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The power of Language: Exploring Foundations of Neoliberalism in Federal Financial Aid Policy

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Abstract

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Keywords

Critical race theory, financial aid, policy, higher education, neoliberalism

Disciplines

Education Economics | Higher Education | Home Economics | Secondary Education

Comments

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The Power of Language: Exploring Foundations of Neoliberalism in Federal Financial Aid Policy

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Despite claims that colleges and universities are isolated from ideological preferences, sociopolitical discourse regularly shapes policies and practices of postsecondary education. This article considers how national discourse on federal aid for postsecondary education during the 1970s reflected a monumental shift in higher education policy. Specifically, we critique neoliberalism, a tenet of critical race theory (CRT), to examine key testimonies from six expert educational leaders during a 1978 hearing on the Middle Income Student Assistance Act (MISAA). The key testimonies examined in this article highlight how language shifted the focus of national discourse on federal financial aid from public to private good, and from equal opportunity for traditionally underrepresented populations to equitable education for all.

Keywords: *Critical race theory; financial aid; policy; higher education; neoliberalism*

Over the last decade, considerable attention has been given to policies that influence postsecondary access and completion. The contemporary college completion agenda is supported by both national economic interests and community-based motivations for social justice (Chambers, 2016; Perna, Finney, & Callahan, 2014). The United States, however, continues to fall behind nation-state peers in the percentage of working adults with a postsecondary credential. Furthermore, disparities in postsecondary access by demographic background, notably race, ethnicity, and class, remain. These outcomes suggest that principles of meritocracy and egalitarianism are elusive ideologies for postsecondary institutions.

Despite claims that colleges and universities are isolated from ideological preferences, sociopolitical discourse regularly shapes policies and practices of postsecondary education. The symbiotic relationship between higher education and government policymakers (local, state, and federal) often supports the ascendance of particular sociopolitical beliefs (Loss, 2012). A core example is the recurring debate around the financing of postsecondary education. Discourse that considers postsecondary education to be a service for the public good supports policies that supplement financial costs for individuals through local, state, and federal expenditures. In contrast, those that believe higher education to be a private benefit support policies that limit public revenue to colleges and universities, placing the majority of costs on individuals.

For a deeper understanding of the contemporary contest between these contrasting views on higher education, it is valuable to revisit a critical turning point in this dialogue. Loss (2012) notes that the state-higher education partnership was forever reshaped by the structural deterioration of the United States economy in the mid-to-late 1970s. Rising costs of social programs established under President Lyndon Johnson, the extended Vietnam War, and a significant surge in oil prices led to a bipartisan effort to realign public postsecondary education with free market beliefs. Prior to this period, the public approach to higher education had been increasingly reinforced through federal acts expanding postsecondary opportunities—legislation such as the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, otherwise known as the *G.I. Bill* (1944), the *Higher Education Act* (1965), and *Title IX* (1972), as well as a series of Supreme Court decisions desegregating higher education—*Gaines v. Canada* (1938), *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950), and *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents* (1950).

More recently, scholars have suggested that shifting racial dynamics in the United States during this period altered support for social institutions like higher education (Giroux, 2002;

Hohle, 2015; Rhoads, Wagoner, & Ryan, 2009). Rather than subscribe to forms of assimilationist integration (e.g., ‘melting pot’ ideology), communities of color used expanded opportunities to challenge institutional and cultural norms masking forms of White privilege. 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 and multiculturalism (Hanley-Lopez, 2014).

