PERFORMANCE-BASED FUNDING IN TEXAS: SENSEMAKING EXPERIENCES OF ADMINISTRATORS AT HISPANIC-SERVING COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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Abstract

Despite the expansive literature on higher education performance-based funding (PBF) policies, there is an oversaturation of quantitative studies focused on measuring metric performance at the statewide level. These studies have largely found that PBF fails to meet its goal of improving graduation rates and has unintended consequences for historically underserved student populations (e.g., Black, Latinx/a/o, low-income) and under-resourced institutions (e.g., community colleges, minority-serving institutions). Further, the limited qualitative studies have revealed widespread positive attitudes and institutional changes at the campus level in the early stages of policy implementation. However, the literature fails to critically examine campus-based attitudes and experiences over the longterm, particularly at institutions most likely to be impacted by neoliberal policies like PBF. Therefore, there is a need for an in-depth understanding and critical analysis of how administrators make sense of PBF over time at institutions most likely to experience policy-related impacts.

Based on interviews and artifact analysis conducted with eight administrators at two Hispanic-serving community colleges (HSCCs) in North Texas, this study focused on understanding how community college administrators make sense of PBF after being with their institution for at least three years. By framing this study with critical sensemaking and policy implementation theories, I present a critical analysis that explains how an individual's role, institutional context, and state environment shaped the administrators' quality, frequency, and access to sensemaking opportunities related to PBF. My first finding, *Individual Role: Who Has a Seat at the Table?*, examined how an individual's place in the organizational hierarchy influenced their awareness of and access to PBF-related sensemaking. My second finding, *Institutional Context: Hispanic-Serving Across the Rural and Urban Divide*, demonstrated that

while participants from both institutions often failed to address Latinx/a/o student needs, their institution's unique geography and demographics determined if they had access to policymakers and resources to not only assist with understanding PBF, but to influence its future design in Texas. Finally, in *State Environment: A Climate of Control*, participants contended with a complex and competitive regulatory environment and grappled with policies that embedded neoliberal values. These findings suggest the need for equity-minded reforms to policy design for policymakers, policy implementation for higher education leaders, and further study using critical frameworks and methods.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the two women who inspired me despite never having the opportunity to meet: my grandmothers, Elizabeth Gracey and Susie Launius.

To Elizabeth, for whom I am named, the first woman to be a professional educator in our family, who then inspired two generations of female educators. A female mathematician. I remain inspired by the legend of you wearing pants underneath your dresses and skirts as an act of personal defiance to the school dress code.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background

In recent decades, American public higher education has experienced several shifts in finance and accountability public policy, marked by an economic recession, decreasing state appropriations, and increases in the enrollment of first-generation, low-income, and racial minority students (Flores & Shepherd, 2014; Lacy & Tandberg, 2014). These changes are collectively referred to as the Completion Agenda. During this time, policymakers' attention shifted towards accountability structures that reward successful completion resulting in a credential instead of allocations based on enrollment.

The Completion Agenda rose to national prominence with a wave of economic recession in the 2000s, which increased policymakers' concerns about the need for a modern, educated workforce (Gill & Harrison, 2018). As a result, state legislators and governors developed higher education master plans to increase accountability and completion. Texas followed this trend with two statewide plans. The first, coined *Closing the Gap 2015*, was passed in 2000 and set targets for improved institutional performance, emphasizing increasing enrollment of underserved students (Flores & Shepherd, 2014). Its successor, *Texas 60x30*, set priorities for improving outcomes of at-risk student populations, which were defined as low socioeconomic status, racial minorities, enrolled part-time, and adult students, to meet the goal of 60 percent of Texans ages 25–34 obtaining a certificate or degree by 2030 (Natale & Jones, 2018). One policy associated with Texas's higher education master plans is the state's performance-based funding (PBF) policy, called the *Student Success Points* initiative.

PBF reforms state funding formulas to redirect a portion of allocations based on educational outcomes instead of enrollment-based calculations. PBF has emerged from the

completion agenda as a popular policy, with 46 states considering, transitioning to, or operating PBF as of 2016 (Gándara & Rutherford, 2018). Despite their prevalence and stated objectives, there has been little evidence that PBF meets policymakers' goal of increased completion rates (Gándara & Rutherford, 2018; Hillman, Tandberg, & Fryar, 2015; Hillman, Tandberg, & Gross, 2014). Indeed, Tandberg, Hillman, and Barakat (2014) found that the Student Success Points program negatively impacted completion rates. Furthermore, minority-serving community colleges, which provide important access to higher education for students from historically underrepresented racial backgrounds, were disproportionately impacted by Texas's PBF reforms and received less funding on average than non-minority-serving community colleges (Li, Gándara, & Assalone, 2018).

Minority-serving community colleges (MSCCs) are important gateways to higher education for low-income, first-generation, and racially minoritized students. Community colleges maintain an access-oriented mission and serve various educational needs, including workforce development, literacy, and academic preparation for transfer to 4-year institutions (Bragg, 2001; Dowd, 2003). However, PBF is primarily rooted in efficiency as a value and is commonly associated with neoliberal policies (Dougherty & Natow, 2019). Therefore, the introduction of PBF can serve as a disruptive event for community colleges. In response, PBF has been shown to cause changes in institutional operations (Thornton & Friedel, 2016). Despite a lack of evidence for the effectiveness of PBF and noted changes to operations, higher education leaders maintain positive feelings (Gill & Harrison, 2018). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand how community college administrators make sense of PBF within their context working at access-oriented institutions.

Statement of the Problem

Although it intends to increase students' retention and graduation, there has been little evidence that PBF meets these goals (Gándara & Rutherford, 2018; Li et al., 2018; Tandberg et al., 2014; Wayt & La Cost, 2016). In fact, PBF, primarily rooted in efficiency as a value (Dougherty & Natow, 2019), may serve as a disruptive event for community colleges. PBF may lead community colleges to adopt restrictive enrollment practices to maximize their state allocations, shifting their mission from open access to completion (Dougherty & Reddy, 2011). Community colleges, especially Hispanic-serving community colleges (HSCCs), have a long history of serving low-income, first-generation, and racially minoritized students. For these schools, such a shift in mission may create more barriers for these traditionally underrepresented students to access higher education (Dowd, 2003; Gándara & Rutherford, 2018; Gasman et al., 2017). Despite PBF's potential harm to access and lack of evidence for its effectiveness on completion, higher education leaders, including those in community colleges, express positive attitudes towards PBF (Gill & Harrison, 2018), which could result in adopting reforms in institutional operations in response to PBF (Thornton & Friedel, 2016). However, these changes could be harmful, as there is little evidence of positive outcomes for student success and several unintended consequences for students and institutions.

Community college administrators serve as policy implementers who are responsible for carrying out strategies in response to identified problems. Policy is purposefully written without specificity, which provides implementers with latitude in how they meet objectives (Gonzalez et al., 2021). Vagueness also creates ambiguity, with implementers faced with competing priorities, unintended consequences, and implementation burdens. Researchers have suggested that PBF policies fail because of implementation burdens, including the unique challenges that community colleges face such as lack of financial support to make changes (Dougherty et al., 2013) or

complexity of student retention models (Hillman et al., 2015). Therefore, research is needed on the PBF policy implementation process at institutions most likely to be negatively impacted.

Further, while there are several PBF case studies focused on early policy implementation responses, there is still a need to describe how administrators make sense of PBF over time. Administrators are institutional leaders who play a significant role in the functionality of the institution and the setting of culture. They also play a powerful role in shaping plausibility among faculty and staff to enhance support for institutional changes in response to new educational policy. Two recent studies (Soderlind & Geschwind, 2019; Zerquera & Ziskin, 2020) demonstrate the promise of sensemaking as a framework for studying institutions with access-oriented missions, but neither studied HSCCs. Additionally, their findings suggest the importance of power, identity, and knowledge structures in sensemaking for these institutions. Therefore, research is lacking in understanding PBF at HSCCs, which serve as important gateways into higher education for low-income, first-generation, Black, and Hispanic students.

Purpose of the Study

The shift to PBF has shown that administrators are likely to implement changes in institutional operations (Thornton & Friedel, 2016). Despite a lack of evidence for the effectiveness of PBF (Ortagus et al., 2020), higher education leaders maintain positive feelings (Gill & Harrison, 2018). Further, research that examines the long-term implementation process and, specifically, with understanding PBF at Hispanic-serving community colleges (HSCCs) is lacking. HSCCs serve as important gateways into higher education for low-income, first-generation, Black, and Hispanic students. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand of how community college administrators at HSIs make sense of PBF.

The use of critical sensemaking in this study facilitated attention to the tension in the

literature: despite limited knowledge of the underlying reasons for PBF's ineffectiveness in improving student outcomes, higher education leaders maintain positive attitudes regarding its efficacy. Building on the most recent sensemaking research on PBF (Soderlind & Geschwind, 2019; Zerquera & Ziskin, 2020), the current study addressed how Hispanic-serving community college administrators make sense of PBF in Texas. The study expanded the research on Texas's policy by sampling participants from HSIs and urban institutions. In doing so, it provided insight into how individual roles, institutional characteristics, and the state environment impacted their sensemaking of PBF-related changes.

Research Question

This study addressed the following research question:

How do community college administrators make sense of PBF policies within their context as access-oriented institutions?

Theoretical Framework

This study is framed by several policy implementations and sensemaking theories. Policy implementation theories consider how individual actors' behaviors and attitudes influence the outcomes of policy implementation processes (Smith & Larimer, 2017). Community college administrators function as "street-level bureaucrats" by making sense of policy ambiguity or vagueness to implement reforms within their day-to-day realities (Lipsky, 1971, p. 391). Contextual interaction theory describes policy implementation as a process whereby an individual's motivations, experiences, and knowledge combined with institutional, structural, and governance contexts interact with and shape cooperative, opposition, or joint learning behaviors at the organizational level to produce policy outcomes (Bressers, 2007). Spillane, Gomez, and Mesler (2009) emphasized that organizational resources promote or restrict change in response to

the policy. Organizational resources include human capital (e.g., employee knowledge and skills), social capital (e.g., flow of information, forms of social pressure), technology (e.g., computers, protocols), and organization routines (Spillane et al., 2009). Higher education policy researchers have applied contextual interaction theory to understand undocumented student policy implementation (Nienhusser & Connery, 2021). These combined policy implementation theories frame the study's attention to administrators' beliefs, values, and experiences; local, regional, and national contexts; and organizational behaviors that support or hinder implementation.

In addition to policy implementation theories, critical sensemaking (CSM) provides a framework for understanding the context of ongoing social interactions and meaning-making activities as individuals navigate the organization and policy implementation process (Helms Mills, Thurlow, & Mills, 2010). CSM acknowledges that sensemaking "occurs within a broader context of organizational power and social experience" (Helms Mills et al., 2010, p. 188). Therefore, CSM considers both individual sensemaking and contextual factors. Traditional organizational sensemaking focuses on seven properties: identity construction, retrospection, extracted cues, plausibility over the accuracy, enactive of the environment, social, and ongoing (Weick, 1997). Researchers have successfully applied critical sensemaking approaches to develop in-depth understandings of transfer policy (Chase, 2016), undocumented student policy (Nienhusser, 2018), and performance-based funding in the U.S. (Zerquera & Ziskin, 2020) and internationally (Soderlind & Geschwind, 2019).

Positionality

My interest in exploring how community college administrators make sense of PBF emerged from my own experience as a community college administrator. My first administrator

role coincided with my transition to the 2-year sector. At that time, my institution was undergoing several changes, and I recall trying to understand what felt like an overwhelming number of new strategies, initiatives, and best practices. At first, I thought my sense of overwhelm was attributed to the fact that I was learning about my new role, the institution, and its sector. However, as I built more relationships, I realized my peers, even those with more tenure at the institution, were also trying to keep up with new initiatives. I quickly gathered that there was an institutional culture of initiative fatigue marked by quick transitions from one new strategy to the other with little time for assessment, evaluation, and process improvement.

Within a year of my arrival at the institution, senior leadership introduced new information about state funding models that incorporated accountability. To my shock, our performance landed my institution in the bottom quartile of rankings under the Student Success Points program, Texas's PBF policy. The presentation also helped many of the recent initiatives make more sense, including projects such as a student services strategic plan that identified strategies to support student entry and connection, progression, and completion. With the introduction of PBF, I understood that these targets (i.e., connection, progression, completion) aligned perfectly with PBF metrics for students obtaining 15, 30, and 45 credit hours. Our implementation of guided pathways appeared to target stackable credentials and entry into high-demand fields, resulting in bonus points for completions under the PBF model. I realized that with one piece of information, I could make sense of a significant amount of organizational change that previously did not seem interrelated.

My experiences led me to question how other administrators make sense of the policy within their institutional contexts since I understand that my experience is not generalizable. In particular, my experience sensing that key information or context to organizational changes was

withheld informs my critical approach to this study. Further, I was critical of how effective many of these changes were in improving student outcomes over the short and long term. As a result, I am biased in believing that PBF often fails to align with community college missions and instead creates unintended consequences. This presents a challenge for my research as I have a clear preconception in this manner. As I consider how other administrators make sense of and implement PBF reforms, I need to be aware of my bias to ensure the trustworthiness of this study.

Methodology

To conduct this study, I utilized an exploratory qualitative approach to explore how community college administrators at Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) make sense of performance-based funding. I adopted a critical paradigm that recognizes there are multiple ways of knowing and that power shapes the ways of being, knowing, and understanding (Denzin, 2015). Since policy implementation is inherently value-laden, a critical qualitative design allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of administrators' sensemaking and whether their responses "reinforce or reproduce social injustices and inequalities" (Diem et al., 2014, p. 1072).

Utilizing a critical qualitative approach, I conducted semi-structured interviews and document analysis with community college administrators working at HSIs in North Texas. The administrators who participated in this study have had significant institutional oversight of one or more departments or divisions and have been employed at their institutions for a minimum of three years, which allowed them time to understand the PBF policy and institutional changes in response. The total number of participants was eight, based on my ability to achieve institutional and functional area representation. I conducted two interviews with each participant, which lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Before the second interview, participants provided artifacts

that were significant in their sensemaking process related to PBF. Artifacts allowed me to understand how PBF was implemented and the sources of information that influenced their understandings. In my second interview with participants, I utilized stimulated recall as an elicitation technique, which is an effective way to challenge “the power balance between researcher and participant” (Barton, 2015, p. 180).

At the time of data collection, the country was navigating public health protocols in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, I conducted all interviews virtually to ensure the safety of the researcher and participant. I used Zoom video conferencing software to conduct and record two interviews with each participant. Audio recordings of the interviews were retained and transcribed for accuracy.

Significance of the Study

This study will contribute to literature, theory, practice, and policy. First, critical sensemaking is an emerging theoretical framework yet to be applied to the study of PBF. Therefore, this study will contribute to its application and theoretical understanding, helping to develop further the literature and theory surrounding PBF and CSM. Additionally, the results will benefit higher education leaders as they navigate a complex policy environment that often emphasizes efficiency as a primary value. Critical sensemaking shows promise for identifying resistance patterns, and results may provide examples of strategies to maintain an access-oriented mission.

Additionally, this study will contribute to the research on Texas’s PBF and the effect of policy on HSIs by providing an in-depth description of how administrators make sense of the policy within their context at access-oriented institutions. There is a lack of current research on how community college administrators in Texas make sense of PBF. Further, there has not been

an inquiry into how the state's HSIs are implementing changes in response to PBF. This research is timely as the state must accelerate its completion measures to achieve its goal of 60% of 25- to 34-year-olds earning a postsecondary credential by 2030 (THECB, 2021). More notably, completion rates among the state's Latinx/o/a population need to significantly improve, thus making this research particularly timely given the focus on HSIs.

Definition of Terms

Executive administrator. For this study, executive administrators were participants who reported directly to the chief executive officer (i.e., chancellor or president) of a community college. They often have titles such as vice chancellor or provost and participate in cabinet-level meetings.

Hispanic-serving institution. Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) are not-for-profit, 2- and 4-year postsecondary institutions, private or public, that enroll a minimum of 25 percent Latinx/o/a students and 50 percent low-income students. The category was established by the 1992 Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (Gasman et al., 2015).

Hispanic-serving community college. Hispanic-serving community colleges (HSCCs) are 2-year postsecondary institutions with an HSI designation. According to Nguyen et al. (2015), there are approximately 114 HSCCs, most concentrated in California, Texas, and New Mexico.

Latinx/a/o. Latinx is a gender-neutral term referencing all people of Latin American origin or descent. In most instances, I use "Latinx/a/o" to reflect the range of personal identities.

Mid-level administrator. Mid-level administrators included participants with titles ranging from Dean to Director. They had responsibilities for several departments and typically reported to a senior or executive administrator.

Minority-serving institution. Minority-serving institution (MSI) is an umbrella term for four federal designations for colleges and universities: Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), and Asian and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs) (Gasman et al., 2017). Title III of the Higher Education Act of 1965 defines and recognizes MSI categories (Martinez, 2008).

Minority-serving community college. Minority-serving community colleges (MSCCs) are public and private, not-for-profit, 2-year minority-serving institutions based on federal designation or qualifying student populations (Nguyen et al., 2015).

Performance-based funding. Performance-based funding (PBF) is a funding system that allocates a portion of state funding based on specific performance measures. Common performance measures include degree completion and credit attainment. The portion of funding and specific measures range by state. In the literature, the policy is also referred to as outcomes-based funding (OBF) and performance funding (PF).

Referencing race. Throughout this study, I capitalize references to minoritized racial identities. As Tharps (2014) argued, “Black with a capital B refers to people of the African diaspora. Lowercase black is simply a color.” I reflect this usage when referencing Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color. Further, I intentionally use a lowercase w when referencing white people to de-center white supremacy in research and scholarship.

Senior administrator. Senior administrators were participants who held roles just below executive but above mid-level. Participants held titles with prefixes like assistant, associate, or vice. Their reporting structure depended on the role and institution; some senior administrators reported to the chief executive while others reported to an executive administrator. Regardless of

reporting structure, they commonly participated in an expanded cabinet meeting but were not a core member.

Summary and Forthcoming Chapters

PBF has emerged as a widespread reform to public financing for higher education. Yet, empirical studies suggest that it fails to meet its intended outcomes of improving completion rates (Hillman et al., 2014, 2015; Tandberg et al., 2015). Furthermore, researchers have identified several unintended consequences, including decreases in enrollment of low-income, Black, and Latinx/o/a students and funding reductions for community colleges and minority-serving institutions (Gándara & Rutherford, 2018; Li et al., 2018; Umbricht et al., 2017). Additionally, PBF represents a more significant shift in educational policy aligned with neoliberalism, prioritizing efficiency as a value (Dougherty & Natow, 2019). Meanwhile, community colleges emphasize access as gateways to higher education while meeting various community needs (Bragg, 2001; Dowd, 2003).

Further, Hispanic-serving institutions serve an increasing portion of the nation's Black, Latinx/a/o, low-income, and first-generation students (Garcia, Nuñez, & Sansone, 2019). Therefore, the study presents an opportunity to identify how administrators implement policy and respond to ambiguity in ways that align with institutional mission (Felix, 2021). Despite the promise, few qualitative studies have been conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of how administrators are responding to PBF policies at Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), and only a single case study of Texas's Student Success Points program exists. Policy implementation theories and CSM provide a promising theoretical framework to understand how community college administrators make sense of PBF within their context as access-oriented institutions. This study seeks to address a gap in the literature on PBF and explore how context influences the

sensemaking process. The findings from this study will inform higher education leaders and policymakers about how community college administrators make sense of educational policy and navigate conflicting values. This is valuable to higher education leaders who confront an increasingly complex and high-stakes policy landscape. It is similarly relevant for policymakers concerned about performance who can reform ineffective policy instruments. An in-depth understanding of how to confront mission conflict will benefit both groups, who have a shared desire for student success.

In the following chapters, I review the related literature and the methodology used to conduct this study. I proceed with chapters in the following order: the second chapter includes a review of relevant literature, beginning with the history of PBF and synthesizing studies exploring the efficacy of PBF by highlighting its impact on institutional funding and student outcomes. I also discuss the role of community colleges and minority-serving community colleges in particular before concluding with the specific context and structure of Texas's PBF policy, the Student Success Points program. After the literature review, I present policy implementation and critical sensemaking as my theoretical framework for the study before introducing my research questions. In the third chapter, I describe my research design for the study, and I provide details on my data generation and analysis procedures. The fourth chapter presents my findings and an overview of the participants. In the concluding chapter, I discuss the results of the study and implications drawn from the results, including recommendations for future policy, research, and practice.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Research on performance-based funding (PBF) has proliferated recently but remains focused on studying 4-year institutions using quantitative measures. As a result, there is a need to form an in-depth understanding of how community college administrators make sense of PBF as part of the policy implementation process. The purpose of this literature review is to understand the scholarship about PBF based on the regional and institutional context.

I begin with a historical review of PBF and its evolution as a policy construct. From there, I organize the review of the PBF literature into two sections: (a) the background and impact of PBF and (b) institutional responses to and employee attitudes regarding PBF. Related to the impacts of PBF, I discuss literature covering institutional funding and student outcomes. Then, I discuss the influence of neoliberalism in higher education policies and the Texas policy context. I also review the literature on the role of community colleges and the specific purpose of minority-serving and Hispanic-serving community colleges. I close this chapter with my theoretical framework, informed by policy implementation theory and critical sensemaking.

Performance-Based Funding

Background

Performance-based funding's (PBF's) ultimate goal is improving college completion rates to meet economic demands while holding institutions accountable for expenditures (Dougherty & Reddy, 2011; Gándara & Hearn, 2019; Gándara & Rutherford, 2018; Tandberg, Hillman, & Barakat, 2015). Hillman et al. (2015) noted that the history of PBF policy has also been turbulent, as evidenced by under- and defunding policies, delayed implementation, and lack of data tracking. One of the earliest PBF policies was adopted by Tennessee in 1979. The first

generation of PBF policies primarily focused on simple performance reporting linked to degree completion. Early state adopters were also more likely to award PBF as a bonus in addition to annual state appropriations (Hillman et al., 2014; Tandberg et al., 2014). However, policy adoption during the first wave of PBF was minimal, with only three states adopting performance measures by 1985.

The current era, also known as PBF 2.0, has been marked by increased adoption across states, with nearly all 50 states considering, transitioning to, or operating with PBF policies as of 2016 (Gándara & Rutherford, 2018). However, most policies are still relatively new, with 27 state policies being less than ten years old as of the 2020 fiscal year (Ortagus et al., 2020). PBF 2.0 policies are marked by developing more complex measures that award funding for student achievement beyond mere degree completion. The argument is that these measures are positively correlated with degree attainment and are commonly referred to as “milestones” (Li et al., 2018). These measures vary by state but most often include outcomes linked to developmental course success rates, credit attainment, and transfer to a 4-year institution (Gándara & Hearn, 2019; Tandberg et al., 2014). Another significant evolution in second-generation policies is that they largely shifted funding from serving as bonuses to functioning as a percentage of annual state appropriations. However, the portion of state appropriation tied to performance measures can vary widely, from as low as Washington’s policy of only basing 1% of funding on performance (Hillman et al., 2015) to Ohio’s policy linking 100% of appropriations to performance (Ortagus et al., 2020). Still, most policies award less than 20% of total funding based on performance (Ortagus et al., 2020).

While policy innovations vary by state, they share similar outcomes and contexts, with the policy environment remaining unstable (Burke, 1998; Burke & Modarresi, 2001). Burke and

Modarresi (2001) studied the variables associated with instability of performance funding programs, including seven categories: stakeholders' input, goal achievement, future prospects, main difficulties, current and desired policy values, suggested improvements, and the appropriateness of metrics. The researchers sampled government officials, higher education system leaders, and college and university leaders in states categorized as either stable (Missouri and Tennessee) or unstable (Florida, Ohio, and South Carolina). Their findings reveal that outsiders, usually not higher education stakeholders, directed the development of performance funding. Gándara and Hearn (2019) studied the policymaking process in Texas nearly two decades later. They found similar external influences, notably the role that philanthropic organizations, think tanks, and the business sector played in shaping educational policy. In another study, McKinney and Hagedorn (2017) also noted elements of instability in Texas's PBF policy with revisions to metric formulas. These studies highlight how the policy agenda for accountability metrics continues to evolve. In the next section, I provide a review of the literature on the impacts of PBF.

