

Strategic Blunder? Strategic Planning for Changing Demographics in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

A strategic plan is not a simple goal to be reached, rather in many ways it is similar to the brain that guides the collective actions of members of an organization (Bryson, 2004). In the widest sense, a strategic plan can actually manifest a certain vision of reality by structuring the perceptions and actions of those members (Bryson, 2004; Allan, 2007). More importantly, no plan is ever neutral or independent of larger societal influence (Bryson, 2004; Peet, 2009). This point is especially salient in regards to the volatile nature of globalization and neoliberalism, both of which have restructured many organizations' missions from service to profit accumulation (Giroux, 2011). This paper will examine the Federal Department of Student Financial Aid's strategic plan and its treatment of nontraditional students in light of globalization and neoliberalism. Nontraditional students in higher education are students that either attends school on a part-time basis or work over 20 hours a week. The reason for examining this population is because the numbers of nontraditional students are drastically increasing (McSwain, 2008). In order to analyze the strategic plan in the context of the wider social environment, this paper operates from a framework rooted in critical theory and postmodernism. The main purpose of the framework is to identify "simulacra." Simulacra are terms which were assumed by the writers to signify a certain state of affairs, when in actuality, the terms did not represent what the writers assumed they represented. If organizations operate from simulacra, they can unknowingly act in ways counter to their own well-being and contrary to the well-being of the people they serve. The investigation turned up a number of potentially damaging simulacra and attempted to correct them.

The Problem of Truth in the Contemporary Age

The notion of representation has entertained thinkers for centuries. How can anything, any idea, any concept or object truly be represented by a language, institution, idea or image? In the information age the notion of representation is even more pressing. Information is now viral; it proliferates and leaves its referents, or what it is supposed to accurately represent, behind. This is a contention of many thinkers who are considered postmodern. They dispense with the notion that a sign can accurately signify a referent or what it is supposed to represent (Baudrillard, 1994; Bess & Dee, 2008). Twenty-four hour news streams, reality television, professional sports, billboards, radio, in short, the images of our daily life, all merge into a common stream (Debord, 2011). And it is this stream of images that has become our reality, what we take as "true" (Debord, 2011). Debord called it "the spectacle." Truth is the accurate correspondence of a signifier to that which it signifies which is called the referent (Baudrillard, 1993; Baudrillard, 1994). The signifier can be an image, a word or notion. For instance the terms "research" or "nontraditional student" represent or signify certain actions or things which are the referents. In the spectacle however, this notion of truth is increasingly challenged. Globalization that ensues according to the dictates of neoliberalism has altered the relationship of signifier to the signified or the referent. Neoliberals see the acquisition of profit by individuals and private companies as the main determinant of social progress and to impede this is to block social progress (Giroux, 2011; Rhoads & Torres, 2006). This unrestrained pursuit of profits and sanctioned greed has aggravated the sign to

signifier relationship because truth is made to serve profit (Giroux, 2011). If signifiers do not accurately signify or represent their referents, the truth, propaganda and fantasy become increasingly entwined in the spectacle.

In regards to strategic planning for public institutions, this absence of truth and accurate representation is especially challenging. How can an organization plan for the future in this volatile environment? One area in particular where this unstable notion of truth is a particular concern is in regards to postsecondary access and retention. Due to neoliberalism's dismantling of the welfare state and public institutions in order to allow the free market to operate efficiently, college tuition is increasing annually. As a result, the number of nontraditional students is growing and all within the backdrop of an increased lack of state and federal funding of higher education (Rhoads & Torres, 2006). In addition, there are a growing number of occupations that do or will require higher education (McSwain, 2008). Higher education institutions, along with society in general, are facing a grave situation. More college graduates are needed at a time when more students are not able to attend and complete college. In short, we as a society are facing the prospect of the next generation being less educated (McSwain, 2008; Slaughter & Rhodes, 2004). A new, radical vision of strategic planning may be able to mitigate some of the harmful results of neoliberal globalization. Specifically, a vision rooted in postmodernism and critical theory.