Given this historical context and the on-going contemporary debate, the purpose of this article is to examine the shift in national discourse on federal aid for postsecondary education during the 1970s. Specifically, the authors use critique of neoliberalism, a tenet of critical race theory (CRT), to examine key testimonies from six expert educational leaders during a 1978 hearing on the *Middle Income Student Assistance Act* (MISAA). The act, eventually signed by President Jimmy Carter in 1978, widened eligibility for the Basic Pell grants program while also expanding the student loan program. The key testimonies examined in this article highlight how language shifted the focus of national discourse on federal financial aid from public good to private good (Pasque, 2007; Slaughter, 1991), and from equal opportunity for traditionally underrepresented populations to equitable educational experience for all (Gladioux, 1996; St. John, 2003).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Structures of racial and class subordination in American higher education can be traced back to the founding of colonial colleges whose leaders raised capital through slave labor and campaigns promising to ‘acculturate’ Native Americans (Wilder, 2013; Wright, 1988). While the *Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862* extended higher learning opportunities to working class men and women, curricular focus was typically limited to agriculture, home economics, and teaching. The *Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1890* increased higher education opportunities for African Americans through federal and state support for what one refers to as historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs); however, the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision ensured higher education systems that were separate and unequal. The National Association for the Advanced of Colored People (NAACP), led by a young lawyer named Thurgood Marshall, supported several cases related to postsecondary education opportunities to challenge the legality of racial segregation in social institutions. *Gaines v. Canada* (1938), *Sipuel v. Board of Regents of University of Oklahoma* (1948), *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950), and *McClaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents* (1950) all reached the Supreme Court and began to chip away at the “separate but equal” law established under *Plessy*. These Supreme Court decisions, also, however, foreshadowed the deliberate and slow pace of racial remediation efforts.

In 1965, facing mounting pressure from civil rights activism (including student protests across college campuses), President Johnson signed the *Higher Education Act*. This act, which gave federal funds to colleges to support students through loans, scholarships, and grants, was intended to strengthen the commitment to low-income and underrepresented students by providing financial assistance as a means to increase the likelihood of their enrollment (Gamson & Arce, 1978; Green, 2004; McPherson & Schapiro, 1991). From the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s, low-income and underrepresented populations increasingly attended college in the United States (Gamson & Arce, 1978; Thelin, 2004). In fact, by 1976, enrollment percentages for Black and Hispanic high school graduates (ages 18–24) were proportionally equal to their White counterparts at 33 percent, respectively (Carnoy, 1994), marking a major triumph following the ugly American history of segregation. Furthermore, although economic outcomes for education among Blacks and Hispanics lagged behind White peers, research indicated evidence of an expanding middle class among underrepresented populations through the 1970s (Oliver & Shapiro 2006; Pattillo, 1999). For those benefiting from intergenerational mobility through education during this period, however, the tenuous middle-class status was held through annual income rather than accumulated wealth (Freeman, 1976).

When President Carter stepped into office in 1977, federal student financial aid (not including aid for veterans through the G.I. Bill) had been primarily awarded to low-income students and underrepresented students of color during the expansion of colleges and universities (St. John, 2003; Thelin, 2004). Financial aid had a major responsibility to help equalize educational opportunity for historically disadvantaged individuals. After the reauthorization of the *Higher Education Act* in 1976, a new discourse started to occur. Middle-class voters felt as though financial aid was no longer needed to address past injustices; the goal of equalizing higher education was lost to the goal of equal aid for more students (Green, 2004). The concept of financial aid began transforming into a “privilege” that needed to be distributed among a wider range of people, including the middle-class.

According to St. John (2003), the rationale for expanding student aid revolved around the use of taxes and the interpretation of an emerging theory, human capital theory. The use of taxes was becoming a controversial political topic as citizens were not sold on the obligation of paying taxes to support a proportionately small population of students, Black and low-income students, going to college. Many taxpayers believed that a fairer use of expenditures would benefit a wider range of students, including those from middle-income families. The concept of “costs and benefits” was applied to higher education and the financial aid context; the conversation centered on the most effective uses of taxpayers’ money in relation to college outputs in the workforce (Slaughter, 1991). By 1978, MISAA was proposed and debated; if it passed, middle-income students would be eligible to receive federal financial aid to attend college.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The quick retreat from the redistributive rationale for federal financial aid policy established through the 1965 *Higher Education Act* reflects an ideological preference for meritocratic principles that amplify individual responsibility as primary determinants of social outcomes, reducing most consideration of historical and contemporary foundations of structural oppression (Baber, 2017; Dixon et al., 2017). While this sociopolitical movement is less overtly organized around racial and class subordination, it continues to operate covertly through coded language and signified meanings (Hanley-Lopez, 2012; Hohle, 2015). On the surface, terms like ‘entitlement programs’ and ‘states-rights’ are *presented* as culturally neutral constructs; however, they are *understood* in association with historical and contemporary frames of American racism and classism.

