocation, there are numerous accounts of participants connecting their ambivalence about TFPP to resource access. Hugh, the former financial aid professional, anticipated that TFPP could redistribute funds away from need-based financial aid and support initiatives: “It it’s for everybody, that will take away funds that might be need-based.” This was echoed by Jeanette, who questioned whether low-income students would lose academic and material support resources in a TFPP context:

> We rely a lot on intrusive advising, doing all the supplemental instruction and tutoring, plus making sure our students have transportation and childcare, so it’s just hard to imagine justifying that if everyone is going for free and it’s hard to scale.

Julia also expressed ambivalence about the potential for TFPP to reallocate resources originally meant for low-income, first-generation students:

> You see this a lot, where colleges see TRIO and say, hey we should do a learning common with SSI and tutoring or somethings like that, we should have an academic support center in the cultural centers. That’s all good, but it takes a lot of money and staff and support when you replicate services like that, and it has to come from somewhere.

Finally, from a community college perspective, Blong questioned how TFPP may decrease visibility and resource support for Pell-eligible (low-income) students: “We do a lot of things based on who is getting the Pell, you know. It’s sort of the way we know who has the most need.” The design of state-wide TFPP, and its emphasis on universal access, is inherently not focused on equity for low-income students. Instead of an equitable distribution of resources (committing resources to those individuals with the greatest need and highest barriers), TFPP promotes an equality-based, need-blind approach to resource allocation.

Does TFPP create effectiveness for low-income students?

Effectiveness is defined as a CPA value that maximizes the desired outcome of a policy (Neumann & Pallas, 2015). It is particularly important to assess education policies according to their ability to maximize the intended outcome, given the history of exclusion and stratification in higher education (Lucas, 1999; Karabel, 2005; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011). As my grandma says often, *Do the most good with what you have*. In relation to creating a college-going culture for low-income students, effectiveness is tied to not only access but also persistence and degree completion (St. John, Paulsen, & Carter, 2005; O'Shea, 2016). This is why the participants of this study frequently espoused concerns about the influence of TFPP on the retention and completion of low-income students.

The promise of obtaining a college credential is integral to the motivation of low-income students as they navigate the college access process. Diana shared:

> It's still a risk for many of our students, with student loans and not being able to work full time, they have to know that it will be worth it and they will graduate, and they will be able to get a job that will raise their circumstances.

Beyond the financial and material significance of completion, Opal reflected on the symbolic significance of persistence and completion:

> It's that representation thing, right?...During summer bridge, we bring our alumni in for a panel and they talk about all of their college experiences, and how great it

> is but also how challenging it can be and how they overcome hardships and keep going. And I'm looking at our current high school students, and they are so inspired and they keep those examples in their minds. Like, 'I was a freshman in UB when they were a senior, and how they are a junior in college'. It's hugely motivational for them to see that progress.

In the same vein, Cliff connected his ambivalence about TFPP to the potential impact of students not persisting.

> When we meet with families, everyone knows someone who dropped out of college and still have loans, and that is a common precautionary tale, so we always assure them that their kids will have support and resources...we try to give examples of the students who did finish, and how important it is for them to have that support, like we say, to and through.

The importance of the effectiveness of any policy is underscored by these participant narratives, which focus on the community impact and legacy of persistence and completion.

Does TFPP promote liberation for low-income students?

In the context of CPA, a policy's liberatory potential is measured by its ability to promote "freedom of action unless the actions harm others" (Neumann & Pallas, 2015, p. 159). For this purpose of this study and appraising the influence of TFPP, the value of liberation can be connected to the importance of institutional choice and resisting stratification. Contemporary higher education scholars assert the significance of resisting institutional tracking and expanding student agency in the college access process, particularly given the legacy of institutional stratification and disenfranchisement (Perez

& McDonough, 2008; O'Connor, Hammack, & Scott, 2010; Barringer, Taylor, Barrett, & Slaughter, 2019). Nez Perce ancestor Heinmot Tooyalaket (1897) spoke of the power of agency and freedom in asserting personhood and sovereignty:

> Let me be a free man, free to travel, free to stop, free to work, free to trade where I choose, free to choose my own teachers, free to follow the religion of my ancestors, free to think and talk and act for myself.

The value of liberation echoes the importance of agency and choice expressed by the participants, and the potential that TFPP may constrain or exempt choice and agency in the college access process.