Research Objectives for the Study

The Affordable Healthcare Act passed Congress in March of 2010. This act made the federal government the main supplier of federal aid for college loans. The Department of Education's financial division created a new strategic plan to undertake this effort. The strategic plan tried to tackle many of the issues regarding funding and access. In particular, the creators of the plan made a major effort to attract and accommodate nontraditional students. Nontraditional students are defined as students who attend postsecondary education on a part-time basis and/or who work 20 hours a week or more. Unfortunately, as the literature shows, the term nontraditional student is a complex and multi-faceted term that is not easily classifiable. It is my contention that despite the seemingly well-meaning efforts of the DOE, the truth that the plan assumes regarding nontraditional students and funding issues may not be accurate or identical with what is actually occurring. The creators of the strategic plan may unintentionally manifest a vision of reality which actually further impedes access and funding of higher education to the population it is trying to help (Allan, 2007). While the federal strategic plan may not be able to be changed, it is my hope that this analysis can help guide strategic plans of higher education institutions. Writers of other strategic plans must be cognizant of these social forces which affect nontraditional students. This paper will employ postmodern and critical theories to assist institutions in their strategic planning, specifically to grapple with the elusive notion of truth faced by educational institutions in the age of the spectacle.

Using a postmodern and critical theory framework, the aim of this paper is to examine whether the creators of the Federal strategic plan adhere to a truthful notion or referent of nontraditional students. This study will seek to examine a series of assumptions:

1. The term "nontraditional student" as employed by the writers of the strategic plan is too simple to represent the complex nature of nontraditional students and the situations these students face.

2. The misrepresentation may have the potential to promote certain detrimental attitudes and behaviors toward nontraditional students on the part of the federal government and institutions of higher education.
3. These misrepresentations can be “realigned” and made to correspond with a more truthful referent that more accurately represents what a nontraditional student is and the situations these students face.

It is my contention that the notion of the dialectic can be used to correct or realign the simulacra with a more truthful referent. The dialectic can be described as a perpetual negation of outdated and oppressive segments. These outdated elements exist in a present state of affairs and are negated in order to reach a higher, more beneficial state (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1969; Kellner, 1992; Jay, 1996). The more accurate and truthful referent will be created by drawing on the work of scholars, government reports and other policy reports. And most importantly, as a product of a dialectical analysis, the referent will not be static, but rather in the form of questions to engender continual social action.

Literature Review: A Brief Overview of Previous Works

The literature review has been divided into two sections. The first section deals with literature on nontraditional students. The second section deals with postmodernism, critical theory and relevant literature.

Literature on Nontraditional Students

The term nontraditional will evoke certain preconceptions in the minds of faculty, administrators and even students themselves. In 2009, the non-profit organization, Public Agenda, put out a report entitled “With their Whole Lives Ahead of Them” written by Jean Johnson, Jon Rochkind, Amber Ott and Samantha DuPont. The report tried to debunk certain myths regarding nontraditional working students, specifically working students who dropped out of a two or four year school without completing a degree. Some of these myths were that working students were lazy, bored, procrastinators and/or stupid. The authors of the report argued instead that an increasing number of students have to work while finishing their degree (Johnson, Rochkind, Ott & DuPont, 2009). The authors also illustrated how working over 20 hours a week is a major challenge to completion. That is why I chose this classification for nontraditional students. These facts are underscored by a look at the National Center for Education Statistics, as well as the US Census.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, in 1970 the amount of students working over 20 hours a week attending college full time stood at 14.4%. In 2003, it stood at 29.5%. Additionally, 45% of all undergraduates attending four year schools worked over 20 hours a week in 2009, and 60% of students at two year schools worked 20 hours or more a week (Johnson, Rochkind, Ott & DuPont, 2009). Students attending part-time have risen as well. In 1967 roughly one sixth of all undergraduate students at both four year and two year schools attended part-time. In contrast, by 2009, part-time students comprised over one third of all undergraduates. Part-time students comprised roughly one sixth of the undergraduate population at public four year institutions and over fifty percent of students at public two year institutions in 2009. The bulk of part-time students attend community colleges, however, the number of part-time students at four year colleges has risen since 1967. Similarly, in the fall of 2009, over 33% of all undergraduate students were over the age of 25 (NCES, 2011). On the whole,

the numbers of part-time students, students who work full time and adult students comprise a sizeable portion of total students.