Critical race theory (CRT) serves to challenge the ways in which forms of racism and classism influence social structures and opportunities for people of color. Stemming from critical legal studies, CRT began in the mid-1970s as a movement of scholars and activists who examined legislation using a racial lens (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, 2005). CRT scholars investigate how legislation in the United States benefits White Americans and maintains White ideologies (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Tate, 1997). According to Delgado and Stefancic (2001), CRT is different from other theories because of its elements of activism and transformation. That is, CRT aims to uncover “how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies [as well as how to] transform it for the better” (p. 3). CRT scholars posit that racism is real, yet, is cunningly camouflaged within language, behavior, and governmental interventions (Bell, 2005; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016; Tate, 1997). Delgado and Stefancic (2001) argued that “attitudes and words are important . . . racism is a means by which society allocates privilege and status. Racial hierarchies determine who gets tangible benefits, including the best jobs and the best schools” (p. 17). Guided by the premise that racism is real, scholars use central tenets of CRT to unmask policies that give way to injustices. In education, various hallmarks of CRT are used to better understand how race and racism influence educational inequalities (Brady, Eatmen, & Parker, 2000; Chadderton, 2013; Green, 2004; Harper, 2009; Harper & Patton, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Minor, 2008; Parker & Lynn, 2002; Patton, McEwen, & Howard-Hamilton, 2007; Tate, 1997). Most notably, higher education scholars have focused on revealing the following patterns:

- *Racism as a normative*, rather than aberrant, experience for people of color in education contexts
- The consistency of *interest-convergence* in educational practices and policies—racial progress is only promoted when potential outcomes simultaneously benefit Whites
- *Race is a social construction* used as a mechanism to create and maintain hierarchies of power and ideologies of White supremacy
- *Importance of intersectionality and anti-essentialist perspectives* in considering how structural oppression operates simultaneously across identity categories
- *Use of counter-narrative storytelling* to advance understanding myriad ways race and racism operate within colleges and universities
- *Critique of frameworks grounded in forms of liberalism, including neoliberalism*, that serve to silence the unique, persistent role of racism in creating and maintaining postsecondary inequalities

Understanding that CRT principles are fluid and overlap, the authors mainly focus on the last tenet, specifically the critique of neoliberalism, as an analytical tool to examine the shifting language around federal financial aid policy during the 1970s. Neoliberalism reflects some core hallmarks of traditional liberalism, specifically the role of nation-state interventions to maximize individual opportunities (Baber, 2017; Hohle, 2015; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Rich, 1986). However, while traditional liberalism focuses on political and religious liberties, neoliberalism emphasizes maximizing economic outcomes through development of human capital, reallocation of public resources, and reducing nation-state protection of the marketplace. In higher education, a neoliberal paradigm repositions colleges and universities as investments for workforce needs of commercial industry and the economic self-interest of the individual. A neoliberal approach to higher education emphasizes efficiency through policies grounded in ahistoricism, colorblindness, and interest-convergence. Using a critique of neoliberalism, this article explores how language—and discourse regarding financial aid—influenced the shifting ideology on financial aid. The research question that guides this study is: What role did language play in the changing discourse on federal financial aid?

METHODS

To address the research question above, searches were conducted to locate transcripts of hearings from 1978 related to the MISAA using the Lexis-Nexis (2009) Congressional website. These searches identified over 20 hearings and sessions, and other forms of documentation related to the MISAA. (It is possible that there were more hearings, sessions, and documents that have not been made available to the public). Transcripts included testimonies from college administrators and congresspersons, questions from the subcommittee, remarks from organizational spokespeople, and letters presented to the subcommittee in favor of or challenging the MISAA.

To bound the abundance of data (i.e., transcripts and letters), the data analyzed in this study are restricted to testimonies from the “Subcommittee on Postsecondary Education” session on February 9, 1978. This particular session was selected because that day’s testimonies were given by six educational experts, most of whom were executive-level college and university administrators (e.g., president), and most of whom held joint appointments as leaders in their respective educational associations (more descriptions about the testifiers will be presented in the findings section). To ensure that the February 9 subcommittee session was the most appropriate session for analysis, hearings before and after this session were reviewed more than once for the purpose of understanding the sequence of events and historical context involved.