On its surface, TFPP promises to provide a 'free college' option. However, many of the participants in this study anticipate that the free institution would become the only option for low-income students. The participants noted their familiarity with current state TFPP programs that render certain institutional types, namely community and vocational colleges, as tuition-free. Lucille said:

> Affordability is always the front and center issue when we make the plan (safety-middle-reach list). So that's where we come in and say, don't look at the sticker price, look at the school. Look at the best place for you. Let's go on a campus visit and see you how feel. Let's fill out the FAFSA and look at the award letter together, and sometimes you know, the school that didn't seem possible because of the price is suddenly feasible for them.

Lucille's description of the college choice process as facilitated by TRIO illustrates the limits and merit of low-income student agency. From a community college perspective, Blong shared:

> We get a lot of students who are here because they were worried not being able to go the four year route because of money, and so they didn't even apply anywhere else, you know...we do the transfer plan, and show them how they can get credit and make it worth it to get the four year degree.

Finally, Opal discussed TFPP in the context of constraining choice for certain (low-income) students:

> I don't like the idea of like, 'Well, students of a certain income level should go here', because the people who are making these policies are not going to send their kids to a two-year school. I promise, they ain't going there.

Opal's concern that TFPP will be used as a tracking, or institutional stratification tool, is an important point in analyzing the liberatory limitations of such 'free college' policy platforms.

Does TFPP provide security for low-income students?

Security is a central CPA policy value and is defined as the extent to which a policy takes into account the satisfaction of basic human needs such as food, shelter, and clothing (Neumann & Pallas, 2015, p. 159). Beyond 'basic needs', CPA views other needs as central to providing a sense of security, including healthcare, education, and self-determination, and applies to both the needs of an individual and the needs of a social group (Neumann & Pallas, 2015). In the context of low-income student access, a policy provides security by taking into account the material needs of economically vulnerable students (Kezar, 2011; Tierney 2015; St. John & Bowman, 2015). The choice to enroll in college represents a multifaceted financial risk for low-income students, as they are prompted to curtail employment, take out student loans, and adapt the logistics of their living environment, transportation, nutrition, and child/family care (Gupton, et al., 2009; Abedi, 2015). The Ojibwe writer Louise Erdrich (1998) connects material and bodily needs with our intrinsic vulnerability as economically dispossessed peoples: "We have these earthly bodies. We know what they want. Half the time, we pretend they are under our mental thumb, but that is the illusion of the healthy and the protected." In a collegiate setting, it is often assumed that basic needs are met, but that is the illusion that Erdrich warns us to avoid. The participants consistently expressed concern that TFPP may further bifurcate the material needs of low-income students, and exempt higher education institutions from providing security for these materially vulnerable students.

As the TRIO professionals redefined affordability and access for low-income students, they advocated for policy that attends to the holistic material needs of LIFG students. Marisol shared:

> We have the food pantry on campus, which is great, because for many students, they're just stretching every dollar to cover food, rent, and basic necessities. And you know, it's kind of sad because for students that grew up with food insecurity, they are embarrassed, it (going to the pantry) takes them back to being on public assistance. But then they go and see lots of students there, grad students even.

The reality of socioeconomic struggle on college campuses was echoed by all the participants, particularly related to the daily lived reality of low-income students. Marta said:

> At a small private college, and we require residency, we see our (TRIO) students working an on campus work study job, trying to get a job where they can study, like being a security dispatcher or a front desk worker in a res hall. They work

> max hours, and then you would be surprised how many also have off campus jobs in town. We try to tell them to limit their employment hours, you know, but it's just not possible...and it's not for tuition and fees, most of them have it covered already, it's being able pay for basic things. Nobody is sending them money, actually the reverse! They are trying to help out at home too.

The majority of participants advocated for a holistic understanding of the affordability needs of low-income students, specifically in the form of providing security resources on campus (emergency financial aid, housing support, childcare, and food pantries). The sense of security that such resources provide for low-income students is critical to go beyond our surface-level understanding of access and affordability (the focus of TFPP), and toward a more equitable, care-centered response to the financial realities of LIFG students.

Does TFPP foster community or solidarity for low-income students?