The growing income disparity in the United States has made full time or near full time employment a necessity for many students, either to support themselves or their families (Fowler, 2009; Johnson, Rochkind, Ott & DuPont, 2009). A majority of the wealth in the United States, in the form of monetary wealth, stocks, real estate and investments is held by a small minority of the population (Fowler, 2009; Peet, 2009). Since the 1980s, income disparity has increased, real wages have remained steady or decreased, inflation has increased and tuition costs have outpaced wages (Fowler, 2009; Slaughter & Rhodes, 2004). Responsible for the growing inequality is the neoliberal dismantling of the welfare state and public institutions in the name of global progress and free trade (Giroux, 2011). According to the US Census, in 2000 the median household income rose by roughly 1,000 dollars for the lowest fifth of the population and 3,000 dollars for the second lowest fifth. By contrast, during the same period, the median household income rose by over 27,000 dollars for highest fifth and by over 35,000 dollars for the richest 5% (US Census, 2011). In tandem with this, college tuition has increased dramatically over the last 20 years as a result of widespread state budget cuts (Fowler, 2009; King, 2000).

Johnson, Rochkind, Ott & DuPont argued that nontraditional students posed a moral question for policymakers and higher education administrators. The higher education system has to learn to contend with the growing population of nontraditional students or it will fail them and the country as a whole (Johnson, Rochkind, Ott & DuPont, 2009). This makes the claims in this study relevant and of pressing concern. What the literature points to is the fact that nontraditional students occupy the lower end of the traditional/nontraditional hierarchy. While this division is implicit, it is evident in funding patterns, such as the fact that traditional students receive a majority of funding. The hierarchy is also embedded in institutional practices. As an example of this, many times office hours are catered to traditional students (McSwain, 2008; Merisotis, 2011; Pusser et. al. 2008). Further, the term nontraditional is taken to represent a definable population. In reality this population is extremely complex and defies simple, binary categorization. In short, the American Higher Education system was built for the traditional, full time, 18-24 year old student (McSwain, 2008; Pusser et. al. 2008). Right now however, as the literature cited above makes clear, there is a growing number of nontraditional students. It is crucial for strategic planners to recognize this. It is my contention that the ideas of postmodernism and critical theory can give strategic planners a tool for better understanding this growing population.

Postmodernism, Critical Theory and other Relevant Literature

Modernism holds that signs and signified accurately correspond (Bess & Dee, 2008). Many thinkers labeled postmodern by contrast, dispense with the notion of representation. This is why I feel postmodernism can aid strategic planners by deepening their understanding of representation of phenomena in an information age. One of the most stringent criticisms of the notion of representation was put forth by the French thinker Jean Baudrillard (1994). Baudrillard argued that while members of modern society believe they experience reality, they actually live in a state of simulacra and hyper reality. A simulacrum is when a signifier no longer signifies what it is supposed to signify or represent, and this new, misrepresented state of affairs is actually taken as truth (Baudrillard, 1994). In hyper reality, images do not correspond to any type of referent or truth. In contemporary society, due to the advance of media technology, such as personal computers, photocopiers and now the internet, Baudrillard posited that simulacra are now

viral. With no need to correspond to any truthful referent, the media, advertisers, government propaganda and political pundits produce signifiers and images at a frenzied pace. The referent, or the truthful idea or statement that an image had to correspond to, has been lost in a sea of images. As a result of the loosening of signifier or image and its corresponding referents, images and signifiers are now produced in viral proportions. The notion of truthful representation, where an image accurately corresponds to something underneath it, is almost impossible to achieve in contemporary society (Baudrillard, 1994).

Of course, Baudrillard stopped here. He, like many other postmodern thinkers are skeptical of reform and societal change because they do not view oppression as a simple relationship between two neatly defined groups, such as oppressor and oppressed. Postmodernism is by no means a coherent school of thought, but it does lack a critical or liberating element. Rather it usually falls back into a self-destructive criticism, relativism and nihilism (Rhoads & Torres, 2006). This lack of liberating potential mainly stems from the fact that postmodernism became popular during the 1970s and 1980s. This was a time that saw the end of the revolutionary and optimistic 1960s, a severe economic recession, pervasive discrimination and a growing gap between the rich and the poor to name a few (Bess & Dee, 2006; Rhoads & Torres, 2006). This present paper however, while drawing on postmodern theories, is ultimately a work of critical theory.