Impact of Performance-Based Funding

PBF policies aim to improve graduation rates by incentivizing completion and milestone achievements. Unfortunately, the literature reveals that most PBF policies fail to achieve these outcomes. In a notable exception, Tandberg et al. (2014) found improvements in their study of PBF at community colleges—using states as the primary unit of analysis—between 1990 and 2010. The researchers used a difference-in-difference regression technique common in studies of PBF because it allows comparisons between pre- and post-implementation to states without policy adoption during the same time period. Tandberg and colleagues generated comparison groups based on regional similarities. Their analyses revealed mixed results with improvements

in four states, decreased in six, and inconclusive results for nine. However, when Hillman et al. (2015) studied 31 technical and community colleges under Washington's Student Achievement Initiative from 2002 to 2012, they were able to attribute increased completion rates in the state to improvements in short-term certificates, as opposed to both certificates that last longer than a year and associate degree awards. Still, Washington's 2-year colleges did have higher retention rates than neighboring states.

These findings are more common, as other researchers have identified that PBF most often results in decreases in graduation rates (Hillman et al., 2018; Umbricht et al., 2017), neutral impacts (Hagood, 2019; Hillman et al., 2015, 2014), and increased awards of certificates (Hagood, 2019; Hillman et al., 2015; Li & Kennedy, 2018). In particular, PBF has been shown to increase completions from shorter-term degree programs at community colleges (Hagood, 2019; Hillman et al., 2015; Li & Kennedy, 2018; Li & Ortagus, 2019). Li and Kennedy (2018) evaluated state outcomes for short-term (less than a year), medium-term (one to two years), and associate's degree outcomes across 751 two-year colleges between 1990 and 2013. Their study also classified PBF policies by typologies according to the amount of state funding tied to metrics, mission differentiation, equity metrics, and stability in formula. On average, states with any type of PBF policy showed no significant changes in any of the three credentials. However, when outcomes were compared across policy typologies, researchers discovered that policies associated with higher funding percentages, including mission differentiation and equity metrics, and those operating for longer periods of time, produced fewer associate's degrees and more short-term certificates. This suggests that policies designed to induce the most institutional changes, even when structured to counteract equity gaps, continue to produce unintended outcomes.

When evaluating a specific state's outcomes, researchers have found similarly concerning results related to tangible improvements in graduation rates (Hu, 2019; Li & Ortagus, 2019). Li and Ortagus (2019) studied Tennessee's PBF policy for community colleges, finding no changes in awarded associate's degrees between 2001–2002 and 2014–2015, and in one model, decreases in degrees awarded. The researchers found increases in short- and medium-term certificates compared to outcomes in states without PBF. Hu (2019) found similar results for Louisiana's PBF policy between 2006 and 2016. Hu's study also included variables associated with retention rates, and the findings revealed lower retention rates for both full- and part-time students after the introduction of PBF.

Hillman, Fryar, and Crespin-Trujillo (2018) examined associate's and bachelor's degree production under PBF systems in Tennessee and Ohio—states with prominent policies for both 2-year and 4-year institutions. Additionally, both states emphasize degree production by tying a higher portion of state funding for public institutions to metrics. Their policies have been in effect for a more extended period of time, providing more robust data for analysis. Using the common difference-in-difference regression analysis, Hillman and colleagues (2015) identified that only Tennessee community colleges saw improvements in certificate production. Instead, overall, both Ohio and Tennessee saw either null or negative effects on bachelor and associate degree production, confirming earlier findings at 2-year institutions (Hillman et al., 2014, 2015; Hu, 2019; Li & Ortagus, 2019; Tandberg et al., 2014).

While PBF policies have largely failed to improve completion rates, PBF advances efficiency as a policy value. In this regard, some institutional actors have reported improved institutional and academic operations (Li, 2019; Thornton & Friedel, 2016) due to policy implementation. These findings are largely associated with traditional qualitative methodologies

and are discussed in greater depth in a later section. However, as the previous literature suggests, these self-reported institutional improvements are not resulting in increased graduation rates as intended. Additionally, the research has identified unintended consequences of PBF, like decreasing institutional funding and disproportionate student outcomes, which I will discuss in detail in the next two sections.

Institutional Funding

Studies of PBF's impact on institutional funding have shown mixed effects, but there is evidence of negative effects on public institutions (Dougherty et al., 2016; Hagood, 2019; Hillman & Corral, 2018). Hagood (2019) examined the effect of PBF on state appropriations per student at 4-year institutions, compiling data from 428 institutions between 1986 to 2014 and using difference-in-difference methodology to identify the impact on funding and compare outcomes among different institution types. Hagood found that, on average, states with PBF consistently spend less per student. However, when evaluating heterogeneous institutions, the analysis reveals that after introducing PBF, per-student spending increased on average for research-intensive and selective institutions and decreased for non-research and non-selective institutions. Conversely, Dougherty et al. (2016) found that two-thirds of institutional leaders indicated that PBF had little to no impact on the college's budget in their qualitative study of unintended consequences at community colleges. The remaining third of community colleges reported significant budgetary impacts associated with campus initiatives designed to improve outcomes.

Variation in institutional impacts, particularly related to state funding, is common in the literature. Hillman and Corral (2018) studied the impact of PBF on funding allocations for 4-year universities in 21 states to identify any differences in funding for minority-serving institutions

(MSIs). They found that PBF states reduced per-student allocations in the years following implementation on average. More concerningly, Hillman and Corral (2018) also found that after the introduction of PBF, MSIs lost $763.60 per student more in funding than those in non-performance funding states. When comparing MSIs' funding against predominantly white institutions (PWIs) in the same state, results varied. In five states, MSIs lost significantly more than PWIs, while minority-serving institutions in three states experienced significant increases. The researchers theorized that this could result in further unintended consequences associated with PBF, including decreasing faculty-to-student ratios, reducing support services, and increasing tuition costs for students.

However, the same findings are not replicated for minority-serving community colleges. Li et al. (2018) examined how minority-serving community colleges fared under PBF policies in Texas and Washington. Minority-serving institutions (MSIs) in Washington secured fewer milestones than non-minority-serving institutions. Despite securing fewer points, Washington's PBF policies weighted milestones that minority-serving institutions were more likely to meet (e.g., success in development education sequences); therefore, this did not have a negative impact on funding rates for Washington's minority-serving institutions. In Texas, the difference between minority-serving institutions and non-minority-serving institutions was minimal, amounting to $2 more per student at non-MSIs. Their findings suggest that policies that consider the unique needs of community college students can reduce unintended consequences.

Finally, as Hillman and Corral (2018) suggested, PBF may increase costs for students. Hu and Villarreal (2019) studied Louisiana's PBF policy, which provides tuition-setting authority to incentivize institutions that meet specific metrics. Based on regional and national comparison groups, researchers compared tuition and fees over a nine-year period at both community

colleges and universities in the state with non-PBF states. Their findings revealed that tuition increases in PBF states were higher and statistically significant among community colleges and universities across all comparison groups. Tuition increases were particularly troubling at community colleges, and they ranged between 21 and 40 percent when controlled for various factors. These outcomes are concerning because standalone tuition deregulation policies are associated with enrollment decreases among low-income students (Camou & Patton, 2012) and Hispanic students (Flores & Shepherd, 2014). Furthermore, research about college costs and student choice suggests that Black and Hispanic students' enrollment choices are particularly influenced by financial aid packages. Ultimately, students may elect to attend a school that ranked lower on their preference list in favor of the financial support available (Kim, 2004). Unfortunately, PBF is also associated with reduced access and enrollment for several student groups, as discussed in the next section.

Student Outcomes under PBF

In terms of institutional outcomes, PBF has not improved graduation rates, and some studies have demonstrated unintended impacts on students through increased selectivity and reduced access for low-income and racial minority students (Gándara & Rutherford, 2018, 2020; Jones, 2016; Kelchen, 2018, 2019; Li, 2019; Umbricht, Fernandez, & Ortagus, 2017). Under PBF, there have been noted decreases in completion rates among low-income, Black, and Hispanic students, suggesting that institutional responses resulted in increased selectivity (Umbricht et al., 2017). As a result, states have introduced premiums (i.e., financial bonuses) to PBF policies as a solution.

In one of these studies, Gándara and Rutherford (2018) evaluated the impact of financial bonuses at 4-year universities (where they are more likely to see changes in selectivity) with PBF

premiums against those with PBF policies that did not include financial incentives for low-income or minority students. The researchers found that 4-year universities with low-income and minority premiums were more likely to see increases in enrollment among Pell recipients and Hispanic students. However, all forms of incentives continue to have negative outcomes for Black students, with some low-income-only premiums resulting in an 8% enrollment decline of Black students. Conversely, Kelchen (2019) found little evidence that PBF formulas with equity incentives improved enrollment of underrepresented students. However, Kelchen (2019) noted little evidence of systemic usage of selectivity at community colleges affected by PBF. Overall, standalone premiums for minority students do not appear to have positive outcomes on enrollment and do not increase access for underserved students.

Research on PBF policies suggests disproportionate outcomes for low-income and racial minority students, which may increase the stratification of American public higher education. These studies exclusively focus on outcomes at 4-year institutions, where changes in admissions processes are more likely. However, critics maintain that increased selectivity at the university level has the impact of stratifying higher education by shifting low-income, academically underprepared, and Black and Hispanic students to community colleges (Rhoades, 2012). In addition to increased admissions standards, PBF has been shown to have disproportionate impacts on other student groups.

The finding that PBF has been shown to increase selectivity at 4-year institutions demonstrates that PBF policies may increasingly shift disadvantaged student populations to community colleges. Other studies have used policy analysis and correlational designs to identify negative relationships between policy metrics and other populations of students, including part-time students (McKinney & Hagedorn, 2017), Black students (Cornelius & Cavanaugh, 2016;

Gándara & Rutherford, 2018), students with disabilities (Cornelius & Cavanaugh, 2016), low-income students (Hu, 2019; Natale & Jones, 2018), adult students (Li & Ortagus, 2019), and other underrepresented groups (McKinney & Hagedorn, 2017; Natale & Jones, 2018).

Cornelius and Cavanaugh (2016) conducted a policy analysis of Florida's PBF policy to identify correlations between the policy's metrics and institutional factors such as size and enrollment demographics. Their analysis suggests a negative correlation between institutional performance and higher percentages of Black and disabled students. Similarly, Li and Ortagus (2019) investigated Tennessee's community college enrollment after implementing the state's PBF policy. Their analysis used a difference-in-difference design, and their findings suggested that adult student enrollment decreased between 10 - 18% on average, depending on the comparison group (Li & Ortagus, 2019).

Natale and Jones (2018) conducted a similar policy analysis of Texas's Student Success Points program. Using a correlational design, they studied how community college institutional and student characteristics may affect securing student success points. The researchers used three regression analyses to mimic the policy's funding formula, which averages three years of performance to award success points. The model using institutional data from 2009–2011 suggests four statistically significant variables: Hispanic student enrollment, Pell Grant percentages, Black student enrollment, and institutional support expenditures. Pell Grant and institutional support revealed a negative correlation, and racial categories indicated a positive association. This pattern of statistical significance and correlational relationship was maintained in the model using data from 2010–2012. The final model analyzed the difference in the two sets of three-year averages and found no statistical significance. Additionally, several variables did support the prediction of total points, but they did not maintain this relationship over time. As a

result, the researchers concluded that the Texas formula does not mirror previous findings of negative relationships between race and metrics (Natale & Jones, 2018). However, the institutional academic support expenditures findings suggest that academically unprepared students may be disadvantaged under the policy. Finally, Natale and Jones (2018) noted that institutional size had a positive correlation with success points, suggesting that larger colleges with larger populations of Black and Hispanic students perform better because of size—thereby mitigating any racial correlations with the policy design. However, other studies of Texas's policy have suggested a negative relationship between race and success points (McKinney & Hagedorn, 2017).

McKinney and Hagedorn's (2017) study of Texas's PBF policy revealed similar findings for academically underprepared students. Still, their analysis indicated that Black students were significantly less likely to secure points and were overrepresented in students who secured no institutional funding over a six-year period. Their study used longitudinal student data from a large community college district in Texas to determine the cumulative amount of PBF a student would earn for an institution over the course of enrollment. McKinney and Hagedorn (2017) considered a variety of student demographics, including race, age, academic preparedness, and socioeconomic status. Their analysis indicates that Black, adult, part-time, and academically underprepared students were significantly less likely to earn PBF for their institution (McKinney & Hagedorn, 2017).

These findings collectively suggest that certain groups of students may be shifted away from 4-year universities and steered toward community colleges. Meanwhile, community colleges may be unintentionally incentivized to shift their outreach, recruitment, and academic course offerings to improve institutional funding under PBF. For example, community colleges

could emphasize recruitment of recent white high school graduates who plan to enroll full-time, as opposed to community-based outreach efforts to increase enrollment of adult students or those with GEDs. College access for all students could be further jeopardized by adjustments in course offerings and academic policies that reduce the number and amount of allowable retakes of adult and developmental education or English as a Second Language courses (Dougherty & Reddy, 2011).

Institutional Response and Employee Attitudes

PBF researchers frequently use principal agent theory as a conceptual framework for their studies (Hillman, Tandberg, & Gross, 2014; Hillman et al., 2015; Tandberg et al., 2014). This economic theory explains how principals (i.e., the state or policymakers) use incentives to coax agents (i.e., colleges) to act in ways the principals desire. It has proven to be an effective tool for identifying how institutions have responded to PBF. Proponents of PBF argue that these policies incentivize higher education institutions to develop strategies to improve completion rates. However, when Thornton and Friedel (2016) interviewed administrators at four rural community colleges in North Carolina and Texas, they found few changes in policy or practice following PBF implementation. Instead, they identified new demands on decision-making and concerns about the complexity and time required to compile data for PBF-associated reports. This finding reveals that changes are occurring in response to the introduction of PBF but the finding also demonstrates nuance in where institutional actors focus during implementation. As the researchers identified, administrators' approach to policy implementation may not align with policymakers' goals.

Despite a lack of evidence indicating that PBF improves completion rates, student affairs professionals, college presidents, system administrators, national advocacy organizations, and

think tank professionals report positive feelings about their efficacy (Gándara & Hearn, 2019; Gill & Harrison, 2018; Hillman et al., 2015). Gándara and Hearn (2019) noted how college leaders' localized efforts to improve degree success rates leveraged relationships with national advocacy organizations. Meanwhile, faculty (Holmes, 2018) and administrators (Akakpo, 2017; Driskill, 2014; Grubbs, 2014) alike are aware of the calls for accountability and have reported adjustments to their institutions due to this PBF policy implementation. Despite positive attitudes, administrators and faculty voiced concerns about implications and unintended consequences. These concerns included the necessity to increase external revenues (Akakpo, 2017); conflicts with an institution's mission (Driskill, 2014); workload increases (Holmes, 2018); and new data tracking and reporting demands (Grubbs, 2014; Thornton & Friedel, 2016). Despite these concerns, employees seemed to have generally positive attitudes toward the stated goal of PBF policies: increasing student success and completion rates to meet economic demands and maintain fiscal responsibility.

Neoliberalism's Influence within Higher Education

Neoliberalism has fundamentally reshaped higher education policies to emphasize consumerism and market-based reforms (Dougherty & Natow, 2019; Newfield, 2018). Neoliberalism emerged in the 1970s as a model philosophy for public administration that embraced market-based reforms to public services (Gill & Harrison, 2018). Neoliberalism promotes the tenet that liberty is best achieved through private enterprise, individual responsibility, and competitive markets (Natow & Dougherty, 2019). As a result, neoliberalism influences policymakers to develop policy solutions that value efficiency and accountability, including PBF (Ziskin, Rabour, & Hossler, 2018). As a result, neoliberalism is embedded within dominant discourse and the established knowledge structure within higher education. For

example, Dougherty and Natow (2019) emphasized the role that the New Public Management (NPM) theory plays as a subset of neoliberalism. In particular, NPM de-emphasizes the importance of academic freedom and shared governance. Critical scholars have noted that PBF policies emphasize students' value solely for workforce development rather than their holistic development and liberal education (Gill & Harrison, 2018). Prioritizing workforce development results from the growing influence of businesses in the development of PBF and other neoliberal policy reforms (Dougherty & Natow, 2019). In a comparative study of four PBF policies in the United States, United Kingdom, and Italy, Ziskin and colleagues (2018) studied to what degree and in what manner neoliberal ideas were central to the discourse on PBF. Their analysis showed patterns of expectations that aligned with the neoliberal concepts of performativity and privatization. Gildersleeve and colleagues (2010) argued that "the wholesale embrace of a public agenda for higher education has gone unquestioned, unchecked, and uncritically investigated in the mainstream and dominant circles" (p. 86). However, there are efforts to understand the higher education policy context better. In the next section, I describe the literature most relevant to this study's Texas context.

Texas Policy Context

Texas state legislators have enacted several higher education reforms in response to the Completion Agenda, including two comprehensive higher education master plans, beginning with Closing the Gaps 2015. The policy set overarching goals to increase the number of students who enroll in college, increase institutional persistence rates, strengthen institutional prestige, and increase the amount of federal research funding in key fields (e.g., science and engineering) (Bricker, 2008). Additionally, as the name alludes, Closing the Gaps set targets for improved performance among underserved students in the state, emphasizing increasing enrollment of

underrepresented groups (Flores & Shepherd, 2014). To achieve these goals, several policy initiatives were developed, including mandates related to academic rigor, K–16 curricular alignment, reformed admissions policies, expanded financial assistance, and the Student Success Points Program (a PBF policy) (Bricker, 2008; Li et al., 2018; Rankin, Scott, & Kim, 2015; Winkle-Wagner, ThandiSule, & Maramba, 2014).

In 2011, the Texas legislature passed House Bill 9 (HB 9), known as the Higher Education Outcomes-Based Funding Act, which directed the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) to develop performance metrics (McKinney & Hagedorn, 2015). THECB created a task force with institutional leaders and the Texas Association of Community Colleges and proposed that college funding be set at $1 million in base funding and award 90% based on enrollment and 10% based on performance outcomes (Ellis, 2015). The Student Success Points Initiative was then passed by the 83rd legislature in 2013 and enacted in 2014–2015 (McKinney & Hagedorn, 2017). The established success points milestones were weighted as the following:

- Being college ready (measured by meeting TSI standards in math, reading, or writing): 1 point for math, .5 points for reading, .5 points for writing
- Completing first college-level math course: 1 point
- Completing first college-level reading/writing course: .5 points for reading, .5 points for writing, 1 point for combined reading/writing course
- Completing 15 semester credit hours (SCHs): 1 point
- Completing 30 SCHs: 1 point
- Earning a degree or certificate (non-critical field): 2 points
- Earning a degree or certificate in a critical field (i.e., STEM and allied health): 2.25

points

- Transfer to a university after completing 15 SCHs: 2 points (THECB, 2019)

Points are calculated based on cohort-level data averaged over a three-year period. The model was slightly reformed in 2016–2017 to shift to a distributive model of funding based on institutional improvement over time (McKinney & Hagedorn, 2017).

Natale and Jones (2018) noted that while Closing the Gaps established priorities for improving outcomes of at-risk students (e.g., low-income, underrepresented racial minorities, part-time, adult learners), the PBF system does not establish similar priorities. For this reason, the researchers conducted a quantitative correlational study of how student and institutional characteristics may affect how student success points are earned. Natale and Jones's study included independent variables focused on students (i.e., age, race/ethnicity, enrollment status, Pell Grant status) and institutional characteristics (i.e., proportion of enrollment in technical programs, student expenditures, institutional support). In their three regression analyses, only the modeling for the fiscal year 2010–2012 showed four statistically significant variables: Hispanic and Black student enrollment, institutional expenditures per full-time equivalent student, and academic expenditures per FTE. Additionally, while several characteristics predict total points, "they do not drive the change in points over time" (Natale & Jones, 2018, p. 671). For this reason, the researchers concluded that despite lacking specific targets for at-risk groups, the policy will likely not negatively impact minority-serving community colleges and other institutions that enroll a high percentage of at-risk students.

However, when McKinney and Hagedorn (2017) used longitudinal student data from a community college that enrolls a high proportion of non-white, low-income, older, and academically underprepared students, they reached a different conclusion. Their research design

compared student characteristics with the state's specific metrics to determine which students generate the most and least funding. Their findings showed that the least valuable students (in terms of Student Success points) are Black, older students enrolled part-time; these students are also the most academically underprepared. These findings do suggest that the state's PBF policy may harm minority-serving community colleges and other 2-year institutions that enroll a high portion of underserved students.

In summary, PBF policies have continued despite little evidence that they achieve their goal of improving completion rates. Furthermore, research on the impacts of PBF shows unintended consequences for minority-serving community colleges (MSCCs) and the students they serve (e.g., low-income and racial minorities). This is particularly true for Texas MSCCs. While a recent case study showed positive attitudes among Texas community college administrators regarding their value (Thornton & Friedel, 2016), these were published prior to research indicating the ineffectiveness of the Student Success Points program. Finally, this study addresses tension in the literature, which finds that PBF policies are ineffective, but higher education leaders maintain positive attitudes regarding their efficacy (Gill & Harrison, 2018). The role of neoliberalism as a driving force behind the Completion Agenda may provide clues to this tension. Therefore, the purpose of the current study is to develop a critical, in-depth understanding of how community college leaders make sense of PBF within the tension of narratives surrounding access and equity. Community colleges are an appropriate site to explore this tension based on their historical role in advancing access and equity, as I discuss in the next section.

The Role of Community Colleges

Community colleges serve as an important gateway to postsecondary education in the

United States. Historically, this has been achieved through low tuition, open admissions, and a comprehensive mission designed to meet various educational needs, including vocational training, general education, and academic preparation for transfer (Bragg, 2001; Dowd, 2003). These principles can be traced back to the 1947 Truman Commission, which set a goal to double the college-going rate in the United States by improving college access and equity through expanding the role of community colleges (Gilbert & Heller, 2013). This section traces community colleges' evolving mission and role and highlights the unique sector of minority-serving community colleges—specifically, Hispanic-serving community colleges.

Community colleges have a "democratizing effect" (Dowd, 2003, p. 93) on education through their access-oriented mission and purpose. In particular, low tuition and open admissions have been essential components of this mission. Scholars have identified evolutions in the mission and role of community colleges, beginning with their status as "junior colleges" that primarily served as general education and preparation for university transfer (Bragg, 2001; Dowd, 2003). After the Truman Commission in 1947, community colleges were identified as the "avenue to provide educational access for the vast majority of American youths" (Bragg, 2001, p. 98). As a result, community colleges played an increasing role in developmental education, vocational training, adult education and non-credit community outreach (Bragg, 2001; Dowd, 2003; Gilbert & Heller, 2013). As a result, both the number of community colleges and the number of students enrolled at them increased.

As community colleges expanded, they relied on local funding and state support on a per-student formula (Dowd, 2003; Gilbert & Heller, 2013). Some early formulas considered equity in funding, making adjustments for differences in the student population at community colleges, including considerations for differences in academic preparedness and socioeconomic status

(Dowd, 2003). However, as policy priorities shifted towards efficiency, accountability measures were introduced, including measures like PBF. PBF and other "current accountability efforts emphasize production efficiency" (Dowd, 2003, p. 110). Specifically, PBF's ultimate embedded goal is to increase efficiency by improving college completion rates to meet economic demands while holding institutions accountable for expenditures. Tandberg et al. (2014) noted that PBF metrics are often established with 4-year universities in mind and that their framework conflicts with the intentions of community colleges and the students they serve. Harbour and Jaquette (2007) echoed this issue and cautioned that "when community colleges must simultaneously compete with an expanding private sector and conform to expanding state performance programs, their traditional commitment to equity is inevitably threatened" (p. 198). Minority-serving institutions have a similar purpose as community colleges, with the specific goal of advancing racial equity in response to the historical exclusion of racial minorities. In the next section, I discuss their role in higher education (and specifically focus on minority-serving community colleges).

Minority-Serving Community Colleges

Minority-serving institution (MSI) is an umbrella term for federal designations of 2-year and 4-year institutions within four categories: Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), and Asian and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs) (Gasman et al., 2017). Increasingly, researchers also use emerging labels to identify historically white colleges and universities that may be close to achieving formal recognition as an MSI based on student enrollment (Gasman et al., 2017). MSIs receive this federal recognition based on legislation or verification of their demographic characteristics.