Audre Lorde (1979), the activist and public intellectual, said: "Without community, there is no liberation." The final critical policy value, community or solidarity, is described as a policy's ability to foster "the collective responsibility of a social group to maintain the wellbeing of the group itself" (Neumann & Pallas, 2016, p. 160). Affinity spaces, including cultural organizations, ethnic studies departments, and TRIO programs, promote the wellbeing and campus acclimation of underrepresented and marginalized students and have been sites of critical resistance to dominant paradigms in higher education (Ferguson, 2012; Carales, Garcia, & Mardock□Uman, 2016). This policy value is focused on the collective self-maintenance of such spaces, often referred to in the indigenous worldview as sovereignty. As described by the Dakota educator and ethnographer Ella Cara Deloria, Aŋpétu Wašté Wiŋ (1944): "kinship systems create unity and sustains the people." Collective solidarity entails the structural uplift and concentration of support towards the most vulnerable populations within an environment or institution. The participants of this study specifically named TFPP as a policy that could undermine the visibility and cohesion of the low-income, first-generation community. Solidarity and community has long been a sustaining practice of TRIO programs. As Gao shared:

> You know, being poor or being first-gen is not only an invisible identity, it's also one of those things where there's a lot of shame. So having this program where you know you're not alone, and other students are worried about money and dealing with the same issues, it makes a big difference.

Hugh shared a story reflecting the material benefit of such collective solidarity:

> We had this group of pre-med students who all chipped in to buy the expensive Chem book and software, it was like $300. And they get together every week to study together and share the book. They even have a schedule when they pass it along to each during the week. So now, they are all helping each other get through this famously hard class, and they do it for their other classes too. And it all started because they knew they could approach each other about sharing costs, because they're all TRIO and there's less of a stigma about saying, 'hey, I can't afford it but we could do it together' and it benefits everyone.

This story of collective resources and mutual aid was reiterated in some form throughout all the participant interviews. Lucille connects the power of the collective to the visibility and sustainability of low-income, first-generation students:

> One of our alumni interned at Google, got a job after graduating, and then he helped recruit two more of our students into their intern program...[TFPP], it's not for just low-income students, you know, it's for everyone. So you lose that ability to make sure that low-income students know each other and see each other, and there's so much they can share in terms of learning together, being connected and having that shared full college experience. And they take it further than just college, they stay in each other's networks after graduation and that is crucial, because after college they are still experiencing PWIs, just in the form of their work settings and neighborhoods, so that connection to home and each other helps with that sense of 'we're doing this together, we can keep going and help each other belong.

The possibilities of collective wellbeing and solidarity described by the TRIO professionals is a critical transgressive practice to resisting systems of subjugation. In the seminal text *Red Pedagogy: Native American Social and Political Thought*, Sandy Grande (2018) asserts the significance of community and solidarity spaces within educational institutions:

> A fugitive space wherein the pursuit of knowledge is not perceived as a path toward upward mobility and material wealth but rather as a means towards eradicating oppression in all of its forms. The ultimate goal is to create in the present a future that overthrows the logic of neoliberalism" (p. 183).

The following section details how TFPP functions as a logic of neoliberalism and threatens the equity, effectiveness, liberation, security, and community of low-income, first-generation students.

"It Seems Like a Good Idea at First." Exploring Tuition-Free: Discourses in the Context of Neoliberal Multiculturalism

In the educational equity world, we assume free is good, that lifting financial barriers to higher education will result in a new paradigm of access and inclusion. The narratives shared by the TRIO professionals demonstrate their ambivalence is rooted in a fundamental distrust of the ways public policy is designed and implemented as a "technology of power" to reinforce and even deepen socio-economic disenfranchisement (Martinez-Aleman, 2015, p. 14.). Many of the professionals provided ample examples of how various policies that begin with the promise of bolstering college access are ultimately operationalized to hinder students' sense of options and self-efficacy. As Opal shared, "It always seems like a good idea at first," but public policy's transformative potential is frequently handicapped by the fact it is often initiated and designed far from the communities it espouses to serve.