Critical theory not only seeks to identify oppression, it seeks to do something about it. Critical theory can help establish truth in the information age and thus I feel it is imperative for strategic planners to use it. Two famous German critical theorists, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, argued that modern society was sinking into what they called the "new barbarism." The new barbarism emerged due to the tyranny of efficiency and standardization brought about by the industrialization of Western society during the nineteenth century. At the heart of this new barbarism was the separation of the sign from the referent or signifier (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1969). In the effort to give a formulaic, calculable meaning to the world in order to better manipulate it, modern science rendered the world chaotic by inaugurating this separation. In a later section, Adorno and Horkheimer argued that the use of words was hijacked by science and now constitutes a type of modern magic. Words, without any type of truth to correspond to; can be used to say anything. Adorno and Horkheimer argued that the separation between the sign and the image, between the sign and signified, is inevitable in modern society, but it tends toward a destruction of truth. Naturally this was not a static, objective truth as in the positivistic or modernist tradition; rather it was a dialectal and fluid truth which was always open to change. Horkheimer sought to use philosophy and critical theory to "name things," to try and pin down meaning in the amorphous sea of images (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1969; Jay, 1996; Kellner, 1992). This paper will follow Horkheimer and use philosophy to "name things," and specifically a referent or correspondence of truth, by way of a dialectal movement.

Adorno argued that when one attempts to apprehend reality, there is so much the human mind cannot comprehend. Dialectics only proceeds by this ever elusive attempt to capture what we cannot name (and building on what we do know) but nonetheless by identifying it and trying to understand it, at least in some degree. Adorno stated that when we do try to express the inexpressible, we must not simply equate idea and thing, but rather, see ideas and things or images and referents as part of a much wider constellation of meaning. Different societal phenomena are connected in vastly complex ways, yet many policymakers and others assume simple casual relationships. Adorno and Horkheimer noted that the dialectic does not render neat and easily classifiable information or discreet facts; rather the dialectic helps connect disparate pieces of

information and leads to social action (Adorno, 1973; Horkheimer, 1974; Adorno & Horkheimer, 1969). These abstract ideas can point to new directions of study for higher education especially when combined with the theories of academic capitalism.

Academic capitalism was first elucidated by Leslie and Slaughter in the late 1990s and again by Slaughter and Rhoades in the early 2000s. Academic capitalism argues that higher education has transitioned from a public social good to a private economic good due mainly to the influence of neoliberalism (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Higher education is a public good and as such became the target for neoliberalism. Neoliberals sought to make higher education a private market good by starving it of funds and support and thus forcing it to compete on the global market for students, funds and resources (Rhoades & Torres, 2006). Academic capitalism, along with Adorno and Horkheimer's new barbarism, offers a relevant framework for assessing the growth of non-traditional students.

With regards to strategic planning, Bryson argued that many times strategic planning is seen as a linear process and that it could benefit from new and more dynamic conceptualizations (Bryson, 2004). One such theory is Principal Agent Theory (PAT). PAT holds that principals, in this case federal and state policymakers, many times adhere to different goals than the people who actually write the plans, such as administrators and faculty members (Auld, 2010). Their goals may overlap, but many times are at odds with educators (Auld, 2010). Thus, strategic planning at the university level must take this disjunction into account and governments and institutions must work more cooperatively, as far as is possible (Auld, 2010). I feel this is too optimistic. The assumption of PAT is that the federal and various state governments are rational entities, which can be made to "see the light." I am too cynical to believe that policy is strictly a rational endeavor. The strategic plans of institutions of higher education, both public and private, must contend with the political or irrational aspect of governmental agencies. Kritsonis argued that postmodern theories can enhance the strategic planning process for educational institutions (Kritsonis, 2007). I would add that ideas from critical theory are just as valuable for strategic planning. I feel that a critical analysis of the DOE's plan, with a postmodern/critical theory framework can yield and positively modify the faulty reality manifested.

Methodology

The analysis of the strategic plan entailed a three part process which aligns with the three initial research assumptions posed in this study. The first component of the framework attempted to address the first research assumption, which assumed that the strategic plan misrepresented nontraditional students. This was accomplished by determining if any portion in the plan did not match the actual experience of nontraditional students as it currently exists.

