# GOING UNDER TO GET AHEAD:
# PAYING FOR COLLEGE IN AN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY

by

Hannah E. Clarke



A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the

SCHOOL OF SOCIOLOGY

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In the Graduate College

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

2019

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
GRADUATE COLLEGE

As members of the Dissertation Committee, we certify that we have read the dissertation prepared by Hannah E. Clarke, titled Going Under to Get Ahead: Paying for College in an Age of Uncertainty and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Brian Mayer — Date: (4/12/19)

Jeff Sallaz — Date: (4/12/19)

Jeremy Fiel — Date: (4/12/19)

Final approval and acceptance of this dissertation is contingent upon the candidate's submission of the final copies of the dissertation to the Graduate College.

I hereby certify that I have read this dissertation prepared under my direction and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement.

Brian Mayer
Associate Professor
Sociology

Date: (4/12/19)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would not have been completed without the support and feedback of Monica Whitham and Brian Mayer. I would also like to thank Jeremy Fiel, Jane Zavisca, and Jeff Sallaz for comments and suggestions that improved this project. I will be forever grateful for the Consumer Society, Classical Theory, and Contemporary Theory classes I took with the sociology faculty of Boston College.

Most of all, I would like to thank the students who participated in a study on Paying for College, without whom this dissertation would simply not exist.

# DEDICATION

for my father

# Table of Contents

# LIST OF TABLES

# ABSTRACT

Student loans have become a cornerstone of democratized access to higher education. This dissertation contributes a novel approach to conceptualizing the student loan issue: students as consumers—both of college and of the student loans themselves. Through a mixed-method in-depth study of a graduating cohort at a public flagship university, I examine how students perceive these loans and the impact of these perceptions on the subjective experience of contemporary students. I gathered original data using a campus survey of registered seniors, in-depth follow-up interviews with a strategic sample of survey respondents, and a second, post-graduation follow-up interview with the main interview sample approximately two years later. In the first manuscript, I use 111 in-depth interviews to examine the evaluative frameworks students use to assess the legitimacy of student loan-use through the theoretical lens of "economic fictions," which holds that in the face of unknown outcomes actors rely on socially coordinated narratives about the future to motivate decision-making. I use findings on 'contested futures' to argue that the political viability of an economic fiction may be based on a social consensus surrounding the acceptable distribution of risk. In the second manuscript, I present an original conceptual framework for understanding differences between students in how they approach and relate to the use of debt-based aid. I created this concept, which I refer to as *orientations to debt*, from an iterative analysis of the 178 longitudinal interviews. These orientations to debt cannot be reduced to total loan amount; rather, they are informed by lived experiences with economic (un)certainty and financial control and the information to which a student has access in the present. Among other implications, my findings suggest that variations in student orientations to debt are a likely source of

the potential for debt-based aid to alter student trajectories while in college (e.g. dropping out). In the third manuscript, I draw from cognitive linguistic theory and literature on the dual ability of debt to enable as well as constrain in order to present a unique methodological framework that uses metaphorical reasoning—specifically, animal metaphors—as a proxy for student perceptions. Data come from in-depth interviews with 82 student borrowers. Results of this analysis were mapped with student demographic characteristics including race, class, and gender, as well as two additional dichotomous variables that I inductively formed from the interview data: perceived family safety net, and prior disruptive financial event. The results provided a rich and revealing portrait of student perceptions of the role these loans play in their lives: as domestic chore, object of fascination, source of harm, and a constant and incessant burden.

# INTRODUCTION

In the US educational system, a large-scale expansion of credit is enabling democratized access to higher education. This policy solution leaves it up to individual students, and their families, to use debt to navigate their way to the economic future that a college education can provide. The three manuscripts that constitute this dissertation are the result of a mixed-method, heavily qualitative examination of the possibility that some individuals will be more fortified for that journey than others.

## Background

Popular understanding holds that the individual and societal effects of higher education are overwhelmingly positive. Education beyond a high school degree is thought of as the most significant driver of social mobility for lower income groups and an essential tool for the reproduction of higher ones (Acs and Zimmerman 2008; Allen and Reich 2013; Brown 2013; Haveman and Smeeding 2006; Hout 2012). Aggregate data repeatedly demonstrate that investing in education leads to better jobs, greater earnings, more health and happiness, and increased overall social tolerance (Hout 2012). Yet a combination of escalating costs and escalating debt loads has sparked extensive debate about the larger value and purpose of higher education in our society, including who should have access to it and who should bear the financial burden of providing this access.

Policy experts, too, have begun questioning whether the positive income effects of a college degree will continue to hold as more college-educated workers enter the labor market (e.g. Reich 2014). Other researchers have proposed that the market and fiscal pressures closing in on higher education may be incentivizing a "beer and circus" environment, which would undermine educational investment in human capital in favor of consumer-oriented student experiences (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Arum and Roksa 2011; Sperber 2001). Such debates about the value of higher education have only gained traction in public media as the student loan "crisis" has taken on greater focus.

Despite these questions and concerns, the subjective understanding of the students who are actually confronting the problem of paying for college has been left largely unexamined. The majority of academic research on the student loan issue to date has taken a quantitative approach, prioritizing outcomes and associations that can be directly measured through existing survey data (Baker, Andrews, and McDaniel 2017). These quantitative approaches cannot tell us how individual students see and experience their college-related choices, the impact of loan-use (or non-use) on their college experience, and the consequences of these decisions after graduation. Existing survey data also cannot tell us how the combination of increased college costs and debt-based aid will affect younger cohorts of graduates, as effects will still be unfolding over many years to come.

This dissertation study addresses the impact of the US policy turn to debt-based financial aid on contemporary students through a mixed-method in-depth study that examines the subjective experience of a graduating cohort at a public flagship university. As will be detailed further, I designed and issued an online survey on Paying for College to 4000 registered seniors during the 2015-2016 academic year. From the 975 individual surveys that resulted, I selected 111 students for in-depth interviews that I conducted in-person over the course of that year. Over the 2017-2018 academic year, I re-contacted

102 members of this original interview sample and conducted 67 in-depth follow-up interviews. As graduates were now living in all sorts of locations, I conducted these second interviews remotely.

## OVERVIEW OF DISSERTATION

I adopt a 3-article format to organize and present results from this study. At its broadest theoretical level, this dissertation is using a consumers and consumption approach, which means that attending college is seen as simultaneously a route to social mobility/social reproduction *and* an individualized experience embedded with aspirational meaning. Student loans, as a socially facilitated means to pay for college, are treated as financial instruments that enable the entirety of these college objectives. Original data was gathered using a campus survey of registered seniors, in-depth follow-up interviews with a strategic sample of survey respondents, and a second follow-up interview with the main interview sample approximately two years later.

The first manuscript, “Student Loans as Investment in Your Future: Using an Economic Fictions Framework to Explore the US Student Loan Issue,” examines the evaluative frameworks that 111 students use to gage the legitimacy of student loan-use through the lens of Jen Beckert’s theory on economic fictions. In the second manuscript, “The Debt Solution: Orientations to Debt and their Implications for Today’s College Students,” I present an original concept, *orientations to debt*, which is a conceptual framework for understanding differences between students in how they approach and relate to the use of debt-based aid. I designed this concept through an iterative analysis of the 178 longitudinal interviews. The third manuscript, “Lions and Tigers and Bears:

Using Metaphor to Examine College Students' Perceptions of their Loan Debt," treats animal metaphors as a proxy for individual perceptions of loan debt among 82 student borrowers using a unique methodological framework derived from cognitive linguistic theory.

Each of these three manuscripts, which are appended to this dissertation, makes a unique theoretical contribution using a different qualitative analysis of the dataset I have assembled. Together, this dissertation has built a unique approach for conceptualizing student borrowing that treats students as consumers—both of college and of the student loans themselves. The goal of my approach is to better understand how a debt-based financial aid environment is experienced and managed from the perspective of individual students. By using a consumption-oriented theoretical perspective to address the student loan issue, this dissertation is also contributing to a budding overlap between the sociology of education and economic sociology literatures.

## STUDY DESIGN AND METHODS

### Study Setting

A public university setting provided an ideal case with which to begin a qualitative investigation of how debt-based aid is affecting US students. Public universities are historically charged with equalizing access to higher education and are, as such, wrapped up in American dream-type narratives regarding education and social mobility (Rosenbaum 2001). Democratized access for less resource-advantaged students in state schools, combined with steady decreases in state appropriations for grant aid and tuition subsidies, creates a relatively high debt load for students relative to their career prospects (Dwyer, McCloud, and Hodson 2012).

Critical to the present study, socioeconomic diversity on the campus is high, and some students—though not all—have a degree of flexibility in their borrowing decisions. This flexibility is due to a combination of factors, including the relatively moderate tuition and low cost of living in the local area, as well as peculiarities in financial aid packages that occur through the federal process of calculating and awarding financial aid. Since the university is actively recruiting affluent out-of-state students from nearby states, students taking a financially modest route to their degree must coexist with those who have chosen, or have been afforded, the option to spend more.

## Phase 1

### *Online Campus Survey with In-depth Follow-up Interviews*

Over the 2015-2016 academic year, I issued an invitation to participate in an online survey on Paying for College that held the possibility of being selected for an in-depth in-person interview to a random sample of 4000 registered seniors stratified by college division. Given known response rates to other campus surveys, my target realized sample was 1000 individuals at an expected response rate of 25%. Achieved sample size was 975 individuals with a response rate of 24.4%. These survey data were combined with registrar data on the student's college and major.

The survey was distributed in four waves in order to stagger recruitment over the academic year. Survey questions covered demographics and family background; living arrangements; hours worked; uses of student loans, whether the student would be responsible for repayment (i.e. as opposed to parent/s), parental resources, and other sources of aid; as well as a final question asking if the student would like the chance to be selected for an in-person follow-up interview. Additionally, the survey included two attitudinal measures on the meaning and purpose of college and an experimental vignette measuring willingness to take a relatively financially risky post-college internship. Prior to each interview, I reviewed the participant's survey answers and integrated these responses into the interview script.

Interviews were semi-structured in format, conducted face-to-face, and averaged eighty minutes in length. The interview script was designed to elicit discourse surrounding (1) how pathways taken through college—including major choice, residency changes, lifestyle and consumption habits, and struggles and achievements—interact with the means by which students are paying for college; and (2) the student's perception of the risk and social legitimacy of borrowing (or not borrowing) to pay for a college degree. Major topics included: family background and decision to attend college; aspirational goals; pathways taken through college; strategies, rationales, and justifications for using loans and other types of financial resources; perceptions of student loan risk; strategies for repayment; and post-college plans. After each interview, I wrote an analytical memo to revisit my study expectations, formulate emerging expectations, and document the non-verbal and ethnographic details of each interview encounter.