Diversity and equity discourses in higher education often oversimplify, obscure, and ultimately neutralize/rationalize the structural barriers experienced by underrepresented, low-income, first-generation students in higher education (Ahmed, 2012; Archer, 2007; Harper, 2012). This tendency is consistently reiterated by the participants in this study, who asserted repeatedly tuition only represents one form of affordability concerns experienced by low-income, first-generation students. The TRIO professionals drew a much more expansive, inclusive picture of how low-income students navigate financial constraints, naming the daily struggle to secure basic needs such as transportation, childcare, food, and shelter. They also pointed out on several occasions low-income students are essential contributors to their family and community's material and labor resources, and the choice to seek higher education is often in tension with the realities of employment and resource sharing. The TRIO professionals view the "big picture" of college affordability and the actual lived experiences and needs of low-income students as in direct contrast/tension with the discourses of free college, which reduce and flatten the holistic financial barriers imposed by a system predicated on class and financial privilege.

In the context of this study, low-income student participation in the higher education system is valuable only insofar as it contributes to the capitalistic aims of the dominant society. Critical theorist Noam Chomsky (2018) wrote:

> Neoliberalism should be understood as a form of class war, which we can see by its experience and obvious design, that tends to assigns power and resources to narrow sectors of concentrated capital … this shows up in all institutions, including universities" (p. 59).

Given the cultural reverence and symbolic prestige of U.S. higher education, this institutional system is highly predisposed to perpetuate neoliberal stratification. If students are made more vulnerable by institutional tracking, student loan participation, and the expenditure of federal grant aid to tuition-free institutions, it is rationalized by the goal of labor market preparation and participation. This trade-off was reflected in Evelyn's narrative of her experience in workforce development prior to TRIO.

> … the goal there (at workforce development) was jobs. If you want to go to college, the question is, what job do you want—welding, HVAC, or nurse practitioner? What are your choices if you want to go to college? The military, or the voc-ed program. It felt like we were saying, "let's make it easier for the

> students with these options," but it also felt like in some ways we were letting their income status determine their options, you know?

Neoliberal multiculturalism places the "ethic of multiculturalism" as central to its policies and initiatives and posits diversity and multiculturalism as an asset to the agendas of capitalism (Ahmed, 2012; Chomsky, 2018; Melamed, 2011). This is reflected in higher education's predominance of diversity statements and initiatives, with its emphasis on increasing the representation of students of color and low-income and first-generation students. While these initiatives benefit the goals of access, they frequently posit those who are dispossessed or negatively affected by structural inequities as "handicapped by their own monoculturalism and cultural deficiencies," reinforcing deficit narratives consciously and unconsciously constructed to justify underrepresented student attrition and institutional stratification. The TRIO professionals reflected this in their narratives related to questions of academic preparation and institutional fit. For example, Opal contextualized TFPP by speculating about the ways participation may track students according to income level.

> I love the two-year school, and I think for a student who really wants a career, that a two-year school is going to equip them for that and then yes, they should go for that. But, I don't like the idea of like, "Well, students of a certain income level should go here," because the people who are making these policies are not going to send their kids to a two-year school. I promise, they ain't going there. So, why do you want that for some students and not your own?

The deficit narratives of low-income, first-generation student access and persistence in higher education are manifold: they are not academically prepared, they are culturally clannish, they do not have self-efficacy, and they do not know how to navigate the institution.

Under neoliberalism, institutions recognize and reinforce dominant forms of capital such as generational wealth and class socialization, training students in what Melamed (2011) referred to as “egotistic individualism and self-enterprise (distinguishable qualities of global citizens)” (p. 42). These forms of capital are often in direct competition with other forms of capital or subordinated within institutions, such as those delineated by Yosso (2005) as characteristic of the capital accrued in underrepresented and low-income communities: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital. Several TRIO professionals reflected on these forms of student capital and the ways higher education policy fails to recognize and value such capital as a primary dilemma of access. Marta, Evelyn, and Drew commented on their students’ diminished ability to participate in unpaid internships and study abroad as socialization structures within their fields. Lucille asserted many of her students possess advanced financial literacy capital by merit of their serving as a primary translator of financial and insurance documents for their household.

> I’m telling you, they know more than me! They really do. Think about it, they’ve been opening the mail for years, going with their folks to fill out the EBT and Minnesota Care forms, helping with the school forms, all of it. Yes, they need help with the college financial aid but trust me, they know a lot about money and finances, and they really understand how to be proactive and make sure that business is taken care of. You know, even after they go to college, they are doing their FAFSA alone and helping their little siblings and neighbors too.

