

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: WHAT MAKES A COLLEGE WORTH IT? A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF CONSTRUCTIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL PRESTIGE IN U.S. HIGHER EDUCATION

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In the United States (U.S.), attending and graduating from college has been positioned as necessary for individuals to get a good job, earn a high salary, and be successful in life (Ashby-King & Anderson, 2022). However, not every college degree seems to be created equal as graduates of *elite* (i.e., highly selective, well resourced, highly ranked, prestigious) institutions have been found to experience an increased return on investment in comparison to their peers at less selective institutions (Ge et al., 2022). Colleges and universities then compete to increase their ranking and decrease the percentage of students they admit trying to gain prestige and symbolic capital in the marketplace of U.S. higher education (Blackmore, 2018; Brewer et al., 2002). As not every institution can be highly ranked, in addition to engaging in prestige-seeking behaviors, they also use communication and public relations practices to communicatively construct themselves as prestigious. Thus, I suggest that it is important to examine and understand how institutions are constructed as prestigious and how students interpret said constructions as they seek to gain capital themselves by attending college and earning a degree.

As determinations of what is deemed worthy capital in different fields creates the social structures that exist in said field, I took a critical public relations approach to examining this problem to understand how communicative constructions of prestige reinforce and/or challenge dominant ideologies—especially neoliberalism and whiteness. In this dissertation, I conducted a two-part qualitative study that included a textual analysis of articles related to prestige and rankings published in two media outlets and in-depth interviews and a follow-up questionnaire with currently enrolled college students. Based on my critical thematic analysis, I argue that discourses of institutional prestige functioned to reinforce the notion that higher education is a marketplace by focusing on competition, hierarchy, and exclusivity. As students interpreted these discourses, they were less focused on institutional prestige and more concerned with the social capital they would gain from an institution that would help them get good jobs post-graduation. Throughout this process, when interpreting institutional communication college students did not always trust the institutions. Therefore, they sought additional information from social media and their networks and interpreted said institutional communication in relation to other texts and discourses. Through this project, I advance theory by (1) emphasizing the agency individuals and publics have when they communicate with organizations; (2) theorize public relations as a vehicle for communicating the social and cultural capital an organization can offer publics; and (3) reinforce the ways discourses of institutional prestige function to reinforce neoliberalism and whiteness. I conclude by offering practical implications to inform public relations and communication practice within and beyond the context of higher education.

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HIGHER EDUCATION

by

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the future, when we have children and they're applying to colleges where do you think they're going to be going? Like no one is going to be getting into college at that point.

It's crazy. (Smith, 2021, 0:38:34)

In the United States (U.S.), over the past century, attending a college or university and earning a postsecondary degree has become the primary path to the middle-class (Eckel & King, n.d.). A college education has been central to understandings of how to achieve social mobility across U.S. society as it has become increasingly challenging to remain economically stable, let alone gain economic mobility without a bachelor's degree (Labaree, 2017; Skinner, 2019). In comparison to their peers who only received high school diplomas, college graduates earn more annually, are employed at higher rates, and are significantly less likely to be unemployed (Pew Research Center, 2014). It is no wonder that scholars have consistently argued that students and their parents believe that they must attend college to get a good job and earn a living wage post-graduation (Ashby-King & Anderson, 2022; Kranstuber et al., 2012).

Although earning a college degree is related to positive economic outcomes for graduates (Abel & Deitz, 2014), scholars have suggested that not all institutions of higher education are created equally in terms of their graduates' economic success (Ge et al., 2022; Ovink et al., 2018; Witteveen & Attewell, 2017). Attending a college that is highly selective with low admission rates—a key indicator of an *elite*, prestigious institution—has been suggested to offer an increased return on investment compared to attending a less selective institution (Ge et al., 2022). The benefits of attending a highly selective college go beyond students' on-campus experiences as graduates of these institutions have been found to gain employment more easily

and have increased short and long-term earnings (Abel & Deitz, 2014; Ovink et al., 2018; Witteveen & Attewell, 2017). These findings support the suggestion that, when it comes to economic opportunities in U.S. society, not only whether someone goes to college, but where they go to college matters (Iloh, 2018).

Students and their families have become increasingly concerned with institutional rankings because, although not empirically supported, in their minds the higher an institution is ranked the better the education they will receive (Brewer et al., 2002; Eckel, 2008). Simultaneously, the cost of college has been rising especially as public funding for higher education has decreased resulting in competition between institutions as they seek to communicate with prospective students that their institution is worth attending (Abel & Deitz, 2014; McClure, 2019). These dueling phenomena have led institutions to invest in prestige seeking behaviors with the intent of rising in the rankings and gaining research university status (e.g., becoming more selective, increasing research expenditure; Brewer et al., 2002; Blackmore, 2018), and increasing the amenities they offer students (e.g., luxury student housing; McClure, 2019; Mughan et al., 2022) to become more competitive in the market that is U.S. higher education. Not only have institutions invested in gaining prestige via institutional rankings, but they have also sought to communicatively construct themselves as prestigious by emphasizing the amenities they offer, comparing themselves to their peer institutions, and discussing their history, traditions, and longevity as markers of prestige (McClure, 2019; O'Meara, 2007; Ortagus, 2016).

Based on my discussion above, I suggest that the landscape of U.S. higher education is a *field* of networked institutions that create and reinforce hierarchies, power relations, and ideologies (e.g., neoliberalism, whiteness) as they determine and redetermine what is considered

as valuable capital within the U.S. higher education system (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Webb et al., 2002). Considering higher education as a field, institutions and individuals seek to advance their interests by gaining capital. Although economic capital is important, institutions of higher education often seek to gain and promote forms of symbolic capital which are created through the development of exclusive classification systems (Bourdieu, 2013; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). I posit that institutional prestige seeking behaviors are key strategies institutions use to gain symbolic capital that can be used to attract students and is subsequently transferred to those affiliated with the institution. However, since traditional notions of prestige (e.g., rankings) are a zero-sum game every institution cannot be highly ranked (Blackmore, 2018). I suggest that institutions use communication and public relations to communicatively construct themselves as prestigious within the field of higher education (Ihlen, 2007). In doing so, institutions also communicatively convey the symbolic capital students will gain by attending their institutions that can then be used to gain success post-graduation (Bourdieu, 2011).

The fact that scholars have lent empirical support to the notion that those who attend prestigious, highly selective colleges and universities fair better on the job market post-graduation and earn more throughout their lifetimes (see Ge et al., 2022; Ovink et al., 2018) lends some support to my suggestion that students can gain symbolic capital from the institutions they attend that can then be wielded to achieve success post-graduation. However, scholars have consistently argued that the most prestigious institutions often do not provide the best educations to their students (Brewer et al., 2002; Eckel, 2008). This incongruence suggests that institutions that are not focused on providing an outstanding educational experience for undergraduate students are viewed as prestigious and highly desirable, while institutions committed to undergraduate education are not thought of as good options in the minds of the public based on

the characteristics of higher education institutions currently valued in U.S. society. As scholars have identified this phenomenon—which I suggest is a problem—exists, the question now becomes how has this understanding of what makes a college or university worth attending has been reinforced and what opportunities are there to disrupt the reproduction of these hegemonic logics and the ideologies that guide them? Thus, the purpose of this dissertation project was to examine how institutional prestige is communicatively constructed through public relations and communication practices and how said constrictions are understood and interpreted by college students.

Guided by a critical public relations approach (e.g., Ciszek et al., 2022; L’Etang, 2005; Motion & Weaver, 2005), I sought to understand how public relations practices are used to reinforce and challenge hegemonic ideologies, specifically neoliberalism and whiteness, and shape students’ understandings of institutional prestige and the role their understanding plays in relation to their engagement with the U.S. system of higher education. As the epigraph I shared at the beginning of this chapter alludes to, getting accepted to college and deciding where to go are stressful and possibly life changing decisions for students. Thus, it is also important to question and examine how and why dominant understandings of this social phenomenon come to be and conceptualize communicative interventions that could support a more robust social understandings of the possibilities of higher education in the U.S. beyond attending a highly ranked institution.

To achieve the goals of this dissertation project, I conducted a two-part study that examined how institutional prestige was communicatively constructed by media outlets and institutions and how currently enrolled college students understood and interpreted said constrictions of prestige and institutional communication more broadly. First, I conducted a

textual analysis of 12 months' worth of articles published by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *InsideHigherEd*—two prominently read outlets that focus their reporting on higher education—that related to the notions of institutional prestige and rankings. Second, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interview and a follow-up qualitative questionnaire with currently enrolled college students.

Based on my critical thematic analysis (see Lawless & Chen, 2019) of all the data collected for this study, I argue that media outlets and institutions communicatively constructed institutional prestige through the lenses of competition, rankings, hierarchy, and exclusivity. Through their discourse they positioned higher education as a marketplace where institutions are competing for the best faculty and students. Those who had the resources to rise in the rankings were positioned as more worthwhile institutions. Therefore, when institutions communicated with prospective students they did so in ways that highlighted varying rankings and positioned themselves as different and better than peer institutions.

Although students articulated and were socialized toward these traditional notions of institutional prestige, as they described their college admissions process prestige was not a very salient factor when they evaluated institutions. Rather, they were more concerned with an institutions ability to help them develop the social capital they needed via networks and connections that would help them get a good job post-graduation. Participants emphasized that they did not often trust institutional communication about the opportunities they could offer and the success of their graduations because they felt like the institutions were simply trying to sell them on applying and enrolling. As participants engaged with and interpreted institutional communication and public relations efforts, they sought out additional information about the

institution from social media and their personal networks to help them evaluate the messages they were receiving from institutions.