*Recruitment Material, Interview Sampling Technique, and Study Participation Rates*

This study embraced an iterative approach to qualitative data collection and analysis. In total, 111 seniors were interviewed during the first phase of this study.

Demographics are included in Table 1. All borrowers in the sample expected to be the person responsible for loan repayment after graduation (as opposed to parents). Throughout the data collection period, I maintained a pool of potential interview subjects that was continually updated as survey results came in. For each week of active data collection, I selected approximately seven to twelve subjects for interviews according to a theoretically driven sampling logic. This logic ensured sufficient variance in student characteristics such as parental income and education, race/ethnicity, gender, Pell grant status, residency status, college major, total expected borrowing amount, and so on. When the pool of available interview subjects exceeded research needs for a given category, I selected subjects in a random manner. In order to avoid any potential scheduling bias on my part, interviews were conducted between the hours of 8am and 9pm, weekdays and weekends, and participants were able to schedule in advance as well as last minute.

Table 1: Phase 1 Interview Sample Demographics

*Phase 1*

| Gender | | Class | | Race | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| M | F | MC | WC | W | O |
| 47% | 53% | 55% | 45% | 50% | 50% |

| Total Loan Amount | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| $0 | $1 < $19,999 | $20,000- $29,999 | $30,000 + |
| 24% | 23% | 31% | 22% |

I designed the Phase 1 recruitment material with an eye toward diversifying motivations for study participation. Recruitment language appealed to students on three distinct levels: (1) money; subjects were compensated $20 cash for their time; (2) status; recruitment materials were personalized as much as possible, including identifying each student by name, and emphasizing phrases like *your participation*, *your perspective*, and *you were selected for a follow-up interview*; and (3) altruism; I appealed to potential subjects as a fellow university student conducting a research study on a socially important topic. Informal debriefing with subjects at the end of each interview suggested that this technique was at least somewhat effective in diversifying motives for study participation.

Demographics of survey results compared favorably with available data on the university student body. Among survey respondents, 80% indicated willingness to participate in the follow-up interview. Rates were slightly higher among females than males, and lower for students in the School of Engineering. After accounting for non-response to interview invitations, the achieved response rate for the in-depth Phase 1 interviews was 65%. Non-response occurred primarily during peak times of the semester. No additional variation by categories of interest was found.

*Data Management*

Interviews for both phases of this study were audio recorded[1] and transcribed by either a professional transcription service or myself. Transcriptions were coded within

[1] Five participants chose to decline permission to record the first interview, in which cases I took extensive written notes. All second interviews were audio recorded.

MAXQDA computer-assisted qualitative coding software using a mix of both open and closed techniques. When more functionally appropriate, Excel and Microsoft Word were also used to organize study data and to do exploratory open coding. Additionally, given that the meaning of written text is, at times, ambiguous, I integrated each interview transcription with its corresponding audio file within MAXQDA in order to retain as much of the original meaning as possible.

Phase 2

*Longitudinal In-depth Interviews*

The second wave of interviews was conducted over the 2017-2018 academic year. Each participant in the main interview sample[2] was contacted on a rolling basis for participation in the second interview; 67 of these 102 participants completed the second interview, resulting in a retention rate of 66%. Overall, minority students and middle-class students were slightly less represented in the follow-up sample compared with the original sample (see Table 2 below); both discrepancies are reduced but not eliminated when comparing borrowers only. Borrowers with higher-than-average loan amounts were also slightly more represented in the follow-up. Second interviews were conducted via Skype, FaceTime, or over the phone, depending on the participant's preference, and lasted approximately ninety minutes each. To reflect graduates' new work and schedule circumstances, participants were compensated with a $50 gift card for the second interview.

---

[2] For various reasons, nine of the original interviews were considered peripheral.

Table 2: Interview Sample Demographics for both Study Phases

*Phase 1*

| Gender | | Class | | Race | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| M | F | MC | WC | W | O |
| 47% | 53% | 55% | 45% | 50% | 50% |

| Total Loan Amount | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| $0 | $1 < $19,999 | $20,000- $29,999 | $30,000 + |
| 24% | 23% | 31% | 22% |

*Phase 2*

| Gender | | Class | | Race | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| M | F | MC | WC | W | O |
| 45% | 55% | 48% | 52% | 57% | 43% |

| Total Loan Amount | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| $0 | $1 < $19,999 | $20,000- $29,999 | $30,000 + |
| 24% | 25% | 24% | 27% |

The second interview script again included a number of semi-structured questions to ensure a degree of uniformity across respondents. Overall, however, I adopted a more open-ended and participant-specific approach. This change allowed me to capture the wider variety of experiences and circumstances among recent graduates as compared to when they were seniors. A more open-ended approach also allowed me to probe respondents regarding specific plans and beliefs they had described during the first interview. Interview topics included general transitions out of college; job searches and employment since graduation, and current career plans and aspirations; money and financial circumstances; student loan bills and dealings with loan service providers; and ongoing perceptions of debt. I also revisited topics covered during the first interview, such as the meaning and purpose of a college degree, and expanded our coverage of prior familial experiences with money and debt.

Analytical interview memoing was used again for the second phase of the study. Prior to beginning each second interview, I reviewed the participant's Phase 1 data, including a complete re-listening of our first interview. In addition to noting topics of emphasis to probe in revisit, I also noted the participant's post-graduation aspirations and goals, job and living arrangement plans, and, if applicable, student loan repayment strategy, which allowed me to formulate expectations for each of these longitudinal interviews in an analytical memo. Following each interview, I returned to this memo to revisit these expectations, formulate new study expectations, and, again, document ethnographic and non-verbal details of the interview encounter.

## Qualitative Interviewing as a Method of Studying Culture

Prevailing research on student loans is heavily quantitative in nature. It is also informed by a dominant economics discourse emphasizing utility maximization, risk-assessment, and risk-aversion, in understanding individual motivations and decision-making processes regarding the cost of college. These assumptions, while not existing in an empirical vacuum, are based on a model of human behavior inconsistent with contemporary economic sociology and cultural sociology (Frye 2012; Guseva and Rona-Tas 2001; Vaisey 2009; Wuthnow 1996; Zelizer 1988).

Theory and existing empirical studies in both of these subfields suggest that motivations and meanings that are based in culture will be relevant for understanding how students approach paying for college, given that understanding and action are causally linked. This link has been established by a series of research within the sociology of culture (e.g. Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Frye 2012, 2017; Gross 2009; Mische 2009; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013). The exact effects of understanding on action remain contested and difficult to quantify. However, the current consensus is that understandings play *some* part in a causal chain between culture and individual behavior; for example, because understandings are part of a cognitive process through which individuals mobilize beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes in order to evaluate situations *before* proceeding with particular courses of action (e.g. Gross 2009). As a methodological tool for examining meaning, qualitative interviewing is ideal for investigating possible mechanisms or "processes," especially as they relate to an economic behavior or "outcome of interest" (Weiss 1995: 10).

Interviews have become a target of methodological infighting as the sociology of culture has gained status (e.g. Jerolmack and Khan 2014; Martin J.L 2010; Vaisey 2013). These prevailing criticisms of interviewing as a research method are often based on an overly simplified view of the relationship between attitudes and behavior, which privileges external processes that are "visible and public" over internal processes that are not (Lamont and Swidler 2014). As summarized by Lamont and Swidler (2014), drawing also from the work of Pugh (2013), Hochschild (1983, 2003, 2013) and their own (Lamont 2010; Swidler 2001), internal processes relevant to behavior include how people understand and respond to the "emotional dimension of social experience," as well as the “imagined meanings of their activities, their self-concepts, [and] their fantasies about themselves (and about others),” which are primarily gauged through talking and asking questions (p. 159).

Prevailing criticisms of interviewing as a research method also tend to be based on a misunderstanding of how interviewers who are well trained in the method’s advantages and limitations do their work and what they think they are accomplishing with the method (Lamont and Swidler 2014; Pugh 2013). Interviewing is not an ideal method for studying why people do what they do; it is, however, advantageous for studying how people *understand* what they do, what others do, and why. One of the greatest strengths of this method lies in its ability to identify and leverage distinctions in *meaning*—how it used, interpreted, and constructed—across analytical categories through systematic analysis (Lamont and Swidler 2014; Pugh 2013). The method is therefore highly appropriate, if not ideal, for a dissertation study that is investigating the cultural meaning embedded in economic activity.

## Logic of Inquiry

As a qualitative researcher, I follow a long line of others who argue that qualitative and quantitative methods are distinct and should be treated as such (Burawoy 2009; Geertz 1973; Luker 2010; Mishler 1986; Pugh 2013; Ragin and Becker 1992; Small 2009). In-depth interviews serve as a methodological tool for assessing collective meaning precisely because of the interpretive nature of their analysis (Pugh 2013; Mishler 1986). This dissertation approaches interview data as dually constructed discourse between a researcher and a person being interviewed (Mishler 1986). Rather than assume it is possible for an interviewer to be an objective methodological instrument, this approach accepts that the person doing the interview will inevitably affect the responses of subjects and the resulting data (Mishler 1986).

Under this approach, acceptance of the affect a researcher will have on subjects, as well as the desire the subjects will have to "present" a particular version of their selves, is built into the research design, including in: 1) how the interview protocol is designed, i.e., using a mix of question techniques, including open-ended, direct, hypothetical (self and others), and "devil's advocate" questions, in order to elicit meaning of interest from multiple angles and at multiple points in the interview; 2) how interview data is analyzed, i.e., treating discrepancies in the accounts subjects choose to present as an additional source of data, as well as emphasizing cross-subject and cross-category analysis rather than isolating specific answers from their original context; and 3) presented as results, i.e., results are not quantified because they are seen as *generalizing to theoretical understanding* rather than to static characteristics and/or probabilistic outcomes within a specific population, which requires a different standard of validity.

## SUMMARY OF STUDY CONTRIBUTION

The average cost to obtain a 4-year college degree has risen exponentially over the last 35 years. In tandem with these cost increases, outstanding US student loan debt has surpassed $1.4 trillion. This escalation is unsustainable, which has sparked extensive debates regarding the current purpose and value of college. Within these debates, both public discourse and policy research typically presume that students are borrowing—or should be borrowing—based on rational expectations of net income gains relative to college costs. This assumption is reflected again in discussion of the US student loan issue as a matter of students borrowing too much, or too little, given the likely labor market value of their degree.

This discourse is misleading in several ways. Framing the student loan issue according to a rational actor model ignores the social and cultural meaning that enters into any economic decision, let alone one as synonymous with expectations of a middle-class lifestyle as attending college. Additionally, it overlooks the broader socio-historical context in which college has transformed from a semi-public good to a matter of individual investment and individualized risk. Finally, as I also discuss in the appended manuscripts, the microeconomics of paying for college undermine rational expectations in that the borrowing decisions of very young adults are being made on a year-to-year basis in order to fund a degree path that is *anticipated* to bring them a return in the future.