These unique forms of capital are rarely recognized by the institution, which under neoliberalism becomes important adjudicators of class and race stratification. Because higher education institutions are viewed as sites in which egalitarian representation and diversity are valued, policies such as TFPP are packaged as benefitting the common good and securing social mobility. Such policies are compelling mechanisms of power, assuaging social economic and racial anxieties. Melamed (2011) asserted one of the most transfixing aspects of neoliberal multiculturalism's ideological mindset is its conferral of "earned" privileges to neoliberalism's beneficiaries ("multicultural, reasonable, law-abiding, good global citizens") and to stigmatize dispossessed, "rightfully" excluded others ("monocultural, backward, weak, and irrational;" p. 44).

United States universities, according to Melamed (2011), distinguish between and certify students as rightful beneficiaries and "others." Burt and Lorenzo (2018) applied this reasoning directly to the neoliberal language of financial aid policy, taking an historical assessment of the hegemonic response to increasing higher education participation of "others" (low-income students and students of color): "Unable to return to overt forms of racial domination, white elites shifted to coded forms of language to support policy preferences that limited progress toward equity" (p. 141). Within higher education, this shift is characterized by neoliberal policies that position higher education as an "investment for workforce needs of commercial industry and the economic self-interest of the individual" and policies grounded in "ahistoricism, colorblindness, and interest-convergence" (p. 143). This approach stands in sharp contrast to TRIO's pre-neoliberal approach to educational equity, which emphasizes the Civil Rights era founding of the program and the collective benefit of college attainment for low-income communities. As Diana reflected, “That’s why we’re all here, that’s why I’ve been here this long. I think back to when the program was started, what it meant to people, and how it’s echoed through generations.”

Tuition-free public policy is an illustrative example of the many mechanisms of power that code low-income, first-generation as “beneficiaries” or “others.” Many TFPP programs are advertised as “promise programs,” promising tuition remission in exchange for community service, mentoring, and academic requirements, disciplining their experience and qualifying them as a “good, reasonable, law-abiding” higher education participant and therefore “rightful beneficiaries” of access. On the other hand, students who are employed, have financial difficulties, need childcare, take breaks, and have limited capacity to do community service are coded according to the prominent deficit narratives associated with low-income, first-generation students. These distinctions are present in the narratives of TRIO professionals, who shared students already experience classism and othering based on the perception their low-income status gives them unfair, or “unearned” financial and resource benefits in higher education. Evelyn shared low-income students “already have a target on their back,” while Cliff reflected “everyone will wonder, who is paying for this? … it might make it worse for them.”

Tuition-free promise programs demonstrate an attempt to rationalize and make socially palatable college access for underrepresented, disenfranchised students by disciplining their experience and coding them as “rightful beneficiaries” of neoliberal exceptionalism. Beyond the low-income, first-generation population, Melamed (2011) pointed out under neoliberal multiculturalism, the entire higher education system learns how to code vulnerable and exploited groups with the "buzzwords" of diversity (service, mission, benevolence, reform), allowing them "to play their part in disconnecting a policy's target population from circuits of neoliberal wealth and value" (p. 45). This crucial point demonstrates how structures of inequity reproduce and are perpetuated even amongst the socially aware and "woke" members of higher education institutions.

Representation and demography, rather than equity and liberation, is frequently framed as the goal of diversity initiatives in the neoliberal multicultural context. In this discourse, institutions "move away from antiracist and anti-capitalist discourses" because remedying systemic racism and class oppression requires a vast restructuring of the institution itself, and of higher education as a whole (Ahmed, 2012). Polices such as TFPP, therefore, serve as a "red herring" of change and inclusion within neoliberal multiculturalism, promising to increase the representation of low-income, first-generation students within certain institutions without attending to the needs and barriers they will face in higher education. The TRIO professionals explicitly named the fear of attrition as central to their resistance to TFPP, taking into account the reverberating effect of institutional disenfranchisement in poor and low-income communities. Cliff shared:

> … if a kid goes to college without being prepared and being invested in the process, and having academic support resources, the likelihood of he or she dropping out is higher. We see it a lot, and then we keep hearing about it from their younger siblings and parents, and in the schools, like, "Oh, they went to college and dropped out, and now they have debt and they can't get back in." So, it's even more important that if they go, they are ready and it's a good fit, because everyone is watching them back home.