Ultimately, I suggest that the discourses of institutional prestige I identified across my analysis functioned to reinforce the hegemonic logics of neoliberalism and whiteness. By positioning higher education as a marketplace, these discourses suggested that all individuals had an equal opportunity for success as long as they worked hard. Constructing higher education, through prestige, in this way reinforced the hegemonic logics of individualism and meritocracy that hide the socio-political and historical contexts that marginalizes countless members of U.S. society to preserve the illusion that higher education creates opportunities for social mobility rather than reinforcing existing hierarchies. Thus, I argue that these discourses of institutional prestige functioned to (re)produce neoliberalism and whiteness by emphasizing their underlying hegemonic logics of individualism and meritocracy.

Considering these findings, I posit this dissertation project advanced theory in three key areas. First, I propose a reorientation of public relations theory related to publics and organization-public relationships toward a multi-faceted understanding of publics as individuals and collectives that exert agency as they communicate with organizations and each other. Second, I theorize public relations as the vehicle for communicating the social and cultural capital an organization can offer publics, especially in the context of relationship building in higher education. Lastly, I further explicate the ways discourses of institutional prestige reinforce neoliberalism and whiteness by advancing market-driven notions of higher education.

As I conclude this dissertation, I offer practical implications that could be implemented by public relations and communication practitioners within and beyond the context of higher education. I emphasize possible approaches organizations can take toward fostering authentic

connections, providing public-centered examples that support their communication efforts, and communicating authenticity while centering publics' interests. Collectively, I suggest these practices could be enacted to resist functionalist approaches to public relations and relationship building and reorient organizations toward public and community centered approaches to communication.

Here, in chapter one, I have introduced this dissertation project by outlining the research problem and phenomenon that was studied and providing an overview of the findings and contributions this study makes. In chapter two I review the literature central to this study paying specific attention to critical approaches to public relations, defining U.S. higher education, introducing neoliberalism and whiteness as hegemonic ideologies, discussing Bourdieu's sociology, and conceptualizing institutional prestige. I conclude chapter two by emphasizing the five research questions that guided this project. In chapter three I explicate the method used to address my research question. I discuss my positionality and how I came to propose this project, the metatheoretical approach that guided this study, and outline the specific procedures I used to collect, analyze, and interpret the data at the center of this project. In chapter four I present the findings of my analysis and how they answer each research question. In chapter five I discuss this projects theoretical and practical implications and offer my concluding thoughts.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Across the United States (U.S.) attending college and earning a degree have been framed as the “correct” path young people should take to achieving success. From the perspective of students and their families, attending college is viewed as the primary way to obtain a stable job with a good salary (Ashby-King & Anderson, 2022). As U.S. higher education transitioned from an elite activity to an endeavor fundamental to achieving social mobility (Labaree, 2017), colleges and universities were influenced by market forces because earning a degree became a product students consumed on their path to a career and successful life (Giroux, 2020). This has led institutions of higher education to use communication to effectively position themselves in the market to attract top students and faculty who will be successful and garner notoriety for their institution that can be used by institutional leaders to further promote their brand.

Central to this positioning is the concept of institutional prestige which is predominantly achieved by engaging in institutional practices that propel institutions up the rankings (e.g., increasing admissions selectivity, research output, and financial expenditure; Brewer et al., 2002; O’Meara, 2007). However, with over 4,200 colleges and universities in the U.S., it is impossible for most of them to become household names and gain prestige by increasing their ranking. Engaging in the practices necessary to increase their rankings, for many institutions, can be counterintuitive to their mission and purpose. Yet, these institutions are compelled to compete for students in a *market* framed by prestige and competition. I argue that examining institutional practices that garner prestige via rankings, although an important metric, does not allow for a complete understanding of institutional prestige seeking and ultimately limits our ability to understand how students and other key publics make sense of what it means for an institution to be “prestigious” and to offer an excellent education—if they connect these phenomena at all.

Therefore, I posit that it is important to examine how institutions communicatively construct themselves as prestigious and how their framing is interpreted and understood by students and suggest a critical public relations approach as a useful foundation to consider this problem.

In this chapter, I review the literature that framed this dissertation project. I begin by outlining critical approaches to public relations as the grounding for this project and note how I define U.S. higher education for the purpose of this study. Next, I review theorizing on neoliberalism, whiteness, and Bourdieu's articulation of field, habitus, and capital in relation to higher education as the sensitizing theoretical concepts guiding this study. Finally, I conceptualize prestige as it is understood in relation to U.S. higher education and conclude by outlining the five research questions that guided this dissertation project.

Critical Approaches to Public Relations Research

Throughout public relation's history as an academic discipline, scholars (e.g., Grunig, 2006; Grunig et al., 2006) have privileged a functionalist paradigm—the view that all public relations research and practice should support the achievement of organizational ends (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Edwards, 2012). In doing so, they sought to produce an *edifice* of descriptive and normative theory that outlined public relations' contribution to the achievement of organizational goals and ends (Grunig, 2006). Although this endeavor was successful in clearly defining the discipline, by creating an overarching, dominant approach to public relations scholarship and casting any criticism to the approach as unwarranted or unjustified, James Grunig and his colleagues (e.g., Grunig, 2006; Grunig et al., 2006) have, in many ways, stifled the development of public relations scholarship and limited the possibility for public relations scholars to make contributions beyond the narrow scope of the functionalist public relations paradigm.

Since the early 2000s, public relations scholars researching from the margins of the discipline have made a consistent push to move beyond the constraints of the functionalist approach toward understanding public relations as a social practice (L'Etang, 2005; Motion & Weaver, 2005). Indeed, critical scholars have challenged the discipline to reconsider its foundation and ask new questions. Scholars have pushed beyond the notion of reputation and image repair in crisis communication research to examine contested meaning making (Ashby-King & Aragón, 2022; Iannacone, 2021), argued that organizations—specifically corporations—have a responsibility to marginalized communities because they have benefitted from their oppression (Logan, 2021), and sought to give voice to those often marginalized and unheard in public relations scholarship (Place & Ciszek, 2021; Waymer & Heath, 2007). These examples show the important contributions that public relations, as a discipline, can make when scholars challenge the assumptions of the functionalist paradigm and consider the implications of public relations practices from the perspective of publics and society at large (Edwards, 2012). Below, I begin by defining critical public relations approaches broadly and outline specific critical approaches that scholars have used to frame critical public relations research. Based on this approach I articulate how I position this project in relation to the public relations discipline's focus on relationships.

Defining Critical Public Relations

Broadly, critical public relations is an approach to scholarship that falls under the umbrella of what Edwards (2012) described as non-functional approaches to the discipline. When describing non-functional approaches, Edwards (2012) outlined three central assumptions: (1) public relations is not confined to the organizational context, allowing scholars to move away from managerialist approaches; (2) public relations should be considered in social and cultural

terms as the practice is shaped by the society and culture in which it occurs; and (3) public relations is not a value-neutral practice and can be used to reinforce and challenge hegemonic power structures in society. Although not specific to critical approaches, these assumptions provide a shared starting point for most, if not all, of the approaches to public relations scholarship that are considered critical.

Within the public relations literature, scholars have suggested that critical research disrupts and challenges assumptions central to the field, works to shift the boundaries of the field, critiques dominant practices, and/or draws on the intellectual traditions known as critical theory (L'Etang, 2005). Across the variety of critical approaches, the central understanding that critical scholars share is an interest in examining how public relations, as a communicative practice, is used to build and maintain hegemonic power in society and can be used to challenge dominant systems of power (Ashby-King & Aragón, 2022; Logan, 2021; Motion & Weaver, 2005).

In focusing their research on power, critical scholars challenge the long-held assumptions of public relations as a neutral practice and suggest that to fully understand public relations it needs to be considered within the social, political, and economic context it occurs in (L'Etang, 2005; Motion & Weaver, 2005). By understanding public relations as a “socially embedded” practice, critical scholars examine how public relations is used to create and maintain symbolic power that allows for the normalization of harmful social structures (Edwards, 2006, p. 229). For critical scholars, it is important to consider public relations as a discursive practice that seeks to influence public opinion (Heath, 2009; Ihlen, 2010) and achieve specific political, economic, and/or sociocultural goals (Motion & Weaver, 2005). Thus, as public relations research remains focused on organizations, critical scholars must consider them as “powerful sites of capitalist

production” that not only offer products and services, but also contribute to the (re)production of hegemonic ideologies and social identities (Ciszek et al., 2022, p. 4).

Although some scholars identify their approach under the broad banner of *critical scholarship* (e.g., Motion & Weaver, 2005), others have named and outlined specific critical approaches with their own unique commitments. *Critical modernism*, as discussed by Pal and Dutta (2008), “interrogates the terrains of power within which discourse is articulated and rearticulated” offering “alternative possibilities through engagement with voices that have traditionally been erased from the discursive space” (p. 175). To actualize this approach, critical modernist scholars consider who public relations practices serve, the taken-for-granted assumptions of the practice and how they work to reinforce power and control, and who public relations privileges and how it reinforces hegemonic ideologies (Pal & Dutta, 2008).

Looking beyond critical modernism, Holtzhausen (2000, 2002, 2011) has forwarded a *postmodern* approach to public relations scholarship. Although they share some commitments with critical modernism, postmodern approaches reject master narratives and view theory and practice as local and immediate. Therefore, postmodernists challenge hegemonic discourses and seek to use narrative and discourse analysis approaches to understand how language and communication are used to structure systems of power and privilege (Holtzhausen, 2011). While critical modernists believe in the presence of social structures that shape individuals’ experiences in society, postmodernists suggest that “knowledge is fragmented” and piecing it together to form a single truth is impossible (Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015, p. 35).

Considering the numerous critical approaches to public relations scholarship, I situate myself in relation to the critical modernist tradition (see Pal & Dutta, 2008) as I seek to broadly understand how public relations is used to reinforce and challenge the ideologies and systems

that structure contemporary society and U.S. higher education. In doing so, the critical approach I take draws on critical theory (L'Etang, 2005) and understands public relations as a discursive practice that is socio-political in nature and cannot be divorced from the cultural and historical contexts it is being practiced in (Ciszek et al., 2022; Motion & Weaver, 2005). Based on this approach, in the following section I position myself in relationship to the public relations discipline's focus on relationships between organizations and publics.