To expand theoretical understanding of the US student loan issue, Manuscript 1 examines the evaluative frameworks students use to assess the legitimacy of student loan-use through the lens of Jens Beckert's theory of "economic fictions" (2013, 2016). The economic fictions framework holds that in the face of unknown outcomes actors rely on socially coordinated narratives about the future to motivate their decision-making. Drawing on 111 in-depth interviews, I use student narratives surrounding loans as 'investment in the future' to highlight what are, from a rational actor standpoint, clear inefficiencies in the student loan market.

In highlighting this inefficiency, the purpose of Manuscript 1 is not to argue that students are behaving irrationally as economic actors; there is nothing irrational in the pursuit of a college degree. Rather, the narratives students choose reveal cracks that have formed in the policy foundation of debt-based aid, including outright contestation of its legitimacy. I use this finding on 'contested futures' to argue that the political viability of an economic fiction may be based on a social and political consensus surrounding the acceptable distribution of risk.

Manuscript 2 considers this distribution of risk as a matter of a political economy. Prasad (2012) argues that consumer credit can operate as a political economic solution to the problem of social inequality. In the US case, large-scale expansions of credit have historically functioned as a critical means of equalizing access to social resources, such as the government-facilitated expansion of mortgage markets in the 1960s that fueled home ownership increases (Hyman 2012; Prasad 2012). The "debt solution" is a way of increasing access to desirable social goods, such as housing, while still prioritizing the orientation of consumers in a liberal marketplace (Prasad 2012).

It is, in fact, an expansion of credit over the last decades to nearly all potential student borrowers that has fueled federal college-for-all policies (Perna, Kvaal, and Ruiz 2017). The increases in college costs and student debt loads that have resulted are indisputable, yet whether they signal a need for a policy change is subject to debate. For example, some research suggests that since the late 1980s increases in college debt load are less than increases on college returns (Akers and Chingos 2014). On the other hand, even if accurate, these returns will come only to those students who graduate. Existing research has repeatedly demonstrated that debt-based aid may deter college entry and persistence for at-risk students (Dwyer, Hodson, and McCloud 2013; Dwyer et al. 2012; Goldrick-Rab 2016; Mortenson 1990; Perna 2000).

Given the reality of this policy turn, securing a baseline understanding of how individual students navigate a debt-based financial aid environment will be critical for contextualizing the existing research on student loans, as well as the longer-term outcomes that are only beginning to be captured in survey research. Toward this end, Manuscript 2 puts forth an original concept, referred to as *orientations to debt*, which I designed to capture how differences between students in their (dis)comfort with borrowing affect how they approach and relate to debt-based aid in college. These orientations cannot be reduced to total student loan amount; rather, they are informed by lived experiences with economic (un)certainty and financial control and the information to which a student has access in the present.

As I further discuss in the appended manuscript, I designed this concept through an iterative qualitative analysis of the 178 longitudinal interviews. Findings from Manuscript 2 suggest that variations in student orientations to debt, such as a perception that loans always cause harm or that a loan is not worth accruing for certain college activities, are a likely source of the known ability of debt-based aid to alter educational outcomes (e.g. dropping out). Additionally, this manuscript's findings on practice-based understandings of money and finance suggest that the current structure of financing higher education may be based on a flawed understanding of how young adults in college relate to debt. I conclude that, in addition to the material and psychological impact student loans are having on every student who faces an individual responsibility for their borrowing, asking students to navigate a debt-based financial aid environment *before* they have gained a concrete sense of what repayment will actually be like may be putting students who are, for various reasons, less shielded from the non-material burden of borrowing at a disadvantage.

On the post-graduation end of the student loan issue, findings from Manuscript 2 suggest the structure of student loan *repayment* may again be exacerbating existing disparities between individuals; now, in the initial job circumstances, resources, and emotional support that leave some recent graduates scrambling to find an immediate solution to repayment that they can live with—or figuratively running away from the problem—while other graduates can afford a more relaxed approach. I therefore concur with Dynarski (2015) that one solution to the inevitable financial instability that many recent college graduates face would be to follow the example of other countries that automatically enroll borrowers in income-based repayment, as recent graduates who are doing relatively well financially can always just choose to pay more.

Of course, regardless of the actual impact of debt-based aid on students and graduates, the current higher education context is such that many individuals face a “trade-off” between accepting student debt and facing the labor market without a college degree (Dwyer, Hodson, and McCloud 2013). It is well established that students who borrow but do not graduate will face a higher risk of default than those who do (Perna, Kvaal, and Ruiz 2017). Thus one of the more pressing challenges facing higher education policy is how to help at-risk students navigate a debt-based financial aid environment in a way that balances the positive potential of borrowing with the very real increase in risk these students will face when they do borrow (Perna, Kvaal, and Ruiz 2017).

This challenge is the subject of Manuscript 3. In order to address this challenge, a better understanding of how debt-based aid is able to affect students in both positive and negative ways is needed. Gaining this better understanding will require researchers to go beyond the prevailing survey-focused methodological approach to student loan research. Drawing from the economic sociology literature on the duality of debt, I therefore present a unique methodological framework that uses metaphorical reasoning—specifically, animal metaphors—to directly examine students' subjective understandings of their loan debt. Data come from in-depth interviews with 82 student borrowers.

Analytically, I treat these *metaphors as a proxy for student perceptions* that may otherwise be difficult for them to express—or which may otherwise be difficult for a researcher to access. The animal question used in this study gave students a ready lexicon for discussing their loans, which was both an abstract concept and a sensitive subject, in a manner that was playful and relatively judgment free. By provoking a more from-the-hip response than would be elicited from a routine interview question, the animal question challenged one of the more common critiques of interviewing as a research method (see, for example, Pugh 2013; Vaisey 2013). These answers were analyzed in conjunction with the body of interviews as a whole. The results provided a rich and revealing portrait of student perceptions of the role these loans play in their lives: as a domestic chore, object of fascination, source of harm, and a constant and incessant burden.

These metaphor results were mapped with student demographic characteristics including race, class, and gender, as well as two additional dichotomous variables that I inductively formed from the interview data: perceived family safety net, and prior disruptive financial event. Among other pertinent results, I find that female students are overrepresented in the more fear-based categories, as were students who had gone through a disruptive financial event. Class background was not found to be particularly relevant. When considered in conjunction with the rest of the interview data, results suggest that financial knowledge and familiarity with the *positive* side of credit and debt may increase student comfort with borrowing.

## CONCLUSION

This dissertation contributes a novel approach to conceptualizing student borrowing: students as consumers—both of college and of the student loans themselves. At the time I began this dissertation project, existing research on student borrowing was heavily dominated by economics and public policy literatures, which rely heavily on rational-actor-derived theory and the analysis of large-scale survey datasets. With a few notable exceptions (e.g. Dwyer, Goldrick-Rab), academic attempts to examine the experience of students, who are the people actually doing the borrowing, were surprisingly absent from the literature.

Less surprisingly, I was not able to find any existing studies that considered student borrowing through the lens of consumers and consumption, a subfield of sociology in which cultural meaning and socio-historical context are considered foundational to understanding economic action. As demonstrated through the appended manuscripts, a consumers and consumption lens offers much clarity to our existing understanding of student borrowing because student loans are a specific type of financial instrument that individuals are choosing to consume (or not) as part of their strategy for paying for college. These loans must be applied for (FAFSA), accepted, and paid for in origination fees and interest. For students, borrowing money to help pay for college is, technically, both a choice and a purchase, despite the inequality that leaves some students far more likely to have to face this decision than others. The agency of borrowing decisions allowed me to treat student loans like any other object that people choose to consume, and as we would predict with any other object, I found that the *meaning* embedded in these loans is affecting whether and how students are using them.

This research is also unique in viewing student borrowing according to the full spectrum of what a college education is providing today's young adults. This current provision goes far beyond a mere labor market credential. From a cultural perspective, college provides young adults with a specific lifestyle and a chance to forge an independent identity, on top of the chance to earn a coveted labor market credential. I found that this additional function of college as a semi-exclusive life stage is essential to a complete understanding of student motivations for borrowing, as it is part of the "package" of benefits a college student is choosing to purchase regardless of whether that student is using loans or not. The marketing efforts of colleges and universities are well aware of this additional function, as is media discourse on student borrowing and college costs; to ignore the motivational role of lifestyle aspirations in academic and policy research on student borrowing is naïve.

In applying a consumers and consumption lens, I have also treated the US *policy* of debt-based financial aid as a choice; under my approach, this policy is seen as a specific political economic solution to college access, which is embedded in the current socio-historical context and, as such, neither inevitable nor incapable of reform. As noted throughout this dissertation, a debt solution to college access is similar to the US approach to home ownership: a government-facilitated student loan market is offering students (and families) relatively "safe" credit with which to "invest" in a college degree.

Like an owned home, a college degree is a lifelong asset widely believed to pay for itself, and more, over time.

By ensuring that the majority of students have access to enough credit to cover a modestly priced college education, debt-based financial aid is allowing all young adults to afford some type of college degree, regardless of their current socioeconomic circumstances. As with individualized, mortgage-based housing in the US, individuals have been provided with a politically and economically reasonable means of securing access to a semi-public good: college. The catch, if there is one, is that *individuals* assume the bulk of the risk of this investment.

Clear similarities in the policy logic and structure of debt-based financial aid and mortgage-based home ownership are documented in the existing literature (e.g. Prasad, Dynarksi). One of the main conclusions I drew from this dissertation research, however, is that there is a fundamental difference between these two purchases in *process*, that is, the context in which individuals, as economic actors, are doing their decision-making. I refer to the context in which students are making their decisions as the "microeconomics of paying for college," and it is a central finding of this dissertation research. The context of paying for college renders installment-style financing, under which, typically, a material object would be seen and assessed as a whole before being purchased under set terms, extremely problematic.

Among other problematic aspects of this policy, the microeconomics of paying for college involve a relatively active and extended timeline on which decisions accumulate, unfold, and play out from year-to-year, if not semester-to-semester. This timeline extends over a life stage that is known for personal development, growth, and change, and it includes narrowing down career options through exposure, failures, and discovery. This growth is not just about what the student wants to be; it is also about what they are good at, which may not be what the student originally imagined it would be. Decisions a student makes throughout their college career can trigger a path dependency effect that is opening doors to some future opportunities while closing others. At least at a state university like PFU, these decisions can impact total cost of attendance, and, over enough time, may impact an individual's net returns from their college degree as well.