Characteristics of MSCCs

MSIs share many characteristics with and face similar challenges as community colleges. In terms of mission and role, MSIs serve as a key point of access to higher education for low-income and racially minoritized students and meet community needs for technology, information, and public space access (Gasman et al., 2015; Gasman et al., 2017). They also play an important role in developmental education (Nguyen et al., 2015), educating men of color (Gasman et al., 2017), and increasing diversity in critical fields like teacher education and STEM pathways (Gasman et al., 2017). MSIs face similar sociopolitical challenges to community colleges—notably, a lack of financial resources—resulting in an over-reliance on local funding sources (Elliot et al., 2019). Despite a shared responsibility for educating an increasingly diverse population, most research on MSIs focuses on the 4-year sector, while few community college studies specifically focus on two-year MSIs, otherwise termed MSCCs (Nguyen et al., 2015).

While MSIs share many characteristics, there are also vast differences among MSIs, both in considering the different types of MSIs, and diversity within categories. Title III of the Higher Education Act of 1965 defines and recognizes HSIs and HBCUs, but there are significant differences in eligibility and funding (Martinez, 1998). Notably, HBCU eligibility criteria require that the institution pre-date the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and maintain a mission to educate Black students (Martinez, 1998). HBCUs, along with TCUs, receive annual federal appropriations, while HSIs may apply and compete for the Title V "Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions" Grants (Vargas & Villa-Palomino, 2019). Title III defines Hispanic-serving institutions as enrolling at least 25 percent Hispanic students and 50 percent low-income students. Since recognition rests solely on enrollment thresholds, researchers and advocates have attempted to define what "Hispanic-serving" means in terms of institutional culture, outcomes, and behavior

(Garcia, 2016, 2017a, 2017b; Garcia et al., 2019; Nuñez et al., 2016; Zerquera et al., 2017). I explore this topic in greater detail later after thoroughly exploring the current literature on minority-serving community colleges.

Nguyen and colleagues (2015) conducted the singular descriptive study on minority serving community colleges (MSCCs). They defined MSCCs as public and private, not-for-profit, 2-year minority-serving institutions based on federal designation or qualifying student populations (Nguyen et al., 2015). In their typology of MSCCs, the researchers identified 248 qualifying institutions, which represents 46% of all minority-serving institutions (Nguyen et al., 2015). Hispanic-serving community colleges (HSCC) make up a significant portion of MSCCs and represent the majority of HSIs. In particular, HSCCs are concentrated in California, Texas, and New Mexico.

While MSCC is an emerging institutional category, it already shows promise for studying the impact of educational policy. Boland and colleagues (2018) conducted a longitudinal analysis of three policies associated with California's higher education master plan to determine how they contributed to upward social mobility for racial minorities. Their study compared MSCCs and non-MSI community colleges to determine the impact of policy on the state's public institutions, which are now predominantly MSIs. Their findings show that MSCCs can reduce the achievement gap, as demonstrated by higher retention rates at MSCCs and improved performance among Hispanic students. In nearly every performance measure, MSCCs outperformed non-MSIs, except white student performance and transfer rates, where non-MSIs performed slightly better. These findings suggest that MSCCs may reduce the equity gap in student outcomes in higher education when higher education policy considers their unique context.

Defining Hispanic-Serving Versus Latinx-Serving

Hispanic-serving became a recognized federal category following the 1992 Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (Gasman et al., 2015). Because the HSI designation is based solely on student enrollment level, it creates unique circumstances where an institution does not need a specific mission or purpose aligned with educating Hispanic students (Gasman et al., 2015). Garcia et al. (2019) explained the importance of this dynamic and noted that "the HSI designation has functioned as a federal construct, with no guide for implementing strategies or infrastructures to serve and support Latinx students" (p. 746). As a result, researchers and advocates have attempted to define "Hispanic-serving" through various methods (Garcia, 2016, 2017a, 2017b; Garcia et al., 2019; Nuñez et al., 2016; Zerquera et al., 2017). Garcia (2016) promoted the concept of "Latinx-serving" articulated as a unique identity separate from an "HSI identity," which is representative of the federal definition for enrolling Hispanic students.

Garcia (2017a) conducted an in-depth case study and literature review on organizational identity and culture to understand what it "means for postsecondary institutions to be Latinx-serving" (p. 111). The researcher interviewed participants to construct the ideal indicators to identify different Latinx-serving typologies and identified six: graduation, graduate student enrollment, employment, community engagement, positive campus climate, and support programs. By using an organizational identity lens, Garcia (2017a) theorized four HSI typologies based on high or low organizational outcomes and culture that reflect Latinx identity. She defines these as:

- Latinx-producing: high outcomes for Latinx students and low presence of Latinx organizational culture
- Latinx-enrolling: low outcomes for Latinx students and low presence of Latinx

organizational culture

- Latinx-serving: high outcomes for Latinx students and high presence of Latinx organizational culture
- Latinx-enhancing: low outcomes for Latinx students and high presence of Latinx organizational culture (Garcia, 2017, p. 122s).

As this typology system indicates, Latinx-serving is the ideal HSI identity, where institutions both produce high success rates for Latinx/a/o students and reflect their culture and unique ways of knowing and learning. However, it is not the only type of HSI in this proposed typology, nor the only proposed way of classifying HSIs.

Garcia et al. (2019) conducted a synthesis of the literature on HSIs to understand how researchers conceptualize "servingness" at HSIs by framing their institutional limitations and contributions. Their review of 148 studies identified four themes that define servingness: outcomes, experiences, internal organizational dimensions, and external forces. Outcomes included academic and nonacademic factors like graduation rates, retention, and perceptions of campus climate. Experiences included how students and nonstudents felt regarding the campus racial climate and experiences of exclusion or inclusion. Internal organization dimensions explored how decision making and curricular and pedagogical practices considered the cultural and racial ways of knowing of Latinx/o/a students. Finally, researchers identified that external factors, primarily the influence of policy and governance, shaped institutional decisions and policies. Within these themes, researchers identified various institutional approaches reflective of the diversity among HSIs. Nuñez et al. (2016) conducted a descriptive study of HSIs to develop institutional typologies to define serving Latinx/o/a students.

Nuñez et al. (2016) analyzed enrollment, census, and economic data to characterize

institutional diversity among HSIs. Their conceptual model guided analysis by considering five interrelated forms of diversity: systemic, programmatic, constituently, resource, and environmental. Their analysis revealed six types of HSIs: Urban Enclave Community Colleges, Rural Dispersed Community Colleges, Big Systems Four-Years, Small Communities Four-Years, Puerto Rican Institutions, and Health Sciences Schools (Nuñez et al., 2016). As the labels suggest, institutional size and geography were defining characteristics of typologies. When the researchers conducted a more nuanced analysis, differences in institutional expenditures, graduation rates, and faculty composition became clear. For example, Urban Enclave Community Colleges were the most prevalent type and shared commonalities with low institutional expenditures, graduation rates, and full-time faculty, despite the likelihood of being in highly affluent urban and suburban areas. Nuñez et al.'s typology one way of defining the diversity of HSIs, while other researchers have focused more intently on classifying ways of serving Latinx/o/a students (Garcia, 2016, 2017a, 2017b).

Garcia (2016) emphasized that "the process of sensegiving is used to construct an organizational identity based on consistent and legitimate narratives" (p. 119). As a result, organizational changes in demographic representatives can also cause the organization's identity to shift. Carter and Patterson (2019) studied this dynamic in their qualitative case study of a Midwestern community college that obtained a federal designation as a Hispanic-serving institution. The researchers revealed a lack of changes in the college's organizational identity despite the new designation as an HSI. These findings suggest that emerging HSIs may be unaware of their role in advancing racial/ethnic equity in higher education attainment. These findings are reflected in Preuss et al.'s (2020) survey of students and employees at HSIs in seven states. The researchers found that less than 20 percent of institutions provided regular

information on the needs, concerns, and culture of Latinx/o/a students (Preuss et al., 2020). This gap was reflected in Latinx/o/a student survey responses, revealing that staff and faculty did not demonstrate cultural competency (Preuss et al., 2020). This is in contrast to Historically Black Community Colleges, where research has established the role and importance of institutional mission embedded within organizational identities (Elliott et al., 2019).

Zerquera and colleagues (2017) explored the perspectives of 21 administrators regarding how they understood institutional mission at four urban-serving universities; two of the universities they examined were HSIs, and two were classified as emerging HSIs. Their findings revealed a variety of approaches and definitions regarding access and diversity. For some, "diversity was described as a commodity" (Zerquera et al., 2017, p. 214), where "serving students of color was viewed as a costly endeavor in needs of circumvention" (p. 215). Vargas and Villa-Palomino's (2019) study of successful Title V Developing Hispanic-Serving Institution grant applications revealed similar findings. The researchers found that colorblind strategies were present in 85 percent of abstracts indicating plans where Latinx/o/a students were unlikely to directly benefit (Vargas & Villa-Palomino, 2019). This is concerning in light of Vargas's (2018) study of the racial composition of Title V grantees in 2016 to determine what, if any, institutional characteristics are associated with the likelihood of successful awards. Unfortunately, the findings suggest that whiter institutions were more likely to secure federal funds, while Black student enrollment had a negative effect (Vargas, 2018). While these findings are alarming, there were positive examples of individuals enacting Latinx/o/and access-centered missions in both studies.

A final positive example of Latinx-serving strategies emerged in Felix's (2021) case study of race-conscious leadership and policy implementation. Felix immersed himself in the

institution for over 18 months in order to understand how HSI leaders implemented race-neutral policies. His findings revealed that leaders can leverage even race-neutral policies to develop true equity-minded initiatives when leaders adopt a race-conscious mindset. Felix explained, "Ideal implementers are friendly to a culture of inquiry, can have conversations about race and racial disparities, and have power, influence, and institutional know-how to create change from the ground up" (2021, p. 26).

In summation, studying higher education policy and, in particular, funding streams with a racial-conscious approach is especially important because resource allocation has the potential to counteract or perpetuate patterns of inequity. Further, HSIs enroll more Black and Native American students than HBCUs and TCUs, respectively (Cuellar, 2019). However, HSIs must compete to secure federal resources, unlike HBCUs and TCUs (Garcia et al., 2019). Therefore, understanding if and how administrators implement PBF at HSIs is valuable for identifying strategies to decrease inequities for racially and economically minoritized groups, not just Latinx/o/a students. As Felix (2021) suggested, administrators can use policy to either challenge the status quo or replicate it. In the next section, I explain how I employ policy implementation and critical sensemaking theories to guide my research design.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs policy implementation theories and critical sensemaking (CSM) to understand how community college administrators make sense of performance-based funding policies. Garcia et al. (2019) noted that external influences in the form of policy and governance shape how HSIs serve students and that sensemaking plays an important role in shaping institutional culture. CSM is concerned with issues of power and identity in sensemaking processes—in particular, the role of dominant discourses, formative context, and organizational

rules (Aromaa et al., 2019; Helms Mills et al., 2010). In the following sections, I first present an overview of policy implementation theory and then outline critical sensemaking, in which I include a discussion of its connection to Weickian sensemaking. Later, I discuss in detail the components of critical sensemaking that are central to the purpose of this study: the connection to identity and the role of knowledge structures and dominant discourses.

Policy Implementation

Policy implementation is the process of enacting a policy designed to address a public problem. Depending on the policy, implementation can involve a variety of actors, ranging from the policymakers themselves to the governmental agencies and institutions they seek to reform (Smith & Larimer, 2017). Dumas and Anyon (2006) framed implementation as a “social practice” (p. 151) where context influences the process. Unfortunately, Gonzalez et al. (2021) noted that policy implementation has been largely unstudied in higher education, as evidenced by the finding that fewer than 6 percent of articles are on this topic in the most cited higher education journal. The lack of research on implementation presents a critical gap in the literature, as “higher education professionals are charged with serving as policy implementers” (Gonzalez et al., 2021, p. 11). Additionally, colleges and universities are targets of policymakers, often framed as stagnant and thus needing policy tools to induce change (Spillane et al., 2009).

Understanding implementation is important because while policies are designed to induce change, they may fail to consider current change processes already underway or resources available to support reform (Spillane et al., 2009). While organizations themselves do not implement policy, the individuals who comprise them do, and the study of their behavior provides insight into implementation processes. Lipsky (1971) termed these individuals “street-level bureaucrats” (p. 95) who influence the application of policy tools. Spillane and colleagues

(2009) advanced a framework that explains the role of organizational behavior in shaping policy implementation. They argued that “organizational members are not free agents; their sensemaking and practice are shaped or structured by the organizations in which they work” (Spillane et al., 2009, p. 413). Spillane et al. identified four forms of organizational resources that enable and constrain implementation: human capital, social capital, organizational routines, and technology and tools. However, the researchers acknowledged that these resources are rarely distributed equally among and within organizations. While the forms of available resources will influence implementation, how they are used is equally important.

Bressers (2007) proposed a “layered explanation of social processes,” (p. 11) termed “contextual interaction theory,” to explain how actors interact with one another and use tools to implement policy and other changes. In this framework, actors are shaped and reshaped by context and interactions in a dynamic fashion. The factors comprising institutional context include: (1) individual actor characteristics, (2) specific context, (3) structural context, and (4) wider context. Individual actor characteristics entail their motivations, cognitions, capacity, and power. The specific context considers geographic setting, organizational demographics, and institutional norms and customs. The structural context considers legislative and administrative rules, while the wider context understands that economic, societal, and political structures influence organizations. The nature of the interactive process can take the form of cooperation, opposition, or joint learning and continues to influence context. Cooperative interactive processes may be active, passive, or forced (Bressers, 2007).

Together, contextual interaction theory (Bressers, 2007) and Spillane et al.’s (2009) organizational resources provide a framework for understanding how individual behavior, context, and organizational resources influence policy implementation. Policies often target

organizational routines to induce desired changes (Spillane et al., 2009). Therefore, interactive processes influence the likelihood of adoption and adequacy of implementation (Nienhusser & Connery, 2021). By studying community college administrators, we can understand how their identity, context, and access to resources influence policy implementation.

In one example of such a study, Nienhusser (2018) employed sensemaking as a theoretical framework to understand how community college administrators made meaning of their role while implementing policies for undocumented students. The research found that the employees navigated role conflict and policy vagueness by relying on their context and "open-access mantra" (Nienhusser, 2018, p. 447). Dumas and Anyon (2006) argued that "decisions at each step of the implementation process are informed by race and class" (p. 164). In this instance, Nienhusser (2018) found that participants could leverage mandates requiring change by drawing upon their context and personal beliefs to maximize access for undocumented students. Nienhusser situated participants as policy actors and relied on sensemaking to analyze their understanding. While Nienhusser utilized Weick's (1995) initial framing of, I explore critical sensemaking (an emerging extension).

Critical Sensemaking

Critical sensemaking has emerged as a distinct theoretical approach built upon Weick's (1995) theory of organizational sensemaking. Scholars argued that Weick's initial framing of sensemaking failed to operationalize how power affects the sensemaking process (Schildt et al., 2020; Helms Mills et al., 2010). In response, Helms Mills and colleagues (2010) advanced a new understanding of organizational sensemaking that takes a more critical approach. They argue that Weick's (1995) "approach is limited by an under focus on issues of power, knowledge, structure, and past relationships" (p. 188). Similarly, Schildt et al. (2020) claimed that "much could be

gained from incorporating a power-sensitive aspect in theoretical models of sensemaking processes since the unexpected events that trigger sensemaking also threaten existing power relationships" (p. 242). Helms Mills et al. (2010) drew on interpretivism, poststructuralism, and critical theory to develop an understanding of the power within organizational sensemaking.

While Schildt et al. (2020) did not use the term "critical" in their sensemaking framework, they were similarly concerned with how episodic and systemic power influence sensemaking processing, particularly related to sensegiving and sensebreaking.

Aromaa et al. (2019) traced the use of CSM in applied studies through their analysis of 51 studies, noting CSM's increased use in published articles, chapters, and dissertations since 2013. Their analyses revealed both strengths and limitations associated with the application of CSM. First, they noted that CSM is a promising approach to understanding "agency-in-context" (p. 22) and its efficacy in uncovering the role of dominant discourses, context, and organizational roles and rules in understanding issues of power. I return to these topics later in this section. Secondly, Aromaa et al.'s (2019) summary of limitations cautioned future researchers that CSM is not merely a critique of Weickian sensemaking or an effort to consider power in sensemaking studies (Aromaa et al., 2019). Weickian sensemaking relies on cognitive thought patterns, while CSM is distinct in considering context, rules, and dominant discourses (Aromaa et al., 2019). Still, Aromaa et al. (2019) noted that Weick's seven properties of sensemaking provide a beneficial heuristic framework for analyzing power and identity. For these reasons, in the next section, I trace the development of CSM to Weick's organizational sensemaking and summarize his seven properties of sensemaking.

Weickian Sensemaking

CSM builds upon Weick's (1995) conceptualization of sensemaking as the process of

individual and social construction of plausible understandings through a retrospective examination of events. In his seminal text, *Sensemaking in Organizations*, Weick identified that sensemaking often responds to shocks, ambiguity, or problems. In fact, he articulated that "once something is labeled a problem, that is when the problem starts" (p. 90). Individuals receive a constant stream of cues and events, many of which are routine or automatic, and must make sense of which cues or events may cause disruptions. Weick explained that an organization's level of openness impacts the frequency of interruptions that trigger sensemaking.

Furthermore, the level of complexity within an organization affects what people notice and ignore. Weick et al. (2005) expanded on the early activities of sensemaking, describing them as an attempt to organize chaos through a process of noticing and bracketing events. Sensemaking proceeds by labeling these "cues" through reliance on mental models to understand and formulate responses. These mental models are influenced by ideology, organizational premise control, paradigms, theories of action, tradition, and prior experiences. Weick (1995) also emphasized that sensemaking is a communicative process that relies on "sentences, discrete definitions, concepts, and interpretations" (p. 108) to create understanding. Successful sensemaking relies on rich dynamics and process imagery.

Sensemaking often occurs when organizations experience change, ambiguity, or uncertainty. Ambiguity results from incoming cues that could have multiple meanings simultaneously. Meanwhile, uncertainty triggers sensemaking because of a lack of information. As a result, organizations either need more information or deliver that information in various formats to increase opportunities for understanding. Weick (1995) emphasized the need for in-person, informal interactions to resolve confusion through dialogue. He argued that "face-to-face interaction provides multiple cues" (p. 99). Because sensemaking occurs when organizations

need to navigate ambiguity or uncertainty, it is often used to study organizational change and crises (Eckel & Kezar, 2003; Kezar & Eckel, 2002a, 2002b).

Weick (1995) identified seven properties of sensemaking: grounded in identity development, retrospective, focused on and by extracted cues, driven by plausibility, enactive of the environment, social, and ongoing. Sensemaking is grounded in identity development because our understanding of the circumstances simultaneously is shaped by our identity and shapes our identity in response to it. It is also a retrospective experience because, as Weick (1995) noted, “Our actions are always a bit ahead of us” (p. 26). Furthermore, sensemaking relies on individuals scanning, searching, and noticing cues to interpret what is occurring. Sensemaking is “driven by plausibility rather than accuracy” (Weick, 1995, p. 55), as it is more concerned with the frames and filters people use to form coherence. Enactment describes the role of action in sensemaking and captures the co-construction of organizing as a process. Enactment connects to how sensemaking is social and ongoing. As Weick (1995) described, “people are always in the middle of things” (p. 43). Finally, sensemaking occurs in the context of our relationship with others and relies on communications, physical interactions, and symbolic exchanges.

Weick’s (1995) seven properties are useful as heuristic properties for understanding how power and identity shape sensemaking. Still, CSM is a distinct theoretical approach beyond sensemaking. I return to the discussion of critical sensemaking by describing its connection to individual identity and reliance on dominant discourses.

Connection to identity. In examining identity within institutional actors, Schildt et al. (2020) and Helms Mills et al. (2010) emphasized power’s connection to identity. Schildt et al. (2020) described identity as a “conduit” for power and discussed how it motivates individuals to maintain their senses of self, influencing how people label and interpret what is happening

around them. Similarly, Helms Mills et al. (2010) argued that power affords a privilege to certain identities over others. They emphasized, in particular, how these limitations impact the analysis of identity development and plausibility. In response, they proposed critical sensemaking, which "shifts focus to how organizational power and dominant assumptions privilege some identities over others" (p. 188) and provided "a lens through which to analyze the power relationships reflected … within organizations" (p. 189).

Soderlind and Geschwind (2019) used sensemaking to understand how Swedish academic officers were influenced by performance measures. As part of their qualitative study, they interviewed 14 academic managers from two different Swedish universities to evaluate how metrics influenced decision making, strategy formulation, performance evaluation, support structures, internal and external relationships, and incentives. While their study did not use CSM, their findings revealed how power influenced the sensemaking process. For example, their introduction of metrics was seen as important among managers and often used as a tool of organizational control. Additionally, these metrics served as cues for the sensemaking process, often reshaping organizational culture and demonstrating a connection to identity. For example, the prioritization of publications in international peer-reviewed journals was regarded by one participant as "an Anglo-Saxon adaptation" (Soderlind & Geschwind, 2019, p. 84).

Similarly, the sociology department chair described the effect on her faculty's diminished role as experts in societal development: being pushed to publish in peer-reviewed journals rather than providing analysis for public officials. These two examples also hint at the role of dominant discourse in shaping the plausibility of actions in response to a changing environment. Schildt et al. (2020) and Helms Mills et al. (2010) emphasized the role of knowledge structure in shaping identity and serving as a conduit of power in the sensemaking process. The next section

discusses this in detail.

Knowledge structures and dominant discourses. Sensemaking develops stories of plausibility that usually "tap into an ongoing sense of the current climate, are consistent with other data, facilitate ongoing projects, reduce equivocality, provide an aura of accuracy" (Weick, 2005, p. 415). Schildt et al. (2020) argued that Weickian sensemaking focuses more on the outcomes than the process, which leaves out an analysis of power. In their analysis of power in sensemaking, the researchers concurred with Weick (2005) that sensemaking rests on plausibility, which is arrived at through a process of influencing and building coherence. Power can be defined as influence. The research of Schildt et al. (2020) divides it into systemic and episodic; episodic is defined as when people act intentionally to influence, while systemic is more subtle, like how employees are socialized into the workplace. While Weick (1995) hinted at this by acknowledging systems like "third order controls," without critical sensemaking, the existing coherence analysis lacks consideration of power. Schildt et al. (2020) and Helms Mills (2010) emphasized the role of knowledge structures, which are conduits for power, in shaping coherence in the sensemaking process. Knowledge structures shape what we pay attention to and how we assign meaning. Schildt et al. (2020) described the influence in macro and micro ways, ranging from global ideology to job-related training. While these discourses can constrain individual power, they also allow individuals and groups to develop new understandings that challenge dominant narratives and provide a pathway to resistance.

Zerquera and Ziskin (2020) relied on sensemaking as part of the conceptual framework that they used to study how administrators at four urban-serving research universities (USRUs) navigated a new statewide performance-based funding policy. In particular, their study highlighted the pressures administrators faced when making sense of their institutions' identities

as public servants with the neoliberal influences of the state's PBF policy. Administrators reported feeling pressure to shift away from their institutional missions by adopting the values and priorities of the legislature. In particular, participants noted that the state metrics were the same for all universities, regardless of institutional mission, student population, or other contextual factors. While Zerquera and Ziskin did not employ critical sensemaking, their use of *Weickian* sensemaking and a critical analysis of neoliberalism helped "in unpacking individuals' and institutions' conformity and resistance to neoliberal ideals" (p. 16).

Summary

Performance-based funding (PBF) has emerged as a widespread reform to public financing for higher education. Yet, empirical studies suggest that PBF policies fail to meet the intended outcomes of improving completion rates (Hillman et al., 2014, 2015; Tandberg et al., 2015). Furthermore, researchers have identified several unintended consequences, including decreases in enrollment of low-income, Black, and Latinx/o/a students and funding reductions for community colleges and minority-serving institutions (Gándara & Rutherford, 2018; Li et al., 2018; Umbricht et al., 2017). Additionally, PBF represents a larger shift in educational policy aligned with neoliberalism, prioritizing efficiency as a value (Dougherty & Natow, 2019). Meanwhile, minority-serving community colleges emphasize access as gateways to higher education while meeting various community needs (Bragg, 2001; Dowd, 2003). Despite this conflict, few qualitative studies have been conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of how administrators are responding to PBF policies, and only a single case study of Texas's Student Success Points program exists. Critical sensemaking provides a promising theoretical framework to understand how community college administrators make sense of PBF implementation within their context as access-oriented institutions.