Discourse analysis was the methodological approach selected to analyze the transcripts from the February 9 meeting (Johnstone, 2008). The use of discourse analysis allowed the researchers to identify patterns of language (e.g., word choice, phrasing, rhetorical strategies) and generate hypotheses regarding how communicative patterns served as powerful mechanisms to control the discourse around financial aid. The following questions guided the analysis of the transcripts (Johnstone, 2008): Who is speaking? What is being said? Who is the intended audience? What

are the language patterns? These guiding questions not only prompted the researchers to consider the social and historical contexts in which the session took place, they also helped them ask how present-day definitions impacted the coding of the text and how dialogues related to race were framed (or not discussed) during the session; they also allowed the researchers to foreground why financial aid was being discussed.

Session transcripts were read several times. The initial reading focused on gaining a general understanding of the context of the hearing and the discourse that led to the session. The second reading included the identification of word repetitions; repetitions of words were highlighted as language patterns, possibly indicating the symbolic nature of particular words (Johnstone, 2008). With a better understanding of the symbolic words being used during the session (see Table 1), the transcripts were read a third time, now taking into consideration the usage of symbolic words. Repetitive words were categorized based on their thematic properties (e.g., whether words helped to champion or challenge the proposed MISAA legislation). After the categories were developed, the session transcripts were read a final time using the tenets of CRT (specifically, critiques of liberalism and neoliberalism) to guide interpretations of the categories.

Table 1

Testifier Summaries from the “Subcommittee on Postsecondary Education” using Select Symbolic Word Frequencies

Testifier	Position	Organization Represented	Occupation	Select Symbolic Words (frequency)
William Bowen	+	American Council on Education	President of Princeton University	All (6) Need (6) Balance (4) Opportunity (4) Additional (3) Distribution (3) Society (3)
Frank Matsler	+	Board of Regents of State Colleges and Universities (Illinois, USA)	N/A	Additional (2)
Paul Bragdon	+	National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities	President of Reed College	Additional (6) Middle-income (5) All (4) Need (4) Expansion (4) Opportunity (3) Balance (2) Choice (2)
Harold McAninch	+/-	American Association of Community and Junior Colleges	President of Joilet Community College	Need (3) Low-Income (2) Opportunity (2)
Table 1 continues				

Andrew Billingsley	+/-	National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education	President of Morgan State University	Additional (8) Middle-Income (8) Black and/or White (5) Access (4) Low-income (4) Clientele (3) Expansion (3) Society (2)
Father Timothy Healy	-	Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities	President of Georgetown University	Choice (8) Access (7) Talent (6) National Interest (4) Poverty (4) Low-income (3) All (2) Citizen (2) Entitlement (2) Preservation (2) Regressive (2)

Note. Positions: “+” denotes an endorsement for the passing of the Middle Income Student Assistance Act (MISAA); “+/-” denotes a neutral stance towards the passing of the MISAA; “-” denotes opposition for the MISAA.

FINDINGS

Critiques of neoliberalism provide a lens through which to interrogate the MISAA discourse and its adverse impacts on Black and low-income students. To start, it is important to remember the sociohistorical context surrounding the hearing as well as the intended audiences of the hearing. The testifiers were speaking broadly to politicians, lobbyists, taxpayers, citizens of varying social class backgrounds, college administrators, association members, and college students during a time when racial and political unrest intersected. While these various constituencies were the intended audiences, it can be assumed that each testifier, and their respective associations, differently prioritized which audience(s) they targeted in their testimony. Taking into consideration how words were symbolically used to target these constituencies is important to understanding the evolving discourse on financial aid (St. John & Elliot, 1994).

Summary descriptions of the six key testifiers are provided in Table 1 (their position toward the proposed legislation, the organization they represented at the hearing, their occupation at the time of the hearing, and select symbolic words used during their testimony); testifiers are presented in the order in which they spoke at the hearing. From the testifiers’ statements, 30 symbolic words were identified. These 30 symbolic words were then categorized into two overarching themes (i.e., discourses): (a) financial aid as a mechanism for equality, and (b) financial aid to all students as a public good for society.