Public Relations and Relationships

In 1984, Ferguson outlined three areas she believed were important for public relations scholars to develop theory. Of the three, she suggested the most important was relationships. Here, she argued that by orienting the discipline around relationships the central issue of concern would be the relationships between organizations and publics rather than the parties involved in said relationships (Ferguson, 2018). For a significant period of time, the dominant strategic management approach to public relations focused on theorizing these organization-public relationships and publics as entities in and of themselves (see Grunig & Huang, 2000; Grunig et al., 2006; Grunig & Repper, 1992; Hung, 2005). From their perspective, publics existed in relation to organizations and formed in response to organizational actions. It then became the job of public relations practitioners to identify the most communicatively active contingent of said publics in order to communicate with them and minimize harm to the organization (Grunig & Repper, 1992; Kim & Grunig, 2011). Building on an understanding of relationships as the central focus of public relations and publics as forming around organizations, scholars advancing excellence theory suggested that building relationships was central to public relations contribution to organizations (Grunig et al., 2006). They suggested that ideally these relationships would be two-way (i.e., organizations and publics would have open lines of back-

and-forth communication) and symmetrical (i.e., both parties would benefit for the relationship). These relationships were then said to have six outcomes: control mutuality, trust, commitment, satisfaction, communal relationships, and exchange relationships (Grunig et al., 2006; Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Hung, 2005). Although this approach to public relations has been useful to scholars seeking to advance organizational ends, I suggest the approach is ripe with contradiction because if public relations is supposed to advance organizational ends how can it consistently develop relationships where all parties always benefit equally? Therefore, I turn to critiques of this approach to articulate how I conceptualize public relations, organization-public relationships, and publics as entities in and of themselves.

Scholars have long critiqued the strategic management approach's treatment of relationships and publics suggesting that by taking a top-down approach where organizations dictate the publics they will develop relationships with and focusing on manipulating communication landscapes and predicting publics' behaviors to improve organizational financial ends the potential of public relations has been lost (Pal & Dutta, 2008; Valentini et al., 2012). In today's complex, everchanging communicative environments I support the suggestions that public relations can be used to develop community as organizations show individuals how they can benefit society and said individuals lives (Valentini et al. 2012) and that the practice can be opened up in ways that listen to and consider the voices of many complex publics (Pal & Dutta, 2008). Therefore, it becomes vital that public relations scholarship looks beyond relationships as dyadic and understands that organizations and publics exist within networks that are connected in different ways and span different contexts (Heath, 2013; Yang & Taylor, 2015). Publics then should not be thought of as entities that simply exist in relation to an organization but should instead be understood as forming in their own right as individuals develop a sense of belonging

to a collective through the (re)circulation of texts and discourses (Iannacone & Ashby-King, 2023; Warner, 2002). Thus, as Pieczka (2019) noted, “relationships arise out of contextual negotiations within a network” (p. 233) where publics come to be and dissolve in their own right and communicate with organizations as part of complex, contextual networks of discourse. Therefore, in consider constructions and interpretations of institutional prestige, I center this study on examining the discursive interplay between organizations, the media, and individuals themselves as possible members of publics as a way to understand how publics and organization-public relationships may form throughout the college admissions process. In the next section I articulate my conceptualization of U.S. higher education for the purpose of this study and then define neoliberalism and whiteness as hegemonic ideologies that are central to the current structuring of U.S. higher education and society at large that contribute to the discursive landscape at the center of this project.

Defining U.S. Higher Education

The landscape of higher education in the U.S. includes over 4,200 diverse and complex degree granting institutions (Eckel & King, n.d.; Gordon & Berhow, 2009; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021). These colleges and universities make up a decentralized system of higher education where public institutions are under the purview of each state, private institutions operate independently, and all institutions are accredited by regional agencies (Helms et al., 2019; NCES, 2018). For the purpose of this study, I define institutions of higher education as public and private not-for-profit colleges and universities that confer associate, bachelor’s, master’s and/or doctoral degrees (Helms et al., 2019). Public institutions are those operated by boards that are elected or appointed by a public official and are supported directly by public funds (NCES, 2018). Private institutions are those operated by boards and/or individuals not

elected or appointed by public officials and are not directly supported by public funds. When an institution is not-for-profit those running the institution do not make a profit. This type includes independent institutions and those affiliated with religious organization (NCES, 2018). I am excluding private for-profit institutions from this definition of institutions of higher education because these institutions are not solely focused on their educational mission as they seek to turn a profit—thus openly operating under an overt capitalist structure.

Higher education in the U.S. began as an elite activity with the founding of Harvard College in 1636 where institutions excluded individuals based on their race, gender, religion, and social class (Eckel & King, n.d.). As the purpose of U.S higher education has changed over the past four centuries, institutions have had to navigate the tension between higher education functioning as a public or private good (Labaree, 2017). Of specific note is the 20th century where higher education became the primary path toward the middle-class and women and people of color began to enter colleges and universities at higher rates (Eckel & King, n.d.). Around the same time, institutions began to seek increased investment through grants and contracts as they had the expertise to provide research and development needed by the federal government and other organizations and sought to replace decreases in state funding with the revenue from these endeavors (Labaree, 2017). Ultimately, Eckel and King (n.d.) suggested that U.S. higher education has had three key influences: (1) Thomas Jefferson’s legacy of keeping institutions separate from government control, (2) capitalism and the perspective that markets are rational, and (3) a commitment to social mobility and equal opportunity.

In recent decades, scholars have argued that the market has become the dominant force shaping and reshaping higher education in the U.S. across public and private institutions. This shift has resulted in institutions privileging disciplines with higher market value and investing

less in those that do not (Eckel & King, n.d.). Institutional administrators feel the need to respond to the market so they have the resources and funding necessary to implement their educational mission (Eckel & King, n.d.). The tension between capitalist market forces and educational goals has led scholars to take a variety of approaches to studying colleges and universities including treating them like any other organization responding to market force and institutions only focused on educating students.

Public relations and communication scholars have identified and begun to explore the tension between institutions' desires to function as service providers where students are positioned as consumers and as social institutions contributing to the public good and society at large. Within the first perspective, scholars have treated institutions of higher education as very similar to other organizations studied in the discipline. For example, Gordon and Berhow (2009) examined how higher education institutions infused dialogic communication into their websites. Through their analysis of doctoral granting and liberal arts institutions, they found that college and university websites were not living up to their dialogic potential (Gordon & Berhow, 2009). This finding is reflective of much of the public relations literature that has examined organizational use of dialogic features on websites and other forms of digital and social media (see Kent, 2010). Taking a critical approach, others have argued that universities operate within a functional paradigm focusing on maintaining the status quo and communicating toward institutional ends (Ashby-King & Aragón, 2022). Scholars have also suggested that rather than creating mutually beneficial relationships with the community they are embedded within, colleges and universities have viewed their relationships with their communities as contractual (Bruning et al., 2006). Engagement with the communities surrounding institutions has occurred in transactional ways where students leave campus to provide a service to community members

and the return to campus. Thus, Bruning et al. (2006) suggested that colleges and universities need to develop more long-term forms of engagement with their communities that are ongoing and bring community members to campus. This suggests that colleges and university should have a more social orientation where they are responsible for contributing to society.

Public relations scholars have posited that colleges and universities have a responsibility to contribute to society and work toward social change (Heath & Waymer, 2021; Veil & Waymer, 2021). Compared to other organizations, colleges and universities have a unique obligation to behave in socially responsible ways. These responsibilities include elevating the standards that guide them; improving the public arenas they communicate in toward social impact; and engaging in research, teaching, and community service that improves their community. In this way, the license to operate of institutions of higher education centers on their ability to make positive contributions to society (Heath & Waymer, 2021). Veil and Waymer (2021) supported this notion and built on it by arguing that colleges and universities not only have an obligation to contribute to their communities, but in fact have a responsibility to contribute to social change with specific attention paid to race. Through teaching, research, and service institutions need to take ownership over fostering respectful and meaningful conversations about race, racism, and other social issues in ways that do not place the burden for social change on marginalized communities to make positive contributions to society (Veil & Waymer, 2021).

The dichotomy I outlined above offers two perspectives on how scholars can examine institutions of higher education through the lens of communication and public relations theory. Although I acknowledge that, due to numerous factors, institutions of higher education have become corporatized, service-oriented organizations, as a critical-interpretive scholar I consider

institutions of higher education as social organizations that are responsible for contributing to democratic society. In this dissertation project, I examine colleges and universities as social actors whose communication can reinforce and challenge larger social discourses and ideologies and seek to understand how these discourses shape college students' experiences on campus and in the classroom. In the next section, I outline neoliberalism and whiteness as two ideologies that structure contemporary U.S. higher education.

Neoliberal and Whiteness Ideologies

Ideology is “a worldview that shapes a person or group’s values and beliefs” (Ciszek & Logan, 2018, p. 121). As a communicative practice, public relations—and its related body of scholarship—has functioned to forward specific worldviews that privilege some interests (i.e., organizations) over others (i.e., publics; Bourne, 2019; Edwards, 2015; L’Etang, 2013). Therefore, I suggest that the (re)production of hegemonic ideologies should be of concern to public relations scholars because communication shapes ideology, ideologies come to life and materialize through communicative interaction, and ideologies shape how individuals engage with one and other (Ciszek & Logan, 2018). Public relations scholars have often overlooked issues that do not affect dominant groups in U.S. society (Ashby-King & Aragón, 2022). If public relations, as a discipline, is going to live up to its ethos of mutually beneficial relationships and contributions to society, scholars and practitioners cannot overlook how public relations has and is being used to maintain power relations by reinforcing hegemonic ideologies that privilege some and marginalize others (Ashby-King & Aragón, 2022; Ciszek & Logan, 2018). I turn to neoliberal and whiteness ideologies as they have been central to structuring the landscape of contemporary U.S. higher education and society at large.