This study seeks to address a gap in the literature on PBF and how identity, power, and ideology are enacted in the sensemaking process. The findings from this study will inform higher education leaders and policymakers about how community college administrators make sense of educational policy and navigate conflicting values. These results are valuable to higher education leaders who confront an increasingly complex and high-stakes policy landscape. It is similarly relevant for policymakers who are concerned about performance and can reform ineffective policy instruments. An in-depth understanding of how to confront mission conflict will benefit both groups, who have a shared desire for student success.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to understand how community college administrators make sense of performance-based funding (PBF) within their contexts at Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs). As a researcher, I embraced a critical paradigm (Cannella & Lincoln, 2015) and employed a critical qualitative approach to develop my methodology due to their combined ability to reveal how sensemaking occurs related to PBF. This section summarizes my research design and describes the steps taken to recruit and select participants, data collection and analysis procedures, how I ensured trustworthiness, limitations, and my reflexivity as a researcher.

Paradigm and Philosophical Underpinnings

I adopted a critical paradigm as the philosophical underpinnings to guide the research approach for this study. A critical perspective challenges dominant ideologies by acknowledging multiple truths coexist and that knowledge is ultimately subjective (Denzin, 2015; Pasque & Perez, 2015). As a researcher, I drew upon critical epistemology in not assuming that the participants would have the same experience nor than their experience is representative of all community college administrators. As such, I negotiated different value systems and understandings throughout the research process and my paradigm was integral in how I approached my methodology and engaged participants during the study.

Ontologically, the critical paradigm recognizes that power shapes ways of knowing, being, and understanding. Critique allows one to uncover or reveal how power has shaped phenomenon. In doing so, I embrace the axiological hope that through revelation one creates new realities and a more just society. I understand that research is not a neutral activity and that my values as a researcher shape my agenda. Additionally, I am influenced by the same power structures that shape my participants and their ways of knowing and understanding. Therefore, I

navigate this tension directly to reveal new insights and experiences outside of dominant narratives. In doing so, I recognized my positionality provides an opportunity to engage in mutual growth and understanding alongside my participants. As a researcher, I recognize I achieved this when both myself and the participants gain an awareness and appreciation of their context, complexities, and seeing value in others' ways of knowing and understanding.

In sum, a critical paradigm aligns with this study as it provides an opportunity to reveal complexities and multiple truths and ways of knowing. My critical paradigm allows me to explore value-laden dynamics that often replicate social inequities and reproduce systems of oppression. Therefore, a critical approach is essential to interrupt these cycles and amplify narratives uncommon in the literature. In sum, my epistemological, ontological, and axiological stance guided the design of my research approach, as I describe in the subsequent sections.

Research Design

To conduct this study, I use a critical qualitative design. Pasque and Perez (2015) argued that scholars who study a topic concerned primarily with issues of inequality and discrimination, such as community college inequities, must be driven by a critical approach throughout the research study to effectively consider "the complexities of the past as well as contemporary issues" (p. 143). A critical qualitative design is defined by several factors, including (a) centering the voices of individuals and communities troubled by public policy, (b) using inquiry as a tool to help people and reveal opportunities for change, and (c) the desire to affect social policy (Denzin, 2015). Policy contexts are particularly complex, subjective, and value-laden (Diem et al., 2014). A critical orientation provides an opportunity to explore the deeper effects of policy outcomes—particularly the institutionalization and internalization of the dominant culture through policy structures and tools (Diem et al., 2014). Thus, critical qualitative inquiry

empowers researchers to explore how policies "reinforce or reproduce social injustices and inequalities" (Diem et al., 2014, p. 1072). In doing so, social justice is an outcome of revealing social stratification, identifying sites of resistance, and influencing future social policy (Koro-Ljungberg & Cannella, 2017).

In this study, I focus on how Hispanic-serving community college (HSCC) administrators make sense of PBF policies to reveal opportunities for resistance and change. In the next section, I describe how I approach my inquiry through a critical research methodology.

For this study, I employed a critical qualitative methodology. Critical scholars approach methodology with an "emphasis on experience and its meanings," as it suggests that policies should be "judged by and from the point of view of the persons most directly affected" (Denzin, 2015, p. 41). Pasque and Perez (2015) outlined that critical methodologies should:

1. Be informed by past and present contexts
2. Problematize and complicate power
3. Serve as an instrument for social change and action
4. Be emergent methodologically
5. Be iterative and embedded (p. 141)

Critical sensemaking provides the framework for interpreting these experiences and their meanings by considering "how context, rules, discourse, and power shape sensemaking in contexts such as organizational crises" (p. 370) and in response to organizational change, strategy, and identity.

Research Sites

I focused on administrators employed at Hispanic-serving community colleges, as research demonstrates that these institutions are most likely to experience unintended

consequences of performance-based funding. I selected North Texas as a geographic focal point for this study because it is a region experiencing significant growth that is primarily Latinx/a/o (Texas Demographic Center, 2021). Additionally, community colleges within the region represent diversity in size (i.e., small, medium, large, very large, multi-site districts) and service regions (i.e., urban, suburban, rural). The region is an appropriate focal point since the most significant population growth is among Hispanic residents. As I have noted, the literature reveals differences between HSCCs and non-minority-serving institutions, warranting a more in-depth examination of PBF within this context.

Administrators were recruited from community colleges in North Texas from the regional membership of the North Central Texas Council of Governments (NCTCOG). Within the region, there are 12 community colleges; five are designated as Hispanic-serving, according to the 2020 Texas Public Higher Education Almanac (THECB, 2020). Among the region's five HSCCs, there is diversity in institution typology demonstrated by small, medium, large, very large, and multi-system colleges in rural, suburban, and urban areas. Ultimately, participants were employed at two of the five HSCCs in North Texas, identified by the pseudonyms of Metropolitan Community College (MCC) and Pastoral Community College (PCC). MCC is one of the state's largest community colleges and serves students at multiple campus locations across one of the region's urban counties. PCC is a small community college with a vast service region across eight rural counties. PCC enrolls students primarily at a single campus, with smaller outreach and training centers in secondary locations despite its large service area. Thus, the sample expands on previous qualitative literature on PBF in Texas beyond rural settings (Thornton & Friedel, 2016) and explores how unintended consequences may impact Hispanic students (Gándara & Rutherford, 2018). In the next section, I describe the steps I took to select and recruit

participants.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

Purposeful sampling was used to identify administrators at these institutions. To identify participants, I searched each institution's employee directories for individuals with titles commonly associated with oversight of a department, program, or other division. I used the following search terms: chief officer, vice president/chancellor/provost, dean, associate/assistant dean, and directors. Additionally, I reviewed departmental contact pages and organizational charts to identify administrators from the following areas: Student Affairs (i.e., Student Success, Student Services, Enrollment Management), Academic Affairs, Workforce Development, Institutional Research, Business or Financial Services, and/or Communications, Marketing, and/or Public Affairs. As a result, I identified 128 potential participants.

This approach aligned with the goal of purposeful sampling "in a deliberative and non-random fashion in order to achieve a certain goal" (Patton, 1990). Additionally, by recruiting from all Hispanic-serving community colleges, I developed a contextual, critical, in-depth understanding of how HSCCs' administrators make sense of PBF and implement changes in response. The literature review on PBF reveals that colleges have reported changes and unintended consequences in student services, finances, institutional research, and academic affairs. Therefore, participants were selected using purposeful sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to intentionally identify those most likely to be involved in policy implementation. Further, administrators play a particularly important role in enacting the college's mission and communicating it internally and externally, thus revealing an opportunity to explore how sensemaking occurs within a Hispanic-serving context.

To build rapport, I sent individual recruitment emails to all 128 potential participants and

included a screening questionnaire to verify that they met the qualification for participation in the study. The screening credentials included the following:

- Must be a full-time administrator at a North Texas community college designated as a Hispanic-serving institution.
- Must have oversight of a department, program, or other division of the institution within one of the following areas: Student Affairs (i.e., Student Success, Student Services, Enrollment Management), Academic Affairs, Workforce Development, Institutional Research, Business or Financial Services, and/or Communications, Marketing, and/or Public Affairs.
- Must be employed at the current institution for a minimum of three years.

Schildt et al. (2020) noted that systemic power has gone unnoticed in sensemaking studies, as it works "indirectly and over longer periods of time" (p. 244). Therefore, it was important for participants to have been employed for at least three years to build institutional and contextual knowledge about PBF and organizational changes in response.

Out of 128 potential participants, 12 individuals indicated their interest and met the qualifications to participate. From the 12, I selected eight individuals based on their availability to participate in the data collection period and to ensure representation across functional areas and levels within the organization. Table 1 provides an overview of the study participants, listed by their pseudonyms.

Table 1

Study Participants

Name	Administrative Level	Scope of Responsibility	Institution
Alex	Executive	Student Services	Pastoral Community College

Brione	Mid-Level	Instruction	Metropolitan Community College
Christine	Senior	Instruction	Pastoral Community College
Derek	Mid-Level	Instruction	Metropolitan Community College
Elena	Mid-Level	Student Services	Metropolitan Community College
Grant	Senior	Instruction	Metropolitan Community College
Harris	Mid-Level	Instruction	Pastoral Community College
Isaac	Executive	Instruction	Metropolitan Community College

Data Collection

To collect data, I completed two semi-structured interviews with participants and asked them to provide artifacts (e.g., reports, training materials) that were significant in their sensemaking process related to PBF. A complete list of these items is provided in table 2. Brown and Danaher (2019) encouraged researchers to adopt exploratory practices that give participants several opportunities to share their experiences within their environments. Thus, two interviews and artifact submission provided multiple opportunities for participants. Reischauer (2015) found that a combination of participant interviews and artifact analysis effectively revealed the sensemaking activities regarding organizational innovations. I used a semi-structured interview to "strike a balance" between eliciting information and natural conversation (Brown & Danaher, 2019, p. 76). Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. In the first interview, I built rapport with the participants by asking them about their professional background, current context, role at their institution, and sensemaking regarding PBF. My interview guide can be found in Appendix A. Participants were asked to submit their artifacts after the first interview but before the second.

For artifact collection, I suggested examples, including institutional documents, training materials, and external resources from intermediary organizations. Diem et al. (2014) noted that critical approaches to educational policy studies must be fundamentally concerned with the "differences between policy rhetoric and practiced reality" (p. 1072). Therefore, by collecting documents of meaning to the participants, I achieved multiple purposes. First, it provided insight into how PBF is practiced at their institution. Secondly, the artifacts also identified the sources of information that influenced the participants' understandings of PBF. Finally, the artifacts were utilized in my analysis process, as I discuss later. In my second interview with participants, I utilized stimulated recall as an elicitation technique, which is an effective way to challenge "the power balance between researcher and participant" (Barton, 2015, p. 180). Elicitation techniques rely on external visual, verbal, or written artifacts to encourage reflection and reveal tacit beliefs (Barton, 2015). Participants' artifacts served as the guide for their second interview with questions designed to stimulate recall of mental processes, contributing to a more in-depth understanding of their sensemaking. Copeland and Agosto (2012) found that elicitation techniques resulted in deeper data collection and triangulation of data and were particularly useful for reflecting on emotions.

Brown and Danaher (2019) argued that qualitative researchers must center on authentic and dialogical relationships with participants during data collection. They promoted three principles of dialogical relationships: connectivity, humanness, and empathy (Brown & Danaher, 2019). Together, these principles advance data collection processes to reduce the power dynamics between researcher and participant by embracing the duality of relationships and appreciating mutuality. This aligns with a critical orientation, as Cannella (2015) argued that critical research practices should be "partnered, participatory, and collaborative" (p. 16). I

adopted these practices in my data collection procedures by employing relationship-building techniques with participants through multiple interviews and soliciting artifacts as a collaborative approach to data generation.

Due to public health protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted through Zoom, a secure online video platform. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed through Otter transcription services. Transcripts were verbatim, including non-verbal cues (Saldaña, 2016).

Data Analysis

My data analysis process began during data collection as I conducted two rounds of interviews. Additionally, participants provided their artifacts prior to the second interview, which allowed me to review the item in advance. Therefore, it was important for me to understand their sensemaking experience throughout the data collection process.

Table 2

Participant Artifacts

Participant	Artifact(s)
Alex (Executive, PCC)	(1) Internal spreadsheet tracking of annual college outcomes per metric for years 2011-2019
Brione (Mid-level, MCC)	(1) Chart of all Texas community colleges by weighted Success Points per FTE students for Fiscal Year 2017
Christine (Senior, PCC)	(1) Internal spreadsheet tracking of annual college outcomes per metric for years 2011-2019
Derek (Mid-level, MCC)	(1) Internal slide deck titled “Board Briefing and Budget Workshop” dated September 10, 2015 (2) 2009-2010 annual budget for college (3) Texas Association of Community Colleges website print out explaining the “Student Success Points” model, dated 6/14/2015
Elena (Mid-level, MCC)	(1) THECB Success Points Data Flow as revised October 2019

Grant (Senior, MCC)	(1) Draft internal academic organizational structure enacted following the introduction of PBF (2) Draft internal academic department vision and goals enacted following the introduction of PBF
Harris (Mid-level, PCC)	(1) Title V-Developing Hispanic-serving institutions grant abstract
Isaac (Executive, MCC)	(1) Draft internal program review process enacted following the introduction of PBF (2) Internal slide deck outlining institutional PBF modeling for executive leaders

Each interview was recorded and transcribed using Otter transcription services. Using the transcriptions, I analyzed data using Saldaña's (2021) two-stage coding recommendations to identify forms of verbal communication that lead to sensemaking activities. This included both inductive and deductive coding. The first coding stage used a deductive approach to identify sensemaking processes. Specifically, I used a priori codes based on my policy implementation framework and the seven properties of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) using literal tags and descriptions of sections of data (Ziskin, 2019). I coded interview transcriptions only at this stage with approximately 20 a priori codes.

My second phase of coding was inductive (Doyle et al., 2020), guided by CSM's analysis of power, particularly Schildt et al.'s (2020) theory of systemic and episodic power. At this stage, I completed an interpretative analysis of the participants' artifacts. I relied on Reischauer's (2015) organization-oriented analysis to consider how the artifacts were embedded within their institution and how they compared. Analysis of embeddedness considers production and history, usage, functions, and linkages within the organization, while comparison analyzes to what degree and in what ways artifacts were similar or different from one another (Reischauer, 2015). This allowed for the triangulation of data across multiple sources of information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Throughout my analysis, I wrote reflective memos and annotations to record my thoughts about my research questions, methodological process, and theoretical framework (Pasque & Perez, 2015; Ziskin, 2019). This aligns with a critical epistemology, which "allows for the emergence of the unexpected and the unthought" (Koro-Ljungberg & Cannella, 2017, p. 330).

Table 3

Codes, Sub-themes, and Findings

Findings	Individual Role: Who Has a Seat at the Table?	Institutional Characteristics: Hispanic-serving Across the Rural and Urban Divide	The State Environment: A Climate of Control
Categories	Fluctuating attitudes Enacting changes Background experiences	Interest convergence Size matters	Neoliberalism influences Policy mechanics Coercive processes Mutual mistrust
Second Coding	Policy is in the background "Above my paygrade" Capacity and Power Using champions Expectations for leaders Feeling disconnected Interactions with faculty Periodic transparency Chance encounters Encountering difficulty	"Serving all students" Seeking recognition Accessing power players Funding is everything Competing priorities Avoiding race "Marketability of the student" Increasing certificates Partnering externally	"Hard to argue against" "Polarizing" racial issues Prioritizing workforce needs Policymakers misunderstanding
A Priori Codes	Sensegiving Triggering Instance Social Interactions Plausibility Attitude or Belief	Specific Context Outcomes	Policy Context State Context

In reviewing my interview transcripts, artifact analysis, and memos, I identified emerging patterns and themes to tell a story (Ziskin, 2019). At this stage, I relied on pattern coding by "looking for threads" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 93) that tie bits of data together into relationships, constructs, causal explanations, and categories or themes. I completed a variety of analytical memos to explore and expand upon these patterns to arrive at a thematic summary ultimately. See Table 2 for a partial listing of codes, sub-themes, and findings based on my analysis. I present my thematic summary of these findings in Chapter 4 using thick, rich descriptions (Geertz, 1973) and the participants' direct phrases (Doyle et al., 2020).

Ensuring Trustworthiness

Since I selected a critical qualitative study, it was important to examine the historical, political, and social contexts from the perspective of "voices of those typically not heard in traditional policy contexts and processes" (Diem et al., 2014, p. 1077). As a researcher, my experiences and perspective influence the process. However, I have taken several steps to ensure the trustworthiness of the data to elevate the voices of the unheard. Lincoln and Guba (1985) outlined several traditional ways to ensure internal and external validity, which I adopted:

- Triangulation of data through multiple sources of information (i.e., multiple interviews, artifacts)
- Peer debriefing of coding and artifact analysis
- Presentation of findings with thick, descriptive data

Beyond these traditional approaches, Lincoln and Guba (1985) theorized a new standard for rigor in qualitative research by establishing authenticity by negotiating different value systems throughout the data generation process. This advances a more participatory process aligned with critical paradigms. In this framework, researchers can verify the rigor of their findings through

ontological, educative, catalytic, and tactical authentication. In my study, I achieved ontological and educative authentication. Ontological authentication is established when participants demonstrate increased awareness of their context and complexities. Educative authentication is established when participants appreciate the values of others in relation to the phenomenon. Evidence of this is presented in Chapter 4 with thick, rich descriptions (Geertz, 1973) to present findings in a way that closely resembles the participants' own words (Doyle et al., 2020).

Researcher Reflexivity

In the critical paradigm, it is important to acknowledge that the researcher holds power (Cannella, 2015) and is also situated within the study (Denzin, 2017). Reflexivity serves to situate the researcher in the data by disclosing their experience and knowledge of the topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a critical researcher, it was important for me to negotiate my role in the relationship with the participants in order to build connectivity and dialogical relationships (Brown & Danaher, 2019). My inquiry into the area of PBF extends from my own experience as a community college administrator at an HSI in the region. I was honest with participants about my background, as Brown and Danaher (2019) recommended, by recognizing that both myself and the participants were "givers and receivers of information" (p. 82). In particular, I am employed at a Hispanic-serving community college in North Texas. Therefore, I had pre-existing relationships with some participants and was mindful of these dynamics by emphasizing confidentiality and transparency in how artifacts would be used—specifically, their use for analysis and not publication. Additionally, my use of peer debriefing and reflexive journaling contributed to my reflexivity during data generation.

Limitations and Delimitations

The primary limitation of this study is the context and period occurring during the

COVID-19 pandemic. The first limitation is my lack of direct access to sites and participants. Video interviews were conducted per institutional policy and participant comfort. One campus limited visitors at the time of data collection, thus prohibiting access to the research site to conduct observations, thereby limiting contextual insights. A final limitation to the study was that participants were sampled from only two of the five eligible community colleges. I encountered difficulty in gaining access to interested respondents from one college. While classified as HSIs by THECB, the remaining two institutions had not sought the federal designation. Administrators from at least one of these institutions responded to my inquiry to indicate their interest but noted that they did not work at an HSI. Despite efforts to understand the research site selection criteria, I did not receive a response. This suggests that despite qualifying under the state's definition, most institutions associate HSI status with the federal designation, creating a barrier to conducting research at these emerging HSCCs.

The delimitation of the study is that it is explicitly focused on administrators at HSCCs in Texas. To expand this study's critical analysis of the sensemaking process, there could be more insight from sampling faculty and front-line staff members. However, due to researcher time and resource limitations, this study solely focused on how administrators make sense of PBF. Community college administrators from non-HSIs and institutions located outside of Texas were excluded from participation.

Summary

For this research, I conducted a qualitative study using a critical paradigm to understand how community college administrators make sense of performance-based funding (PBF) within their context at Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) in North Texas. Considering that many scholars have explored the impact and outcomes associated with PBF, few studies have explored

how higher education professionals respond to PBF over the long term. Conducting a critical qualitative study allowed my findings to contribute to this gap in research and serves as an entry point for future studies.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Introduction

The intent of this research study is to understand how community college administrators make sense of performance-based funding (PBF) at Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs). Eight administrators from two different Hispanic-serving community colleges shared their understandings of and experiences with PBF through two individual interviews via Zoom. They also shared institutional and regulatory artifacts that helped shape and inform their sensemaking related to PBF. In this chapter, I present a critical analysis of the worldviews and perspectives of administrators who implement PBF-related policies and practices. As college leaders, these participants also influence and shape how staff and faculty understand PBF within their institutions. The administrators' voices have been included as much as possible to highlight their experiences with PBF within their places, spaces, and time.

In the subsequent section, I provide institutional profiles of the research sites, followed by a brief summary of each participant's background. Next, I present three primary themes. The first theme, *Institutional Role: Who Has a Seat at the Table?*, describes how participants' institutional roles shaped their access to sensemaking opportunities and thus, their understandings of PBF. The second theme, *Institutional Context: Hispanic-Serving Across the Rural and Urban Divide*, presents participants' descriptions of the demographic and geographic factors that influenced their understandings of PBF. Additionally, this study is situated in two Hispanic-serving communities. Participants described ideal features of serving Latinx students but stated that their institutional culture often failed to address their needs and created a diffusion of responsibility for addressing inequities when implementing PBF. The final theme, *State Environment: A Climate of Control*, explores how a statewide climate of control influenced

administrators' understandings of PBF. I conclude this chapter with a summary of how the three themes and their subthemes weave together.

Institution Profiles and Participants

This section provides brief overviews of individual participants and the institutions where they worked. The participants and the institutions are identified by pseudonyms. The participants' backgrounds, institutional context, and roles at the institutions often influenced the type of sensemaking and attitudes formed regarding PBF. First, I present an overview of Metropolitan Community College and the participants who worked there: Brione, Derek, Elena, Grant, and Isaac. Then, I introduce Pastoral Community College and its participants: Alex, Christine, and Harris.

Metropolitan Community College

Metropolitan Community College (MCC) is a large community college in North Texas. It has multiple campus locations that provide academic programs and student services. According to Nuñez et al.'s (2016) HSI typology, MCC is an Urban Enclave Community College. Urban Enclave Community Colleges are the most common HSI, typically located in urban or suburban cities with historical Latinx/a/o populations and higher average income and education levels. Participants had experience working at multiple campus locations and the primary administrative offices. They remarked that each campus had its own unique culture due to differences in academic program offerings and the demographics of the immediate surrounding communities. Additionally, the college serves a highly diverse student population reflective of the urban community regarding race, ethnicity, age, nationality, and socioeconomic status.

Brione

Brione is a dean at MCC, where she works in dual credit programs at two campus

locations. She has worked at MCC for about five years as a mid-level administrator. At MCC, dual credit programs report within the academic structure. As a dean, her responsibilities primarily focus on external partner engagement and the design and management of program agreements. As a result, she recalled frequent interactions with representatives from local independent school districts. Prior to working at MCC, she worked in TRIO pre-college programs at a different institution.

Derek

Derek is an academic dean for the sciences and has worked at MCC for almost two decades. He worked his way up in the organization, beginning as a part-time employee and gradually becoming a faculty member. During that time, he primarily worked at a campus in the northern service region. Derek served in various leadership roles at MCC, most often in areas of using institutional data to improve teaching and learning. He attributes this experience to his interest in PBF.

Elena

Elena is a student services dean and has worked at MCC for about a decade, although working at a community college was not her initial professional goal. Elena has held various roles in the student services division, but her current responsibilities are primarily enrollment management. Before coming to MCC, she worked at institutions in the south and northwest. Her undergraduate degree and college internship at a state legislature contributed to her interest in educational policy.

Grant

Grant is a senior academic leader and has worked at MCC for three years. His academic portfolio focuses on education programs. He participates in a monthly expanded leadership

cabinet with the chancellor and other executive leaders as a senior leader. His role also involves frequent partnerships with external organizations. Prior to joining MCC, he was a K–12 teacher and administrator and views himself as a higher education “newbie.” Despite his relatively recent transition to working at a community college, he felt familiar with PBF conceptually because of his background as a school administrator responding to K–12 accountability metrics.