Symbolic words are underlined in the testifier quotations. In addition, words are bold to illustrate “duplicitous language” (i.e., word choices with multiple interpretations, potentially ambiguous to listeners). Taken together, the underscored and bold words are germane to the analysis and help illustrate how transcripts were analyzed and interpreted.

Discourse 1: Financial Aid as a Mechanism for Equality

The first discourse suggested that the MISAA legislation would equalize financial aid for low- and middle-income students. The leading argument within this discourse related to whether or not financial aid should be “equally distributed.” William Bowen—who spoke first and longest—set the tone for the remainder of the hearing. Specifically, by strategically selecting

symbolic words like “all,” “balance,” “need,” “equity,” “opportunity,” and “diversity,” his testimony was ambiguous as to the purposes of financial aid:

The higher education community strongly supports the use of existing aid programs as the most effective way to help middle-income families meet the costs of higher education. We pledge to work with the administration and the Congress to assure the most equitable and balanced distribution of funds among existing progress to meet the needs of students attending all types of institutions.

In the first line of the passage, Bowen supported the MISAA on behalf of his organization; the American Council on Education. The symbolic words he used (illustrated by underscores) were words previously used to describe how federal financial aid assisted low-income and underrepresented students (Gladieux, 1996; St. John, 2003; St. John & Elliot, 1994). Recall that during this period in the United States, as is still true today, White students were the largest proportion of the middle class, and therefore, the most likely to benefit from the MISAA. Furthermore, Bowen set the tone for the conversation on financial aid to center around supporting a wider, “diverse” middle-class (i.e., White) college-going population.

While Bowen’s powerful testimony laid the foundation for the argument to pass the MISAA, Father Timothy Healy’s testimony unapologetically challenged Bowen’s. Healy, the only testifier to show clear opposition to the legislation, emphatically stated that he and his constituency (the Association of Jesuit College and Universities) were not in favor of the MISAA. He cautioned that the MISAA would impede the progress made by the financial aid system that, at the time, addressed the access to college of low-income students. In addition, he stated, “It [the MISAA] really creates an entitlement but does not call it such.” This quotation illuminated his prediction that expanding financial aid to middle-income students would create a sense of entitlement, that is, that financial assistance in the future would become expected as a right for all citizens. Evident in Healy’s testimony was the counterargument that passing the MISAA would not create parity for middle-income students, but rather give further advantage to middle-income students.

The second argument within this discourse centered on “equal opportunity.” The symbolic word “opportunity” caused ambiguity within the hearing; when it was mentioned, listeners might have been forced to reinterpret what opportunity was, and who received it. The testifiers supporting the MISAA suggested that a fair process included providing equal opportunity to middle-class students in the same fashion as low-income students through financial assistance. For instance, Harold McAninch stated: “It is just as important to continue the opportunity for the low-income students. We believe a provision should be included to protect that low-income student in the legislation.” In the preceding quotation, McAninch, who represented the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, raised previously unexplored points. Specifically, “low-income” was underlined because before President McAninch’s testimony, there was minimal discussion (or mention) of low-income students. Because “low-income” was not mentioned (perhaps a rhetorical strategy of omission by proponents of the MISAA), it gave greater emphasis to the intended beneficiaries of the new legislation, middle-income (i.e., White) students. McAninch suggested that the goal of the MISAA should be secondary and that the commitment to low-income students should be maintained. In addition, “continue the opportunity” is underlined to illustrate that the symbolic word “opportunity” was used, but unlike Bowen’s use of the word, McAninch argued that aid should “continue” to support low-income students.

Similar to McAninch, Frank Matsler acknowledged through his testimony the continued financial need for low-income students: “I am aware, Mr. Chairman, that more and more complaints are from those families in the marginal salary range, say, of \$16,000 to \$18,000, where little or no funds are available.” Yet, he also wanted to ensure that the MISAA offered an opportunity for the federal government to support middle-income students. Ultimately, Matsler overwhelmingly expressed his organization’s (Board of Regents of State Colleges and Universities) support of the MISAA:

Our association believes that President Carter . . . and others who are supporting the Middle Incomes Student Assistance Act, should be congratulated for their strong support of important new legislation to provide additional assistance to middle-income as well as lower income students, to help them meet the rising costs of college.