Neoliberalism

Simply put, neoliberalism is “a socio-economic theory that holds that the social good is maximized by unregulated market behaviors” (Saunders, 2007, p. 2). As an ideology, neoliberalism seeks to organize society based on market logics and relations (Bourne, 2019) that privilege “deregulation, privatization, and consumerism” (Giroux, 2002, p. 196). As neoliberal logic contends that the market treats everyone equally, social identities and historical contexts are not viewed as effecting an individual’s ability to succeed or fail (Asen, 2017). Rather, “success is attributed to thriftiness and entrepreneurial genius” and those who are not successful are perceived to have failed because they did not work hard enough (Giroux, 2003, p. 195). The reproduction of neoliberal ideology has introduced consumer logics into what were once thought of as public goods (e.g., education) and has (re)envisioned them as matters of private interest only available to those with the capital to attain them (Giroux, 2002, 2003).

Over the past two decades, scholars have documented neoliberalism’s intrusion into U.S. higher education (see Baltadano, 2012; Giroux, 2002, 2003, 2020; Lawless et al., 2019; Saunders, 2007). Many scholars have focused on publicly funded higher education, but I argue that due to the not-for-profit nature of many private institutions, neoliberalism has affected them in similar ways. From a neoliberal perspective everything is subsumed by the market (Baltadano, 2012). Therefore, what counts as valuable outcomes from gaining a college education have changed. Rather than educating an engaged citizenry prepared to participate in democratic life, institutions of higher education are seeking to graduate students who will be successful on the job market as indicated by their ability to obtain jobs with high salaries (Giroux, 2002). Following market logics, institutions now place the most value on disciplines that can produce revenue. Disciplines that can obtain corporate contracts, federal grants, large donations (e.g., endowed chairs and professorships), and graduate students with high earning potential that may

eventually donate to the institution themselves are valuable and receive significant institutional support. In contrast, disciplines that cannot be viewed as expendable and are either underfunded or eliminated (Giroux, 2002).

Ultimately, neoliberal ideology has come to frame higher education in market terms. Students and their families are positioned as consumers seeking to purchase the degree that will offer them the best job post-graduation (Giroux, 2002; Saunders, 2007). This perspective is then reinforced by those closest to prospective students further reinforcing their belief that the main, if not only, reason to go to college is to get a job and earn a high salary (Ashby-King & Anderson, 2022). Rather than a process of learning and development, higher education is viewed as a transaction where students purchase knowledge and curriculum in order to get their degree (Lawless et al., 2019). As public relations has been informed by neoliberalism (Bourne, 2019), I argue that institutions' continued use of normative public relations practices to recruit and enroll students contributes to the (re)production of neoliberalism in higher education as said communication plays a role in shaping students' understandings of the purpose of college.

Whiteness

As an ideology, whiteness is the organizing structure that gives meaning to the historical conditions that create social hierarchies that privilege white people and marginalize people of color (Applebaum, 2016; Leonardo, 2009, 2013). The social meaning around these historical formations are then produced and reproduced through discursive practices that create systems of power (McLaren, 1997). In doing so, whiteness is positioned as the norm and sets the standards for difference and exclusion. Through the use of “emotions...rhetoric...symbolism...and speech” (Matias & Newlove, 2017, p. 317), whiteness positions white norms as *value-neutral* in order to make the control and domination whiteness has over U.S. society invisible to those who

benefit from it (Applebaum, 2016). Through the logic of color-blindness (see Bonilla-Silva, 2018) white people can simultaneously benefit from the socio-political structures that marginalize people of color and claim that racism, especially structural racism, does not exist (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013).

In a society where race is the most prominent social division (Mills, 2007), Harris (1993) contended that whiteness is a form of property valued and protected by white people. In positioning whiteness as property, Harris (1993) was not suggesting that whiteness is a tangible thing someone can own. Rather, she used property in a broader sense to include “jobs, entitlements, occupational licenses, contracts, subsidies” and many other “intangibles that are the product of labor, time, and creativity” (Harris, 1993, p. 1728). Whiteness functions as a form of property because it is invested in by white people and gives those accepted by whiteness access to certain social benefits (Applebaum, 2016; McLaren, 1997). Whiteness then functions not just as an aspect of identity but can also be used to exert power toward getting what one wants (Harris, 1993). For example, in higher education contexts whiteness has functioned as a form of property in the sense that those who could use their whiteness could more easily gain access to colleges and universities via admission policies that look favorably upon them and get the benefits that come with a degree and institutional affiliation (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015).

Within organizations, whiteness is often institutionalized, meaning that organizations create structures that values specific likenesses which result in some being welcome and others being reminded they are different (Ahmed, 2007). Although whiteness often functions to position organizations as race-neutral, Ray (2019) suggested that organizations are actually “racialized structures that reproduce (and challenge) racialization processes” (p. 27). He contended that racialized organizations exert control or give agency based on one’s racial group, legitimize the

unequal distribution of resources by viewing organizations that do not fit the norms of whiteness as less than, and normalize whiteness as a credential that legitimizes hierarchies by giving some access and agency while limiting others (Ray, 2019). Even when people of color gain access to organizational spaces they are never fully accepted because although whiteness is a set of norms people of color can seek to adhere to, whiteness also never allows them to fully assimilate to said norms (Calvente et al., 2020). As organizations have and continue to be the beneficiaries of racial oppression (Logan, 2021) and their public relations practices have functioned to reproduce whiteness (Ashby-King & Aragón, 2022; Vardeman-Winter, 2011), I suggest it is important for scholars to continue to examine whiteness as it relates to public relations.

The Logics of Individualism and Meritocracy

Neoliberalism and whiteness both promote and reinforce the intersecting logics of individualism and meritocracy. Individualism represents the idea that everyone is their own person with an equal opportunity for success or failure (Putman, 2017). Those advancing meritocracy expand on this notion suggesting that an individual's success and failure is based entirely on their hard work and ability (Miller, 2019). These logics contend that social structures (e.g., race, class) do not matter because when everyone is equal and success is earned based on hard work and merit alone. However, although these logics work to maintain order they do so in ways that provide legitimacy to inequities in power and privilege (McNamee & Miller, 2009; Miller, 2019). The socio-political and historical contexts that have shaped present day U.S. society do not allow for the equality of opportunity meritocracy requires. Therefore, the idea that meritocracy guides U.S. society is a myth that is used to maintain the status quo. Successful individuals who hold marginalized identities (e.g., President Obama, Tiger Woods) are then used as examples of meritocracy at work which reinforces the myth even though their success is not

proof that discrimination and systemic disadvantages do not exist (Chen et al., 2015; Liu, 2011). Rather than rewarding true merit, these systems function to maintain the status quo as they are forwarded by ideologies such as neoliberalism and whiteness.

As noted earlier, one of the basic premises of neoliberal ideology is that markets treat all actors the same. Therefore, neoliberalism's proponents suggest that one's social identities have nothing to do with their market behaviors, successes, or failures (Asen, 2017). This assumption works to reproduce individualism and meritocracy by suggesting that everyone has an equal shot at success in the market if they simply put in enough work. Although this is a compelling narrative, it divorces the market from larger socio-political and historical contexts. For example, Miller (2019) suggested that the recent college admissions scandal (Operation Varsity Blues)—where wealthy parents bribed university staff or paid to have people cheat on their children's standardized tests to increase their scores—should have been a clear example that U.S. society is not a meritocracy. However, the logic of meritocracy protected these wealthy individuals because as they have been successful in other areas of the market that is U.S. society (e.g., in business or entertainment), their children were conferred specific benefits even though they had not put in the required hard work (Miller, 2019).

Similarly, whiteness, through its ability to become invisible to those who benefit from it, also functions to advance individualism and meritocracy by suggesting that racism is a thing of the past and all people have equal opportunities regardless of race (Putman, 2017). This assumption suggests that everyone is their own individual who can succeed or fail based on their own merits. Furthermore, it normalizes the success of white people and positions the challenges of people of color, due to systemic marginalization and inequity, as their own individual misfortune and inabilities. Therefore, by promoting the logics of individualism and meritocracy,

whiteness works to hide the benefits it gives white people and the harm it does to people of color.

Bourdieu's Sociology and Public Relations

To further understand how ideologies function and are reproduced I turn to the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Although not widely considered in public relations scholarship, Bourdieu's work has been introduced to the discipline in the past two decades by critical and rhetorical scholars (see Edwards, 2015; Ihlen, 2009, 2018; Wolf, 2018). Bourdieu's scholarship examines how "the social world is structured, constituted, and reproduced through individual and collective struggle to conserve or transform the social world" (Ihlen, 2018, p. 120). Thus, Bourdieu's theorizing provides a useful framework to examine how ideologies are reinforced and challenged in varying social spaces.

In his work, Bourdieu rejected approaches that focused only on individuals' subjective experiences and system level analyses that did not consider how individuals existed within said systems. Bourdieu forwarded an approach that simultaneously considered individuals as actors with agency and control of their actions while understanding that how individuals exert their agency cannot be separated from the socio-political and cultural structures individuals exist within. I support the notion that Bourdieu's understanding of the social world is a valuable framework for critical public relations scholarship because it allows scholars to consider both the communicative acts of organizations and publics within the larger socio-political contexts they occur within through the lens of a struggle for power and influence (Wolf, 2018). Three concepts have been central to Bourdieu's scholarship and theorizing: *field*, *habitus*, and *capital* and in the remainder of this section I describe each concept.

A *field* can be understood as a network of institutions that create and reinforce hierarchies and power relations through the creation and acceptance of certain discourses and activities (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Webb et al., 2002). It is important to note that fields do not just objectively exist. They come to be and are recreated through conflict over what counts as capital within each specific fields. Fields are created and (re)produced through “the interaction between institutions, rules, and practices” (Webb et al., 2002, p. 22). Each field is a social space with its own notion of what is valuable thereby creating structures that determine who is dominant and who is subordinate in each social space (Ihlen, 2007). Examples of fields include “the school system, the state, the church, [and] political parties” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 102). Considering the rules and norms of each field, individuals and institutions engage in struggle to advance their own self-interest (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and scholars have suggested that public relations play a role in helping organizations achieve their desired position in the field(s) they operate within (Ihlen, 2007).