To analyze potential misrepresentations, I used a discourse analysis. Discourse analysis looks to the actual text and language of a document in order to understand how the words and language position or frame certain persons or events (Allan, 2007). Each section of the plan was examined to determine what type of signifiers and subsequent explanations of signifiers were used to represent nontraditional students. Signifiers in this case represent the actual words used, while the signified are the ideas/notions the signifiers are supposed to denote. I did not arbitrarily identify terms of interest. Instead I drew on the relevant literature and created a list of common terms that are used to label nontraditional students and which carry narrow, limiting or even demeaning connotations. Each time a word or phrase appeared, it was counted. The full list of terms and their frequency appear in Appendix A, Tables One and Two. In addition to subject

positions regarding nontraditional students, terms referring to neoliberalism, capitalism and modernism were also identified and tabulated for the strategic plan. Some examples of relevant terms are economic, globalism, data, profit, industry and consumer. The full list of terms and frequency appear in Appendix A.

The strategic plan was then examined for a second time. Based on the above frequency counts, the context of the terms within the text and the background literature, I formed categories. The rationale here was to identify a reoccurring term which may seem innocuous or neutral, but which actually carries with it a specific set of meanings or connotations. Further, the terms that I identified were repeated frequently throughout the document, subconsciously reinforcing their connotative meanings. To create a category, I situated the reoccurring, connotative terms found above in the context of the particular literature I was using.

First, I situated the terms traditional and nontraditional as part of a dualistic hierarchy with traditional being superior to nontraditional. As a review of the literature makes clear, there is a division between traditional and nontraditional students on college campuses. This division entails funding, access and policymaker perceptions. Additionally, the statistics from the NCES and US Census make it clear that one of the main factors that cause the growth of nontraditional students is on the rise, the growing income gap in US society. In this context, nontraditional is no longer a neutral term, but a morally laden term. It is a term that occupies a definite place on a hierarchy, as well as a term or condition that at least in part is the result of economic and political policies. I created the traditional/nontraditional category to reflect this hierarchy.

The next category was neoliberal discourse. I devised this category by situating the terms from Table One and Two within not only the literature on nontraditional students, but also the literature on postmodernism and critical theory. I specifically looked at Adorno and Horkheimer's notion of the "new barbarism." The terms linked to the language of business and efficiency, or neoliberalism, such as customer service, performance efficiency and cost-benefit analysis are indicative. As Adorno and Horkheimer note, these are the notions that constitute the new barbarism, and the new barbarism falls in line with neoliberal discourse. Regarding academic capitalism, the market acts as the sole source of merit and virtue, and the guiding criteria is efficiency (Giroux, 2011; Rhoads & Torres, 2006; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). It was not just the frequency of these terms however, but the frequency of neoliberal terms in conjunction with what was *not* present in the strategic plan. There was no mention of liberal education, citizenship, humanism, fine arts or critical or transformational thinking. The only language used to describe higher education was that of neoliberalism. The strategic plan casts neoliberalism as the natural and unproblematic state of affairs. A reading of critical theory, however, shows how capitalism and neoliberalism can be extremely problematic. This was the rationale for the creation of the neoliberal discourse category.

The final category was the structural versus social opposition. The main things that led me to create this category were: the nine references to "the system" in the strategic plan and the many references to advertising and customer service in the strategic plan. The assumption of the writers of the strategic plan seem to be that there is a natural "system" of higher education and it is fluctuations in the system that causes tuition to increase. Further, some actions that can be taken to influence "customers" in the system is increasing efficiency and advertising to reach wider audiences. The absence of any mention of moral, political or social elements to the system led me to create the structural versus social category. The writers of the strategic plan did not seem to take any social factors into account. The lone exception was that the strategic plan mentioned that "these times" will see increasing tuition costs, and this is a stretch. The category is meant to

underscore the fact that the writers of the documents seemed to neglect the role that social factors play in policy and organizational behaviors. This was a prominent theme in the strategic plan. This is the rationale for creating this category.

The creation of frequency counts and the subsequent creation of categories from them was the attempt to examine the first research assumption: how do the documents represent nontraditional students? The next task was to decide whether the categories contradicted the evidence gathered from the various policy reports and research regarding nontraditional students, as well as economic and societal trends in general. This task was meant to examine the second research assumption: misrepresentations may have the potential to promote certain detrimental attitudes and behaviors toward nontraditional students.