Isaac

Isaac is an executive academic administrator and has worked at MCC for about eight years. He oversees academic services, including faculty development, library and tutoring, curriculum and assessment, and academic scheduling. He has held an executive role for the duration of his time at MCC and arrived around the time the legislature initially passed PBF. Because of his executive role, he had particular insight into both early and current sensemaking related to PBF.

Pastoral Community College

Pastoral Community College (PCC) is a small, rural institution located in North Texas. Its service region comprises a large geographical area over three counties. It has a primary campus located “literally out in the middle of a pasture” (Christine), approximately 10 miles from primary population centers. According to Nuñez et al.’s (2016) HSI typology, PCC is defined as a Rural Dispersed Community College. Rural Dispersed Community Colleges are typically smaller and located in communities with low levels of education, average home prices, and annual income (Nuñez et al., 2016). The participants described PCC as a “tight-knit community where folks wore many hats,” and as a result, many of the same individuals were in most meetings. Participants also recounted that the surrounding community and their institutional demographics had been changing with the growth of Latinx residents. As a result, the institution

became a designated HSI in recent years.

Alex

Alex is a vice president and serves as the senior student services administrator. As the executive student services leader, he oversees enrollment management, athletics, student life, and student housing. He has been at PCC for nearly a decade and was promoted to this role. His promotion coincided with the implementation of PBF.

Christine

Christine is a senior academic administrator who has worked at PCC for almost 15 years. She provides leadership for the college's transfer-focused academic programs, dual credit, distance learning, and academic grant programs. Prior to becoming an administrator at the college, she was a faculty member and still felt that she could resonate with the faculty experience. As a result, she prioritized communication and transparency in her leadership style.

Harris

Harris is a mid-level academic administrator with primary responsibilities for dual credit and distance learning. He is also an alumnus of PCC, and his entire professional career of more than a decade has been with the college. He completed his doctoral degree and studied the role of faculty administrators, which influenced his interest in the role of mid-level administrators.

Institutional Role: Who Has a Seat at the Table?

Administrators' proximities to decision-making influenced the type, frequency, and quality of opportunities for sensemaking on performance-based funding. Their proximities to decision-making were related to their levels of access to the president or chancellor and their participation in a corresponding cabinet, thereby giving them the power to influence formal decision-making and provide greater insight into certain actions. Executive participants reported

directly to the president or chancellor. Senior roles typically reported to an executive and were included in an expanded cabinet. Participation in a cabinet provided those administrators with greater insight than mid-level administrators, but not always the full scope. Mid-level administrators had responsibilities for several departments and reported to someone with either an executive or senior role but did not participate in cabinet-level activities. Their distance from the highest level of institutional decision-making, consequently, limited their exposure to policy implementation.

Participants described that their institutional roles determined who, proverbially, has a seat at the table to make decisions related to PBF. They described how place, space, and proximity shaped their understandings and forms of sensemaking. Those with access to the table experience frequent social interactions where they attempt to understand PBF and implement changes in response. Senior and executive administrators have access to this table through direct or second-level reporting to the president or chancellor. Executive administrators were involved in cabinet-level planning related to PBF, while senior administrators participated on a semi-frequent basis.

Meanwhile, mid-level administrators do not have access to the table or insight into how PBF consistently shapes their institutions. Instead, they encounter PBF only infrequently and through chance encounters. This leads them to believe that PBF plays only a background role. Regardless of role or awareness, all academic leaders encountered some degree of resistance to changes influenced by PBF.

In the subsequent sections, with direct quotes from the participants, I describe the differences between mid-level and senior administrator sensemaking related to PBF and how administrators encountered faculty resistance to PBF-associated changes.

Executive and Senior Leaders

Individuals with more decision-making responsibilities, namely executives, reported participating in frequent conservations about PBF. At times, the frequency of these conversations approached "daily." Alex, an executive student services administrator, recalled that he was promoted to his first (and still current) executive role near the time when PBF policy was first implemented in Texas. He described how the transition into his role coincided with PBF implementation:

> And so obviously, with the new change in position and learning those things. I would say I was familiar with it [PBF] kind of before, different versions of it across the country and those type of things. But not on a day-to-day basis or thinking about it until I took this position.

For Alex, his new role influenced his need to think more frequently about PBF as an institutional leader. As an executive leader, Alex was expected to understand and be able to discuss PBF. He described that:

> Overall, I'll definitely say upper-level administration are fairly familiar and talk about it on a daily basis or quite often. As far as staff members and those types of things, we continue to try to educate and talk about the importance of it [PBF].

As an executive, not only was Alex expected to understand the PBF policy in encounters with his peers, but he was also expected to help his subordinates understand its importance. Yet, Alex felt that "it kind of took a few years to get it to where we kind of understood what it looks like, especially within our institution." For Alex and his institution, this understanding came after "surprises" associated with PBF. Alex provided a longitudinal chart used to track his college's performance on PBF metrics as his artifact. He explained that it was created after PCC was

surprised by dips in PBF-related allocations.

Proximity to decision-making afforded administrators different tools to help them build their understanding of PBF. Isaac recalled that he and other executives were motivated to quickly understand PBF "to be prepared from a reporting perspective." He described,

> Early on, it was all about figuring out the mechanics on how they were going to measure it. I remember the day where they kind of launched it and we're in a back room. I remember our IR [institutional research] folks saying, well how, what are they calling a credential? We were all about the mechanics.

Isaac expressed that it took not only frequent discussions, but also time and tools to make sense of the PBF policy in a meaningful way. Before arriving at that point, he admitted that their early obsession with the metrics got them "caught up in the game" of just focusing on "what was the best combination of things to do to maximize funding." While executives were spending considerable time trying to understand PBF, mid-level administrators were often left in the dark.

As executives, both Alex and Isaac understood that their roles carried power and authority within the organization. They reflected on the various ways they navigated these dynamics in relation to PBF. Isaac felt that at times, he had to "tread lightly" as an executive and understand how he might be perceived as "push[ing] the Student Success agenda." As a result, Isaac often relied on "champions" to serve as his intermediaries when launching new initiatives. In some instances, these champions were senior or mid-level administrators who were responsible for leading projects without understanding their connection to PBF. Alex shared that he also worked "to improve on the communications side" and learned to "anticipate" challenges when it came to "communicating and arguments and all those kinds of things" that arise when discussing PBF. Despite awareness of their power and influence, executives cited few specific

examples of inclusive decision-making related to PBF. Instead, they had passive recollections of attempts to share information, or instances where they issued "charges" to faculty and mid-level administrators. In response, they occasionally encountered resistance, almost exclusively from faculty.

Senior and executive participants recalled enacting a variety of institutional changes both directly and indirectly in response to the introduction of PBF. In terms of direct changes, Isaac attributed changes in academic program review and the development of stackable credentials and short-term certificates as influenced by PBF. He also explained that PBF introduced an emphasis on student success broadly at his institution. In this way, he felt that PBF also indirectly influenced changes. As an academic executive, he ascribed student services initiatives tied to retention and graduation as indirectly influenced. Alex, an executive student services administrator at PCC, affirmed this from his lens. He described that PBF's emphasis on student success had challenged his institution to consider student needs more intently. Alex tied PCC's development and expansion of basic needs services, including a food pantry and mental health counseling, to his institution's efforts to improve student success and thereby PBF metrics.

Mid-Level Administrators

Mid-level administrators in the study often first learned about PBF in informal manners and only recalled isolated instances when the college explicitly discussed PBF. These instances could best be described as temporary interruptions in the administrators' day-to-day priorities. For mid-level administrators, these interruptions were noteworthy because the transparency was often seen as unusual and rare. For example, despite working at different campus locations, Brione (Dual Credit), Derek (Academics), and Elena (Student Services) all uniformly recalled a time when district and campus administrators were particularly transparent about finances.

During this time, the executive administrators provided campus presentations where PBF, along with other state policy and institutional priorities, were introduced. Two participants provided documentary artifacts confirming the information shared with faculty, staff, and administrators. Prior to that, Derek only remembered a bit of "water cooler talk" when they first learned of PBF's introduction or passage in a newsletter, describing it as:

> I think when you talk about when we first heard the words, performance-based funding, everybody had that jaw drop moment. We're like, oh my gosh, they're gonna make me get my students through the class. Now, I'm going to have to give away my grades. I mean, these are things I actually heard by the way.

Without much more context to their roles, this first mention of PBF was confusing for Derek and his faculty. While executive administrators had opportunities for rich social interactions related to PBF, mid-level administrators encountered only periodic discussions or chance encounters.

As a result, mid-level administrators in the study largely felt that PBF "didn't compel us to do anything different than we were already doing" because outside of these isolated instances, PBF was "out of sight, out of mind" (Harris, Dual Credit). Sometimes, mid-level administrators recalled chance encounters with colleagues about institutional processes directly tied to PBF. In one example, Brione described:

> The only time it [PBF] really came up outside of just like me and my team was when we were talking with CTE [career and technical education]. And there was an issue with the number of starters we had versus completers. And how that was negatively impacting their programs as a whole. But other than that, I don't know that it is a strategic initiative.

As with this instance, these chance encounters were often tied to the reporting requirements associated with PBF. Elena recalled PBF being emphasized for her team:

> Particularly because I did oversee areas of admissions and registrar. And so, when we were talking about certification data. We're certifying students, you know, completers, and just being really deliberate about those different items, particularly in enrollment management. You heard about it [PBF] a little bit more, but never in a comprehensive way, I don't think.

These chance encounters combined with institution-level conversations led mid-level administrators to view PBF as a technical, budgetary policy that merely operated in the background for them.

Unbeknownst to mid-level administrators, executive and senior officials were making sense of PBF by enacting changes within their respective colleges after they moved beyond the "initial scramble, initial confusion" of the policy. These changes included operational ones like "new strategic plans" and "drastic organizational shifts," as well as curricular reforms, including "developing more short-term industry credentials" and implementing "course templates and master courses." Executive and senior administrators served as decision-makers in identifying these needed changes and designing the responses to them. As described here, changes included standardizing operations, restructuring departments, aligning strategic goals, revising advising practices, and reforming curriculum. While executive and senior administrators clearly attributed these changes to varying degrees of influence from PBF, mid-level administrators remained largely clueless about their connection.

There were, of course, exceptions to mid-level administrators being in the dark. In some instances, they were able to identify patterns that allowed them to assume that changes may be tied to PBF. For example, Harris recognized that PBF "has a great deal to do with how we think about strategic planning" and even that "success points being met" is "there because it has to

be." In one instance, this study itself provided a reflection point for Elena to connect advising reforms with PBF metrics. When discussing her artifact, she recalled, "And to be honest with you, I had completely forgotten about like the 15 and the 30. And then I'm like, that's why!" In most cases, mid-level administrators were typically left to their own devices to make sense of these institutional changes without connection to PBF.

While executives used their proximity to decision-making to build an in-depth understanding of PBF and identify reforms to improve performance on identified metrics, they were rarely transparent about the motives for these reforms. As a result, mid-level administrators, faculty, and staff were left to assume that PBF had little influence, except in extreme examples. Harris recalled a period of "significant conflict" under a previous president who "made some unilateral decisions, without consulting faculty or anything like that." As Harris described:

> His big idea was to kind of segregate if you will or segment the online experience from the on-campus experience. He wanted to reserve the on-campus experience for like a select group of students. And what I mean by select group of students is students that it made sense for them to come and spend all day on campus. You know, traditional students who had the time, who didn't work, who maybe even lived on campus. They would create this campus community of just those people that it made the most sense for, and then everybody else could do online. We had nontraditional students, full-time job people, parents, whatever. And he just wanted to radically change the culture, basically overnight, and didn't involve anybody in that thinking. He just held a press briefing one day and said here it is. And it was a miserable disaster, disastrous failure.

This example from PCC is an outlier in the magnitude of proposed changes associated with PBF, but still reflects how insulated the institutional decision-making process can be. Mid-level

administrators were gracious and understood the challenges that executives faced, saying, "I think I'm fortunate that I can kind of step back and take a view of, spectate, how that's going on. Because [chuckle], I'm not a senior administrator." Still, Elena questioned if "maybe it's intentional" that mid-level administrators were not included in efforts to make sense of PBF.

Despite their lack of proximity to decision-making, mid-level administrators did attempt to influence their institutions in ways often tied to their identities. It was notable that mid-level administrators more closely reflected the student demographics that their institutions served. For example, Harris was a first-generation college student and alum of PCC. Similarly, Elena identified as Latina and voiced a desire not to lose sight of herself or her motivation for working at an HSI:

> Just trying to make sure, you know, does this align with my values and what I want to accomplish for me. And I think it's hard, too, right because as you go up in your position, you do get farther removed from the students that you serve. And so, I think it's, for me, it's just kind of having that balance of like, don't forget who you're serving. Don't forget who you're serving.

In Elena's case, she often shared characteristics with the students she served. As Harris and Elena demonstrate, their distance in proximity at times made mid-level administrators more critical of what they perceived as performative solutions. Brione indicated:

> I haven't seen a lot of like, increase increases in tutoring, or office hours, or library services, like I haven't seen that increase. But I have seen an increase in campaigns to get students to register again or come back and finish.

While they vocalized criticisms, they did not recount efforts to directly resist these changes and often bore the responsibility for implementing aspects of those changes. As a result, all

administrators recounted resistance to institutional changes associated with PBF—most often from the faculty.

Encountering Faculty Resistance

Regardless of proximity to decision-making, all academic administrators encountered faculty resistance to PBF-related initiatives. Executive leaders often relied on curricular reforms as a strategy to increase the predictability of PBF success rates by standardizing instructional delivery. Examples include:

> So, there's been a lot of consternation, and I've, we've been asked, Why are you looking at this? You don't have a right; you don't have a right to look at this granular level in my course by instructor. So those are some of the conversations that we've had to navigate. (Isaac)
>
> But our English instructors are not that receptive to something like that they would not, that would not go over with them at all. (Christine)
>
> There's so many qualitative elements to the teaching experience that I think that it just makes it sensitive. And, you know, the faculty that I talked to always want you to talk more about outliers than they do patterns. They want to talk about the one student that had to drop because they had a hardship, rather than the fact that they've got a 64% success rate. So yeah, it's really hard to talk institutionally about data. (Derek)

In response to resistance, executive administrators would often deflect blame, saying something similar to, "I can kind of get out of the initial conversation by saying, 'Hey, the state has really asked us to focus on these things. So we've got to do this.'" Unfortunately, mid-level academic administrators were often unaware of this connection and instead pleaded for their commitment to "improving student success" to elicit cooperation from faculty.

Regardless of proximity to decision-making, administrators shared responsibility for implementing performative changes that, at times, manipulated policy metrics and reduced academic freedom with dubious benefits to students. This outcome reflects the reality that for these participants, regardless of individual or institutional proximity, faced a statewide climate of control. As the participants argued, this was particularly true for community colleges when compared to their 4-year counterparts. I describe the effects of this regulatory environment shaped by neoliberal values in the next section.

Institutional Context: Hispanic-Serving Across the Rural and Urban Divide

The data revealed that the administrators' institutional contexts shaped their opportunities to make sense of PBF in both quality and frequency. When considering how institutional context influenced sensemaking, a narrative of the rural and urban divide emerged. Characteristic of this narrative, the institutions' paths diverged when considering their economic and enrollment circumstances. More significantly, their proximity to decision-makers, including policymakers, shaped their access to resources and knowledge. Participants from PCC openly acknowledged this comparative dynamic with other administrators from the same institution, raising concerns that PBF particularly disadvantaged rural institutions like theirs. Participants from MCC recognized that their institution had significant financial resources, which meant PBF was often in the background. The impact of this could be another policy that affirms the rural versus urban narrative.

I present two sub-themes that comprise institutional context: HSI identity, and institutional geography and demographics. This study situates the research question within the context of Hispanic-serving community colleges. While participants were aware of their institution's HSI status, they described a diffusion of responsibility for meeting the unique needs

of Latinx students. Specifically, institutional proximity, primarily in the form of geographic access, created opportunities for participants to influence decision-makers and shape future initiatives.

HSI Identity

This section summarizes how administrators navigated and understood their institutional culture as a Hispanic-serving community college and how this influenced their sensemaking regarding PBF implementation. This sub-theme contributes contextual understanding in response to the research question, which grounds the study at HSCCs. All administrators were aware of their institution's status as an HSI. They acknowledged that their institution's designation as an HSI was a result of serving a significant number of Latinx students. While both institutions are HSIs, their histories as HSIs differ, which shapes their institutional culture and approach to change, including the introduction of PBF. For context, PCC only recently became an HSI, while administrators at MCC, like Derek and Isaac, recalled that the institution had been an HSI for their entire tenure, which spanned more than ten years. Despite this difference in the period of recognition, administrators at both institutions did not indicate any significant attributes of their institution beyond enrollment figures that demonstrated a Hispanic-serving mentality. Instead, they more readily identified gaps in meeting Latinx students' needs. When administrators did identify initiatives designed to specifically serve Latinx students, those examples featured alignment with other institutional interests. Ultimately, this culture influenced participants by undercutting initiatives and emphasizing race-neutral attitudes in implementing PBF-associated reforms. This section is organized into three subsections that describe the characteristics that result in a diffusion of responsibility: (1) institutional culture, (2) failing to serve, and (3) diffusion of responsibility for addressing inequities.

Institutional Culture

Although administrators were aware of their HSI status, they largely failed to acknowledge the HSI status without prompting. When asked about their college's HSI status, administrators referenced their understanding that they served a numerically significant enrollment of Hispanic students. Participants from PCC had more reflections about their HSI status, likely due to the more recent designation as an HSI. The HSI designation also occurred around the same time that PBF was implemented. Participants at PCC recalled the process they underwent to receive the designation. Harris described:

> But one of the things that I think made us think about and come to this realization, "Oh, my gosh, we may be a Hispanic-serving institution," is when there were grant opportunities that came up. So, we wrote a couple of Title V grants that the only way to get them was to be an HSI. And so that's when we started really looking explicitly at our demographic numbers to determine whether or not we met that threshold.

Here, Harris described that PCC's initial motivation to pursue an HSI designation was to obtain federal grant funds. It was only when the institution identified funding opportunities that they more intently reviewed institutional demographics. As a result, PCC administrators undertook data mining efforts in response. Christine shared:

> What we did was we took the student demographic information, and we started looking at it, like how many students have declared that they're Hispanic. And we looked and we had students that never checked the box! And so, we just figured out, okay, this data is not accurate. We have students that we know are Hispanic that have not claimed that they're Hispanic. And so that's where we kind of started from.

Christine reflected on the moment when she and her colleagues realized their institutional data

were inaccurate, which influenced her sense that PCC was more diverse than the data suggested. Christine's sense that PCC was already serving at least 25 percent Latinx students suggested that institutional culture shifts were unnecessary. Instead, the prevailing lesson she learned was the unreliability of the institution's data prior, which will connect directly to how she and other participants at PCC made sense of PBF. Christine described this dynamic in further detail, and shared that "when we get to 2015, all of our numbers, we were never really trustworthy of those numbers. And so, we feel like going after 2015, that we have a little bit better grasp of true numbers." Institutional data were an important resource that could help or hinder participants in making sense of PBF; for PCC, the data were essential to receiving the HSI designation.

Even though MCC had been an HSI for longer, participants were similarly unable to identify institutional characteristics or culture that reflected their HSI designation. For example, Grant felt this was evident from a public perspective, and said:

> I would just say when I think about Metropolitan College, and this is again, my opinion. I would say the public thinks about Metropolitan College, I don't necessarily think the first thing that comes to mind is, "Metropolitan is a Hispanic-serving institution." I think they think, "oh, Metropolitan College, they do a great job of serving historically underrepresented populations."

Without adopting a Hispanic-serving mentality, administrators frequently avoided referencing race/ethnicity in discussing MCC's institutional culture or identity. When asked about institutional identity, Grant struggled:

> I am unsure from an identity perspective of how we differentiate ourselves as a Hispanic-serving institution. Let me follow up with that. I think we identify ourselves from my perspective as serving a diverse student body. And obviously we could spend hours

> unpacking sort of what I mean by diverse and whatnot. But I would say that to me is more prevalent as an outward facing message, we serve all students. (Grant)

For Grant, he did not recognize unique attributes that comprise an HSI identity. Instead, he argues that MCC "serves all students," an exact phrase uttered by other participants in describing their student services. As Brione believes:

> But you know they're paying the same amount of tuition. And so whatever services that are available, I think, should be available to all. If they choose to use them that's different. Because we do have other like federal TRIO programs, things that are specifically for this group, but if we're getting performance points by the institution, then, you know, the benefits should benefit all students, not just certain groups.

For Brione, she believes that MCC should serve all students because they all pay the same amount of tuition for services and programs. While she carves out an exception for TRIO, a grant-funded program similar to Title V, institutions have shown they are willing to expand targeted services to benefit all students. Isaac describes this approach within the context of the local community:

> It's just not about being a Hispanic-serving institution. But if you look at the demographic shifts in our state, we have got to have systems in place that help all of our communities. And so, I've been pleased to see the state kind of look to us for guidance in some areas, and we've even been able to get some funding as well to kind of pilot new things. I think part of that had to be because we were a Hispanic-serving institution.

These statements were representative of the typical participant attitudes held and reflections regarding HSI status—primarily, that their recognition was a minor component of their institutional mission and culture. Instead, participants repeatedly emphasized the need to "help

all of our communities" by "serving all students" and "not just certain groups." As I will explain later, individual and collective attitudes like these can either evolve into or reflect a race/ethnicity-neutral culture that influences if or how individuals consider equity when implementing PBF-related changes. Administrators often had critical personal opinions about their institutions' abilities to meet Latinx students' needs. The next section describes this and highlights examples of services that fail to meet the needs of Latinx students and align with other interests.

Failing to Serve Latinx Students

For some participants, their institution fails to serve Latinx students because the institution did not adopt relevant values and actions, nor did outcomes ultimately improve for Latinx students. Participants did not often offer unprompted examples of services or changes designed to specifically address Latinx student needs. However, when prompted, administrators were often critical of their institutions' Hispanic-serving culture, noting failures to meet student needs and limited evidence of dedicated strategies for Latinx and other minoritized student groups. These critiques included concerns with promoting, reflecting, and affirming Latinx students and their unique ways of knowing and learning.

In this study, there was only a single participant who self-identified as Latinx. Elena noted that she is listed as white on her birth certificate, but self-identifies as a bilingual Latina with Mestiza/Indigenous roots. From her lens as a Latina, she highlighted the need for values alignment:

> I think we have a long way to go before we are a true HSI, you know, where it's not just, because you can profess your values, but are you living out your values, right? That applies to an individual and then applies to a collective.

Elena asked a significant question about both the individual and collective commitments to being a Hispanic-serving institution. For her, demonstrating a commitment to Latinx students means moving beyond words to actions.

Other participants reported that their institutions failed to serve Latinx students in both actions and behaviors. One of the ways to demonstrate commitment for some administrators was by ensuring employee representation and hiring Latinx employees. At PCC, there was a range of success in employee representation. While Alex's student services team included bilingual and Hispanic staff, Christine lamented the challenges of attracting faculty to a rural institution. It was even more challenging to attract faculty from diverse backgrounds; "We don't mirror our student population with our faculty," Christine stated. The impact of this misalignment was a challenge at times, she felt, for both current and prospective Latinx students to have a role model and someone who understood their culture and background. The challenges in reflecting Latinx identities are even demonstrated in this study's participants. Despite my own efforts to recruit a diverse array of participants, there is only one Latinx administrator who participated.

Ultimately, administrators' primary critique was their perception of the gaps in meeting Latinx student needs. Brione vocalized her longstanding frustration and advocacy to "have a Spanish translator at graduation." From her perspective, this gap demonstrated an overall failure to provide an inclusive student experience at MCC. Brione argued:

> Students invite their family to this milestone and their family can't understand. Because we don't have translation services. Our signage in our buildings, it's all in English. So, if I'm coming to campus, to register for English language courses, unless I can find somebody who speaks Spanish, I'm lost. And then, from my experience, just the lack of information. I've helped multiple students who came to campus for their ESOL/ESL

> courses, but the course was canceled, and no communication was given in Spanish. There's nobody in that office that I can call because it's after five. So, it's just a little thing. You know, I'm not gonna say that little, it's things like that. Where I can't say that, yes, we have embraced our identity as a Hispanic-serving institution.