Habitus can be thought of as a set of values and framework for understanding the social world based on one’s cultural history, upbringing, and everyday experiences (Bourdieu, 2013; Webb et al., 2002; Wolf, 2018). Each individual’s cultural experiences form their understanding of the world around them which contributes to the formation of the attitudes and values they hold and the way they behave. This creates a habitus that is partially unconscious and functions to naturalize itself so one’s perspective and behaviors that develop from their habitus are not questioned (Webb et al., 2002). As Ihlen (2009) noted, the concept of habitus breaks with the “notion of humans as rational agents through and through” because one’s habitus shapes individuals’ understandings of what they should and should not do in the social world (p. 65). In outlining the concept of habitus, Bourdieu is suggesting that although individuals have agency in

the social world, their decision making is often framed by the invisible structures and rules that shape the field they are operating within because said structures and rule have contributed to a specific understanding of which behaviors, values, attitudes, and beliefs are considered normal.

Central to Bourdieu's scholarship has been understanding how power operates within certain fields and he determined *capital* as an effective way to understand these power relations. Although economic capital is important, it is not the only thing of value. As Webb et al. (2002) noted, "any sort of resource including things like social and professional contacts, personal or institutional status and anything else that has value and translates into the ability to make things happen" can confer power in a specific field (p. 86). In addition to economic capital, Bourdieu has theorized cultural, social, and symbolic capital.

Cultural capital is gained over time through the acquisition of knowledge and expertise that allows someone to effectively operate within a specific culture (Bourdieu, 2011; Wolf, 2018). Cultural capital can take the form of tangible goods (e.g., paintings and books) that communicate an understanding of what is valued in a culture that can then be easily transformed into economic capital (i.e., selling the items). It also comes in institutionalized forms, such as an academic credential, which indicates the recognition of a specific institution and suggests one has inherited knowledge valued by a specific culture (Bourdieu, 2011; Wolf, 2018). As the transmission of cultural capital is not as overt as transactions of economic capital, cultural capital is often not recognized as a form of capital and is considered "legitimate competence" or a natural state of being (Bourdieu, 2011, p. 84).

Central to the notion of social capital is the connections and relationships an individual has in their network. Social capital represents the resources one has access to and can mobilize (Bourdieu, 2011; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). For example, becoming a member of an elite

group or social club gives individuals access to relationships that can result in material profits in the form of economic capital (e.g., investments). Within the context of public relations, scholars have argued that an organization's relationships function as a form of social capital that is developed through engagement and dialogue (Ihlen, 2005; Sommerfeldt, 2013; Taylor & Kent, 2014). Through public relations, organizations have been said to create networks that give them access to others' resources indicating the organization has social capital (Ihlen, 2005).

Both cultural and social capital are considered forms of symbolic capital because their transmission is often invisible (Bourdieu, 2011). Symbolic capital functions through the categorization of other forms of capital positioning some as more valuable than others (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). As Bourdieu (2013) noted, classification systems are needed to create symbolic capital because symbols of prestige and value can only be communicated in relation to exclusion. For example, a salon gains prestige "upon the strictness of its exclusions" (Bourdieu, 2013, p. 295) and this phenomenon extends into many aspects of life, including education. As Bourdieu (2011) suggested, attending a college or university confers a sense of cultural capital. However, by attending a highly selective institution (e.g., Harvard, Stanford) an individual can increase the symbolic value of this cultural capital. By attending an institution that excludes a large majority of applicants, graduates can claim a sense of status and prestige, via symbolic capital, that is valuable in the market. What is important to note, however, is that in valuing symbolic capital people often "misrecognize the arbitrariness of its possession and accumulation" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119). As Wolf (2018) suggested, symbolic capital is often perceived as "a person's natural or inherent quality, rather than something that has been accumulated over time" (p. 313). When those at the lower end of the classification that confer symbolic power buy-into and believe said classification system they legitimize the claim

of power by those wielding symbolic capital and ultimately contribute to their own marginalization (Webb et al., 2002; Wolf, 2018).

Central to Bourdieu's observations and theorizing is the notion that those with power in a field create norms and value by determining what capital has value. In doing so, they are able to (re)produce these systems by socializing individual's habitus toward valuing specific forms of symbolic capital that seem natural and inherent but are often arbitrary markers that are accumulated over time (Bourdieu, 2011, 2013; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Webb et al., 2002; Wolf, 2018). The pattern Bourdieu outlined matches the hegemonic logics described by critics of neoliberalism and whiteness. Therefore, I suggest that when examining how institutions of higher education negotiate their role in the larger educational systems and how individuals navigate said system, Bourdieu's discussion of field, habitus, and capital are a useful analytical tool for this study.

Reputation, Prestige, and U.S. Higher Education

Scholars across the public relations discipline have sought to understand how public relations, as a communicative function, contributes to an organization's reputation. Due to the concept's centrality to dominant crisis communication theories (e.g., Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Image Repair Theory) public relations scholars have paid specific attention to understanding how organizations can maintain and enhance their reputations during and after crises (see Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007). However, other public relations practices (e.g., relationship management) have also been connected to organizational reputation (Grunig & Hung, 2002). For the purpose of this study, organizational reputation is "a stakeholder's overall evaluation of [an organization] over time...based on the stakeholder's direct experiences with the [organization], any other form of communication and symbolism that provides information about

the [organization's] actions and/or a comparison with the actions of leading rivals" (Gotsi & Wilson, 2001, p. 25). I have chosen to use this definition of organizational reputation because it centers reputation around the perceptions of members of organizational publics and includes not only an individual's perceptions based on engagement with an organization, but also considers how said perceptions of reputation may be constructed or altered based on other communication an individual engages with (e.g., from the media, from friends and family; Kiousus et al., 2007). This perspective allows for a more nuanced examination of how public relations shapes organizational reputation by looking beyond the dyadic approach (e.g., organization-public dyad) central to much public relations scholarship (Heath, 2013; Yang & Taylor, 2015).

A strong organizational reputation is important because when publics perceive an organization's reputation to be positive they are more likely to communicate positively about said organization and feel a sense of identification with the organization (Hong & Yang, 2009). Grunig and Hung (2002) asserted that an organization's reputation is a byproduct of their organization-public relationships suggesting a relationship between organizational reputation and relational outcomes (Al-salhi et al., 2021). Scholars have supported this notion suggesting that effective relationship management leads to positive perceptions of organizational reputation (Czarnecka & Ni, 2011; Lee & Park, 2013). Not only is this the case for external publics, but also internal publics because when members of internal publics (e.g., employees) communicate negatively about their organizations they can cause reputational damage (Kang, 2021). Additionally, both traditional and social media have been connected to organizational reputation. For example, DiStaso (2012) suggested that how an organization's annual earnings press release was covered by local and national media were strongly related to perceptions of organizational reputation. In the context of social media, receiving positive comments on organizational posts

were a positive predictor of reputation, whereas negative comments were a negative predictor (Ji et al., 2017). Together, these findings suggest that how an organization communicates and engages with its publics can contribute to shaping individual's perceptions of organizational reputation.

Within the context of higher education, scholars have suggested that the quality of a university's organization-public relationships were related to positive perceptions of organizational reputation by varying publics (i.e., students, faculty, staff; Czarnecka & Ni, 2011). Focusing on students, Sung and Yang (2008) suggested that positive perceptions of reputation positively influenced how supportive a student's attitude toward their institution was. Although reputation, or an individual's evaluation, was a significant factor, external prestige, or the way others interpreted the institution, was four times more predictive of a student's positive attitude toward their institution (Sung & Yang, 2008). This finding reinforces the notion that how individuals perceive organizations is based on both information they gather themselves (e.g., direct experience with and communication from an organization) and information they hear from third parties (e.g., media coverage, messages from friends and family). As colleges and universities are unique organizations I turn to the concept of prestige as an important aspect of reputation to understand in this specific context.

Conceptualizing Prestige

Prestige is an intangible, non-price asset that communicates to the public that an institution is of high quality (Brewer et al., 2002; Ortagus, 2016). Prestigious institutions offer a sense of social status to those who are affiliated with the institution because they provide something of value (Blackmore, 2018). Thus, prestige is a status structure that is defined by an association with things that have cultural, symbolic, or historical value (Blackmore, 2018;

Campbell et al., 2019). In the case of institutions of higher education, specific institutional characteristics—although not indicative of a quality education—are connected to the perception that an institution is excellent (Brewer et al., 2002). Prestige is not necessarily attributed to institutions providing an excellent education. Rather, it is conferred to those who appear to be doing what prestigious institutions do as valued by society (Eckel, 2008). For example, in the U.S. context, institutions that are highly selective are thought of as prestigious because being affiliated with an institution that rejects a large majority of applicants confers a form of status (Campbell et al., 2019). Prestige should be of importance to scholars studying higher education because the benefits of higher education are often not realized until well after students graduate (e.g., higher salary; Brewer et al., 2002). Therefore, when communicating with students and their families’ institutions seek to construct themselves as prestigious to indicate the social status available to those affiliated with the institution.

As Blackmore (2018) noted, “prestige requires scarcity” (p. 234). This means that there is not an abundance of prestige that institutions can go out and get. Rather, institutional prestige is a zero-sum game where institutions are measured in relation to one another (Blackmore, 2018; Brewer et al., 2002). As one institution’s prestige rises another’s goes down. For example, when one institution rises in the rankings other institutions must fall (Brewer et al., 2002). Prestige is constructed through institutional rankings, classifications, and affiliation. A high ranking communicates prestige because it suggests that institutions have invested significant resources in the areas deemed of value (Blackmore, 2018; Ortagus, 2016). Seeking and achieving research university status based on the Carnegie Classification is another way institutions pursue prestige because classification as a research institution helps institutions gain resources (McClure, 2018; McClure & Titus, 2018). Institutions that have achieved research university status then often

seek affiliation with exclusive associations such as the Association for American Universities (AAU). Historically, the AAU has been considered one of the most prestigious organizations universities could be a member of (Kezar & Bernstein-Sierra, 2019). The association is highly selective and meetings its membership criteria is considered to indicate a quality research institution. As AAU membership is a marker of prestige its criteria for membership often guide institutional investments with the hope of one day achieving membership to enhance institutional prestige (Kezar & Berstein-Sierra, 2019; Waymer & VanSlette, 2016).