Dismantling systems of power within institutions requires collective action and a willingness to divest of neoliberal constructs of diversity and equity (hooks, 2000; Kumashiro, 2002). In their study of neoliberal language in financial aid public policy, Burt and Lorenzo (2018) traced a disturbing shift in discourses related to financial aid public policy, a fundamental change in the rationale for providing financial aid: from "financial aid as a tool to increase access for marginalized and disenfranchised students" to "financial aid as a public good for all" (p. 149). This approach sanitizes race and class subjugation from the discourses and construction of financial aid policy, a consistent concern of the TRIO professionals in this study. The TRIO professionals in this study often cited their unique institutional positionality, at the nexus of the community school district, university, and community, as a significant asset in their commitment to recognizing and challenging hegemonic forces that hinder college access. The structure of TRIO and its relatively bias-free status on campuses is a testament to its formation during the social movements of the 1960s, a period characterized by state and institutional commitments to define new rights, freedoms, and socially permissible voices for change. This ethos remains at the heart of TRIO policy and praxis and gives important insight into the ambivalence and dissonance expressed by TRIO professionals as they appraised TFPP.

Future Implications for Research

As I have shared from my own story as a poor, first-generation student, and the illuminating narratives of the TRIO professional participants, college access work in our communities is extremely complex and politicized. There are no direct paths to ensure all students who aspire to seek higher education and social mobility will have agency and access as they navigate the college admissions and financial aid process. However, there are practices and policies we know are effective in increasing equitable access, and they require resisting neoliberal tools of stratification and power. As I traveled across Minnesota, being welcomed into TRIO programs in small towns and big cities alike, I knew this study is only the beginning for me in exploring the LIFG college access world. While this study has enabled me to re-represent many of the primary barriers and opportunities at the intersections of TRIO experience and access policymaking, I continue to share the ambivalence of my participants related to neoliberal multicultural initiatives that purport to address LIFG exclusion and tracking in higher education. Despite our shared ambivalence, I am confident the TRIO community and access allies will continue to advocate for the complicated, messy reforms referred to by Cliff as the “hard stuff” we need to address in order to dismantle structural exclusion at our higher education institutions.

An increasing awareness of how neoliberalism is shaping financial aid and higher education policy mandates an urgent effort to appraise and address the systemic barriers facing LIFG students. A critical aspect of future studies is constructing a representation and critical policy analysis with LIFG students themselves. Several participants in this study cited the influence of students’ perspectives on their own understanding of TFPP and similar initiatives. Lucille shared an experience from facilitating the college planning class. She described spending time each week sharing a current news article or “hot topic” and prompting students to “take a stance” in their journals and support their argument with their own experiences and perspectives. One week the topic was free college, and Lucille shared the students expressed ambivalence about the prospective policy:

> It is something I know that they're aware of because we've read articles on it and journaled about it. And it's a little bit mixed, I think they definitely see it as an access point, but these students are prepared also. Like, they're going to be going into it with time management skills and resources, how to advocate, how to communicate, and a lot of students who don't have this. That's kind of what we see in the numbers already, low-income students are graduating at 11%, versus the 54% of our TRIO students. So, again, just making it free doesn't necessarily mean that they're going to finish and obtain a degree, and that's really what the outcome should be, and that's what they all wrote about in their journals. It's not just to get them there, but to get them the degree. And then being equipped, just having the tools, to navigate that space is just as … Oh, what is the word? It's that social cultural capital that students … you can't just give that to the students, right? And so, you know, just making that access free doesn't necessarily mean that they're going to feel like they belong there, they're not going to necessarily feel like they can be successful, you know, there's so many different aspects of students persisting, that it's not always just about the money.

The students' nuanced criticality regarding TFPP inspires a strong sense of optimism and empowerment as the college access world seeks to shape policy for ourselves. With this in mind, future studies could explore the perspectives of students themselves, and their families and low-income communities. It is important to acknowledge the positional privilege many TRIO professionals inhabit and consider how this may shape their policy analysis. Further, extending this research to be inclusive of student voices could contribute to a deeper understanding of how we can move beyond ambivalence towards action.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this journey, I did not expect this study to be an exploration of ambivalence. Yet, as I spoke with access professionals at every institutional type and observed their incredible commitment to low-income, first-generation students, I realized ambivalence is a most appropriate response to emergent policy proposals. TRIO professionals began the work of college readiness and access in the 1960s, and they have seen multitudes of initiatives come and go across the genealogies of education reform. As Diana shared,

> I've been here almost 40 years, and I see myself as the guardian of my grant. You know, we've graduated and tracked over 3,000 alumni since the first grant. When I think about how many families are a part of that, how often our alumni come back and tell us that they helped another kid go to college, it's really astounding, and it makes it all worthwhile.