This highlights how Brione perceived that the institution's failure to provide translation services at a hallmark event like graduation was representative of a broader failure to recognize Latinx student needs and respond accordingly. Here, Brione conceptualizes that, for her, embracing a Hispanic-serving culture would include institutional changes reflected in the types of signage, communications, and services that are necessary to support Latinx students and their success. While many may agree that being Hispanic-serving means investing more in these types of services, other participants highlighted tensions and resistance in how to move from words to actions. Isaac acknowledged some of these, and said:

> It's not an aptitude issue with our students. And most of our students, the level of grit that they engage in every single day. You can't come to us with this lame excuse for not trying hard enough. Something is wrong with our system and the way in which we're delivering this and that has to end.

Isaac acknowledged that there are systemic issues related to how MCC can better meet Latinx students. His quote also shows that he is aware of others' attitudes, which "excuse not trying hard enough" to meet Latinx student needs when, from his lens, the students are trying hard every day. Despite this realization, there were limited examples of efforts to authentically address gaps. Instead, instances of targeted support were often pursued, but not purely to meet Latinx student needs—rather, because of alignment with other institutional priorities, primarily related to finances and recognition.

In the previous section, I described the grant-seeking circumstances leading administrators at PCC to realize that they may be eligible for an HSI designation. Their process revealed that their data were unreliable and when they undertook efforts to correct student demographic data, they easily documented that more than 25 percent of their enrollment was Latinx. Then, PCC pursued funding opportunities based on their new HSI designation. While these funds are intended to enhance student services that attract and retain Latinx students, participants from PCC openly discussed how important these grant-funded strategies were to improving their institutional performance under PBF. Alex explained:

> Whether it's our advising process, procedures, support measures, or adding different measures in general has helped with metrics as well. You know, our graduation rates, I think the last ones that came out, we were second in the state among community colleges.

Alex described that the services and resources designed to address Latinx students' needs are redirected to the majority, which consists of white students. Further, neither Alex nor his colleagues discussed how these strategies were initially designed with Latinx student needs in mind. Instead, participants described that the institution identified a general need for improved transfer and advising support services. Meanwhile, Title V funds are intended to address gaps in Latinx student support and historical inequities in funding for HSIs. Instead of beginning with Latinx students' needs in mind, administrators at PCC leverage their HSI designation and seek funds to support race-neutral strategies. As participants would also report, these grant-funded strategies, services, and resources also assisted the institution with improving its PBF metrics overall, thereby accruing additional financial benefits.

Similar dynamics of leveraging Latinx identities to pursue financial incentives were

reflected by participants from MCC. Isaac provided one of the few unprompted examples of Latinx-targeted services. Interestingly, Isaac recalled activity from when PBF was first introduced:

> One of the things we did early on, I hate to say it, but playing that game or figuring out what was the best combination of things to do to maximize funding. So, should we do a male minority initiative for STEM and CTE programs? And tying that to PBF because the metrics would allow us to maximize this.

Here, Isaac revealed that MCC's motivation for implementing strategies for Black and Brown students is more about institutional financial gain than an identified student need. Other participants confirmed or offered additional examples of interest convergence when services targeting Black and Brown students were actually a result of other motivations:

> Putting everything on the table, obviously, we've established a transfer center that *everybody* can take advantage of. But we wrote it with the intent of serving Hispanic students, because we have a large number of Hispanic students at our institution. So, in thinking about student success, and how those grants leverage that we had to think about, we were compelled to think about how we can be intentional with that grant money. (Harris)

> Our first grant was focused on success in gateway courses. So, we have seven courses that we focused on, which included English, history, psychology, biology. So, the success rate in those courses has been extremely good. I'll use psychology as an example. The success rates in that class, and I'm talking about for *all students*, so intro to psychology that success, but it was at a 53% failure rate, you know, that classes up to about 87%. (Christine)

> In terms of trying to *meet the needs of our community partners, industry partners and employers*, we know that there is a huge need to increase the number of bilingual teachers in our K–12 spaces … We were just awarded three new Title V grants for about $9 million earlier this year that we are working to, you know, implement over the course of the next five years a Bilingual Education Center. (Grant)

All of these examples provide context for how these administrators understood and used Title V funds that were intended for meeting Latinx students' needs. Instead of identifying specific Latinx students' needs, these examples reinforce that participants were thinking of either all students or external organizations.

In addition to leveraging reforms for financial gain, Black and Latinx students were also used as tools to enhance the institutional reputation. Participants from MCC relied on both students and the institution's Hispanic-serving status to obtain financial resources and enhance MCC's reputation. In one instance, a participant recalled that MCC received PBF-related recognition for their efforts to improve success among Black and Brown students:

> We were recognized by the Coordinating Board for making great gains. Well, it wasn't that we had the most amount of completers at all the colleges in the state. It's that we've made the most progress in very specific areas and focused on all of our minority groups. (Isaac)

Isaac recalled these PBF-related programs were designed with metric accrual in mind, as opposed to identified student needs. Black and Brown students were treated as metrics whose performance could be tweaked. In other instances, participants described how they felt their college leveraged their HSI recognition to enhance institutional reputation. According to Brione, MCC being an HSI was not an authentic "characteristic" and she didn't feel "that it's what we're

living." Instead, it was treated as a "piece of pride," and was performative like "when they submitted for the Excelencia in Education." Unfortunately, most actions were not motivated by equity-minded goals. This is further emphasized in prevailing race-neutral implementation, as described in the next section.

Diffusion of Responsibility

As evidenced in the preceding sections, administrators often undercut Hispanic-serving efforts by demonstrating their primary motivation as financial and reputation enhancement. They also held beliefs that promoted a diffusion of individual or institutional responsibility for addressing inequities. For example, they demonstrated that Title V grant-funded initiatives, intended for Latinx students, were actively promoted, accessible, and beneficial to all students. Participants referenced three unique Title V grants they obtained to provide bilingual education, transfer services, and gateway course redesigns. In most instances, not only were these services promoted to all students, but they were also designed with all students or workforce demands in mind. For example, when asked about services for Latinx students based on their HSI status, Alex questioned the need and explained his approach to student success:

> I would say that we do have an emphasis on maybe trying to support, you know, student populations that are underperforming, if you will, in certain ways with outreach and follow up. And all of those type of ways to try to reach that student. But at the end of the day, it really doesn't differ too much across the board. We don't have a special program for this student population, or a different metric for another one. It's a cohesive, you know, across-the-board mission to help all students be as successful as they can.

Alex used the term "underperforming," a student-centered, deficit framing of student performance. Other examples of deficit framing from participants included "historical non-

consumers" and "hard-to-serve populations." Attitudes like these diffuse institutional responsibility for inequities in student outcomes by shifting blame to students' efforts. When this mentality is combined with the earlier attitude of helping "all students," it begins to place students in positions of being deserving or undeserving of support.

There were isolated examples of equity-mindedness, but those examples were more recent institutional developments. Isaac noted such an example:

> The college has adopted this to really begin to look at some of these metrics at a deeper and more meaningfully from a social justice lens. It's just been so heartening to hear our Chancellor come out unapologetically about the college's role at social justice matters and around equity. He did a town hall just this week. And you know, he's gotten some pushback about our focus on equity matters. And he says, if you can't get this, then you're probably not in the right business. And he was that bold to say that this work we're doing it's kind of mission focus.

While these are promising attitudes, they were rarely connected to PBF, nor did they specifically acknowledge Latinx student needs. Isaac emphasized this point and said, "The Chancellor doesn't talk about student success metrics in those town halls." Despite chief officer support, executive leaders were hesitant to push issues associated with the "social justice agenda," as Isaac explained. He felt that he had to "tread lightly" when discussing issues of social justice and student success. Instead, executives allowed this work to "grow organically" and supported professional development for faculty on topics of equity. Isaac recalled:

> We started an equity and education league, which is a platform by which faculty can come and really, it's a safe space, we can talk about very hard and difficult conversations to have around equity, around systemic racism, bias, conscious and unconscious, and

> ways in which we can help faculty begin to see that. And hopefully, help them to see how they can maybe transform or deliver instruction in a different way.

While these efforts are commendable, they also were rarely required, nor were they implemented on a large scale. Instead, allowing efforts to grow organically meant that formal decision-making remained race neutral. In the next section, I describe how an institution's geographic and demographic dynamics shaped participants' sensemaking of PBF.

Institutional Geography and Demographics

PCC is a small institution set in the rural area of North Texas. The institution does have multiple campus sites, but primarily operates from its rural campus. Christine described, "We're situated in the middle of those three counties. So, we are literally out in the middle of a pasture. We're a small college, and our enrollment usually hovers right around 3000 enrollments." As you can see, the description of its location inspired the alias "Pastoral Community College." Administrators noted that PCC's rural tax base presents regular budgetary challenges and enrollment concerns, and described that in their interviews as follows:

> We want to focus on growth, because we need to be fiscally sustainable, as a rural institution, as a relatively small institution. You know, we have got to make sure we've got money in the bank … I think if you work here long enough, though, you know, funding is a part of everything. (Harris)
>
> We're the lowest income level of the state. I mean, it's, it's terrible. And so not only that but we don't have people in our community that push education, we don't have that. So, we are constantly thinking, how can we make ourselves more viable? (Christine)
>
> And so, what's happened to us is because we're in such a rural area, not only is the state funding decreasing, but our tax base is also decreasing. And so, we have businesses in our

> area that did not reopen because of COVID. And we have a lot of manufacturing. And some of those have gone out of business and so our tax base is not real steady either. (Christine)

As Christine and Harris described, the economic conditions create challenges for PCC and the business community. The impacts on the business community spurs additional financial pressures. Of course, the economy affects individuals, too, as they emphasize:

> It is a consideration when you are faced with students who come to me and say, "so I've got to drop the class because I got to go to work." Navigating that has been, has been interesting, because when we don't get those enrollments, we don't report them to the state. We don't get the funding, but you know what, they don't have a choice. (Harris)
>
> We have found that 51% of all students that graduate from high school go nowhere. It's a large number. So, we've been trying to brainstorm on ways that we can reach those students because they don't go to any kind of higher education or trade school or anywhere, they just don't go somewhere. (Christine)

These economic trends also demonstrate why PCC's presence in the region is important. It also serves as motivation for the administrators. As Harris described, "What I tend to focus on with my folks, are the students' needs being met?"

Indicative of its rural isolation, administrators referenced relatively few formal partners, most notably the closest four-year institution and local school districts. Reflecting its small enrollment and limited resources, the college had a small cadre of full-time staff, administrators, and faculty and struggled to attract talent that reflected their student enrollment. Alex described his division in the following way: "I mean, we're kind of a smaller community college, we're all in the same building. So, if I say advising, I'm also talking to financial aid, we're on the same

team." Christine reinforced the tight-knit culture by emphasizing that "people wear many hats," and said that she is "involved in probably, literally most meetings that go on here on campus." There was significant overlap in roles and responsibilities and opportunities for frequent interaction.

The local economic and enrollment pressure lead to a perception at PCC that "budget is everything." As a result, PBF was only "one piece of the pie" the leaders at the institution must worry about because of their enrollment dependence, declining state support, and local economic woes. As a result, employees "can time it" when senior leadership is going to get on them about enrollment. When PBF is discussed, it's with the emphasis and maybe a looming threat that "this is how we get funded."

By contrast, MCC is one of the state's largest community colleges and is situated in the region's urban core. It operates across multiple sites within a county and partners with a significant number of independent school districts, thereby sharing academic responsibilities at many offsite locations. Administrators reported working at six of MCC's locations. Its proximity to a large population and thriving economy provided comfort for the institution. As an illustration of that comfort, Derek said, "Oh, we don't talk about money very much. And that probably comes from the fact that we're very well-funded." As Derek alluded, MCC itself enjoys relative budget stability. Isaac confirmed that sentiment:

> We're fortunate that we get our funding through pretty much three channels: state appropriations, tuition, and then property taxes. Fortunately, we've had kind of this booming economy and booming housing markets. So, we've been able to offset declines in state appropriations with our tax revenue from the county. So, we've been in a pretty good state the last few years.

Isaac went on to say, however:

> There's a dark side, that really speaks to the disparities across our communities. So bad that recently, a few years ago we ranked like, Detroit was number one, Philadelphia was number two, on this chasm of wealth and although I don't want to make direct correlations between ethnicity or race and wealth, we do know there are correlations.

Even with this challenge, participants from MCC had access to a seemingly endless pool of potential students. It was evident to PCC's administrators, which was clear when Christine compared the challenge of rebounding from COVID declines: "They have a base of students...but we don't have that." On top of this, MCC has access to partners and financial resources so significant that Elena said, "And then the final piece of the pie is other partners, which is kind of where the Foundation kind of plays a role, right." This provides a fourth bucket of funding for MCC. As a larger institution, administrators admitted challenges with communication and recognized opportunities for improvement. Grant felt that there was "probably an opportunity in our new college to, you know, to continue to collaborate and probably break down the silos between academics and student success."

When asked directly, administrators shared generally positive attitudes toward PBF and the necessity to improve student success, in addition to providing access to higher education. However, their proximity to decision-making shapes resource access in the form of financial and knowledge-based support. In terms of financial resources, PCC has a tight budget due to enrollment and economic pressure. Alex emphasized this:

> There's no doubt about it. Finances and institutional revenue are just in a crazy place right now in the state, especially for rural community colleges. So, every penny counts, every student counts. Every class, they take counts on the funding side. So obviously, that

is extremely important.

Alex emphasized the pressure PCC already faced before the introduction of PBF. As a result of PBF, PCC realized it needed to improve its data infrastructure and information technology to assist with reporting PBF metrics. With time, Alex describes that PCC was able to build the resources necessary:

> We have gone from just in my span here, I was just kind of floored at what we really didn't have and how we looked at things. There was always a thing about, Well, you know, the parking lot looks really, really packed, enrollment must be really good. And these are senior administrators. That's kind of what people based things on. I've helped play a good role in encouraging that data culture. Now we have dashboards, we have real-time dashboards, measuring all these things. We're in the process now of a really big project looking at data in different ways.

This contrasts with how Isaac recalled their initial response at MCC, which leveraged its robust data and institutional research capacities. In a circular pattern of enrollment and finances, PCC faces greater enrollment challenges and a diminishing economic base, which makes the introduction of PBF even more dire.

PCC's history of budget challenges means it has limited resources to assist with understanding PBF and implementing reforms. Yet, those who work at MCC leverage its financial resources and get "caught up in the game" of just focusing on "what was the best combination of things to do to maximize funding." As a result, they identify an incentive to "come up with a bunch of short-term certificates" to game the system's point awards for one-year programs. Isaac disclosed that in a desire to be "transparent," they had "done a couple things like that, that have been on the back end, we were more interested in getting the success

points at the state than really serving the students." Their efforts to gain points quickly included the creation of short-term certificates with dubious outcomes for students but clear metric benefits for the institution.

Both Pastoral's and Metropolitan's proximities to decision-making shaped the form of financial resources available to help them make sense of PBF. Another form of resource tied to proximity is the accessibility of knowledge-based resources, in the form of access to policymakers, experts, and other tools.

Both institutions pursue external resources to equip them with tools and strategies to respond to PBF. Because of PCC's financial woes, it pursued federal grants to equip it with financial resources and guidance to enhance student success. Harris described the process of pursuing Title V grants to support the institution's initiatives, and reflected:

> We've been able to do some really great work, setting up a transfer center and a success coach office, which is separate from our advising office, and they meet with specific cohorts of students to provide targeted services. And so really good things are happening. And so, all of that would not have been possible.

While these grants are viewed positively and seen as an integral strategy to enhance the institution's performance, the grants also became another form of institutional accountability for PCC and its employees. Meanwhile, MCC leveraged their financial resources to join Achieving the Dream, which also equipped administrators with tools and processes to identify student success improvements. Isaac described that PBF was the roadmap for this work:

> It also informed some of our bigger initiatives. Most of our schools are Achieving the Dream schools. And it was the guiding document that we use to plan out what our Achieving the Dream efforts were going to be. So, I think it took us probably three

> years, once those were implemented, to really begin to understand how they truly impacted us, but then how we were going to apply those to kind of major key initiatives across the institution.

While these resources are significant in supporting student success improvements, the quality and levels of investment differ greatly. While PCC receives support from technical assistance providers, Achieving the Dream provides a dedicated coaching team. Ultimately, the institution's proximity to decision-making in the form of policymakers proved most significant.

MCC's location in the metroplex provides the university with direct proximity to policymakers to assist administrators with understanding PBF. Notably, Isaac recalled, "and the Coordinating Board is making sense and they're there in parallel, just like we are. So, we would begin to ping them. And I remember pinging the Assistant Commissioner." With direct access to policymakers, MCC was poised to understand a policy more quickly with multiple, complex calculations and data reporting procedures. Further, MCC leveraged its proximity to decision-makers by attempting to influence future policy. Isaac discussed his interactions with decision-makers:

> I'll give you for instance since you've probably heard about this true pathway's initiative. I think this true pathway initiative has really been driven from some of the state success metrics. It was actually an idea that our workforce team came up and pitched it to the state and now it became a part of legislative policy.

In this instance, MCC uses its proximity to suggest policy reform and implementation ideas likely to benefit itself by "prep[ping] the student for a couple industry certifications and this is something the state has really supported. And matter of fact, last week, I had a meeting with our chancellor, our chief workforce officer, and the Commissioner of the Coordinating Board and

about this work." (Isaac) MCC also takes advantage of its proximity to build influential partnerships. Grant described:

> And we have from the educational perspective, we have a number of partners that we are actively talking with, you know, whether it's the K–16 partnership, whether it's the Chamber, whether it's United Way, whether it's the Fed. All these organizations that have an interest in our success. And we have an interest in their success, and those are all organizations that, you know, are really rooted in data-driven cultures as well. So, we're able to lean on them, as well for support, for not only data dissemination, but for them to help us, be champions and advocates of the message that we need to be crafting. But also, they do a lot of crafting because we are partners in a lot of this work, a lot of the messaging is the same. So, a lot of times it actually is, "Hey, we're gonna do the legwork and craft the message, will you all help carry the torch to the end goal."

MCC was able to build partnerships that helped influence narratives and increase the institution's capacity to implement PBF reporting.

Administrators at both PCC and MCC acknowledged in various ways that their proximities—or lack of—resulted in different institutional dynamics tied to PBF. Derek described his reality at MCC:

> I would say I'm not worried about money yet. And let me tell you, I'm not worried about my dollars because I am STEM, I am percentage points. So, again, I'm coming from a very affluent area, I don't hurt for enrollment, I don't hurt for students. I have a lot.

Derek would later acknowledge that if he worked at a "less affluent" institution, he may have to be "more robust" in his attention to PBF. Administrators at PCC would agree with Derek if they

had the opportunity to speak with him directly. Alex summed up how their context and PBF calculations added up against PCC:

> You know, there was one year when we were within the three-year rolling average of our performance funding and enrollment levels were a little different. Our success measures were actually higher than they were during the previous year. But our points went down, just based on enrollment numbers. And so, what it tells you is that there weren't as many kids in school because of a change in economy. But our ability to get them successful and reach these milestones, we were doing a better job. But the funding went down because of the headcount.

Conversely, Derek reported no sense of budgetary impact following the introduction of PBF. From his recollection:

> At one point in time, back in 2015, someone stood up in front of us and said, "Here's where your money comes from. Go get it." And then in the last six, seven years, as that conversation was never refreshed, I got to the point where that I didn't really care where the money came from, because it always kept coming.

Elena, like many of her MCC colleagues, affirmed this by saying that they "never really closed the loop" after introducing PBF. This was true despite Brione's presentation of statewide success metrics demonstrating MCC's ranking in the bottom quartile of college performance. Meanwhile, PCC remains in the top of state performance metrics, yet its administrators experience the policy as punitive and PBF appears to reinforce economic resource divides between rural and urban institutions.

This inverse relationship between performance and financial pressure demonstrates an example aligned with the third finding, which describes an environment of control in which

competition flourishes. As evidenced here, the competition improves neither efficiency nor success as the policy intends. Institutional proximity to decision-making shaped what opportunities were available to assist with making sense of PBF. The closer to decision-making an institution was, the higher the quality of opportunities and resources. Largely, these benefits were available to executive administrators, as their roles included responsibilities for publicly representing the institution. Regardless of individual role or institutional characteristics, all participants recalled navigating a statewide climate of control achieved by regulatory control, competitive dynamics, and embedded neoliberal values. As I describe in the next section, participants felt that they had to make sense of PBF within this environment while it also contributed to these factors.

State Environment: A Climate of Control

The third and final way participants described navigating PBF was within the statewide environment of a climate of control, which resulted from the state's regulatory environment. According to participants, administrators were faced with a complex policy environment in which PBF not only intersected with, but also influenced the adoption of other policies. In addition to PBF, participants had to make sense of several state-level initiatives, which oftentimes conflicted with other higher education policies, stated goals, and institutional missions. This resulted in competitive responses that placed community colleges at odds with each other and other education institutions. For a variety of reasons, administrators were distrustful of policymakers' motives and voiced concerns that PBF conflicted with the purpose and mission of community colleges. Ultimately, there is ample evidence that PBF promoted the adoption of neoliberal reforms, including introducing competition, framing students as products, and continuing inequitable funding allocations. This theme includes three sub-themes: (1)

regulatory control, (2) conflicting dynamics, and (3) embedded neoliberal values.

Regulatory Control

Even prior to the introduction of PBF, administrators felt that state governance of community colleges was highly regulated, complex, and controlling. As Isaac described:

> Under the coordinating governance of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, community college is probably ramped up a little bit. I'll give you for instance, we all have common course numbering in general. We all have our courses, course names, course descriptions, those are all governed by the state under a common umbrella, of course repositories.

Alex's description demonstrates that community colleges faced regulatory controls that their 4-year counterparts did not. Additionally, state-level control caused internal conflict, with faculty being dismissive and annoyed with exercises tied to mandated core learning objectives. As a result, administrators must make sense of PBF in this context of regulatory oversight and control.

In addition to regulatory oversight, administrators reported an extensive list of state policies that they had to grapple with in addition to PBF. As a result, administrators were often making sense of PBF in relation to initiatives, including the expansion of dual credit, mandated testing, and developmental education reform. Christine shared:

> One of the success points is math readiness, reading readiness, writing readiness. So, it covers developmental English and developmental math and every single year since 2015, something has changed with those, either they've dropped courses or changed the requirements. So, we never have a baseline, we are yet to have a baseline from 2015 to today! We do not have a good baseline of our developmental programs, because it's changed every single year.

As evidenced by Christine, these other policies often directly intersect with and affect PBF metrics. Therefore, administrators encounter multiple policies, resulting in control achieved through mandatory compliance activities. Further, participants encountered pressure in addition to formal policies. This poses difficulty, but PBF itself is particularly complex.

Participants described challenges with understanding PBF due to its complexity. Isaac shared, "The state never told us how to go about doing this. It just said, these are things we're going to measure you by." From his recollection, administrators were not the only ones who struggled to understand the policy. He recalled:

> And I remember pinging the Assistant Commissioner, and he was like, "Wait, I don't know, we've got to figure this out. We don't really know what the data is behind it. We don't know how we're going to measure this."

Isaac described needing to first understand the measurements before being able to introduce changes. Unfortunately, he articulated that administrators could not rely on the policy language itself, nor the agency responsible for oversight. Further, they often felt that policies conflicted with stated goals and encountered complexity in state policies. Christine felt that PBF "forces" colleges to adopt other policy priorities. She provided the example of recent corequisite reforms. Similarly, Elena concluded that PBF was "almost like a carrot" designed by policymakers to "nudge" them to "change how you do business." She believed that this helped administrators "fulfill the mission, not just get [students] in, but we got to get them out with something." However, the policy did not provide a roadmap for improving the outcomes assessed. This dynamic required participants to make sense of PBF policy and practice while facing competing demands from legislators and state agencies.

Conflicting Dynamics

Administrators encountered a complex policy environment due not only to enacted policy, but also policymakers' stated goals, which are often tied to economic and workforce priorities. Legislators, regulators, and even the governor's words carried weight and created additional pressure for community colleges. Isaac pointed out:

> There are other short-term credentials, industry certifications, that don't count towards these points. So, one of the things is sometimes we feel like we're almost in a catch 22. We've got this governor talking about 300,000 jobs in 300 days and getting students in and out in six weeks, short-term credentials. We're not measured for that. But we're tasked to do that. How do we balance that?