Taking Matsler and McAninch's testimonies together, because same words, "opportunity" and "additional," were used by proponents and opponents of the MISAA, these words became ambiguous in their meaning.

The final argument within this discourse was that of "equal needs." Testifiers in support of the MISAA used this argument to suggest that it was the federal government's responsibility to provide financial assistance to "all" students who had financial need. This argument became a trend that gave power to the ideology that all students—referring to low-income and middle-income students alike—should be given financial assistance. This finding is significant because it is likely that the repetition by the educational experts helped redefine who was considered eligible or "needy" to receive financial aid (Slaughter, 1991; St. John & Elliot, 1994).

Like Bowen, Paul Bragdon's testimony was rich with symbolic words and rhetoric, highlighting his glowing support of the MISAA:

I would like to bring to your attention and to the other members of the committee that this association [National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, NAICU] of some 800 colleges and universities did express unanimously their appreciation for the current efforts by Members of Congress and the administration to address the needs of middle-income families through present Federal student aid programs.

Also adopted unanimously by that organization representing over 800 of the independent institutions in the country was this specific resolution:

Recognizing the exclusion of most middle income families from the benefits of present Federal student aid programs, NAICU has identified as a major priority, providing relief to those families in meeting the increasing costs of higher education, and therefore supports those forms of assistance that are basically calling for equitable and that are both tuition and need sensitive.

As illustrated in the quotations provided, Bragdon used the words "needs" in the context of "middle-income" families. He also tugged on the hearts of listeners by suggesting that the new legislation offer necessary "relief" for middle-income families. Finally, he argued that providing financial support to a wider demographic of college students was more "equitable."

The arguments presented within the this discourse provide some evidence for how constituents may have been convinced that increasing the pot of financial aid and simultaneously widening the terms of eligibility might address previous injustices while also making college affordable for "all" students. The commonality between the arguments within this discourse, however, is that they were student- and family-focused. In the section addresses another important discourse added to the arguments to pass the MISAA, but focused on the public/society.

Discourse 2: Financial Aid to All Students as a Public Good for Society

In this second discourse, arguments focused on the notion that providing assistance to students contributes to the greater good of society. Another important distinction within the second discourse is testifiers agreed that providing financial assistance positively impacts society. As a result of their agreement, the low-income and middle-income arguments became neutral, or leaned in favor of the MISAA. Specifically, proponents of the MISAA argued that because the financial aid program was successful with the low-income population, more students (from the middle-class) would have the same opportunities to attend college. The opponents of the MISAA

offered neutral testimonies that did not challenge the cost-benefit argument made by the supporters of the legislation. For instance, in Andrew Billingsley's testimony (representing the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education), he expressed support for the MISAA while also conveying major concerns about the legislation. The two passages below highlight Billingsley's complex positioning:

... the students who attend our institutions [HBCUs] are economically **needy** students, as defined under existing financial aid guidelines. Nevertheless, there is a significant percentage of **Black** students and **White** students attending our institutions from **middle-income** families whose **needs** are not being met by current programs.

It is proper that we expand student financial assistance to accomplish other socially desirable goals such as serving **middle-income** students. However, we should not do so at the cost of foregoing the gains achieved in access . . . to meet the additional demands of **new middle-income clientele**.

Viewed in combination, these two passages illustrate that Billingsley supported the MISAA while also acknowledging the underrepresented populations that could be negatively impacted should the MISAA redistribute money. Political strategy is also visible in the second quotation. He referred to the passing of the MISAA as a benefit to society by creating additional access for middle-income students, whom he strategically referred to as "new clientele." Billingsley's pragmatic thinking (i.e., increasing numbers of White students attending Morgan State University will increase revenue) likely influenced his neutral, yet supportive-leaning, position towards the MISAA legislation. Billingsley's testimony was also significant because he was the first and only speaker to mention race ("Black" and "White") in the context of socioeconomic status. The other testifiers continually used "low and middle-income" and completely left race out of the conversation.

Billingsley's quotations were representative of the rhetorical strategies of McAninch and Matsler. Specifically, each of these testifiers first acknowledged the benefits of current governmental assistance, and then argued that the MISAA should not deduct funding from low-income students. But, because each of these educational experts also agreed that financial assistance to a small segment of Americans (i.e., low-income students) benefits society, it was an easy leap to assume that expanding assistance to a larger population (i.e., middle-class, White) would have a greater influence on society.