This task was accomplished by comparing the information in the strategic plan, specifically the information as it appeared in the created categories, to the information of the policy reports and related research, but in a different way than in the previous task. This time, I drew on Baudrillard's (1994) notion of altered truth. I tried to determine if the portrayal of nontraditional students in the strategic plan represented the phenomena of the nontraditional student, as evidenced by the policy reports and the literature. How well did the signifier, nontraditional student, really represent what a nontraditional student is and the social, cultural, economic and political environment that surrounds her, at least according to the literature? More than this, I wanted to determine if this inaccurate portrayal had or could become a new truth. This called for an assessment of whether the misrepresentations had the potential to restructure human behavior. Did the signifier promote certain attitudes or actions on the part of administrators, faculty or students? The categories can be seen as having the potential for restructuring behavior, and represent the criteria that are present for future decision making. In essence, if nontraditional students are perceived in a misleading way, within the structural confines of the neoliberal discourse. These perceptions may help to drive decisions of future policymakers, higher education administrators and even students themselves, as well as their actions.

The third and final task of the methodology aligned with the last research assumption. I wanted to determine if the misrepresentations in the strategic plan, which subsequently had the potential to become new truths, could be made to correspond with a more accurate referent. Also, I wanted to determine whether, in the absence of a true objective reality, if I could create a useable one? Could I create truth? In order to negate the false truth or misrepresentations found in the above categories and create something new, I drew on the notion of the dialectic. As mentioned earlier, the dialectic is a progressive notion which incorporates the beneficial aspects of the present situation while transforming it through criticism. In a dialectal framework, truth is never static. The truth that I sought to create with the dialectic would be fluid. Each misrepresentation in the strategic plan that did not accurately represent nontraditional students was corrected by creating a new referent for it to correspond to that was more accurate and truthful.

Presentation of Simulacra as Derived from the Strategic Plan

Using the categories obtained from the word frequency counts and contextual analysis, I have identified three simulacra engendered by the strategic plan of the DOE.

1. The creation of an artificial hierarchy
2. Neglecting the societal aspects of policy
3. Unquestioned acceptance of the neoliberal paradigm

Creation of an artificial hierarchy. Traditional students are taken as the norm and nontraditional students are placed outside this norm, they are seen as second tier status, something that needs to be fixed, when in actuality, nontraditional students are becoming the norm.

Neglecting the social aspect of policy. If policymakers and bureaucrats fail to identify the economic problems as social problems, they will be blind to the real barriers for many nontraditional students. Simple Band-Aids such as increasing the amount of aid offered may not be enough to fix the system. Social problems cannot be corrected with simple structural fixes. Neglecting the political and social aspect may lead people to believe that only structural fixes are necessary when in fact they are impotent without corresponding political and social changes. Effective political and social changes however are much harder to attain. Of course the DOE's strategic plan and policy itself cannot entertain such controversial positions; so it casts them as neutral, as simple structural malfunctions that must be fixed. As Habermas (1973) notes, a government must appear neutral and above partisan interests to remain legitimate in the eyes of the governed. However, without this recognition of social realities the supposedly structural problems will remain simulacra because the signifier (solely structural problems) does not correspond to the signified (deeper social problems).

Unquestioned assumption of neoliberal paradigm. Neoliberal dominance is usually taken for granted in US political and economic policy (Fowler, 2009, Peet, 2009). The structuring of public institutions and processes similar to the free-market, to maximize efficiency and choice, is evident in higher education funding in general (Slaughter & Rhodes, 2004). With an unquestioned assumption of neoliberalism, anything that cannot be quantified may be overlooked. For example, student creativity, active citizenship and critical thinking are difficult notions to quantify and sell on the market. If nontraditional students are simply reduced to market analysis, many of the aforementioned dimensions (i.e. the notions of citizenship and creativity) will be lost because they cannot be quantified. Currently, strategic planners only see nontraditional students as consumers, and not citizens.

Negating the misrepresentations and the creation of a dialectal referent

The misrepresentations of the Strategic Plan will be negated by a series of questions. The use of questions promotes the dialectic and its potential for social action. Again, the answers are not absolute, but rather the first attempt at dialectally transforming the misrepresentations. Other scholars must engage with this work and modify, alter and critique it.