As Isaac's comment demonstrates, enacted policy and communicated priorities often sent conflicting messages. As some institutions struggled to meet various expectations, this often triggered competition over limited resources.

In response to these conflicting messages, competition emerged and was most often expressed in the tension over the place of college in the K–16 continuum. As described earlier, PCC's geography made it relatively isolated and reliant on school districts and the closest university. However, these partnerships—despite being essential—were also infused with competitive tension. For example, while the recent launch of a dual credit program was exciting, Harris noted the pressures:

> Number one, I mentioned to the early college high school that we just brought online, it is the first and only one in this region. That's a big deal. For us to be involved in that initiative, we built it from the ground up, we've got our first class of freshmen taking courses now. So, when you're thinking about outcomes and outputs, we're thinking, everybody wants this to go right at the outset. So, outcomes in that regard are pretty

important. And not necessarily tied to success points. But you know what I'm saying.

When asked if the shared issue of performance accountability was ever broached, he stated, "Not really." Further, he explained, "It's almost kind of weird. 'Cause you're right, we both exist in those worlds. But it's almost like a don't ask, don't tell kind of thing." Perhaps this will come with time, since Brione described how accountability policies were a routine conversation for MCC's educational partnership program staff:

> For a lot of our partners, they focus on their CCRSM [College and Career Readiness School Model] funds. And so, I want to be fair and say, "Well, you want to get your funds and we need to get ours as well. And in order to, this is what needs to happen." And when I say that they're like, "Oh, yeah, okay, I get it." And at first, I thought that it would be kind of crass to talk about it. But it's the truth, it's factual. And, unfortunately, now, that's kind of what speaks to people.

Brione describes the partnership development process as a competitive one with each respective partner negotiating program formats to align with state mandates and maximize their institutional funding, rather than being student-centered decisions.

This competitive pattern repeats with university partners who are essential as transfer destinations for students, but adversaries regarding enrollment and premature transfer before the college has maximized point-earning potentials that emphasize completion. In other instances, the complex policy environment drives further competition, as Grant described:

> The bachelor's degree is much more than a program within our school. It allows us to holistically disrupt a system. It allows us to completely alter our approach and our position in the ed prep landscape. And we would be foolish, in my opinion, not to leverage that.

As Grant suggested, PBF is only one of several state initiatives that exerts control and produces competition amongst state-funded institutions within and across sectors. As administrators navigated this climate of control, they expressed a variety of strong emotions.

Participants demonstrated a range of attitudes and responses to regulatory control and conflicting messages. Often, policy text and implementing guidance triggered strong emotions and memories from participants. For example, Elena connected her concerns about PBF with her experiences prior to pursuing higher education. She explored a potential political career through an internship that evolved into a full-time role working for a state representative. This gave her first-hand experience observing policymaking and legislative processes. She said that legislators "drove her bananas" and she felt like "they're just not connecting the dots" when it comes to understanding the needs of community colleges. She described that "when you're dealing with a governmental entity, you don't always have the experts at the table, you have consultants, you've got lobbyists telling you what they think needs to be there and then it impacts our day to day." Her insight on the policymaking process makes her distrustful, and causes her to question whether or not their values aligned. Other participants felt similarly and noted the influence of neoliberalism in PBF as a policy.

Embedded Neoliberal Values

Despite administrators' best intentions, the effect of governmental control and the influence of competition promoted neoliberal values among both institutions and administrators. As the previous finding demonstrated, those with greater proximity to decision-making have more opportunities to make sense of implementing changes in response to PBF. When layered with this finding, we can see how those with greater proximity may also be more influenced by governmental control, but may also respond to its attempts to promote neoliberalism. One of the

primary ways neoliberalism was represented in attitudes was through framing students as products or outcomes. Often, administrators discussed the need to produce students to meet the needs of the community or, more specifically, workforce partners. In one example, this was described as "an opportunity to tap into the assets that we have within the institutions."

Administrators themselves sensed the influence of neoliberalism when it came to PBF implementation. They often voiced concerns about the likelihood that the policy would result in the reproduction of social inequities. Derek summed up his concerns with PBF's influence with these factors directly:

> I actually see it as contributing to inequity, not equity. In fact, I've always harbored this idea that the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. And one of the things that happens if you're going to base the funding on a success point based on graduation. You know graduations are already lower in one of our poorer sectors. And we know that part of that has to do with the input from K–12, which we can't affect. I mean it's a self-perpetuating cycle where you're just going to continue to support and buy the latest greatest tech for the campuses that already have the best. So, yeah, I think it promotes inequity, the exact opposite.

It seems clear to Derek that PBF is designed to replicate the state's history of neoliberal and race/ethnicity neutral policies that result in inequitable outcomes for students and institutions. In this example, the replication is primarily tied to economic systems of power. Derek's concern is evidenced in the divergent circumstances between Pastoral and Metropolitan, where Pastoral performs better but continues to have fewer resources.

Similarly, Harris admitted that he was "jaded" and brought a more critical frame to understanding the policy. His perception was influenced, in part, by his academic experiences

while pursuing his doctorate. During that time, he was introduced to some formal studies on PBF, but more notably, he talked about neoliberalism intensively because he used neoliberalism as a framework in his dissertation. With that lens, he drew connections between several state policies, pointing out that the "best example of that [neoliberalism] is in our workforce programs. Performance-based funding being another, it 100% influences how our faculty engage in their daily work, and how they engage with their students." For Harris, it was not a purely ideological analysis of the policy. He combined it with an "emotional connection to this institution," which was both his alma mater and only professional employer. He reminisced before and after PBF was implemented and watched the college administration shift to a "super business-oriented, top-down managerial strategy, just dripping neoliberalism everywhere." His critique was targeted at the policy, demonstrated by his hopefulness that administrators would be able to resist the policy's neoliberal influences and "still value the old traditional operating." He believes that the institution should be "a safe place for all students to come and learn, better themselves, not just in terms of a degree program."

Harris's concerns seem realistic with Isaac's admission that PBF metrics provide an incentive to "come up with a bunch of short-term certificates" to game the system's point awards for one-year programs. He admitted in a desire to be "transparent" that college leadership had "done a couple of things like that, that have been on the back end, we were more interested in getting the success points at the state than really serving the students." He recognized that these efforts "sound sad now," and that they had moved on to a new phase of understanding the policy as an opportunity for "looking more holistically at what we do" to improve student success. Despite participants' efforts to resist, there is ample evidence that PBF did promote neoliberal values and reforms within these two institutions.

Summary

Participants' individual roles, institutional context, and statewide environment shaped their sensemaking and understanding of PBF. From an individual perspective, participants' hierarchical levels corresponded with the frequency, quality, and type of sensemaking activities. Mid-level and senior administrators had significantly different sensemaking in terms of type, frequency, and quality. Additionally, participants' institutional context influenced their sensemaking. In particular, an institution's geographic location and size afforded participants' proximity to decision-making. Further, as this study is situated at two Hispanic-serving community colleges, participants characterized an institutional culture that failed to identify and respond to Latinx student needs appropriately. Finally, all participants expressed having made sense of PBF while encountering a climate of control that featured regulatory complexity and competitive dynamics, and, ultimately, a policy environment that embedded neoliberalism. These findings demonstrate that Texas's Student Success Points program, a PBF policy, replicates the state's pattern of promoting neoliberal reforms.

In Chapter 5, I discuss key findings, as well as limitations, of this study. Additionally, I present implications for policymakers, practitioners, and future researchers.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to understand how community college administrators at Hispanic-serving institutions in Texas make sense of the state's performance-based funding (PBF) policy. Eight participants from two Hispanic-serving community colleges in North Texas shared their perspectives and experiences with PBF over the course of two interviews, and their accounts were supported by document analysis. In this chapter, I discuss how my findings connect to the research on performance-based funding and Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs). This chapter begins with a brief summary of the findings, as presented under three themes in the previous chapter: *Institutional Role: Who Has a Seat at the Table?*, *Institutional Context: Hispanic-Serving Across the Rural and Urban Divide*, and *State Environment: A Climate of Control*. Then, I discuss limitations, followed by a discussion with recommendations for theory, practice, and future research before concluding the chapter.

Summary of Findings

In Chapter 4, I presented an in-depth summary of the study's three themes, which collectively describe how the study's participants made sense of performance-based funding (PBF) within their context at Hispanic-serving community colleges (HSCCs). Participants' institutional roles influenced the quality, frequency, and access to sensemaking activities. Regardless of role, participants' institutional context, particularly demographic and geographic dynamics, shaped how they understood PBF. Additionally, despite their HSI recognition, participants demonstrated a diffusion of responsibility for addressing Latinx student needs. Finally, all participants encountered a statewide climate of control, comprised of regulatory complexity, competitive dynamics, and embedded neoliberalism.

The first finding, *Individual Role: Who Has a Seat at the Table?*, summarizes how

participants' institutional roles shaped their sensemaking and understanding of PBF. Mid-level and senior administrators had significantly different sensemaking in terms of the type, frequency, and quality. This was related to their proximity to decision-making. From an individual perspective, participants' hierarchical levels corresponded with the frequency, quality, and type of sensemaking activities.

In the second finding, *Institutional Context: Hispanic-Serving across the Rural and Urban Divide*, I described how participants' institutional contexts influenced their sensemaking. First, as this study is situated at two Hispanic-serving community colleges, participants characterized an institutional culture that failed to appropriately identify and respond to Latinx student needs. Participants provided examples of what they considered an ideal HSI identity, where Latinx students' values are reflected in the faculty and affirmed in the services provided by the college. Instead, participants revealed that most of the initiatives that their institutions designed for Latinx students resulted from interest convergence, motivated by financial and reputational gains. Additionally, an institution's geographic location and size afforded participants proximity to decision-making.

In my discussion of the third finding, *State Environment: A Climate of Control,* I recounted that all participants expressed having made sense of PBF while encountering a climate of control that featured regulatory complexity and competitive dynamics and, ultimately, a policy environment that embedded neoliberalism. These findings demonstrate that Texas's Student Success Points program, a PBF policy, replicates the state's pattern of promoting neoliberal reforms.

In the next section, I discuss the intersection of these findings with the existing literature and the implications for future research, higher education practice, and policy.

Discussion of Findings

This study confirmed that individual role, institutional context, and the state environment influence the sensemaking process for administrators serving Hispanic-serving community colleges. Participants described that their roles and institutions provided them with proximity and access to different information and resources to understand and implement changes in response to PBF. Some of these changes reveal alignment with previous research on positive institutional improvements (Thornton & Friedel, 2016; Wayt & La Cost, 2016), increased financial pressure (Dougherty et al., 2016; Hagood, 2019; Hillman & Corral, 2018), and introduction of short-term credentials (Hagood, 2019; Hillman et al., 2015; Li & Kennedy, 2018; Li & Ortagus, 2019). I also discuss how these findings support emerging research on HSI typologies (Garcia, 2016, 2017a, 2017b; Garcia et al., 2019; Nuñez et al., 2016; Zerquera et al., 2017). I conclude my discussion by summarizing how my findings relate to the existing research on the PBF policy environment and Texas's context specifically.

In this section, I discuss how my findings relate to several existing bodies of research: (1) PBF outcomes, (2) HSI designation, (3) policy environment, and (4) alignment with sensemaking research. First, I discuss my findings' relationship to previous research on PBF. Regarding PBF, my findings align with several bodies of literature, one of which is research that focuses on positive outcomes and unintended consequences associated with the introduction of PBF. Then, I turn my attention to research on Hispanic-serving institutions. I next discuss how my participants enacted changes that align with previous research and expand on the understanding of the nuances of Texas's higher education policy context. In particular, I note the connections to PBF's history and trends, including the policy environment and influence of neoliberalism within higher education policies. I conclude with a discussion of how my findings

expand the body of research on critical sensemaking.

PBF Outcomes

My findings reveal mixed outcomes marked by some reported improvements but more significant unintended consequences, aligning with previous research. Participants in this study highlighted various institutional improvements they implemented because of PBF, including standardizing operations, revising curriculum, and enhancing student support services, including academic advising, transfer services, and basic needs initiatives. This aligns with previous research where institutional leaders reported positive changes to institutional and academic operations after PBF's introduction (Li, 2019; Thornton & Friedel, 2016). Additionally, participants in this study and other researchers (Thornton & Friedel, 2016; Wayt & La Cost, 2016) have cited that a benefit of PBF has been a shift toward a data-driven decision-making process. Participants at both PCC and MCC reported significant improvements in their institutional data culture regarding more sophisticated tools and training for employees. However, Taylor (2020) problematized the belief that data-driven decision-making has been an improvement in higher education practice. In conducting critical discourse analysis, Taylor's (2020) findings revealed that as data use practices are adopted alongside a student success narrative, institutional "structures, cultures, practices, and associated power relations" (p. 1089) are transformed. More concerningly, Taylor (2020) concluded that "student success practices that are easily measured induce reductionist conceptions of student success and preclude the introduction of other student success practices that might be effective but difficult to maintain" (p. 1091). This context highlights a tension in participants' beliefs. As mentioned, participants at both research sites made positive references to their improving data cultures. However, they simultaneously shared concerns and hesitations that PBF metrics were too simple and failed to

reflect the true mission of community colleges. Taylor (2020) demonstrated that these are interrelated and are another way neoliberalism is embedded within policy and thus influences higher education practices. Further, a significant body of literature highlights the unintended consequences associated with PBF.

This includes limited evidence of improvements in graduation rates in four states (Tandberg et al., 2014). Instead, researchers have established the well-documented, unintended tendency to increase shorter-term degree programs at community colleges (Hagood, 2019; Hillman et al., 2015; Li & Kennedy, 2018; Li & Ortagus, 2019). This aligns with what my participants at MCC shared regarding their efforts to introduce short-term certificates and advocate for further metric-based recognition of workforce-influenced programs, some with as few as six credit hours. Li and Kennedy (2018) most recently investigated the rise in certificates at community colleges following the introduction of PBF and included Texas in their dataset. Their findings suggest that Texas community colleges did not see an increase in certificates over associate degrees in the aggregate. However, their dataset featured data only from Texas's first year of implementation. Their overall findings suggest that policies operating for a longer period were likely to see this result. Therefore, my findings align with previous studies and demonstrate how implementation decisions over time result in this outcome.

Among other unintended consequences, my findings align with the research regarding PBF’s impact on institutional funding, which reveals mixed effects with some evidence of decreased public funding as an outcome (Dougherty et al., 2016; Hagood, 2019; Hillman & Corral, 2018). MCC reported no adverse impacts on its institutional funding, while participants from PCC openly discussed their budgetary challenges. This aligns with Dougherty et al. (2016), who found that only one-third of the community college participants they interviewed from

Indiana, Tennessee, and Ohio reported significant negative budget outcomes after the introduction of PBF. My findings would suggest a similar trend among Texas community colleges.

Meanwhile, Li et al. (2018) examined how minority-serving community colleges fared financially in Texas and Washington under PBF formulas. Their findings revealed minimal differences in Texas between minority-serving and predominantly white institutions. Of course, both institutions in this study were HSIs. Therefore, my findings suggest that more study about unintended consequences for rural institutions in the state is needed. Thornton and Friedel (2016) studied the early impact of PBF at four small, rural community colleges, two each in Texas and North Carolina. Their findings did not reveal budgetary or financial concerns. Taking my findings into consideration may suggest an interaction between racial and geographic demographics that is putting rural HSIs in the state at a disadvantage. These dynamics also add nuance to Nuñez et al.'s (2016) institutional typology of HSIs, particularly further distinctions between Urban Enclave Community Colleges and Rural Dispersed Community Colleges.

HSI Designation

My findings affirm the complexity of HSI status and organizational culture. Participants in this study were all aware of their institutions' formal HSI designations and accurately explained the enrollment requirements for federal recognition. The federal HSI designation is unique among minority-serving recognitions as the only one that does not include an institutional commitment to address the needs of the underrepresented racial or ethnic group it serves (Gasman et al., 2015; Garcia et al., 2019). Perhaps participants typically failed to share their institutional designations without prompting because of the lack of commitment. This behavior proved to be an early indicator of a diffusion of responsibility for proactively identifying and

addressing the needs of Latinx students. Diffusion of responsibility is a concept identified by social psychologists to describe the phenomenon known informally as the "bystander effect," the dynamic where the presence of others reduces social norms to provide help (Beyer et al., 2017). Instead, participants described an institutional culture that largely failed to conceptualize their practices differently as a result of serving a significant number of Latinx students.

There is a body of literature that explores how "serving" is conceptualized and expressed at HSIs (Garcia, 2016, 2017a, 2017b; Garcia et al., 2019; Nuñez et al., 2016; Zerquera et al., 2017). Garcia et al. (2019) conducted the first and only synthesis of the literature on this topic. Their analysis of 148 studies revealed that servingness was conceptualized in the literature in four ways: (1) institutional outcomes, (2) experiences of students and employees, (3) internal organizational dimensions, and (4) external forces. These findings contribute primarily to the literature on internal organizational dimensions and external forces, as I discuss in more detail in the following sections.

Internal Organizational Dimensions

In my study, participants reported internal organizational dimensions that largely failed to prioritize Latinx-student needs. Garcia et al. (2019) defined internal organizational dimensions as common practices such as decision-making processes and curricular and pedagogical choices. In discussing their decision-making processes, participants revealed that most strategies or initiatives alleged to support Latinx students resulted from interest convergence. For example, participants reported leveraging their institutional HSI identities to secure external funding (i.e., Title V grants) and enhance their reputations. Further, the grant-funding initiatives (i.e., bilingual education training, advising reforms, transfer support) were not designed based on identified Latinx student needs, nor did the initiatives limit their services to Latinx students. Rather, many

of these programs were actively promoted to all students and referenced as significantly beneficial to improving PBF metrics.

While I did not employ HSI typologies in the conceptual framework for my study, participants did report various examples of strategies that might reflect alignment with one or more of Garcia's (2016, 2017) typologies of HSI organizational identities. Garcia (2016) conducted a case study that advanced an HSI typology that measures how organizational identity reflects Latinx culture and produces positive outcomes for Latinx students and employees. Based on this typology, institutions can reflect Latinx-producing, -enrolling, -serving, or -enhancing behaviors (Garcia, 2017, p. 122s). For example, participants at both institutions self-reported high outcomes for Latinx students. Additionally, both institutions had significant Title V grants to develop various Latinx-targeted outreach, support services, and curricular reforms. These factors could classify both PCC and MCC as Latinx-producing or Latinx-serving. However, my findings reveal that interest convergence and external forces shaped the true motivations for these outcomes and services.

Participants from PCC described an overall lack of change in organizational identity after receiving their HSI designation, which aligns with previous research on this topic (Carter & Patterson, 2019). Similar to what administrators at PCC shared, Carter and Patterson (2019) found in their qualitative case study of a community college that recently received an HSI designation that there was a dominant perception that the institution had always served a large Latinx population and that their primary mission was, and is, to serve all students. Unfortunately, this dynamic has been noted in a variety of studies. Vargas and Villa-Palomino (2019) noted that "the enrollment of new Latinx students that pushes a university across the 25 percent threshold does not precipitate inevitable change in the dominant racial logics of the institution" (p. 402).

Vargas and Villa-Palomino (2019) studied 220 successful Title V "Developing Hispanic Serving Institutions" between 2009 and 2016 to understand how HSIs perceived Latinx students and if their institutional practices were Latinx-centered. They found that more than 85 percent of all abstracts were "colorblind" in practice, with strategies that only tangentially benefitted Latinx students. Participants in my study revealed similar institutional practices with the use of Title V funds. These findings are concerning on their own, but when considered alongside Vargas's (2018) analysis of the racial and ethnic demographics of Title V grantees, they are more alarming. Vargas's (2018) analysis showed that HSIs that enrolled higher percentages of white students and lower rates of Black students had "considerably higher probabilities of receiving Title V funds" (p. 7).

Research on the diffusion of responsibility among institutional agents in organizational settings is limited across various academic disciplines, and even more so specifically in higher education. Beyer et al. (2017) studied how online behavior among associates might be susceptible to the diffusion of responsibility by measuring individual sense of agency in completing tasks. Their findings revealed a significant conceptual expansion of the diffusion of responsibility. The researchers suggested that diffusion effects were present in familiar and unfamiliar pairs. Previously, diffusion research focused on behavior among strangers. Ultimately, Beyer et al. demonstrated that established social groups are just as susceptible to this group behavior as strangers. Castrellón (2021) employed diffusion of responsibility as a conceptual framework to analyze how and if higher education administrators enact barriers for undocumented students. Her findings revealed a subconscious evasion of responsibility among institutional agents where their "serve all students" narrative failed to include undocumented students. These findings demonstrate how external influences further influence HSI typologies.

External Forces

Garcia et al.'s 2019 study of HSI research identified a body of research on how external forces, primarily in the form of policy and governance, shaped institutional decisions and policies. My findings broaden the types of external forces that shape policy and practice at HSI. Participants in my study cited external forces beyond policy and governance, including the influence of workforce demands and responding to local socioeconomic forces. For example, participants from PCC faced significant financial constraints as a result of policy, governance, and local socioeconomic forces. These factors then influenced individual attitudes that framed Latinx students as solutions to problems and as an untapped enrollment resource and commodity to be leveraged for financial and reputational improvements.

Zerquera et al. (2017) critically examined institutional perspectives on the institutional mission at "Latinx-enrolling" urban universities. In this case, the researchers studied four institutions: two with HSI designations and two termed "emerging" by enrolling between 15 and 24 percent Latinx students. Their findings revealed that few enacted examples of access-centered mission; instead, the researchers noted that "diversity was described as a commodity" (Zerquera et al., 2017, p. 214). My findings add nuance to the literature on how institutional actors at HSIs respond to external forces in ways that view Latinx students as commodities. Participants in this study identified that external forces created internal financial pressure. As a result, participants described using their HSI designation and, thus, Latinx students as a commodity to secure financial resources, both directly and indirectly. Direct financial resources primarily took the form of securing Title V grant funds. Indirect strategies included using grant-funded Latinx-programs to receive recognition and improve all student performance on PBF metrics.

Using Latinx students as a commodity is not a new or unique finding. Vargas and Villa-

Palomino (2019) identified the practice in their successful Title V grant abstracts analysis. My findings add context to how HSI administrators form these strategies and behaviors. However, not all research has shown this approach. Vargas and Villa-Palomino (2019) cited that 10 percent of abstracts promoted Latinx-centered strategies.

Further, Felix (2021) found examples of "ideal implementers" (p. 26) who embraced race-conscious leadership by developing equity-minded initiatives in response to even race-neutral policy language. The researcher was embedded at the institution for 18 months to understand how race-conscious leadership forms and cited cultures of inquiry that emphasize open conversations and continual learning. With this in mind, there may be hope for the participants and institutions reflected in my study who shared several emerging examples of this culture work forming.

Policy Environment

Participants engaged in sensemaking within a statewide environment they felt was designed to exert control generally over community colleges and specifically through PBF as a policy mechanism. Participants reported a system of regulatory complexity that was more directive for 2-year institutions in the state than their 4-year counterparts. Complexity was evident in the number of policy initiatives and the ways in which they intentionally or unintentionally, intersected with PBF and other policies. Secondarily, participants described encountering ambiguity when policy tools, including PBF, seemed to conflict with other policies or publicly stated goals. While this ambiguity triggered sensemaking, often participants' responses involved enacting competition among postsecondary institutions. Ultimately, through regulatory complexity, ambiguity, and conflict, PBF embedded neoliberal values, and priorities for administrators and community colleges. Examples of neoliberal attitudes include prioritizing

business needs, viewing students as products, and reducing shared governance. These findings primarily relate to two aspects of higher education policy research. The first is aligned with previous research on Texas's higher education policy context. The second area of the discussion focuses on PBF history and trends, including the policy environment and influence of neoliberalism.

Texas Policy Context

As I described in Chapter 4, Texas's statewide policy and governance context played an important role in shaping how participants made sense of PBF, and many of their experiences aligned with previous research. A shared attitude among participants in this study was a sense that Texas policymakers misunderstood community colleges and that administrators felt their needs went unheard. Gándara and Hearn (2019) studied what information was used in the policy formation process of completion agenda frameworks, including dual-credit reform and PBF. The researchers preferred white papers rather than research articles and information from the workforce and intermediary organizations (Gándara and Hearn, 2019). Ultimately, policymakers engaged in what Gándara and Hearn labeled as shaming strategies targeted at colleges and universities instead of cooperative engagement. While my participants cited that they felt unheard, these findings suggest that higher education leaders are *silenced*.