The strongest counterargument about financial aid benefitting society came from Healy. In his effort to posit that financial aid should continue to support lower-income students, he stated:

... we have nationally decided that every talented kid should have access to higher education, whatever his background, whatever his race or color, or how far he is from convenient locations, no matter how **poorly** he may have been trained.

In this Healy quotation, he sarcastically took on the public good argument and the shifting ideology about financial aid being needed by "every" student. Specifically, he stated that the nation's shifting ideology toward college access had been determined that students who wanted to go to college and were eligible should have the resources to do so. The changing national ideology that Healy was critiquing came as a result of middle-income students feeling left out and wanting more resources: federal financial aid. He went further by adding his own rhetorical wordsmithing by asserting that access to college should be available to "every" students "no matter how poorly he may have been trained." By raising the point about students' qualifications, he introduced the precursor to discourse about academic merit as a requirement for receiving certain types of financial aid.

Despite Healy's fervor in protecting financial aid for low-income students, the argument that increasing aid to a wider population could have greater benefits for society posed a challenging hurdle. In Bowen's opening statement he juxtaposed the proposed MISAA legislation with the potential benefits to society:

Over the last decade, the Federal Government has made a major investment to important national goals through a carefully developed program of assistance to students that has increased education **opportunities**. This new initiative underscores and strengthens that commitment.

. . . the learning environment at all of our institutions will be a much better one if it is possible for individuals from different economic backgrounds to learn together. A truly democratic society cannot afford to have institutions of higher education stratified by economic circumstances. Nor can we afford a society to lose the value of pluralism and **diversity** represented by a system of higher education. . .

In these quotations, Bowen used words such as “opportunities” and “diversity” in a duplicitous way (denoted in bold). On the one hand, he could have been referring to increasing access for low-income and underrepresented students. On the other hand, within the context of his testimony, it was apparent that he was referring to the MISAA as a mechanism to increase educational opportunities and assistance to needy students, that is, middle-class students. On a more global level, he suggested that restricting aid to a limited population further “stratifies” society, and stifles the abilities to create a more “diverse” “pluralistic” society, which is counter to the national goals. Overall, his rhetorical strategies turned arguments about injustice on their head to strengthen his points.

It should be noted that the educational experts did not speak to each other in the back and forth manner with which their quotations are presented in this analysis. However, they are presented in conversation in this article because when parsed and thematically organized, the quotations help paint a fuller picture of the evolving discourse. In addition, it could be argued that the themes used to help organize the arguments (i.e., “Financial Aid as a Mechanism for Equality” and “Financial Aid to All Students as a Public Good for Society”) are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are inextricably intertwined. Despite these complexities, what this analysis demonstrates is how specific words, within the context of their quotations, helped shape the evolving discourse around financial aid.

DISCUSSION

Understanding the Evolving Discourse of Financial Aid through Critiques of Neoliberalism

The findings from this article were thematically organized into two discourses: “Financial Aid as a Mechanism for Equality” and “Financial Aid to All Students as a Public Good for Society.” In combination, these discourses illustrate how federal financial aid policy began shifting from need-based to merit-based. Critiques of neoliberalism provides a lens through which to position race at the forefront and illustrate how language was strategically used to redefine the interpretation of financial aid and how the passing of the MISAA would preclude Black and low-income students from being the primary beneficiaries of federal aid.

Most noticeable was the explicit omission of race from the arguments regarding financial aid (with the exception of Billingsley’s, who was the President of Morgan State University, an HBCU), possibly due to the racial tensions of the 1970s. When words were omitted from the arguments, the omissions contributed to discourse; what is spoken and what is “not” spoken are equally important to consider because words shape political discourse (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Johnstone, 2008, Kujovich, 1994). The omission of race was strategic in shifting ideology with regard to who deserves aid. Instead of discussing financial aid in terms of race, most testifiers supported the expansion of financial aid to promote equality and access to financial aid for all students. To champion this position, testifiers utilized a “colorblind” approach to steer the financial aid discourse away from race. Avoiding the mention of “race” or specific races in the context of the MISAA made race no longer central to the discussion of who should receive financial aid. While race was not explicitly mentioned, it was implicitly discussed; race was masked in the usage of words that described socioeconomic status (low-income and middle-

income), “access” (generally used to describe Black students’ opportunities to go to college), “all” (used to suggest that financial aid should be available to everyone, not just low-income Black students), “diversity” and “poverty (poor)” (used to describe the students who previously benefitted from financial aid policies, for example, those students at Morgan State University and other HBCUs).