Across U.S. higher education rankings—such as those published by *U.S. News and World Report*—selectivity, research output, and resources have been valued more than effective teaching and undergraduate education. As prospective students and their families care about institutional rankings and presume rankings are related to educational quality (O’Meara, 2007), published rankings become an “interpretive frame” for students, families, and other institutions to determine which institutions are most prestigious (Ortagus, 2016, p. 13). To gain more prestige, institutions need to become more selective, produce more research, and increase their financial resources and expenditure (Campbell et al., 2019; O’Meara & Bloomgarden, 2011). Highly prestigious institutions carefully monitor their peer institutions to ensure they do not lose their status and less prestigious institutions seek to emulate those ahead of them in the rankings (O’Meara, 2007). Once an institution gains prestige it becomes easier for them to become more prestigious and other institutions then seek to copy said institution to become more prestigious themselves (Campbell et al., 2019; Eckel, 2008).

Across the higher education literature, scholars have suggested a strong connection between institutional selectivity, rankings, and prestige (Campbell et al., 2019; Mihut, 2021). Prestige continues to be important to institutions because students and their families care about

status because they are seeking to increase or maintain their social standing by becoming affiliated with an institution with the highest status possible (Campbell et al., 2019; Hazelkorn, 2007, 2011). Further, there is a perception that highly prestigious institutions provide the best education possible (Campbell et al., 2019). Although there is a strong relationship between an institution's prestige and their graduates' life earnings (Mihut, 2021), prestige does not equal quality education (Brewer et al., 2002). This point suggests that prestige, rather than educational quality, is valued by society and affiliation with prestige benefits students in the labor market upon graduation (Brewer et al., 2002). Yet, since there are over 4,000 colleges and universities in the U.S. it is impossible for them all to sit atop the rankings which emphasizes the need to further examine and consider how institutions differentiate themselves and construct themselves as prestigious.

The stories told and messages shared about institutions matter because they can influence how students and their families make decisions about where to enroll (McClure, 2018). The influential messages people remember shapes their understanding of the world and every aspect of their life (e.g., education, career, relationships; Cooke-Jackson & Rubinsky, 2018). These messages, which come from varying sources (e.g., media, family, organizations), function to socialize individuals to specific understandings and expectations of their future experiences (Jablin, 2001). For example, scholars have argued that the messages college students receive socialize them toward specific understandings of meaningful work (Scaduzio et al., 2018) and to consider getting a job as the central purpose for attending college (Ashby-King & Anderson, 2022; Kranstuber et al., 2012). Influential messages have been suggested to orient college students to specific understandings of how they should behave when enrolled in college (Nazinone et al., 2011) and messages from important individuals (e.g., instructors) were said to

influence students' confidence, morale, and motivation (Kaufmann et al., 2021). As the messages students receive contribute to students' constructions of what it means to go to college, I suggest that institutions create their own interpretive frames to garner prestige.

Some institutions increase the amenities they can offer students to communicate prestige (McClure, 2019). Others promote their history and traditions connecting prestige to their longevity as an institution (O'Meara, 2007). Institutions also create their own interpretive frames by comparing themselves to their peer institutions (e.g., calling themselves a best regional university) to position themselves as more prestigious than other similar institutions. Scholars have also suggested that selective institutions are also using diversity, specifically racial diversity, as an indicator of prestige (Holland & Ford, 2021; Stevens & Roska, 2011). In comparison, institutions with more open access admissions policies consider diversity a liability in relation to constructing themselves as prestigious (Garces, 2014). When institutions have achieved high prestige based on traditional sources (e.g., selectivity, research output) they seek to increase their status by emphasizing the diversity of their students, faculty, and staff because it confers a certain value when presented in tandem with traditional notions of prestige (Holland & Ford, 2021). When institutions do not have high prestige from traditional sources, often those that enroll high numbers of Black and Latina/o/x students, they do not communicate about their diversity (Holland & Ford, 2021). This suggests that within a society structured by whiteness and white supremacy until institutions have achieved prestige, by gaining the capital deemed appropriate by whiteness, they cannot benefit from diversity.

Research Questions

Through the lenses of neoliberalism, whiteness, and Bourdieu's notions of field, habitus, and capital, the purpose of this study is to examine how institutional prestige is constructed

through public relations practices and how that construction is interpreted and understood by college students—an important public for all institutions of higher education. As Wolf (2018) noted, “Relations of communication within a field are also relations of symbolic power in which the power relations between speakers or their respective groups are actualized” (p. 311). In this way, organizations and individuals use communication to compete within their specific field with the goal of strategically positioning themselves within the social order. Although Bourdieu (2013) has previously argued that prestige is created through strict exclusions to position oneself at the top of the classification systems—a notion supported in many ways by higher education scholars (e.g., Blackmore, 2018; Brewer et al., 2002; O’Meara, 2007)—it is important to understand how institutions are communicatively constructed as prestigious beyond their institutional rankings. Thus, I ask:

RQ1: How is institutional prestige communicatively constructed by the media and/or institutions?

Within society, institutions of higher education are not the only agents seeking to obtain capital to advance their own interest. Students and their families use higher education as a way to gain cultural, social, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 2011) that will propel students toward success post-graduation. Although a clear body of scholarship suggests that rankings are an important interpretive frame used by students to determine institutional prestige (Brewer et al., 2002), highly ranked institutions educate a small percentage of the college going population in the U.S. Therefore, since the stories told about institutions matter (McClure, 2018), it is also important to consider other ways that students and their families make sense of institutional prestige and examine how they come to specific determination about what denotes prestige in their specific context. Thus, I ask:

RQ2: How do college students perceive and understand institutional prestige and notions about what makes a college a good school?

RQ3: How did college students interpret, prioritize, and make sense of the communication and information they received about colleges during the admission process?

RQ4: How, if at all, were college students socialized toward specific understandings of institutional prestige?

Whiteness and neoliberalism are dominant, hegemonic ideologies within U.S. society (Giroux, 2002; Leonardo, 2009) that have structured higher education and shaped the way colleges and universities communicate (Ashby-King & Aragón, 2022; Baltadano, 2012; Giroux, 2020; Lawless et al., 2019). Although these ideologies have influenced how institutions of higher education structure themselves, the curriculum they offer, and the way they communicate with their publics, in examining how these ideologies function scholars have also suggested that organizations have a responsibility to transform themselves (Heath & Waymer, 2021; Logan, 2021) and theorized possible avenues for institutional and individual resistance (Ashby-King & Anderson, 2022; Ashby-King & Aragón, 2022). To further understand how public relations and communication can be used for social change, it is important to understand how different forms of institutional communication and publics understandings of said communication work to reinforce and/or challenge dominant ideologies. Thus, I ask:

RQ5: How, if at all, are whiteness and neoliberalism reinforced and/or challenged through constructions and interpretations of institutional prestige?

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

In this chapter I detail the qualitative study I used to address the research questions I posed based on the existing literature. The questions that I conceptualized centered on understanding how the meaning surrounding institutional prestige in constructed, communicated, and interpreted within the socio-political and historical contexts of the U.S. system of higher education. These questions were most suited to be answered using a qualitative approach because this methodology centers around understanding meaning making within specific contexts. Allowing for “deep and prolonged data immersion, thoughtfulness and reflection” (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 591), qualitative approaches allow scholars to acknowledge that there is not one single truth that exists for them to find. Rather, individuals make sense of their experiences within their specific context and knowledge is created through the reflection on and questioning of those experiences. Qualitative approaches then allow scholars to make interpretations across the body of texts (e.g., written documents, interview transcripts) they are examining to construct contextual knowledge that can be used to advance theory and guide practice in a variety of contexts.

I begin this chapter by discussing how my interest in this topic developed and my positionality as a scholar. I then outline my metatheoretical commitments that guided this study and framed my decision to pursue a qualitative study to answer my research questions. Next, I explicate the specific methods for data collection I used for this study (i.e., textual analysis, in-depth interviews, post-interview qualitative questionnaire). I conclude by discussing the approach I took to interpreting and analyzing the data collected during this study. All the procedures referenced throughout this chapter were approved by the Institutional Review Board at my institution.

Reflexivity and Positionality

I became interested in examining institutional prestige after watching *Operation Varsity Blues: The College Admissions Scandal*, a Netflix documentary that centered on the Federal Bureau of Investigation's investigation into a ring of wealthy parents who were bribing the staff of *elite* universities to admit their children to their institution and paying to cheat on their children's admissions exams (e.g., ACT, SAT). As I watched the documentary, I was struck by something a soon-to-be high school graduate said about the realities of getting admitted to college. The student said, "In the future, when we have children and they're applying to colleges where you think they're going to be going? Like no one is going to be getting into college at that point. It's crazy" (Smith, 2021, 0:38:34). As a graduate of a regional, public institution that admits over 70% of its applicants and a scholar who studies higher education, the idea that it would be impossible for the next generation of prospective students to get into college puzzled me. The U.S. system of higher education has a specific set of institutions (i.e., community colleges) with the explicit mission of granting access to all and numerous four-year institutions that admit large majorities of their applications, so what was this student really saying? Pondering the words of this future college student led me to ask myself: *what registers an institution as worth getting into?* To me, this student's comment is not about the impossibility of getting into college, but the possibility that it will be near impossible to get admitted to a college or university that is viewed by society as valuable and to gain all the benefits that come with admission to said institutions.