Another similarity in the literature includes the role of intermediary organizations. Gándara and Hearn (2019) noted that philanthropic organizations think tanks, civil rights groups, and the Texas Association of Business played central roles in influencing the policy formation process. It is worth noting that participants in my study cited similar intermediary organizations assisting their institutions in making sense of PBF. This suggests that external agents play a powerful role in shaping policy formation and implementation in Texas.

PBF Policy Environment

Community college administrators continue to encounter an unstable policy environment (Burke, 1998; Burke & Modarresi, 2001; Gándara & Hearn, 2019). Burke and Modarresi (2001) found that more than twenty years ago, higher education leaders were concerned that policy metrics did not adequately measure academic quality, a critique elevated by my participants in 2021. Similarly, my participants remarked that the broader policy environment and the specific PBF mechanics were unstable. Administrators felt they encountered competing messages and priorities, intrusive and misguided efforts, and regulatory complexity. PBF typology studies suggest that PBF 1.0-era policies are significantly different from PBF 2.0, which shows that little has changed in a policy environment marked by conflicts between higher education leaders and policymakers over values, metrics, and mission alignment (Burke & Modarresi, 2001; Gándara & Rutherford, 2018). Often, this conflict can be attributed to the influence of neoliberalism in PBF policy confirmation (Dougherty & Natow, 2019).

Dougherty and Natow (2019) argued that PBF is an example of how "neoliberal policies can lead to unintended consequences that move higher organizations away from egalitarian ideals" (p. 5). Unsurprisingly, PBF advances efficiency as a value. Helms Mills et al. (2010) revealed how power influences the sensemaking process by privileging certain identities and ideas over others. My findings reinforce that notion by demonstrating that those with proximity to decision-making, a form of institutional power, were afforded frequent interactions related to PBF. Weick (1995) emphasized that the quality of interactions determines the success of sensemaking. In this study, individuals with access to institution-level decision-making had a front-row seat to the rich dynamics and process imagery necessary to understand and implement PBF successfully. The value of proximity is further evident when considering the different forms

of access and power participants from PCC had and contrasting them with participants at MCC.

Zerquera and Ziskin (2020) studied how administrators at an urban-serving research university made sense of a new PBF policy. Their findings revealed that administrators faced pressure from the neoliberal influences of the state policy that conflicted with their institutional mission. Participants in my study voiced similar concerns that the influence of PBF would cause themselves or other administrators to adopt the values and priorities of policymakers that conflicted with their mission and purpose. My participants shared similar critiques as Zerquera and Ziskin's (2020), who described that the PBF policy did not accurately represent their mission, student population, and other contextual factors. Zerquera and Ziskin (2020) used sensemaking as part of their study's theoretical framework, which provided a positive example of its application to the study of PBF implementation.

Alignment with Sensemaking Outcomes

Critical sensemaking was a valuable analytical tool, as it helped to reveal how proximity to decision-making served as a conduit for power (Helms Mills et al., 2010). While executive leaders frequently attributed institutional changes to the requirements of PBF policy, mid-level leaders were largely clueless about this connection. As Dougherty et al. (2016) argued, administrators are an important conduit for information on state goals, policy, and implementation. My findings demonstrate that executive leaders often failed to contextualize institutional changes for mid-level administrators as part of their policy implementation process. Like previous research, mid-level participants often attributed PBF-related institutional improvements to grant funds and Achieving the Dream (Wayt & LaCost, 2016). However, executive participants often cited PBF as a motivating factor for obtaining grant funds or participating in Achieving the Dream. Previous research has shown "challenges, or even

indifference towards disseminating information" (Li, 2017, p. 191) about PBF, particularly to support staff. This dynamic was present in my study as well.

In another application of critical sensemaking, Soderlind and Geschwind (2019) explored how Swedish academic officers made sense of performance measures. Their findings revealed that the introduction of metrics was often seen as important among executives but was viewed as a tool of control by faculty and mid-level administrators. My participants reported instances of faculty resistance to PBF-associated changes. However, mid-level administrators did not reflect the same critical orientation as those in Soderlind and Geschwind's study. As I discuss in the next section, this divergence in findings presents an opportunity for the future application of critical sensemaking to policy implementation studies.

Implications and Recommendations

My findings present several implications for theory, policy, practice, and future research. In the following sections, I present relevant implications and recommendations in the following order: (1) implications for theory, (2) implications for policy and practice, and (3) recommendations for future research. My study used two theoretical frameworks to study PBF for the first time: critical sensemaking and contextual interaction theory. I present several implications and recommendations for policy and higher education practice, including that higher education leaders adopt race-conscious leadership practices and approaches to policy implementation (Felix, 2021) at HSIs. I conclude this section with recommendations for future research into equity-minded policy implementation, mid-level administrators, and HSI culture.

Implications for Theory

My study serves as the first application of critical sensemaking and contextual interaction theory as a theoretical framework for PBF policies in the United States. While both applications

are notable, critical sensemaking provided a more useful framework in my instance for analysis and interpretation. Soderlind and Geschwind (2019) conducted the first study applying critical sensemaking as a framework to explore how Swedish academics made sense of accountability policies. Their study revealed nuances in how the policy provided “plausible accounts” that shape academic work “even if not completely accurate” (Soderlind & Geschwind, 2019, p. 87). Their analysis also revealed two identities constructed by participants: stewards and visionaries. Stewards embraced metrics, while visionaries wove metrics in with their own ideas and priorities for the organization (Soderlind & Geschwind, 2019). The critical orientation of this theory also revealed internal doubt, disagreement, and conflict, and resulted in efforts to control and steer behavior. My use of the theory presents a second successful application in an exploratory design that provides a “lens through which to analyze the power relationships reflected in inequities” (Helms Mills, Thurlow, & Mills, 2010, p. 189). Power dynamics were reflected differently in implementation between my study and Soderlind and Geschwind’s affirming the importance of context. Therefore, they collectively demonstrate the applicability of critical sensemaking to the study of higher education policy implementation and provide recommendations for future researchers to consider adopting its usage when exploring issues of organizational change.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Participants in this study experienced differences in their quality, frequency, and access to sensemaking opportunities related to PBF depending on their role, institutional context, and state climate. This presents several implications for higher education policy and practice. In this section, I present the following recommendations for higher education leaders and policymakers in response to my findings. My recommendations include, in the following order, (a) adoption of race-conscious leadership practices, (b) HSI reform via procedures embedded within

reauthorization, and (c) PBF policy reform with equity metrics.

Embrace Critical Consciousness

Each of the participants in my study served, to varying degrees, as individual implementers as they made sense of PBF and enacted changes in response. Texas has an unfortunate and well-established history of designing higher education policies that are race-neutral, including admissions policies (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2014), PBF (Natale & Jones, 2018), and the completion agenda broadly (Gándara & Hearn, 2019). Additionally, participants provided examples of how PBF and the climate of control embedded neoliberal values. However, participants also provided examples of resistance to this influence, which is reflected in the literature (Soderlind & Geschwind, 2019) and evidence of successful race-conscious leadership (Felix, 2021).

Initially theorized by Bensimon and Malcolm (2012), race-consciousness counters the prevailing "race evasive" approach to student success in higher education. The researchers call for scholars and practitioners to "see the ways in which race is embedded in everyday practices" (Bensimon & Malcolm, 2012, p. 29). Aligned with Felix (2021), I advocate that higher education leaders must be aware of how higher education policy can have adverse outcomes for racially minoritized students and under-resourced institutions. Leaders must be more aware of this reality and have the tools to implement policy in a way that prioritizes student equity efforts needed for mitigating the side effects of enacting neoliberalist policies. It is clear that while further research is needed in this area, institutions and leaders need to invest in these kind of professional development activities to enhance knowledge and leverage policy to improve success for racially-minoritized students.

Reform Via Reauthorization

As I have noted, HSIs are unique among federally designated MSIs because of the lack of a requirement for institutions to adopt a mission, vision, or targeted goals aligned with the population they serve. Research has revealed, perhaps unsurprisingly, that an HSI designation has had little effect on organizational culture (Carter & Patterson, 2019; Zerquera et al., 2017). Additionally, researchers (Vargas, 2018; Vargas & Villa-Palomino, 2019) have studied the allocation of Title V funds with concerning results. In particular, Vargas (2018) concluded that there was no evidence that federal resources designed for HSIs were allocated in ways that emphasize Latinx equity. Meanwhile, Villa-Palomino (2019) found that most grantees intended to use HSI-designated funds in colorblind ways. My findings contribute to the now well-established literature that problematizes the very nature of the federal HSI designation.

Therefore, I recommend that federal policymakers urgently take up the issue of redefining Hispanic-serving institutions via a reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA). The HEA has not been reauthorized since 2008, despite several attempts to revive the process (Gándara & Jones, 2020). Now marks a timely opportunity to do so with the ability to align an HSI designation revision with other current priorities under the Biden administration. For example, Biden has made his support for MSIs broadly and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) well known in both commentary and action. According to the White House (2022), Biden allocated upwards of $2.7 billion in new funding between 2020 and 2022 for HBCUs and created new MSI grant programs to address basic student needs. Now is the time to advocate for equity among MSIs by aligning HSI definitions and funding mechanisms with their HBCU and Tribal College and University counterparts, who receive annual federal funding with grant competition (Vargas & Villa-Palomino, 2019). While proposing automatic funding of HSIs may seem daunting because there are significantly more institutions, combining this with

requirements for the institution to adopt a mission may reduce the number of institutions that qualify. In particular, the HEA should adopt policy language that directs the Department of Education to develop a tool that evaluates an institution's mission and goals reflect Latinx-centered and Latinx-serving approaches. This recommendation would promote horizontal equity among MSIs and increase federal funding to Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students, who increasingly attend HSIs.

Adopt Equity Metrics

Based on my participants' climate of control and the literature on the Texas and PBF policy environments, my final recommendation and implication are related to statewide policy. I recommend that Texas and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) revise the Student Success Points program by adopting equity metrics. The concept of equity metrics for PBF is not a new one, as other states have implemented various policy reforms to address the previously noted unintended consequences associated with PBF. Ortagus et al. (2020) found that approximately two-thirds of states with PBF policies now included some form of equity metric. This leaves Texas in the minority of state policy formulations.

Some states have introduced premiums, which serve as financial bonuses for obtaining outcomes for underserved student groups (Gándara & Rutherford, 2018). Identified underserved groups include low-income, older adult students, minoritized racial and ethnic groups, at-risk students, and students who take developmental coursework (Gándara & Rutherford, 2018). Li (2019) studied the implementation of such metrics in Ohio and Pennsylvania and found widespread positive perceptions of the policy because of increased attention to underrepresented students. While there was still evidence of increased selectivity, Li (2019) still reported significant strategies designed with Black and Brown student needs in mind. Further, Hillman

and Corral (2018) identified that equity metrics positively affected low-income and Latinx students.

While revising the PBF formula would not alleviate participants' expressed concerns with policy instability, this revision would hopefully address other concerns and counteract unintended consequences of the policy. Further, adopting equity metrics would align with the state's higher education master plan and the mission of community colleges, thereby reducing feelings of mission misalignment between policymakers and practitioners.

Implications for Future Research

My findings revealed that the initial compliance pressure and policy ambiguity influenced participants to "play the game" by implementing PBF-associated programs to maximize institutional funding opportunities. Further, my analysis exposes that these efforts and outcomes were often developed as a result of interest convergence, where the true motives were seeking financial or reputational resources instead of addressing student needs. However, participants affirm that their understandings and approaches change over time. Notably, executive leaders revealed a shift to more equity-minded decision-making processes in later stages of sensemaking. This aligns with other research that demonstrates higher education administrators can serve as policy implementers who advance access, equity, and student success (Nienhusser, 2018). Together, there is promise that higher education administrators can approach policy implementation with equity-mindedness from the beginning with the right tools and strategies. Further research is necessary to develop an in-depth understanding of the process to develop such a mindset and tangible strategies for early equity-oriented implementation.

In addition to researching equity-minded policy implementation, my findings also suggest a gap in policy awareness among mid-level administrators. From an individual

perspective, executive administrators reported frequent discussions about the Student Success Points program in the form of informal and formal planning efforts. From their recollections, PBF had influenced, to varying degrees, many institutional changes and priorities in recent years. In contrast, mid-level administrators reported familiarity with PBF but only infrequent recollections of informal or formal discussions. As a result, their perception was that the policy had relatively little influence on their work and day-to-day activities. In reality, PBF has been playing a more central role in the work of mid-level administrators, as they often referenced many of the same institutional changes as their executive counterparts—without awareness of their connection to PBF. This suggests that policy competency is also necessary to advance to senior and executive levels. Therefore, further research is needed to explore how this competency is formed and what early and middle career experiences are integral in professional development.

As I discussed, participants in my study cited various institutional initiatives that align with recent theories on HSI typologies and concepts of servingness (Garcia, 2016; Garcia et al., 2019; Nuñez et al., 2016). In particular, there were significant differences in PBF response and capacity based on demographic and economic factors. The urban setting of Metropolitan Community College (MCC) provided its leaders with geographical proximity to policymakers and prominent intermediary organizations. Conversely, the rural location of Pastoral Community College (PCC) meant limited exposure to formal systems of power and influence. Additionally, its participants described that local demographic and economic factors created enrollment and financial stability challenges. My findings affirm and expand my understanding of Nuñez et al.'s (2016) HSI typologies, specifically the differences between Rural Dispersed and Urban Enclave Community Colleges. However, this also warrants future research into how demographic and

geographic differences shape power and resource access and allocation for HSIs.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand how community college administrators at Hispanic-serving institutions make sense of PBF. The data analysis from interviews and document analysis regarding the sensemaking process yielded the following findings:

(1) Individual roles influenced the quality, frequency, and type of sensemaking experiences related to PBF that participants reported. Executive and senior administrators reported frequent, rich sensemaking experiences that ultimately meant PBF influenced significant organizational changes. While mid-level administrators were aware of PBF, they lacked insight into the policy's level of influence.

(2) Institutional context shaped the types of sensemaking opportunities participants had regarding PBF. Local and organizational demographics and geography afforded participants different types of access to resources and individuals to enrich the process. However, participants at both HSCCs identified limited instances of a Latinx-serving mission and fewer examples of Latinx-serving attitudes when implementing PBF-related changes.

(3) All participants encountered PBF within a statewide environment of control achieved through regulatory complexity and competitive dynamics. Ultimately, PBF and the broader policy environment were effective in embedding neoliberal values and attitudes among participants.

While there are numerous previous studies on Texas's PBF policy (e.g., Li & Kennedy, 2018; McKinney & Hagedorn, 2017; Natale & Jones, 2018; Thornton & Friedel, 2016), there has been a lack of recent studies on the topic. However, there is evidence that long-term PBF policies

may impact institutions differently over time (Li & Kennedy, 2018). Further, the state's progress on its higher education master plan, which set a goal for 60 percent of adults earning a credential by 2030, has stagnated, particularly with completion rates for Latinx/a/o and Black students (THECB, 2021). Unfortunately, previous research has revealed various unintended consequences associated with PBF, notably for MSIs (Li & Kennedy, 2018) and minoritized student populations (Ortagus et al., 2020).

Therefore, this study addressed a timely gap in the research on how community college administrators at HSIs made sense of PBF and related policies. It was evident from the participants that there were inconsistent experiences with sensemaking, which can be attributed to differences in institutional and individual access to power and decision-making. The quality of sensemaking can influence how well administrators and institutions understand, respond, and adjust to PBF over time. All administrators demonstrated personal commitments to improving student success but noted that PBF did not provide a roadmap for how to improve outcomes. From their first-hand experience, they noted the unique role of community colleges and the range of challenges their students face.

Therefore, this study presents important implications for higher education practitioners, policymakers, and researchers. As my participants hinted, equity-minded approaches to policy implementation are possible, given the right resources and time. Researchers must pursue future study to develop an in-depth understanding of what resources and knowledge are integral to building this capacity. In the meantime, practitioners and policymakers cannot wait, and need to take action to ensure that PBF and other Completion Agenda policies advance student access, equity, and success. Practitioners must leverage the opportunities presented by educational policy, regardless of policymakers' race-consciousness. There is ample evidence that PBF does

not achieve its intended goals, and policymakers should work alongside higher education leaders to identify both the metrics and state support necessary to align policy responsive to PBF requirements with the mission and purpose of community colleges.

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APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

4/23/2021

IRB Approval of Minimal Risk (MR) Protocol

PI: Kathleen Launius
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Yi Leaf Zhang
Department: Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
IRB Protocol #: 2021-0481
Study Title: *Power, Identity, and Ideology: An Examination of Community College Administrators' Sensemaking on Performance-Based Funding*

Effective Approval: 4/23/2021

The IRB has approved the above referenced submission in accordance with applicable regulations and/or UTA's IRB Standard Operating Procedures.

Principal Investigator and Faculty Advisor Responsibilities

All personnel conducting human subject research must comply with UTA's IRB Standard Operating Procedures and RA-PO4, Statement of Principles and Policies Regarding Human Subjects in Research. Important items for PIs and Faculty Advisors are as follows:

- **Notify Regulatory Services of proposed, new, or changing funding source**
- Fulfill research oversight responsibilities, IV.F and IV.G.
- Obtain approval prior to initiating changes in research or personnel, IX.B.
- Report Serious Adverse Events (SAEs) and Unanticipated Problems (UPs), IX.C.
- Fulfill Continuing Review requirements, if applicable, IX.A.
- Protect human subject data (XV.) and maintain records (XXI.C.).
- Maintain HSP (3 years), GCP (3 years), and RCR (4 years) training as applicable.

REGULATORY SERVICES
The University of Texas at Arlington, Center for Innovation
202 E. Border Street, Suite 300, Arlington, Texas 76010, Box #19188
(Phone) 817-272-3723 (Email) regulatoryservices@uta.edu (Web) www.uta.edu/rs

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Greetings,

I am a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Texas at Arlington. I am currently conducting a qualitative dissertation research study on how community college administrators at Hispanic-serving community colleges make sense of Texas's performance-based funding policy, the Student Success Points program.

This study is an important part of my requirements as a doctoral candidate and the information gleaned from this research will help inform my futures practices as a higher education administrator, as well as other leaders who are expected to navigate an increasingly complex policy environment. I appreciate your willingness to help and support me in the endeavor.

I am seeking participants to partake in two (2) one-on-one interviews, each of which will last approximately 40-60 minutes. The interviews will be conducted virtually on mutually agreed upon dates utilizing Zoom technology. I am contacting you because I believe that you would be an eligible participant, based on the following criteria:

- Currently employed full-time at a community college in North Texas designated as a Hispanic-serving institution
- Have worked at your current institution for a minimum of three years.
- Have significant responsibility or oversight of a department, program, or division within one of the following areas: Student Affairs (e.g., Student Success, Student Services), Enrollment Management, Academic Affairs, Workforce Development, Institutional Research, Business or Financial Services, and/or Communications, Marketing, and/or Public Affairs.

In the interviews, participants will be asked to reflect upon and share their thoughts regarding their perceptions and understandings of the Student Success Points program and how they have responded to its implementation at their college. The first interview will focus on building rapport, establishing your understanding, and identifying organizational responses. For the second interview, I ask that you provide an artifact (e.g., article, presentation materials, THECB materials) that has influenced your sensemaking related to the Student Success Points program.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please complete this screening survey. If you know someone who would qualify, you may forward this message or please contact Katy Launius at kathleen.launius@mavs.uta.edu.

Thank you for your assistance!

Sincerely,

Kathleen (Katy) Launius
Doctoral Candidate
University of Texas at Arlington Educational Leadership & Policy Studies

APPENDIX C: SCREENING SURVEY

Contact Information
First Name:
Last Name:
Phone:
Email Address:

Are you currently employed as an administrator at a community college in Texas?
YES or NO

Have you been employed at your current institution for at least three (3) years?
YES or NO

Is your community college a designated Hispanic-serving institution?
YES or NO

APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT

The University of Texas at Arlington (UTA)

Informed Consent for Minimal Risk Studies with Adults

My name is Katy Launius, and I am asking you to participate in a UT Arlington research study titled, "Power, Identity, and Ideology: An Examination of Community College Administrators Sensemaking on Performance-Based Funding." This research study is about understanding how community college administrators at Hispanic serving institutions make sense of performance-based funding in Texas. You can choose to participate in this research study if you are at least 18 years old and serve as an administrator at a Hispanic-serving community college in North Texas and have worked at your current institution for a minimum of 3 years.

Reasons why you might want to participate in this study include reflecting and learning from on your own experiences and contributing to the research on Hispanic serving community colleges, but you might not want to participate if you are unable to commit to two interviews and providing an artifact for discussion. Your decision about whether to participate is entirely up to you. If you decide not to be in the study, there won't be any punishment or penalty; whatever your choice, there will be no impact on any benefits or services that you would normally receive. Even if you choose to begin the study, you can also change your mind and quit at any time without any consequences.

If you decide to participate in this research study, the list of activities that I will ask you to complete for the research are two individual interviews, each lasting approximately 40-60 minutes and occurring within one week of each other. Both interviews will be recorded and transcribed. At the second interview, you will be asked to bring a document that has influenced your understanding of performance-based funding. This document will be de-identified before being saved and will not be published publicly. However, it will be included in my data analysis process. Again, each interview should take about 40-60 minutes and there will be two interviews, with the potential for a brief follow-up to clarify any items. You will receive your interview transcripts to review. Although you probably won't experience any personal benefits from participating, the study activities are not expected to pose any additional risks beyond those that you would normally experience in your regular everyday life or during routine medical / psychological visits.

You will not be paid for completing this study. There are no alternative options to this research project.

The research team is committed to protecting your rights and privacy as a research subject. We may publish or present the results, but your name will not be used. While absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, the research team will make every effort to protect the confidentiality of your records as described here and to the extent permitted by law. If you have questions about the study, you can contact me at kathleen.launius@mavs.uta.edu or 262-309-9805. For questions about your rights or to report complaints, contact the UTA Research Office at 817-272-3723 or regulatoryservices@uta.edu.

You are indicating your voluntary agreement to participate by signing on the line below and returning electronically or by agreeing to begin this interview.

IRB Approval Date: 04/23/21
V. 2021-0481

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Interview 1

Introductory Remarks: I am conducting a qualitative study of how community college administrators understand the state's performance-based funding policy, called the Student Success Points program. In particular, how it has impacted your institution's mission and vision related to student access and success. As a reminder, you can choose not to answer any question at any time or withdraw from the study at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Role and Institution Introduction:

1. How would you describe your campus's knowledge and familiarity with the policy?
    a. In what ways have you communicated with the college (individuals or collectively) about performance-based funding?
    b. Who and what departments have played key roles in the implementation of performance-based funding? How are they involved?
    c. How often do you have conversations about institutional performance or outcomes? And with whom?
2. So, shifting to your perspective, how would you describe the purpose and implementation of the Student Success Points (SSP) program?
    ~~a.~~ How did you come to know about SSP?
    b. How has your understanding changed or not change over time? And why?
3. What is your experience with the Student Success Points formula?
4. What role does state funding play in institutional strategic planning and operation?
    a. How has it and SSP influenced your institution's mission or goals? (*Remind, if necessary, equity focus/Hispanic-serving designation*)
    b. How has SSP influenced student success?
5. What changes in planning have you made in response to SSP?
6. What impact has the Student Success Points program had on your institutional funding?
7. Is there something else you think I should know to understand SSP better?

Interview 2

Introductory Remarks: Thank you again for joining me. As a reminder, I am conducting a qualitative study of how community college administrators understand the state's performance-based funding policy, called the Student Success Points program. In particular, how it has impacted your institution's mission and vision related to student access and success. As a

reminder, you can choose not to answer any question at any time or withdraw from the study at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. So, to get started, you provided an artifact that helped you understand the Student Success Points (SSP) program. Can you please describe it?
    a. Where did the artifact originate?
    b. How was it presented?
    c. How has it influenced your understanding of SSP?
    d. Can you share why you selected this artifact to bring?
2. How would you describe how SSP has impacted your day-to-day work and understanding of your role?
3. Now let's talk about performance measurement/accountability measures in general.
    a. Can you share an example of a time where you disagreed or questioned an institutional policy or program that was connected to performance measurement? What kind of response did you receive?
4. Is there something else you think I should know to understand SSP better?