1. *Considering the economic changes in the United States over the last 30 years and the effects of globalization and demographics, how can the higher education student population be re-conceptualized so as not to negatively restructure human behavior?*
2. *What role do social, political and economic factors play in the emergence of nontraditional students?*
3. *Dialectally, what picture emerges of higher education and nontraditional students if neo-liberalism is not seen as the taken for granted paradigm?*
4. *Instead of only asking how should we fund nontraditional students, should we also be asking, why is increased funding needed?*

Considering the economic changes in the United States over the last 30 years and the effects of globalization and demographics; how can the higher education student population be re-conceptualized so as not to exclude particular members of it? Also, how can higher education students be conceptualized differently so as not to pigeonhole certain portions of them into misleading classifications which negatively restructure human behavior? Some of the groundwork has already been laid for these questions. Merisotis (2011) argued that the term 21st century student is more applicable than nontraditional student. The term draws attention to the unique and historical predicament of many students today. It cannot simply be an empty catchphrase however. Policymakers, administrators and students themselves must come to believe and understand this new terminology. Instead of relegation to a second tier position, the term 21st century student implies equal standing. Traditional students, as compared to nontraditional students, are not superior, more dedicated or more intelligent; they simply face different circumstances. It should also be noted that the new 21st century student/traditional demarcation may just simply reinforce the hierarchy because it still poses a hierarchy, a clear division. Perhaps we may have to view all higher education students as unique.

The artificial hierarchy of traditional/nontraditional or full time/part-time is the epitome of Adorno and Horkheimer's "new barbarism." To reduce students to pigeonholed classifications is to treat them as standardized parts. While this may be efficient and necessary to a degree in a larger bureaucratic system, it cannot be the only way students are viewed. Dialectally, this strictly quantitative view of students must be mediated or harmonized with a more qualitative understanding. Nontraditional student is a term which must be seen as historical, economic, cultural and political. The nontraditional label is incomplete because it does not represent the totality of what is a growing population in higher education. This leads into the next question.

What role do social factors play in the emergence of nontraditional students? If the social aspect is taken into account, nontraditional students are no longer structural issues, but students who are struggling in increasingly harsh economic and corresponding social conditions. Many of these students are employed part or full time, and they face rising income disparity and stagnant wages. All of which make it more difficult to attend school. The chances are that earning a college degree is the only way out of the economic burdens they face. A more educated populace, furthermore, benefits the country as a whole (Greenwood, 1997; McSwain, 2007). Dialectally, the structural assessment of nontraditional students must be mediated with the social assessment as well. Policymakers must understand the growing difficulties that nontraditional students face. This leads into the final questions

Dialectally, what picture emerges if neoliberalism is not seen as the taken for granted paradigm? Neoliberalism is largely responsible for the quantification of higher education phenomena, such as looking at students as customers. In addition, neoliberalism has contributed greatly to the growing income disparity in the United States. With this in mind, two further questions emerge: *How can higher education students be dialectally viewed as more than consumers/customers? Instead of only asking how we should fund nontraditional students, should we also be asking, why is increased funding needed? Lastly, how does a dominant conception of neoliberalism change the notion of "public" education, for both the individual and society?*

To view students as customers is not completely detrimental. Students, and especially nontraditional students, do act like customers in a variety of ways. They select programs based on convenience, flexibility and offerings; yet, to view them solely as customers may blind policymakers to more fundamental aspects of this growing

population. These students are not only customers, but citizens of a republic. As such, their education is not just a commodity, but a vital aspect of their political and social existence, and a vital aspect of the republic's survival. Education in a republic must be more than a commodity. Policymakers and bureaucrats must understand this vital function of education, especially in a global world (Giroux, 2011). Dialectally, the notion of student as consumer must be mediated with the notion of student as citizen. The notion of education as an individual commodity, or even as an economic advantage for the nation, must be mediated with the social and political benefits of an educated citizenry. The stakeholders in higher education funding are not simply students and colleges, but the nation itself.