I share this story here for two reasons. First, it allows me to clearly outline how I began to think about the power of institutional prestige and the starting point for conceptualizing this study. Second, because it is important for me to acknowledge that I believe in the possibilities

that higher education has to offer. That one can gain a meaningful, transformative education well beyond the walls of an *elite* institution. I am the product of a regional, public university that most people outside the Midwest, possibly the state of Ohio, have likely never heard of. My experiences have shaped how I understand the problem I examine in this study, and my beliefs drove this study as I sought to understand why some institutions that offer outstanding educations are often viewed as less than and how institutions become prestigious to think about how communication and public relations can be used to reframe these conversations and disrupt a system that limits the possibilities for future students and educators.

As a public relations and communication scholar, my research agenda examines how institutions of higher education communicate as social institutions with a responsibility to contribute to their communities and society. I operate under the assumption that education should not be a transactional process where information is exchanged between instructors and students that results in a degree. I believe education should be a transformational experience that helps students become deep, critical thinkers; learn how to ask good questions; and examine the world around them. As this study centers around higher education, it was impossible for me to separate my values, assumptions, and beliefs from this study. In fact, I asked these questions because of my values, assumptions, and beliefs. Rather than trying to bracket my perspectives, I was guided by an interpretive-critical metatheoretical approach (which I discuss in depth below) that acknowledges this impossibility and understands that each researcher brings themselves to their scholarship. I designed the method outlined below with this reality in mind, knowing that if another scholar conducted a similar project they may come to very different conclusions and both interpretations and arguments would be valid contributions to how communication and public relations surrounding institutional prestige are understood.

I enter this project as a straight, white, cisgender man and acknowledge that in a society structured by white supremacy, patriarchy, and cis-heteronormativity my identities give me significant power and privilege. Even though I seek to promote social justice and equity through my teaching and research, I cannot separate myself from the reality that I benefit from the hegemonic systems of power that shape U.S. society. It is also important for me to consider my relationship to U.S. higher education. As I grew up outside the U.S. I was not socialized to U.S. higher education in the same way as those who were educated in U.S. K-12 systems. Although I always assumed I would go to university and earn a degree, I was not necessarily concerned with which of the eight universities in New Zealand I would attend because I was told by councilors and teachers that which university I would attend would likely depend on what I wanted to study as certain institutions offered certain degrees. I was not fully exposed to U.S. higher education until I was an exchange student during my senior year in high school. As I listened to my friends discuss their experiences applying to college I learned about the U.S. system of higher education and eventually applied to and attended a U.S. university. As these experiences give me a different perspective on the U.S. system of higher education compared to those socialized solely through U.S. K-12 education I brought an alternative, outsider perspective to this study. However, as a current graduate student and instructor at a U.S. university I am also situated as an insider with a clear understanding of U.S. higher education based on my experiences. Therefore, throughout this project I sought to question my analysis and interpretations to interrogate if I had come to a specific interpretation or argument not because it was firmly evidenced by my data but because of my experiences and identities and have been overt about how my positionality shaped my work. Throughout the project I discussed my research and findings with various peers as an

additional layer of reflexivity to support the interrogation of my findings to understand my limitations, especially as a white scholar studying whiteness.

Metatheoretical Assumptions

As a scholar, I describe myself as working at the intersection of critical and interpretive paradigms, where I am strongly influenced by critical modernism (see Mumby, 1997). To explicate my specific metatheoretical approach, I begin by discussing the ontological, epistemological, and axiological commitments of interpretive and critical approaches to research. I then outline my specific metatheoretical approach that guided this dissertation project.

Interpretive Paradigm

Scholars working within the interpretive paradigm argue that reality is socially constructed through human interaction. Rather than seeking to identify an objective, universal truth, interpretive scholars understand reality as socially mediated and constructed through interactions between humans and between humans and objects (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Mumby, 1997; Tracy, 2020). As interpretive scholars do not believe in a single reality, they consider knowledge to be collaborative co-created by researchers and their participants. As knowledge and meaning are always mediated through the researcher, the social world is not something scholars can go out and find. Rather, the social world is a text that can be analyzed and interpreted within a specific socio-cultural context (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Tracy, 2020). Interpretive scholars reject the (post)positivistic notion that research should be values-neutral and that researchers should seek objectivity. Interpretive scholars value the lived experiences of each of their participants and seek to understand said experiences within their given context (Tracy, 2020). Ultimately, these ontological, epistemological, and axiological beliefs and commitments

lead interpretive scholars to seek to understand the many realities that humans socially construct throughout their interactions (Mumby, 1997).

Critical Paradigm

Critical scholars share many ontological, epistemological, and axiological commitments with their interpretive colleagues. However, a key point of departure is critical scholars' suggestion that interpretivism does not do enough to examine how power relations and structures shape the social world (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Tracy, 2020). Ontologically, critical scholars believe that reality is socially constructed and pay specific attention to how power mediates said construction. From an epistemic perspective, critical scholars believe that the process of knowledge creation is power-laden and center on the need to examine power through their scholarship. Central to a critical approach is their axiology which focuses on social justice and the dismantling of systems and structures that marginalize and oppress (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Tracy, 2020). The critical paradigm includes varying perspectives with their own unique goals and values (e.g., feminist, post-structural, Marxist, etc.). Here, I discuss critical modernism and critical *post* scholarship as two broad critical perspectives.

Critical modernism (also described as a critical realist approach; see Tracy, 2020) shares its roots with interpretivism, but suggests that interpretive scholars do not go far enough to consider power (Mumby, 1997; Tracy, 2020). For critical modernists, reality is socially constructed and there are shared social realities that can be discovered and examined. What separates them from interpretivists is their belief that power structures and ideologies play a central role in shaping said realities. By examining power, critical modernists focus on how larger ideologies and social structures marginalize and oppress people and look to work toward emancipation and freedom through their scholarship (Mumby, 1997).

Discussed broadly (Tracy, 2020) and specifically as postmodernism (Mumby, 1997), *post* paradigms are critical approaches that reject the modernist notion that there is any sort of stable reality to examine through the scholarly process. When working from this perspective, scholars view reality and all knowledge as partial and contextual. They reject totalizing discourses and master narratives and focus on examining the partial experiences of individual people. These scholars reject the notion of consensus and modernism and seek to explore different competing discourses and experiences (Mumby, 1997).

My Metatheoretical Commitments

I provided the above discussion of interpretive and critical perspectives as they are the paradigms that have influenced my development as a scholar and serve as the frameworks for my approach to research. I identify with the interpretive paradigm because I understand reality as socially constructed. I suggest that all knowledge is partial, and no single truth exists; therefore, to understand the world as it is socially constructed I seek to center my participants and their lived experiences and look beyond my presupposed assumptions as a researcher and allow my projects to take unexpected turns based on my participants' lived experiences or what I find in the texts I am examining (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Tracy, 2020). I am drawn to critical perspectives because as I have developed as a scholar it has become clear to me that power relations and structures—specifically the (re)production of ideologies, systems, and institutions—are central to how individuals experience the social world. Thus, the majority of my scholarship, including this dissertation project, develops from a critical modernist perspective that is informed by interpretivism but believes in the importance of examining power throughout the scholarly process.

As I designed this dissertation project, I determined a critical modernist approach to be the most appropriate framework to guide this research because although how institutions of higher education communicate and how individual students receive and interpret institutional discourses are organizational and individual experiences in specific contexts, these phenomena are all framed by larger socio-political structures and ideologies that shape the cultural context they occur in. It was important, then, to not only examine and interpret how institutions communicated and how students received said communication, but to also consider how meaning was negotiated and developed as it was filtered through hegemonic ideologies such as whiteness (Leonardo, 2009) and neoliberalism (Saunders, 2007) that have shaped U.S. society and the landscape of U.S. higher education.

Overview of the Method

To address the research questions I outlined in chapter two, I used two intersecting approaches. First, I conducted a textual analysis of news articles in prominent media outlets that cover higher education (i.e., *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *InsideHigherEd*) to answer RQ1 and RQ5. Second, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with currently enrolled college students to answer RQ2, RQ3, RQ4, and RQ5. Additionally, I asked each interview participant to complete a post-interview qualitative questionnaire to collect information about thoughts they developed after the interview concluded. The remainder of this sections outlines the approach taken for each aspect of this project including a discussion of the procedures for data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

Textual Analysis

To answer RQ1 and RQ5 I conducted a textual analysis—sometimes described as document analysis or qualitative content analysis in qualitative research—of news articles

published in prominent outlets that write about higher education (i.e., *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *InsideHigherEd*). As an approach to research, analyzing texts allows scholars to examine how ideologies and meaning are (re)produced within mainstream texts that then become normalized and viewed as commonsense in society (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Texts are “the by-products of human activity” (Olsen, 2010, p. 318) and they function to preserve understandings of past events and experiences in ways that allow scholars to understand meaning within a specific context or track changes over time (Bowen, 2009). They are “written, visual, and physical materials that reveal the complexities of our lives and individuals and societies” (Wood et al., 2020, p. 456). In this way, texts reveal how people organize themselves, make meaning of their past, and envision the future. Texts are central to the process of sense-making (Wood et al., 2020) and their circulation can function to create a sense of shared identity, memory, and connection between individuals toward the formation of publics (Iannacone & Ashby-King, 2023). Therefore, examining texts is a useful way to consider how publics form and create meaning and how ideologies are (re)produced.

As a specific type of texts, those produced by the media are important sites of exploration because they “present a distinctive discursive moment between encoding and decoding” (Fürsich, 2009, p. 238). It is not only important to understand the intent of the producer of a specific text or how individuals interpret specific texts. As a discourse, media content communicates the “myths, rituals and archetypes” valued in a given society (Fürsich, 2009, p. 245). Thus, it is paramount to examine the texts themselves because this allows scholars to consider the “spectrum of reality media allow for” (Fürsich, 2009, p. 246). By examining how texts generate specific meanings and discussing said meaning in relation to the larger socio-

political and historical contexts of a given society textual analysis allows scholars to understand the hegemonic power of discourse (Fürsich, 2009; Hesse-Biber, 2017).