The financial inexperience and vulnerability of this population is also relevant for recognizing what is problematic about the current policy. Undergraduates are a unique population that is, by design, being partially sheltered from the day-to-day realities of adult life. These students are primarily between the ages of 18 and 22 and exist somewhere in the "in-between land" between "real" adulthood and full dependency on parents and family. The majority of these students have not run a household on their own; they have not received a consistent and adult-size paycheck at regular intervals. Even by the time of graduation, many of these students had not yet opened a credit card.

The lack of a concrete foundation with which to relate to debt, as well as the sheer impossibility of ever knowing the actual jobs the future will hold after graduation, means that undergraduates are better seen as relying on a foundation built from trust rather than calculation. This trust is built from what these students hear about money, finance, and the value of college from their parents, peers, institutional actors, media, and other sources, what they read on their own, and what they remember from their past. A foundation for understanding that comes indirectly from others is not, however, the same as a foundation that is based on lived, embodied practice. A solid foundation for evaluating debt, which would, arguably, be necessary for truly informed decision-making, comes only after these students graduate.

The discrepancy between expectations for behavior that are built into the student loan system and the actual context in which decisions are being made begins with the very first step of choosing to attend college. The price of a college degree from an accredited, non-profit institution is consistently found to pay for itself many times over, even if the purchase of this degree is financed with debt and regardless of specific degree path. Assuming a college degree will pay for itself over time is therefore a sound bet; assuming that an individual who embarks on a college education will receive their college degree, however, is not. Forty percent of students who begin their studies at a 4-year institution in any given year will not have completed that degree six years later (NCES 2016). Any loans these individuals have used to help pay for this *eventual* degree will have to be repaid regardless. The job market credential itself is never guaranteed despite operating as the closest thing these students will have to collateral. Barring death of the borrower (or epic fraud), student loan debt cannot be discharged; walking away and starting from scratch is not an option.

Prior to beginning this study, I knew from the existing research that, statistically speaking, at any given time a portion of PFU students are borrowing money to help fund the purchase of a degree that they will not ultimately obtain. Another portion of these students are avoiding some or all of the loans they are offered in their financial aid package because they want to “get by” without borrowing, despite the material hardship and resulting stress this loan aversion can create. While the latter group of students will escape the heightened risk of default that awaits the former, material hardship itself is known to increase a student's risk of dropping out; conversely, so also can carrying debt. This situation presents a complicated dilemma for institutional actors invested in increasing positive outcomes for students, particularly students who come from high-risk populations. The reality of student behavior also complicates perpetual attempts to view student borrowing according to rational-actor-derived theory. At some point, explaining deviations from rational behavior as rational to the people involved loses the ability to provide insight into how behavior can be redirected or changed through policy reform.

The above paragraph presents the more practical side of why researchers should care about how students *perceive* loans. Perceptions affect decision-making. It is in the decision-making space that my dissertation provides its biggest applied contribution. Even within the same institution, material resources affect the pathways students are taking far more than many of the actors involved would like to think that they are. From a policy standpoint, the loans that a student is offered in their financial aid package are intended to offset relative deprivation that can, and often does, constrain a student's chances of success relative to students who have access to more material resources—primarily by way of their parent/s. The system through which financial aid is calculated and awarded is imperfect, and the consequences of this system's flaws deserve a dissertation of their own, but this system is intended to help.

As part of this financial aid system, loans are offered to students and families in order to fill resource gaps, but for many students, these loans will not be accepted, will not be enough, or will be a significant and distracting source of stress from which some borrowers are shielded more than others. Even at a public university like PFU, post-Recession cost increases have left it nearly impossible for full-time students to pay for college and support themselves through paid employment at the same time. Differences in student resources are made up through borrowing money, working more hours, getting by with less, or forming alternative consumption strategies.

At PFU, time and money are in a perpetual trade-off for the students who lack a significant parental contribution or a significant scholarship. “Extra” college opportunities, such as internships and research roles, socialization and networking, involvement with clubs and organization, studies abroad, and so on, will provide students with value that can be redeemed in the job market and in applications for graduate school after graduation. Although whether a student is able to access these opportunities cannot be reduced to a matter of material resources, material resources help. In today’s hyper-competitive race for advantage, the line between incidental consumption and competitive edge is no longer an obvious one.

From a policy perspective, accepting loans that will legitimately contribute to positive outcomes is considered an economically rational decision; in the absence of offsetting alternatives, declining to accept these loans is not. When I began this research, I expected that borrowing decisions would not be nearly so simple from the perspective of many of the individual students who saw themselves as responsible for repayment after graduation (or, as I found, students who were worried about the impact their college costs were having on *parent/s* who were contributing). My initial expectation was that how students perceived loans would revolve primarily around aspirational views of the future: the meaning these individuals saw in a college degree, and whether it was seen as “worth” investing in, even if that investment had to be accomplished with debt.

This is not what I concluded. Regarding what I refer to as “orientations to debt,” which is the conceptual framework I developed for understanding how student perceptions of debt are affecting borrowing decisions, aspirational views of the future are relevant. However, these views of the future are operating more as a motivation for student persistence on the path forward *despite* debt. I found that it was experiences from the past—not views of the future—that played the most significant role in variation in students’ orientations to debt, along with any counter-balancing (or reinforcing) knowledge to which a student has access in the present. To use the language of rational actor theory, for some students, the past is operating as a source of bias that is distorting the decision-making process.

From a policy standpoint, this finding is not exactly ideal, assuming, of course, that the goal of this policy is to foster efficient and relatively “fair” outcomes for students. At its core, the logic of debt-based investment relies on an orientation to the future; expectations for future returns can be calculated, they can be communicated to individuals, and they can be controlled to a certain extent on a social level. Past experiences cannot be coordinated in this way (although they can certainly be manipulated). As a source of motivation for economic behavior, the past is not nearly as easy to control for, given that the past is fixed and relatively idiosyncratic.

Perhaps more importantly, the past can provoke stronger *emotions* than imagination can. As is well known by marketers, perceptions that carry an emotional connotation, such as those based in confidence, complacency, want, envy, fear, anxiety, and anger, are highly relevant for understanding economic behavior. I concluded from this research that debt holds an emotional connotation for many students, as does navigating a highly stratified higher education environment. In the context of paying for college, these emotional connotations are competing for space with rational evaluation according to the “official” purpose and role of this debt. Whether this finding will ultimately matter for student outcomes in the long run remains to be seen.

* * *

When considering the findings of this dissertation, the parameters of the larger study should be kept in mind. Extensive care was taken in the design of this study to represent the wide variety of students who are pursuing their education at one public flagship university. Without further research, findings cannot be generalized to US students as a whole. This study took place at a public university in a state that has faced severe post-Great Recession cuts to education, and the student body reflects a more democratized approach to higher education. In general, students at this institution may be more “on their own” relative to students at private and/or more selective universities. This study also recruited students who have, by definition, persisted through their senior year of college. This approach provided qualitative insight into factors that may affect student persistence, but the study sample may be biased toward resilient outcomes.

However, in designing an in-depth, qualitatively focused examination of how contemporary students within one college cohort experience a debt-based financial aid environment, the goal of this study was not to provide a definitive explanation of why US students are borrowing money (or not) to help pay for college. In future research, I will examine findings from this study for greater or lesser prevalence among categories of students already known to be at increased risk of negative outcomes, such as first generation students, minorities, and women, and test this dissertation's findings for generalizability to additional higher education settings and student bodies.

What this dissertation contributes is a deeper understanding of how a debt-based financial aid environment is affecting today's students on a subjective level, as well as an original theoretical mechanism—orientations to debt—for understanding how current educational policy may be contributing to divergent experiences for students while they are in college and, possibly, unequal outcomes for graduates down the road. By developing this deeper understanding on the foundation of a methodologically robust research design, I am offering an academic counterpoint to an increasingly polarized national public discourse regarding the ethics and implications of financing higher education with student loans.

# WORKS CITED


Acs, Gregory and Seth Zimmerman. 2008. *U.S. Intergenerational Economic Mobility from 1984 to 2004: Trends and Implications*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Charitable Trust.

Akers, Beth and Matthew M. Chingos. 2016. *Game of Loans: The Rhetoric and Reality of Student Debt*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.

Akers, Beth and Matthew M. Chingos. 2014. "Is a Student Loan Crisis on the Horizon?" *The Brookings Institution*. Retrieved November 13, 2014 .

Allen, Danielle and Rob Reich. 2013. *Education, Justice, and Democracy*. University of Chicago Press.

Armstrong, Elizabeth A. and Laura T. Hamilton. 2013. *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Arum, Richard and Josipa Roksa. 2011. *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Baker, Amanda R., Benjamin D. Andrews, and Anne McDaniel. 2017. "The Impact of Student Loans on College Access, Completion, and Returns." *Sociology Compass* 11(6).

Beckert, Jens. 2013. "Imagined Futures: Fictional Expectations in the Economy." *Theory and Society* 42(3):219–40.

Beckert, Jens. 2016. *Imagined Futures : Fictional Expectations and Capitalist Dynamics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Brown, Phillip. 2013. "Education, Opportunity and the Prospects for Social Mobility." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34(5–6):678–700.

Burawoy, Michael. 2009. *The Extended Case Method: Four Countries, Four Decades, Four Great Transformations, and One Theoretical Tradition*. First edition. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Carnevale, Anthony P., Ban Cheah, and Hanson Andrew R. 2015. *The Economic Value of College Majors*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

Cohen, Lizabeth. 2003. *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*. New York : Knopf : Distributed by Random House.

Dwyer, Rachel E., Randy Hodson, and Laura McCloud. 2013. "Gender, Debt, and Dropping Out of College." *Gender & Society* 27(1):30–55.

Dwyer, Rachel E., Laura McCloud, and Randy Hodson. 2012. "Debt and Graduation from American Universities." *Social Forces* 90(4):1133–55.

Dynarski, Susan. 2002. "The Consequences of Lowering the Cost of College: The Behavioral and Distributional Implications of Aid for College."

Dynarski, Susan. 2015. "For the Poor, the Graduation Gap Is Even Wider Than the Enrollment Gap." *The New York Times*, June 2.

Emirbayer, Mustafa and Ann Mische. 1998. "What Is Agency?" *American Journal of Sociology* 103(4):962–1023.

Frye, Margaret. 2012. "Bright Futures in Malawi's New Dawn: Educational Aspirations as Assertions of Identity." *American Journal of Sociology* 117(6):1565–1624.

Frye, Margaret. 2017. "Cultural Meanings and the Aggregation of Actions: The Case of Sex and Schooling in Malawi." *American Sociological Review* 82(5):945–76.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." Pp. 3–30 in *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

Goldrick-Rab, Sara. 2016. *Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream*. Chicago ; London: University Of Chicago Press.

Gross, Neil. 2009. "A Pragmatist Theory of Social Mechanisms." *American Sociological Review* 74(3):358–79.