The Department of Education's strategic plan simply tries to place a Band-Bid on the growing problems of higher education by arguing for more funding or for more efficient funding. While these are necessary measures, a singular focus on them obscures the reasons behind the need for increased funding. As mentioned earlier, neoliberalism has been one of the driving factors in creating the rising income disparity over the last 30 years (Peet, 2009; Slaughter & Rhodes, 2004). This can at least start a conversation among policymakers, higher education institutions, and the general public. It can force these various entities to rethink higher education funding completely. Is funding becoming scarcer because neoliberalism has fundamentally restructured the economy and society? Instead of relying on ever diminishing funds to finance a growing class of students, should education itself, not just funds, become more accessible to nontraditional students? This could include directing more funding to institutions themselves in an effort to lower costs. Of course this would not be a simple redirection of funds but a societal and political change; legislators and ultimately taxpayers would have to be convinced of not only the economic impacts, but the social benefits of an educated citizenry. The general public must take ownership and be made to understand the necessity of higher education. This would entail "educating the state" through lobbying and social activism.

In a global society, education may need to be thought of as a right of all, not a privilege (Pusser, 2008). Actually, it may need to be thought of as a duty of every citizen living in a republic. Of course this is a utopian vision, but the relationship between education and civic participation is obvious. If the numbers of nontraditional students continue to grow, this right and duty will be denied to a greater number of potential students. This is due to the fact that nontraditional students are still seen as nontraditional, or as a malfunction of a neutral system. A greater number of people without an education will obviously be a drain on the republic, as well as restrict the voices able to participate in the republic. Dialectally, neoliberalism's supposed unchallengeable nature should be mediated with the recognition of the adverse effects of neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism, which takes the individual and the free-market as immutable absolutes (Overtvelt, 2007; Reder, 1982) can erode the notion of public education, especially as it pertains to the growth of nontraditional students (Giroux, 2011). Through a neoliberal lens, nontraditional students are viewed mainly as individuals trying to buy a product on the free market. Further, this product is seen as a commodity and as fulfilling an individual need such as the individuals' need or desire for it, as well as a business need for the country as a whole. Education however is not solely a private good which translates to profit. The public aspect of education must be taken into account alongside the more atomistic profit minded conceptions.

Conclusions and Observations

The notion of public institutions is and has been under attack for roughly the last forty years (Bryson, 2004; Newfield, 2008; Peet, 2009; Plant, 2010; Slaughter & Rhodes, 2004; Washburn, 2005). This attack has mainly come from neoliberals who view the notion of the public as really an inept and corrupt bureaucracy (Plant, 2010). Strategic planners, as PAT holds, must be cognizant of this disconnect between policymakers and institutional goals. Unlike PAT however, institutional planners cannot hope for any idealistic solution or cooperation. Institutions of public higher education must understand they are operating in an increasingly hostile climate. Their strategic planning must come to reflect this. Unfortunately, as Vestritch (2008) has argued, up to this point, most institutional strategic planning has been driven solely by neoliberalism and a corresponding market ethos.

The methods offered in this paper can be one way to respond to the harsh realities facing the public sector. By identifying simulacra in the DOE's strategic plan and then creating a new, more truthful reality, institutions of higher education can adapt to the actual situation. In the widest sense then, the actions of the organization could be geared toward answering dialectal questions and notions posed in the new aggressive strategic plan. Organizational behavior and action may then become dialectal. In the process, institutions of higher education can circumvent the action of an increasingly irrational and hostile environment by creating a more accurate reality, at least for its immediate stakeholders.

Strategic planning is sometimes seen as a bureaucratic process. Many lament it, see it as useless and a waste of time (Bryson, 2004; Inbar, 2012). Perhaps there is an element of truth to this. If the process is revolutionized however, if it is seen from a new angle, it can become something more. The process I have outlined above makes strategic planning dialectal and progressive. If a dialectal strategic plan is adapted, for example if simulacra detection and rectification is actually written into the plan, members of organizations may act dialectally. The key however is not just to have individuals acting dialectally, but for their collective actions to be dialectic (Fullan, 2001). The collective actions of an organization can be geared not to mundane and structural goals, but to goals of action and transformation. This can push the organization in new directions. It can enable the organization to deal with the volatile political, social, economic and cultural changes that it now faces. Strategic planning may ultimately need to be a tool of empowerment.

Appendix A

Table 1: References to nontraditional students in the DOE' strategic plan

Nontraditional	9
Traditional	4
Vocational	6
[picture], full-time, adult learner	3

Table 2: References to neoliberalism in the DOE's strategic plan

Customer/customer service	30
Data	13
Advertising, preferences, choice, decision	16
References to "the system"	9
Propriety schools	3
Performance, efficiency	5
Taxpayer interests/cost-benefit analysis	3

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