Numerous public relations scholars have used textual analysis as a way of understanding public relations phenomena and advancing public relations theory and practice (e.g., Anderson, 2013, 2015; Anderson & Guo, 2020; Ashby-King & Aragón, 2022; Dhanesh et al., 2022; Iannacone, 2021). For example, Ashby-King and Aragón (2022) examined publicly available institutional and activist communication (e.g., social media posts, public statements, institutional news articles) to understand how each group communicatively constructed a crisis of racism on campus in ways that reinforced or challenged whiteness ideology. Similarly, Iannacone (2021) examined news articles to understand how meaning surrounding the 2018 migrant caravan were negotiated between actors in the rhetorical arena. A final example is Dhanesh et al.'s (2022) analysis of the visual components of organizational social media posts to understand the role they play in driving engagement online. These examples show the varying ways that textual analysis can be used to advance public relation theory and practice and support my suggestion that analyzing media texts about higher education was an effective approach to understanding how these texts contribute to public understandings of institutional prestige.

Textual Analysis Procedures

I centered my textual analysis on articles published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *InsideHigherEd*. I have included these outlets because they are two outlets that solely cover higher education and each report that their websites are visited by over two million readers each month (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2022; InsideHigherEd, n.d.). Therefore, these outlets, which regularly appear as top stories when searching higher education related issues on Google, are sought out by individuals seeking information about colleges and universities. To focus my

analysis, I collected articles published in each outlet between July 2019 and December 2019 and January 2022 and June 2022. I determined this 12-month period to be an appropriate timeframe because it allowed me to examine contemporary understandings of institutional prestige before the COVID-19 pandemic and as institutions returned to predominantly in-person learning after over a year of remote, online learning due to COVID-19 while maintaining a manageable corpus of texts allowing for an in-depth analysis.

I used the search function on each outlets website to collect articles related to the purpose of this study. Based on my definition of institutional prestige and the corresponding literature I reviewed, I used the search terms *prestige*, *reputation*, and *rankings* to focus my search. I included articles of all types (e.g., news, opinion) to get a broad understanding about the types of texts that may be shaping public understandings of institutional prestige. I saved each article published between July and December 2019 and January and June 2022 that appeared when searching each term as a PDF file and removed any duplicate articles prior to data analysis and interpretation. My searches resulted in the initial inclusion of 934 unique articles published across the two outlets—493 published in *InsideHigherEd* and 441 published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. I then took a 20% random sample of the articles which resulted in 187 articles—99 published in *InsideHigherEd* and 88 published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*—that were included for in-depth analysis.

In-Depth, Semi-Structured Interviews

To answer RQ2, RQ3, RQ4, and RQ5, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with currently enrolled college students because they allowed me to collaboratively construct knowledge with my participants by highlighting their voices and valuing their lived experiences. As an approach to data collection, interviews acknowledge that knowledge production stems

from the lived experiences of participants and shows an understanding that participants have valuable knowledge that can be discussed through verbal communication (Hesse-Biber, 2017). As a qualitative approach to research, in-depth interviews are about more than just the back and forth asking and answering of questions. Rather, they are central to actualizing the interpretive and critical notions of knowledge being created through communication between the researcher and participants (Tracy, 2020).

As I argue that participants play a central role in knowledge production, I selected to use semi-structured interview for this project. In contrast to structured interviews where every participant is asked the same question in the same order, semi-structured interviews give scholars the flexibility to actualize interpretive and critical commitments in the data collection process (Tracy, 2020). When conducting semi-structured interviews, researchers enter their conversations with participants with a set of pre-determined questions and possible follow-up probes. However, the semi-structured approach is flexible and allows researchers to deviate from their prepared questions to follow the path their participants are leading them on. It is fine if not every prepared question is asked because researchers acknowledge that participants may have knowledge about the topic the researcher was unaware of when they prepared the interview questions. Therefore, this approach to interviews allowed me to ask questions beyond those prepared to explore the ideas participants shared (Hess-Biber, 2017; Tracy, 2020).

Interviews have been suggested as useful when a researcher has a specific topic or phenomenon of interest that they want to examine through their study, and they believe talking to individuals will allow them to examine the topic or phenomenon in more detail. As my research questions asked specifically about how college students understood institutional prestige, how they interpreted institutional communication, how they developed their understanding of

institutional prestige, and how their interpretations of institutional prestige reinforced and/or challenge hegemonic ideologies interviews were an appropriate approach to data collection. My research questions focused on a specific pool of participants—college students—and a specific topic of interest—institutional prestige. Therefore, I was able to create a semi-structured interview guide (a list of questions that guided my interviews; Tracy, 2020) that focused on this topic (see Appendix A). However, by using semi-structured interviews I acknowledge that my participants had specific experiences and knowledge I may have been unaware of and the flexibility of this approach to interviewing allowed me to follow their lead as we collaboratively created knowledge.

Due to the broad geographic disbursement of those eligible to participate in this study, I conducted all interviews via Zoom. Mediated interviews (e.g., via phone, Zoom, etc.) have been successfully used by many researchers; however, some limitations have been suggested. Tracy (2020) noted that mediated interviews require participants to have experience with the platform used for the interview, can lead to distractions, and may result in participant attrition. Irvine et al. (2013) argued that mediated interviews are less immediate than in-person interviews because during face-to-face interviews interviewers acknowledged their participants more vocally, participants asked few clarifying questions, and did not check if their responses were as adequate for the researcher.

Although these perceived limitations exist, I selected Zoom interviews as the central approach to data collection for this study because they allowed me to recruit participants located across the U.S. with varying experiences. As many current college students engaged in online learning during 2020 and 2021, many of my possible participants had significant experience using video conferencing platforms (e.g., Zoom) which minimized my concern that participants

would have issues accessing and using the technology needed to participate in the study. Additionally, to increase immediacy during the interviews I took steps to get to know each participant and built rapport with them at the beginning of their interview, was intentional about using verbal and visual acknowledgement when participants were speaking, and sought to ask questions with as much clarity as possible. Considering my previous experience conducting Zoom interviews with college student participants (see Ashby-King & Anderson, 2022), these strategies allowed me to facilitate interviews that resulted in the collection of rich data for analysis and interpretation. Next, I describe the students that participated in this aspect of the project and outline the specific procedures I used for the interview portion of the study.

Interview Participants

I took a purposive approach—seeking participants with specific characteristics, identities, and/or experiences (Tracy, 2020)—to recruiting participants for this study. As I approached this project from the perspective that reality is socially constructed and knowledge is created through interaction, I did not seek a representative sample because I was not trying to make generalizable claims through this research. Rather, I was interested in understanding the lived experiences of my specific participants as a means to understand their perspectives and interpretations of institutional prestige. Thus, participants in this study were students who were at least 18 years old and were currently enrolled at a U.S. college or university.

I elected to recruit currently enrolled U.S. college students as participants because the experience of attending an institution of higher education was a central aspect of their lives at the time of the interview. Currently enrolled college students were not far removed from the college admissions process where they received and consumed significant amounts of information from and about colleges and universities and interviews allowed them to reflect on their experience

and recall how they interpreted varying institutions and their communication. As currently enrolled college students were hoping to soon graduate and begin to reap the benefits of their college education in the few years after they participated in the study, they were also well set to reflect on the possible implications their relationship with their institution will have on their lives in the future.

I piloted my interview guide (and the qualitative questionnaire discussed below) with five currently enrolled students at a large, research-intensive institution in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. After determining the questions in my interview guide would solicit information that addressed my research questions I used the procedures outlined below to recruit 27 college students enrolled at a wide variety of institutions. In total, I conducted 32 interviews that were included for data analysis and interpretation.

Participants were 32 college students currently enrolled at institutions located in the mid-Atlantic, West Coast, Southeast, Northeast, and Midwest regions of the U.S. The type of institutions participants attended ranges from small, private liberal arts institutions to large, public research institutions. Participants were also working toward degrees in varying fields including communication, political science, finance, applied mathematics, and psychology among others. Seventeen participants attended private institutions and 15 participants attended public institutions. Fourteen participants identified as in-state students and 18 participants identified as out-of-state students. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 22 with an average age of 20.38 (SD = 1.13). One participant identified as a Freshman, 10 identified as Sophomores, 10 identified as Juniors, and 11 identified as Seniors. The majority of participants (21) identified as white. Three identified as Black/African American, one identified as African American, one identified as Ethiopian American, one identified as Asian, one identified as Asian American, one

identified as South Asian, one identified as white/Hispanic, one identified as mixed race, and one identified as biracial. Eighteen participants identified as female, 13 identified as male, and one identified as trans/non-binary. Four of the 32 participants identified as first-generation college students and five of the 32 participants attended community college and then transferred to their current four-year institution. Table 1 includes a summary of each participants' demographics. Table 2 includes a summary of the characteristics of the institution each participant attended.

Interview Procedures

As possible participants for this study were a broad group of college students, I took the following approaches to recruiting participants: (1) academic and disciplinary listservs; and (2) using my personal and professional network (see Appendix B for sample calls for participants). I began by using academic and disciplinary listservs to reach potential participants. Although these listservs are not always used by current undergraduate students, instructors and higher education administrators across the U.S. use these listservs. Therefore, I used this approach to participant recruitment primarily to ask these individuals to share the call for participants with the students they teach and work with. Specifically, I sent my call for participants to the COMMNotes listserv. Next, I leveraged my own personal and professional networks and asked those I know and work with to share my call for participants with students in their networks who are eligible to participant. With my background in higher education administration, I sent the call for participants to my former colleagues who now work at institutions across the U.S. and asked them to share the call with the students they work with. Collectively these approaches to recruitment gave me the opportunity to recruit participants enrolled at a variety of institutions.

Each version of the call for participants included a link to a pre-interview questionnaire that was administered via Qualtrics (see Appendix C). The call for participants directed those