Guseva, Alya and Akos Rona-Tas. 2001. "Uncertainty, Risk, and Trust: Russian and American Credit Card Markets Compared." *American Sociological Review* 66(5):623–46.

Haveman, Robert and Timothy Smeeding. 2006. "The Role of Higher Education in Social Mobility." *The Future of Children* 16(2):125–50.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 1983. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2003. *The Commercialization of Intimate Life: Notes from Home and Work*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2013. *The Outsourced Self: What Happens When We Pay Others to Live Our Lives for Us*. First edition. New York, NY: Picador.

Hout, Michael. 2012. "Social and Economic Returns to College Education in the United States." *Annual Review of Sociology* 38(1):379–400.

Hyman, Louis. 2012. "The Politics of Consumer Debt U.S. State Policy and the Rise of Investment in Consumer Credit, 1920–2008." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 644(1):40–49.

Jerolmack, Colin and Shamus Khan. 2014. "Talk Is Cheap: Ethnography and the Attitudinal Fallacy." *Sociological Methods & Research* 43(2):178–209.

Lamont, Michèle. 2010. *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration*. Harvard University Press.

Lamont, Michèle and Ann Swidler. 2014. "Methodological Pluralism and the Possibilities and Limits of Interviewing." *Qualitative Sociology* 37(2):153–71.

Luker, Kristin. 2010. *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences: Research in an Age of Info-Glut*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Martin J.L. 2010. "Life's a Beach but You're an Ant, and Other Unwelcome News for the Sociology of Culture." *Poetics Poetics* 38(2):229–44.

Mische, Ann. 2009. "Projects and Possibilities: Researching Futures in Action." *Sociological Forum* 24(3):694–704.

Mishler, Elliot George. 1986. *Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative*. Harvard University Press.

Mortenson, Thomas G. 1990. "The Impact of Increased Loan Utilization among Low Family Income Students."

National Center for Education Statistics. 2016. *Digest of Education Statistics*.

Perna, Laura W., James Kvaal, and Roman Ruiz. 2017. "Understanding Student Debt: Implications for Federal Policy and Future Research." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 671(1):270–86.

Perna, Laura Walter. 2000. "Differences in the Decision to Attend College among African Americans, Hispanics, and Whites." *The Journal of Higher Education* 71(2):117–41.

Prasad, Monica. 2012. *The Land of Too Much: American Abundance and the Paradoxof Poverty*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Pugh, Allison J. 2013. "What Good Are Interviews for Thinking about Culture? Demystifying Interpretive Analysis." *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 1(1):42–68.

Pugh, Allison J. 2013. "What Good Are Interviews for Thinking about Culture? Demystifying Interpretive Analysis." *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 1(1):42–68.

Ragin, Charles C. and Howard Saul Becker. 1992. *What Is a Case?: Exploring the Foundations of Social Inquiry*. Cambridge England ; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press.

Reich, Robert B. 2014. "Why College Is Necessary But Gets You Nowhere." *RobertReich.Org*. Retrieved December 15, 2014 (http://robertreich.org/post/103472733520).

Rosenbaum, James E. 2001. *Beyond College for All: Career Paths for the Forgotten Half*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Small, Mario Luis. 2009. "`How Many Cases Do I Need?' On Science and the Logic of Case Selection in Field-Based Research." *Ethnography* 10(1):5–38.

Sperber, Murray. 2001. *Beer and Circus: How Big-Time College Sports Is Crippling Undergraduate Education*. First Edition edition. New York, N.Y.: Holt Paperbacks.

Swidler, Ann. 2001. *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tavory, Iddo and Nina Eliasoph. 2013. "Coordinating Futures: Toward a Theory of Anticipation." *American Journal of Sociology* 118(4):908–42.

Vaisey S. 2009. "Motivation and Justification: A Dual-Process Model of Culture in Action." *AJS; American Journal of Sociology* 114(6):1675–1715.

Vaisey, Stephen. 2013. "Is Interviewing Compatible with the Dual-Process Model of Culture." *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 2(1):150–58.

Weiss, Robert S. 1994. *Learning From Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Wuthnow, Robert. 1996. *Poor Richard's Principle : Recovering the American Dream through the Moral Dimension of Work, Business, and Money*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Zelizer, Viviana A. 1988. "Beyond the Polemics on the Market: Establishing a Theoretical and Empirical Agenda." *Sociological Forum* 3(4):614–34.

# APPENDIX A — STUDENT LOANS AS INVESTMENT IN YOUR FUTURE: USING AN ECONOMIC FICTIONS FRAMEWORK TO EXPLORE THE US STUDENT LOAN ISSUE


## ABSTRACT

To expand theoretical understanding of the US student loan issue, this article examines the evaluative frameworks students use to assess the legitimacy of student loan-use through Beckert's framework of "economic fictions." Both public discourse and policy research typically presume that students borrow—or should borrow—based on rational expectations of income gains relative to college costs. Framing the student loan issue according to a rational actor model ignores the social and cultural meaning that enters into any economic decision, but it also ignores the inevitable uncertainty that surrounds investing in a future outcome from the perspective of individual economic actors. The economic fictions framework holds that in the face of unknown outcomes actors rely on socially coordinated narratives about the future to motivate their decision-making. Data come from 111 in-depth interviews. As Beckert's theory would predict, I find that future-oriented narratives function to reduce perceived uncertainty in the face of unknown outcomes. However, narratives about the future do not go uncontested. This finding suggests that the political viability of an economic fiction may be based on a social consensus surrounding the acceptable distribution of risk.

INTRODUCTION

The average cost to obtain a 4-year college degree has risen exponentially over the last 35 years. In tandem with these cost increases, outstanding US student loan debt has surpassed $1.4 trillion. This escalation is unsustainable, which has sparked extensive debates regarding the current purpose and value of college. Within these debates, both public discourse and policy research typically presume that students are borrowing—or should be borrowing—based on rational expectations of net income gains relative to college costs. This assumption is reflected again in discussion of the US student loan issue as a matter of students borrowing too much, or too little, given the likely labor market value of their degree.

This discourse is misleading in several ways. Framing the student loan issue according to a rational actor model ignores the social and cultural meaning that enters into any economic decision, let alone one as synonymous with expectations of a middle-class lifestyle as attending college. Additionally, it overlooks the broader socio-historical context in which college has transformed from a semi-public good to a matter of individual investment and individualized risk. Finally, the "microeconomics" of paying for college also undermine rational expectations in that the borrowing decisions of very young adults are being made on a year-to-year basis in order to fund a degree path that is *anticipated* to bring them a return in the future.

To expand theoretical understanding of the US student loan issue, this manuscript examines the evaluative frameworks students use to assess the legitimacy of student loan-use through Jens Beckert's framework of "economic fictions" (2013, 2016). The economic fictions framework holds that in the face of unknown outcomes actors rely on socially coordinated narratives about the future to motivate their decision-making.

Drawing on 111 in-depth interviews, I use student narratives surrounding loans as 'investment in the future' to highlight what are, from a rational actor standpoint, clear inefficiencies in the student loan market. In highlighting this inefficiency, the purpose of this article is not to argue that students are behaving irrationally as economic actors; there is nothing irrational in the pursuit of a college degree. Rather, the narratives students choose reveal cracks that have formed in the policy foundation of debt-based aid, including outright contestation of its legitimacy, as a result of the very reduction in uncertainty that economic fictions are supposed to support. I use this finding on 'contested futures' to argue that the political viability of an economic fiction may be based on a social consensus surrounding the acceptable distribution of risk.

Data come from in-depth interviews with 111 college seniors at a public flagship university (PFU). These students were strategically selected from a larger survey on Paying for College in order ensure sufficient variation by race, class, gender, residency status, program of study, and total student loan amount. Although results are limited to one educational setting, PFU embodies several pertinent educational trends, including the "tuition rich, mission poor" phenomenon in which public universities increasingly use consumer amenities to compete for out-of-state students (Jaquette, Curs, and Posselt 2016) as well as sharp post-Great Recession tuition increases.

Analysis of these interviews found that while nearly all students felt secure in the ability of a college degree to lead to better job *prospects*, there was considerable variability in whether these students believed obtaining a "good" job because of a college degree was *likely*; in fact, in the larger survey, less than half of seniors agreed with the statement that investing in college will always pay for itself. The majority of these students completed high school during an era emphasizing “college for all” on one hand and a “looming student debt bubble” on the other. Students were saturated with the message that a college degree is key to a successful future, yet they were also frequently exposed to contrarian narratives and cautionary stories about the declining value of an undergraduate degree and the risk embedded in student borrowing.

## 1. ECONOMIC FICTIONS AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR STUDENT BORROWING

Beckert argues in his theory on the causal role of economic fictions that under the structure of contemporary capitalism actors are expected to assume an investment and future-oriented outlook. From the perspective of individuals, however, the future will always be unknown. Drawing from the pragmatic tradition, he argues that individuals must use “fictional expectations” to proceed “as if” these imaginary views of the future will unfold; otherwise, the uncertainty of this system would be overwhelming. At a social level, coordinating economic fictions is then imperative for coordinating economic activity. Fictional expectations are shaped by institutional and political discourse, marketing campaigns, networks, and various other cultural and cognitive influences, all of which are combining to support the broader narratives that motivate and coordinate individual economic action.

As it happens, one of the economic fictions that supports debt-based aid as a government policy is highly apparent. The logic of using student loans to fund college attendance is based on the substantial income returns a college degree will provide over the life course (Dynarski 2002). Federal student loans are framed as an “investment in your future” on government-sponsored informational websites on how to pay for college.[3] This language is widely repeated in the financial aid discourse of individual schools as well as financial institutions. At the aggregate level, this logic is sound; on average, a college graduate will earn an additional one million dollars in wages over their lifetime than a high school graduate (Carnevale, Cheah, and Hanson Andrew R. 2015). However, individual students do not experience their borrowing decisions at the aggregate level. Over the course of these interviews, it was unexpectedly rare for students to use greater expected earnings to justify costs; a greater number of students stated that the income they expected from their desired career path does *not* justify what they are spending on their degree.

Instead, I found that students drew more heavily from three other distinct narratives when evaluating and justifying (or not) the use of student loans to finance a college degree. The first narrative, *Life Stage Value*, contains the belief that the college experience itself will generate an identity return on investment regardless of specific job outcomes. The second, *Morality of College Consumption*, contains the belief that negative future outcomes result from imprudent choices in the present. The third, the *College Imperative*, contains the belief that a college degree is *necessary* to have a successful future, which is an imperative that renders the "choice" to go to college moot.