TRIO professionals take the long view of college access, and their preoccupation with efficacy, outcomes, and collective uplift is a great benefit to the policy analysis and design work on our campuses and in our communities. If there is one intervention I would advocate for at the culmination of this study, it would be for policymakers and campus administrators to include and center the voice of TRIO professionals in their initiatives and reforms. Their extensive policy training and advocacy, coupled with their decades-long praxis working on the goal of interconnected access and retention for LIFG students, is a significantly untapped and ignored resource to our educational leaders and policymakers.

I came to the study with an instinctive and reluctant resistance to the policy discourses I heard throughout our political landscape. My curiosity and foreboding led me to seek the counsel of TRIO professionals, who taught me so much about how to analyze, deconstruct, and reshape policy while maintaining a sense of hope and action. First, I learned our shared ambivalence about TFPP pointed to larger systemic forces of neoliberal domination. We need to reclaim our voice and influence on the public policy that claims to serve us, and to demand representation of our identities and experiences in policymaking and reform. Second, I learned seeking affordability and college choice is more urgent and contingent than ever before, and correlated policy initiatives need to include and expand existing equity interventions such as federal and state grant programs aimed specifically at low-income students. And third, I learned institutional efforts at creating a multifaceted ethic of care for LIFG students are a critical component of going beyond access to ensure persistence. This requires a collective confrontation with the structural issues that undergird "new, shiny" neoliberal access initiatives, namely the desire to further stratify and track low-income students' higher education participation. In individual academic enclaves and within the privileged domains of critical scholarship, we have been able to recognize the ways higher education reinforces and re-edifies capitalist class hegemonies. However, we have not yet brought this intellectual awareness to bear upon the actual policies that influence the access and equity of postsecondary education in the US.

Fourth, collective action has the power to shift policy and power mechanisms. This was resounding in my conversations with the access professionals, who drew upon a lineage of educational activists who fought for the formation and positionality of TRIO, from President Lyndon B. Johnson and Shirley Chisolm to present-day policymaker and TRIO alum Representative Gwen Moore. While many colleges and universities operate as insular, hierarchical institutions, the TRIO professionals consistently enact collaborative, activist leadership in pursing and enacting equitable policy interventions. This is the model we need to replicate if we are to seek increasingly equitable, liberation-focused policy reform for LIFG students. As I think about access, and my own story of being a low-income, first-generation college hopeful who is writing the last paragraph of my dissertation, I think again of the words of bell hooks: “Being oppressed means the absence of choices” (p. 5). I hope this study contributes to a deeper, transgressive understanding of the role of choice and agency in resisting oppression and moving towards a redefinition of low-income, first-generation students in higher education.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Question Protocol

Research Questions guiding this study:

- How does tuition-free public policy influence access counselors' approach in serving LI and FG students?
- How do access counselors make sense of their role in relation to tuition-free public policy, whether they enact, resist, or remain neutral to the policy?
- What is the relationship between policy and praxis for these access counselors; how do the ways they make sense of and apply tuition-free public policy to their praxis relate to the choice, directions, and trajectory of LI, FG students?

Question Protocol:

This semi-structured protocol starts with the researcher giving the participant a printed consent form and reading it aloud. The participant will be invited to sign the consent form if they consent to participate. If the participant consents and signs, the interview begins by turning on the voice recorder and starting with the first question. Based on the participant's responses, the researcher may prompt the interviewee to expand or give examples, or shift the direction of the interview.

Orienting Questions

1. How did you first become interested in working in college access for underrepresented students?
   Prompt: Can you tell me how you came into your current position?
2. Tell me about your current role - what are the primary responsibilities of your position?
   Prompt: What is your host institution? What schools do you serve?
   Prompt: What students services do you deliver?
   Prompt: What is your title (both in the grant and at your institution)?
3. How long have you been in your role?
4. How did you first become interested in college access?
   Prompt: What experiences did you have accessing college yourself that shaped this interest?
   Prompt: What experiences have you had as an educator that shape your interest in college access?