When critiquing neoliberalism, it becomes evident how policies and legislation serve as mechanisms that perpetuate racism and injustice. The MISAA, in particular, was an attempt to camouflage the ideological shift from financial aid being need-based for Black and low-income students to being a right to which White and other middle-income students were entitled. Prior to the MISAA, Black and low-income students were small shares of the total college-going population. Such words as “low-income,” “middle-class,” “expansion,” “additional,” “fairness,” “equal,” “opportunity,” and “all” were highlighted as containing duplicitous meaning; they offered two contrasting, and sometimes, competing interpretations. For instance, the testimonies in favor of the MISAA suggested that increasing financial aid to “all” students would make attending college a more “equal” process, and would be a “fairer” system. In addition, while they appeared to aid in the argument that adding more money to the federal budget would accommodate middle-class students’ needs, the words also simultaneously suggested the importance of maintaining support to low-income students. When testifiers argued that the MISAA should extend the existing financial aid structure, which would offer a greater public good, their argument was strengthened. While MISAA opponents were concerned that the MISAA would reallocate funds for low-income students to middle-income students, testifiers in favor of the MISAA argued that a shift of funds was not appropriate, that instead an extension of funds was needed. By offering the perspective that financial aid should be expanded, it was assumed that “more” students from “all” socioeconomic backgrounds would benefit. In addition, by arguing in favor of extending student aid to middle-income students, some expert testifiers were suggesting that student aid should not go to a small population of citizens, since aid was comprised of tax dollars. Rather, student aid should be awarded to “all” students that “qualify” with “demonstrated need.” This race-neutral ideology removed race from the discourse, deemphasizing the purpose of financial aid to equalize educational opportunity for a historically marginalized population. Caught in the cross hairs of the shifting ideological discourse were students from the growing Black middle class. While still historically underrepresented, the passage of the MISAA also signaled increased competition of federal aid for Black middle class students.

Implications for Future Research

The historical analysis of this article offers insights for future policy directions. First, policymakers should give considerable attention to language and the signifying power of particular words and phrases. As Hanley-Lopez suggests (2014), language is a powerful tool to embed political ideologies, particularly around race and class. The use of CRT in this article shows the complications involved with using language; language evolves over time, sometimes making communication harder to interpret. To help mitigate potential confusion, diverse perspectives should be consulted; this should include students, community stakeholders, leaders from diverse institutions including minority-serving institutions and community colleges. Having these multiple perspectives on proposed new policy could help identify potentially ambiguous language and their implications on students. Second, it is important to consider the role that advocacy plays in policy creation. From the transcripts, it appears that the MISAA gained momentum in part due to the involvement of the key educational experts. The physical presence of the key testifiers contributed to political discourse, as much as the symbolic nature of their position taking. However, faculty members, scholars, and policymakers who engage in advocacy work, and understand the nuances that work, should also contribute to policy creation. As observed in current debates on affirmative action, contributions from educational researchers are critical in considering factors that increase college access and equity (see for example amicus

briefs for the *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin*). This requires that educational experts should be actively involved in the public sphere and work with legislators at the state and federal levels. Furthermore, educators must outline the complexities of political decision-making on postsecondary education outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to better understand the role that language played in the shifting discourse on federal financial aid policy. Examinations of transcripts from educational experts at a key session hearing revealed that symbolic words were used to suggest the expansion of financial aid from Black and low-income students to a more “fair” financial aid policy that made financial aid “equal” for “all” students (i.e., White, middle-class). As we consider how federal financial aid policy has evolved over the last four decades, it is apparent that language has power to shape discourse. With regard to the MISAA legislation analyzed in this study, scrutinizing the discourses involved provides insights into the complex roles that race, language, and policy play in the United States. Particularly, how discourse, through the power of language, can forever change higher education policy.

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