All three of these narratives have a role in motivating decisions to borrow under the economic fictions framework. Calculations students use to evaluate and justify student loan-use are considered causally relevant for student borrowing decisions because they are part of a larger narrative (or fiction) that legitimizes a particular course of action under uncertain conditions. As Beckert adds, "calculations in situations characterized by

---

[3] See, for example, the studentaid.gov frequently asked questions on student borrowing: https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/types/loans.

fundamental uncertainty have an entirely different role than the one assumed by the actors themselves: they are not instruments that make it possible to anticipate the future, but tranquilizers against the paralyzing effects of having to act in unpredictable environments" (2013: 234). Whether these calculations are accurate is not particularly relevant.

A statement such as "student loans are an investment in your future" can therefore be seen as an example of what Beckert (2016) refers to as "props." In this context, a prop is a rhetorical mechanism that reinforces the 'as-if' conditional nature of economic fiction "by evoking imaginaries of a desired world and to communicate the transcending qualities of a good" (68). In this way, Beckert is distinguishing his approach from performativity theory, as the motivational power of language and discourse is central. The locus of the theory is not that actors *create* a predicted future by performing a set of actions, but rather that actors suspend disbelief and trust in an *evolving* narrative so that they may keep moving forward at all, much like engrossing themselves in a work of fiction. The mechanism for action is in how actors understand and make sense of this fiction.

The loans as investment metaphor is plausible because in taking on these loans students are "investing" in a future self that is able to repay the loans because that future self received a college education … that just happened to be financed with loans. It is therefore *like* the student is investing in their future, even though at the moment that future is fictional. As Frye ( 2012) finds, however, for young people, it may not actually be possible to separate rational calculations from hopes and dreams. By opening the door to imagined futures, this particular "prop" collapses *all* of the positive connotations of investing in higher education into the political reality of debt-based financial aid.

### *1.1 Imaginaries and Action: Why fictional Expectations Matter*

The US structure of financing a college degree in many ways resembles the US structure of financing a home. For students with demonstrated need, state-facilitated capital is provided to them as individual borrowers, and this debt is then paid off in installments over a set period of time. Statistically speaking, this method of facilitating "college for all" is sound given the expected monetary returns a graduate can expect to receive over a lifetime. Yet, in paying for college, students are not so much purchasing a degree as purchasing *access* to a degree. Over the 4 years or more it takes to complete a specific degree path multiple contingencies emerge that may alter a student's original plan and cost-benefit analysis.

In practice, then, paying for college is more like *building* a home knowing that it will be paid for later and regardless of how it functions or what it looks like. The student's first major decision—where to go to college—is much like selecting a location and plot of land. Like geographical neighborhoods, different colleges and universities offer different opportunities moving forward and different tradeoffs regarding possibilities foregone. From a rational actor perspective, decisions that are truly "ideal" would require an inhuman degree of informational foresight on the part of the student.

The inevitable unknown in this decision requires that students (and others involved in the process) mobilize a specific understanding of a desired future state in order to make sense of their choices. Recent work within the sociology of culture has drawn from the pragmatic tradition to examine the role of various "imaginaries"—or views of the future—in individual action and decision-making (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Frye 2012; Gross 2009; Mische 2009; Strand and Lizardo 2015; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013). For purposes of this article, the fundamental insight from this line of research is that decisions in the present bring a series of “ends-in-view” (Dewey [1922] 2007) more or less to fruition; thus the *content* of these “ends-in-view” is relevant for our understanding of individual behavior.

Views of the future have been empirically demonstrated to affect consumption strategies (Weinberger, Zavisca, and Silva 2017) and investment styles (Henry 2005). However, views of the future may perhaps have their strongest impact in educational research, if we consider their conceptual overlap with “aspirations” more broadly. As related to education, aspirations refer to how far students would like to go in their education, which are treated as “preferences for a particular outcome” as opposed to “expectations that reflect beliefs about the likelihood of an outcome occurring” (Baker 2017: 1205). Aspirations connected to a student’s social position have been demonstrated to have an intermediate effect on college entry and choice (MacLeod 2008; Paulsen, John, and Edward P St. John 2002; Willis 1981), persistence (Deterding 2015), and occupational ambitions (Croll 2008).

The most direct examination of imagined futures in relation to educational aspirations is perhaps Frye’s (2012) study of young Malawi women who have been exposed to a widespread ideological campaign that connects staying in school with “bright futures.” In this work, Frye finds that young women facing significant structural barriers to opportunity use their claims to an aspirational future identity in order to assert a positive moral identity in the present. In other words, Frye finds that an individual’s claims about what type of person she will be are also claims about what type of person she is now.

Frye's framework is likely to be useful for understanding how US students use aspirational identities to overcome structural disadvantage and adversity. Empirically, however, there is an important distinction between the two cases. The Malawi case is one in which a "gap between aspirations and objective opportunities is particularly wide" (Frye 2012: 1576). In contrast, the US case is one in which *all* students with a high school credential are technically able to access a higher education, provided, of course, that they are willing to pay for it with or without student loans. In terms of structural opportunity, the issue is not that young adults are blocked from higher education, but rather they are asked to assume the financial risk of aspiring to it.[4] It is in this space—a socially encouraged economic decision that is nonetheless clouded by financial uncertainty—where we can expect to find Beckert's economic fictions at work.

## 2. DATA AND METHODS

This article uses a subset of data from my later study on Paying for College, which was designed to address how students at a public flagship university (PFU) navigate a debt-based financial aid environment in relation to their college objectives and goals for the future. For studying the current educational context, PFU is in many ways an ideal case. Tuition at public 4-year state universities has risen on average at a rate of 20% per year, but PFU resides in one of the seven states with increases above 30% (Demos 2014). PFU retains its public mission, however. Over thirty percent of students

[4] Horizontal stratification in higher education is of course another source of structural inequality within the US higher education system.

receive the Pell grant, as of the 2016-2017 data (US News 2019). Students of color represented over forty percent of the 2014-2015 freshman class (PFU Factbook). Social diversity on this campus is high and multiple cost-dependent versions of the “college experience” are available. Considering the amount of socioeconomic stratification on campus, the university is much like a microcosm of the current higher education landscape.

Interview subjects were recruited directly from an online survey that was issued to a random sample of registered seniors stratified by college division. The survey’s primary goal was to gather descriptive data for my population of interest and to screen and select potential interviewees. The survey also included two attitudinal measures regarding the meaning and purpose of college and a vignette. Each individual’s unique answers to survey questions were then incorporated into the interview script. This approach provided me with several advantages, including saving time and establishing rapport with subjects, but also allowed me to “test” emerging hypotheses throughout the data collection period and make adjustments to the interview sample as needed.

The target sample size for the survey portion of the study was 1000 individuals at a response rate of 25%. The achieved sample size was 975 individuals at a response rate of 24.4%. Survey sample characteristics compare favorably with university data; however, the response rate was slightly higher among females than males. Among survey respondents, 80% indicated willingness to participate in an in-person follow-up interview. Males, as well as students in the School of Engineering, were less likely than other groups to be willing to participate in the interview portion of the study.

I maintained an ongoing database of all possible interview subjects. From this pool, I selected subjects according to a theoretically driven sampling logic. Primary criteria for selection were gender, social class (with parental education as a simple proxy), race, traditional college-going age, and expected total loan amount upon graduation. The goal of this sampling strategy was to achieve roughly equal proportions of males/females, first-generation/non-first generation, and minority/non-minority students in the interview sample. Secondary selection criteria included degree path, residency status, living arrangements, and whether the student had ever received a Pell grant. When available participants exceeded research needs for a given category, I selected respondents in a random manner. Of these selections, approximately 15% did not respond to my attempts at scheduling. This non-response occurred primarily during busy peak times of the semester and there were no additional differences observed by category of interest. The final interview sample included 84 borrowers and 27 non-borrowers for a total of 111 individual interviews (see Table 1).

Table 1. Interview Sample Primary Selection Criteria Summary

*Descriptive Characteristics*

| Gender | | Parental Education | | | Race | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| F | M | 1st Generation | 1 Parent BA | Both BA | W | H | O |
| 53% | 47% | 45% | 30% | 25% | 50% | 36% | 14% |

*Total Amount Borrowed*

| $0 | $1-$9,999 | $10,000-$19,999 | $20,000-$29,999 | $30,000-$39,999 | $40,000 + |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 24% | 4% | 19% | 31% | 18% | 4% |

Interviews were semi-structured to last approximately eighty minutes each. Topics included: decision to attend college and aspirational goals; pathways taken through college; strategies, rationales, and justifications for using (or not using) student loans and other types of financial resources; strategies for student loan repayment; and post-college plans. Following each interview, I wrote an ethnographic memo to document the non-verbal interaction that occurred in the interview setting and revisit emerging findings and themes.

In addition to the above topics, the end of the interview included an open-ended series of questions on the issue of student loan-use and college costs. I created these questions in conjunction with content analysis of media discourse, government websites, and public policy documents. The first question in this series was stated as follows: "If you go to the studentaid.gov (where you go to get information of student loans), and look at their FAQ, the first question is 'Why take out student loans?' and the answer is: 'Student loans are an investment in your future.' Do you agree?" Subsequent questions were delivered in a semi-structured manner, and I used follow-up probes as appropriate—i.e., asking students for specific examples and comparisons with other students, schools, and contexts.

We also discussed in this last section whether the student thought college should be free, whether the student thought everyone should go to college, and other politically oriented subjects. At this point in the interview, I often incorporated previous statements the student had made, which allowed me to gently challenge students over contradictory statements—for example, why college was a risky prospect for others but not for them; or why their particular version of "discretionary" spending was legitimate whereas for others it is not.

Interviews were primarily analyzed using MAXQDA computer-assisted qualitative coding software. MAXQDA offers a unique interview transcription feature that allows the analyst to integrate the original audio file into the written transcript. This feature provided a considerable advantage for my qualitative analysis, given that the meaning of transcribed text can be dependent on the tone of the speaker, such as when the speaker is joking, angry, or upset. I then used a mix of both “open” and “closed” coding techniques in which findings are progressively sorted according to emerging themes and, eventually, placed into their final categories (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011).

For purposes of this article, my analysis centered first on the interview section on student loans as “investment in your future.” This question was designed as the most direct means of eliciting student views and beliefs regarding the use of debt to achieve college-related aspirations and goals. Answers to this question yielded a skeletal version of the three evaluative frameworks—or narratives—presented below. Following that analysis, I zoomed out to the rest of the data in order to flush out and refine the findings, including comparative consideration of each student’s interview as whole.

## 3. FINDINGS: THE MICROECONOMICS OF PFU COSTS

Economic uncertainty is distinguished from economic risk through its ability to be calculated and quantified (Stuart 2003). At the individual level, the economics of investing in college make such a calculation “awkward at best,” as students are investing in human capital that holds the possibility, rather than the certainty, of a future pay off (Winston 1999). Adding to this awkwardness, I found that, at a state school like PFU, a number of costs are being accumulated ‘a la carte.’ For PFU students, total out-of-pocket costs are not predetermined upon a student’s decision to enroll but accumulate over the entire degree-seeking period.