Defining Praxis Questions

1. How do you describe the practices you employ/utilize in your role?
   Prompt: How did you learn your praxis?
   Prompt: Praxis has been described as "theory or philosophy in action". How would you describe the theory or philosophy that shapes your praxis?
2. How does your commitment to students show up in your practice/praxis with students?
   Prompt: What is your hope for students as they approach the college-going process?
   Prompt: How do you conceptualize the practice of college access?
3. Can you remember a particular time when you felt successful in your efforts as a college

access counselor?

Prompt: Why does this specific moment stand out in your praxis/experience?

4. Can you remember a particular time when you felt conflicted in your efforts as a college access counselor?

Prompt: Why does this specific moment stand out in your praxis/experience?

5. Aside from your role as a college access counselor, are there other identities or experiences that shape your practice with students?

Positionality Questions

1. How do you describe your role to students and their families?

Prompt: Why do you choose to describe your role this way?

2. How do you describe your role to institutional agents (university colleagues/partners)?

Prompt: Why do you choose to describe your role this way?

3. How would you describe your role in the TRIO world?

Prompt: Why do you choose to describe your role this way?

4. How have your experiences within your host university shaped your practice with students?

Prompt: Do you have a sense of belonging at your host university? Why or why not?

5. How have your experiences in your service schools shaped your practice with students?

Prompt: Do you have a sense of belonging at your service school(s)? Why or why not?

Policy Questions

1. How do you experience public policy (provide examples here?) in your role as a college access counselor?

Prompt: How does public policy influence your approach with students?

2. Can you remember a particular moment when you felt public policy was influencing/ constraining or intersecting with your practice as a college access counselor?

Prompt: Why does this specific moment stand out in your praxis/experience?

3. Do you view policy awareness and/or implementation as part of your praxis? Why or why not?

Prompt: How does this show up in your work with students?

Final Open-Ended Questions

1. What other experiences are important for me to know to best understand your role as a college access counselor

Prompt: ...related to the influence of public policy in your work?

Prompt: ... related to the influence of your institutional position(s) in your work?

2. Is there anything more you would like to share?

Appendix B: Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a study designed to explore the ways that college access counselors engage and respond to public policy in their praxis supporting the college access of poor, low-income, and working class students.

This study is being conducted by Kelly Collins, a PhD candidate in the department of Organizational Leadership, Policy and Development at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities. This study is being overseen by Dr. Rashné Jehangir, PhD, Associate Professor of Higher Education in the Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development.

Study Purpose
This study seeks to explore the influence of public policy on the praxis of college access counselors.

Study Procedures
This study is completely voluntary. If you choose not to participate, it will not affect you in any adverse way. If you agree to participate, you will be interviewed by Kelly Collins. The interview will be audio recorded and later transcribed. Upon completion of the transcription, you will be invited to review the transcript to provide any clarifications or elaborations that emerge upon review. All aspects of your participation are voluntary and may be discontinued at any time.

Risks of Study Participation
This study involves no significant risk to you. Because this research explores identity and experience, you may have reason to comment upon particular instances when your identity was salient to your teaching. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and if any issues of emotional pain or trauma emerge through this questioning, you have every right and opportunity to end the interview.

Benefits of Study Participation
As a participant in this study, you will have the opportunity to reflect on your experiences as a College access counselor and you will have the opportunity to discuss your role and praxis with the researcher. Your participation will contribute to an emerging area of scholarship on the intersections of college access and public policy.

Confidentiality
The records of this study will be kept private. Your record will be maintained in an anonymous form and only accessible via a password protected computer. Research records will be destroyed at the time IRB approval for this project expires (typically five years from the date of this interview).

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with your college or university or with the faculty, staff, or administrators involved in service learning or community engagement at your school. If you decide to participate, you are also free to withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships. You can withdraw by contacting Kelly Collins or Dr. Rashné Jehangir (jehan001@umn.edu; 612-625-3551).

Contacts and Questions
The primary researcher conducting this study is Kelly Collins. You may ask any questions you have now, or if you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact Kelly at coll0767@umn.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you are encouraged to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St SE, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; 612-625-1650.

Please keep a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information, and I wish to be a part of this study.

Signature:_____________________________________ Date:

participant signature

Signature:_____________________________________ Date:

Kelly Collins

If you agree with the terms of this study, please keep a copy of this form.