Housing is a ready example of how this process unfolds: some students at PFU choose to begin their attendance by living in the dorms freshman year; other students choose to live off campus, which is known to be cheaper, and some commute from their family home. In later years, decisions will be made regarding housing elements such as whether it is worth increased rent to reduce commute time, to have less (or no) roommates, or to pay for "luxury" add-ons such as a rooftop pool. Food is another ready example: some students accept the added cost of eating at the Rec Center between classes; others students bring food from home to save money. The latter strategy can be difficult to maintain, however, when spontaneous or unexpected on-campus activities arise, especially for students facing a longer commute time.

These decisions occur over a period of years while the student is still maturing between the ages of 18 and 22 and, hopefully, clarifying their unique personal aspirations and goals. Housing, food, and transportation are very straightforward examples, but the minutia of student-specific circumstances is overwhelming. For example, at least one student in the sample was able to keep an academic scholarship they would otherwise have lost because they used "extra" financial aid to take additional summer courses so that their cumulative GPA would not suffer. Twelve students described choosing to continue in a major they realized was wrong for them over accepting the added cost of a $5^{th}$ year of college; other students had just made the switch, whether they were aware that it would then lead to a $5^{th}$ year or not. These examples do not even scratch the surface of consumption, travel, and personal expenses.

Micro-level transactions such as the above are obscured in official university Cost of Living estimates, since these estimates are—understandably—determined as an "average cost" that is then used to calculate eligible aid. Thus for many individual students in the study sample, the average cost of living used to determine their aid package is neither viewed nor experienced as a given. Instead, to these students, costs are treated as highly controllable through a series of choices that will ultimately decrease or increase yearly costs, all while the financial aid package that is available to them remains the same.

Among students who are offered federal student loans as part of their aid package and expect to be responsible for repayment, cost-related choices become particularly stark.[5] At a minimum, loans must be actively accepted by the student at least once a year, which is a degree of agency that foregrounds the decision, even if the process is still often described as "too easy." Students in the study sample had often made very active decisions in their borrowing, such as accepting only subsidized loans, portioning the amount they accept, waiting until the latest possible semester date before they accept a loan, or accepting a loan only for a very specific purpose such as a summer study abroad program. Other students had developed a budgeting system within which student loans beyond tuition are specifically earmarked for certain expenses, such as paying rent for the semester or paying off debt from a prior semester, which then frees up other "monies" for food and recreation.

As an overall study finding, the agency of student borrowing was not specific to socioeconomic status. For most students at PFU, borrowing (or not borrowing) was, technically, a choice, however unequal the alternatives were, and it was a choice that had

[5] The starkness of cost-related choices also applies to students who do not receive enough of any aid type in their financial aid packages, which is a problem in its own right but one that I do not address in this paper.

been accompanied by the evaluation of multiple contingencies at multiple points in time. These contingencies often change through 4+ years of college attendance: career plans change, family incomes change, cars break down, jobs are lost, classes are failed, and friends and acquaintances are witnessed making costly mistakes. Any one of these changes can upset a student's confidence in their past choices and potential future, which may increase the uncertainty surrounding their college investment. The opposite effect also holds: positive developments, like gaining a competitive internship or a research position, or even learning that subsidized loans are the "good" loans, may reduce a student's sense of uncertainty and increase willingness to borrow.

*3.1 Overview of Student Evaluative Frameworks*

For purposes of the findings described below, I did not focus on why any individual student decided to borrow or to pursue any particular cost-option. In line with a pragmatist approach to studying mechanisms (Gross 2009), this article treats the *student's problem* of meeting costs as a given. This approach allowed me to focus instead on the evaluative frameworks students were using to assess the legitimacy of student loan-use.

The great majority of these students did not cite expected future income in legitimations of borrowing. That is not to say that expected income gains were irrelevant for these students; they were relevant. Expectations of earnings alone were not enough because these students were also aware that outcomes are uncertain, particularly in the era of college for all and individualized financial risk. The narratives below reduce the weight of that perceived uncertainty by providing an "extra" evaluative framework for economic decision-making. As will be apparent, however, the economic fiction that student loans are 'an investment' did not go entirely uncontested.

### *3.2 Life Stage Value*

The life stage value of attending college is the most predictable of these three evaluative frameworks. This narrative covers personal growth and personal identity, both of which are considered to have a "value" on their own that is apart from the financial return a student will get from a future career path. A key part of the personal growth students discussed results from the ability of a 4-year university to remove a recent high school graduate from their prior environments, whether those environments are geographic locations, families, or prior peer groups, and then replant the student in a new location where they have room to explore who they actually want to be with the help of a new, highly diverse group of peers.

One student, for example, contrasts the "wide group of people" he has access to at PFU with the insular experience he would have had staying in his hometown:

> One of my roommates is a sports science major. One of my roommates is a business major. The other roommate is a philosophy major. So none of them are in the same field as me at all. All of my friends are completely different. So you have all these different peoples coming from different walks of life to where if I would have stayed in [hometown] and got a job in [hometown], everybody in [hometown] was from [hometown]. Born and raised in [hometown]. Same farmer dads, farmer—there's not much variety there. Here there's so much variety. This is like a melting pot of

> people because you've got what 40,000 undergraduate students? Yeah. That's a lot of different people.

Another student uses the emphasis college places on learning, which he sees as a key part of growth, to draw a distinction from the home environment in which he was raised:

> College is so much more about growing with people around you and going through and learning—it's not also like learning how to study. It's, like, again, it's like learning how to think. And being able to apply things and think differently. And this sounds, like, incredibly pompous, but I go home, and it's like, I'm around all of my family and my neighbors and stuff like that, none of them—other than like maybe a couple college classes—have any college degree. Or even associates or anything.

Several students went even further in their desire to escape, explaining that they "needed to get out" of these insular environments, which was a transition that would not have happened positively without the financial aid they were offered. As one of these students flatly put it, without student loans, "I wouldn't have a future."

Thus a further additional value of the college environment lies in its incubatory function, in which students are allowed to continue to grow among peers in a contained context, which leaves them "more adult" and "more confident" by the end of it relative to how they would be if they had tried to go straight from high school to an independent living arrangement. As the following student explains, college still gives you the "whole being an adult thing," but allows you to become an adult more slowly:

> I think what's good about going to college—at least for me, because, I mean, some people don't have the support of their family—but for me, it

> was definitely a slow learning experience, and that's a lot better than just being thrown out, you know? So I think that—I think if I had been thrown out, if it's like a sink or swim situation, I would have swam—but it would have been really rough.

Rather than being a matter of speed, another student attributes this growth to the "structure" of college, in which he learned "how to live, like, even just simple things like cooking dinner," without which "I probably would have like fell flat on my face, you know." Finally, other students attribute the growth to the "extra rope" you get "from being an adult but not really," which is kind of like having a safety net, as the following student explains:

> It is like a safety net, to be honest. You make those same mistakes in the workforce, you're fired. Potentially fired, you've alienated some people. You don't have any more connections. College though—I feel like I've done that once or twice, where I have potentially pissed off a professor maybe by not being polite or not sending an email. But I followed up and I understand where I made that mistake and it was okay. I don't know if you can do that in—because you're not allowed to. You're an adult, there's no—you're not a child anymore and that's how it is in the real world. So I guess this is where you can make those mistakes.

The value of this incubatory experience was often specifically linked to the function of college within what anthropologists refer to as an "age grade." For example, one student said that college is somewhere where everyone is "crossing over between the ages of 18 and 22" when he was explaining why starting as an 18-year-old seemed, to him, like it would be worth more than starting on the GI Bill after several years of military service, as his brother is planning to do. This intense, peer-based experience is what leads to personal growth, as another student below explains, but it cannot be found anywhere else, including at work:

> When I was working at [retail store] … there were people there that were my age that were not doing the whole college experience, going away, moving away like I had…. I feel like it was harder for them to have friend groups of similar interest because we're working in an environment where everyone is all different ages. You could have someone that's on the same level as you being 50 years old, whereas your manager could only be 23. And maybe you're all spread out, you don't live in the same place. Whereas like here we all go to lunch together. You all sit there with the Student Union. Everyone has homework, you all sit in the library. You see the same kids in class, all day, every day …. I think it helps develop you as a person too. You kind of have to be drawn into things you're not comfortable with because that's what makes you grow.

The components that make up *Life Stage Value* are also used by students to evaluate the added costs that come from attending a 4-year university for all four years of college attendance, when compared to the costs of beginning instead at a community college. Beyond personal growth, these students believe an added value of the 4-year university also stems from the difference in social identities attached to the two different "types" of students. Several students even cited the "stigma" of community college as the reason they chose not to begin at community college and then transfer to a 4-year university. The identity stigma attached to community college is rooted, in part, in the vocational reputation of these schools. As one student explains it, community colleges are not teaching students how to get a good job; they are teaching students how to be a “good jobs helper:”

> When you go to a community [college] you can be, like, a nurse’s assistant, but you can’t be a nurse. Or you can be a pharmacy tech, but you can’t be a pharmacist. So you can be—it’s sort of like, if you go to a community college, you can be a good jobs helper but you can’t have the really good job.

The stigma attached to community college can provide a push away from this type of education, even when it is considered by the student as more affordable in the long run. From the other side of the equation, the personal growth, community, and the positive social identity that comes from a 4-year university college experience provide the pull, as the following student explains:

> College is about the experiences that you get. You don't get that experience in community college. You don't get to be a part of that larger community. A lot of the [high school] students [I knew]–like I said, a lot of them went to [community college] right after high school. I saw a bunch of kids [who were like] ‘Oh, this is just like high school all over again. I see all the same faces. We're all at the [campus] at [community college]." And then, to me, I'm like, ‘I have new faces all the time. I don't sit next to the same person in class every day.’ We have a football team, we have stuff to be proud of. PFU has a lot of achievements. ... I'm kind of

> competitive. I want to be good at what I do. PFU is good at a lot of things it does. So that reputation, it makes you proud to be a part of it.

As an evaluative framework, *Life Stage Value* supports the perception that college is an experience, and it is one in which only some members of society get to participate. This value is worth paying for, even in borrowed money.

### *3.3 Morality of College Consumption*

The second evaluative framework focuses on the morality of certain types of spending and borrowing decisions among certain "types" of students. Like many cash-strapped state schools, the university has embraced consumer-oriented amenities as a means of drawing in relatively affluent out of state students, but the university also attracts many in-state middle-class students seeking "value" in their undergraduate costs, as well as a core group of students from historically underrepresented backgrounds. This diversity means that multiple cost-dependent versions of "that whole college experience thing" are co-existing on the same campus. This *Morality of College Consumption* narrative was used to support an argument that one particular version of attending college was the "right" one.

The student below, for example, is focusing on overconsumption among students who cannot afford to keep up with a particular lifestyle without the use of student loans. She explains that she knows other students who are using their loan money for fun trips with friends just because they can, but she believes these students will come to regret that behavior in time:

> I know people who just get a loan to maybe, ‘oh, I wanna go to the Las Vegas in a month,’ and they get the loan because they’re a student and they’re capable of doing [that], but they don’t invest it in their future or in school-related expenses. They use it for their own personal expenses and taking advantage of it. But then when they’re older, they’re gonna regret that they got that loan.

Another student refers to students living in one of the luxury housing complexes, of which there is an abundance close to campus, as an example of the “wants versus needs” spending pressures among PFU students. From his perspective, these students are overextending themselves financially for reasons he does not understand, as he explains: “if you're going to put an extra burden on yourself for no reason, why? You don't need luxury housing. If you can't afford it, you can't afford it. Live within your means. Live within your means [sic].”

Of the three narratives, *Morality of College Consumption* makes the most use of “me” as opposed to “them” distinctions between the speaker and other students in order to evaluate loan-use. On the surface, this is also the most present-oriented narrative. However, the distinctions these students are making between their own decisions and the decisions of other students are part of a logical thought sequence through which financially disciplined behavior in the present is assumed to have a particular impact on the future. In this narrative, moral spending in the present is paired with decreased likelihood of financial fallout in the future.

In addition to hedonistic spending, the distinctions students used to separate themselves from other students also included a perceived lack of financial foresight among students in less lucrative majors, such as various arts degrees, psychology, or women's studies, particularly if these students were not sufficiently considering the "extra steps" it would take to ensure a career-relevant job would be found after graduation. The stereotypical example of the poorly thought out major, as this student explains, is the psychology major:

> So if you are [properly] investing in a psychology degree, and your expectations are to do well … you know, to maybe become an established professor, or go to med school, or these things. But to go in, say, 'I'm gonna get a psychology degree, I'm not gonna really work at it,' and then expect certain things to follow through. [It's] the false equivalency of like: college equals this. As opposed to: college with blank and blank and blank and blank equal this.

Again using psychology, another student uses a hypothetical exchange with another student to make a similar point: "I'm surrounded by people, like—what are they studying? What do they wanna do? 'Psychology.' 'But I don't wanna go to grad school.' 'Well what do you wanna do with that?' 'Well I'm in a sorority.'"

Lastly, distinctions within this narrative were also made between the speaker and students for whom attending college is, in itself, an imprudent financial decision. These other students were attending PFU for the wrong reasons, which were usually either to party or to get a degree they have no realistic chance of gaining value from. As one student explains, these are the people who came to college without a future plan: "people who just come to college and say: 'I'm gonna go to college, you know, and make all the friends and live like a college kid.' Well, okay, but, you know, what's your long-term plan?" Another student uses an example of someone he knew who was well-meaning as a person but, unfortunately, just not suited for making good use out of a college education:

> I even think about this one guy I knew, um, his name was Joseph and Joseph means well, you know, he was a first generation student, an overall nice guy. He meant well, but he just didn't get along with very many people, and he had a really difficult time in college. And he jumped around majors a good amount freshman year. I think he finally landed on Criminal Justice—he wants to be a cop, that sort of thing. Um, but he never quite finished. And I think that there was definitely a little bit of a learning disability going on there, um, that was just never identified, and he never had the resources he needed to deal those issues, and so I feel bad for him, but he ended up just graduating with General Studies.

Within the *Morality of College Consumption* narrative, as much as the examples students were using cited 'wasted' resources, the distinction these students are making between themselves and others is not *really* about unsound choices. The floundering student, Joseph, did complete his degree, as will, presumably, the psychology major in the sorority, the students in luxury housing, and the students who went to Vegas with their loan money. In fact, a number of students in the sample made a point of saying that, as much as it sometimes *feels* to them like other PFU students are frivolously wasting loan money, you do not actually know where the money comes from. As an evaluate framework, the *Morality of College Consumption* narrative is a moral claim supporting the speaker's (legitimate) right to be in college, even if they have to borrow money to do it.

*3.4 College Imperative*

The final evaluative framework students used is based on the structural factors that surround increased college costs and the student loan industry. This narrative points to the outside factors that constrain a student's ability to be truly in control of their financial decisions. On its extreme end, the *College Imperative* represents the belief that what students today are paying for is exorbitant administrative university overhead and an abundance of non-educational campus amenities designed to attract students from wealthy families who are *enrolled* precisely because of their parents' ability to buy their children the degree. Thus, although an element of structurally enabled waste is also contained in *Morality of College Consumption*, that narrative is managing uncertainty through the belief that individuals who are in college for the wrong reasons are personally responsible for the financial repercussions of their unsound choices. The *College Imperative*, in contrast, overtly politicizes the uncertainty that students are facing and redirects that sense of unfairness onto a broken educational system.

Overarching across the entirety of this narrative was the belief that higher education has transformed from a public good that benefits society at large to a privatized credential whose price is inflated to benefit people in power. Students in this study had seen a tuition and fees increase every year they had been in attendance. These students were also among the last state residents to benefit from an academic scholarship with relatively "easy to get" criteria, as well as a similar need-based program. In conjunction with the necessary but declining worth of a college degree, some students therefore saw the university as a business attempting to charge students as much money as possible whenever they can get away with it, as the following students says: "I mean, I'm paying to graduate, like, I have to pay $50 to graduate—I actually have to pay $100 to graduate because I'm two different majors—and so, it almost seems like they're just like: 'oh, we can charge for that so we're going to.'"

Another student elaborated on his point that universities are businesses by describing a time when he had confronted a member of the Board of Regents while working his work-study job, which involved driving VIPs to special events:

> I got into a conversation with one of them, because they were—I was literally driving her to the Student Union where they would talk about raising tuition again—and this lady was in favor of raising tuition. And I told her that, I told her exactly that, cuz she tried to downplay it. She said, 'oh we're only raising it by this much'—and I told her, I said, 'this last semester I had a balance of $500 on Bursar's that I had to pay off. You're raising it by 1%, that's another $200 I might have to pay.' To rationalize it that way, to me, it doesn't make sense.

For students like this one, the money they have to pay is seen as very real, but the choice to pay is not, and for this particular first generation student any additional increases in costs meant an additional increase in his loans.

Although their experience at PFU naturally provided these students with supporting details, blame placement was typically opened up to the US educational system as whole, for example:

> That's the system though. I mean, I have to pay them in order to get—hey, they're still the ones that give the degree out, so, in a sense, it is like [a

> business]. You pay for your degree. There's tons of people that might not necessarily should get a degree if you judge them academically. But they get it because they pay for it.

Again in contrast with the *Morality of Consumption* narrative, the *College Imperative* argues that students who do not belong in college according to academic standards likely realize, or have just been led to believe, that a college degree is required for any job that is worth wanting—or at least worth wanting on a social level—as the following student explains:

> I feel like the system has also kind of set this agenda on the need to have a degree, by everyone, which I feel like has really changed the education system, and it has led a lot of students to believe that to be successful a degree is needed. And so now we have a deficit in technical positions that I'm sure a lot of students would excel at and which are needed. … But we're seeing now that for many areas in different arenas, different careers, a college degree may be beneficial, but it isn't needed. So maybe we should provide more opportunities, like, these options for technical positions exist.

That these technical positions "exist" is not enough to decrease inflationary pressure, however, if nobody wants to do them, as another student explains:

> No one glamorizes the electrician, you know—funny thing is electricians can make more money than a lot of college grads do. That doesn't make sense. I think the thing is that a lot of the trade jobs are just not viewed as, uh—what's the word I'm looking for—they don't hold a lot of esteem, I

> guess you'd say. Like they don't, you know, you wanna be a doctor or a lawyer, you don't wanna be an electrician or plumber

As mentioned above, relatively easy access to enough debt to cover the cost of an in-state public university education technically evens the college access playing field. After entry criteria is met, and bracketing imperfections in the financial aid system, a public education is as available to students who are self-funding as it is to students whose families are paying for it. However, not all students choose to accept the debt-based financial aid they are offered, and students with no sources of aid beyond personal loans often max out the federal loans they are offered on tuition, fees, and their basic living expenses, particularly if they are not receiving any financial help from their parents. Students in these situations must make up the difference through paid work, which puts them at a relative disadvantage, as the following student explains:

> Those who don't have to work have more free time to invest in their schooling. I have to work. I have to spend a lot of late nights trying to make it all meet. I mean, [I'm] a full-time student, then I'm taking night classes to get a [work certification] at the same time. And full-time work. Most of my schoolwork gets done after 10:00 PM. I'm up till 3:00 half the nights or so. That's when I have time to be able to do things. And then my roommate, who doesn't have to pay for a thing, he does class and then studies. And then goes to bed at a decent hour. It's a disadvantage to have to pay for it.

Further, borrowing itself can be its own source of stress. For students like the one below, who see themselves as investing in the social mobility narrative that surrounds college attendance, watching peers graduate into underemployment feels like a betrayal of the American Dream:

> I'm getting a degree to better myself, to better my career, to get a job. Cuz that's, like, what we're told, like: 'okay, you graduate college, you're gonna get a job.' I have seen so many graduate and they're working at Starbucks. They're working—a bunch worked with me at [retail store]. A bunch are working right now at just, like, mediocre 11-hour jobs. And it's like, we paid so much money, we studied for how long? We did all of this work, to just work at a wherever place? To work at a Starbucks? How is that fair? It's not.

As an evaluative framework, the *College Imperative* represents the belief that going to college is necessary for any young adult who wants a better future—at least according to how a better future is socially defined. The *College Imperative* also contains the realization that if going to college is necessary for a successful future, but it is not sufficient, then paying for college is paying for your *chance* at a better future. In other words, these students were arguing that is the US structure of higher education that is illegitimate.

## 4. DISCUSSION: RISK, ECONOMIC FICTIONS, AND CONTESTED FUTURES

One of the more intriguing questions surrounding fictional expectations is "what makes imaginaries 'successful'" (Beckert 2013: 235). Through their place in a pragmatic sequence from thought to action, the three evaluative frameworks, *Life Stage Value*, *Morality of College Consumption*, and *College Imperative*, have consequences for student borrowing at both an individual and aggregate level. The statistics on the labor market returns of *any* college degree would predict that even a debt-based investment in college is economically sound in the long run, provided the student graduates. In this sense, the additional narratives that students use to evaluate student loan-use may often serve a positive function. Any reduction in uncertainty is likely to be of value for a student who is otherwise at risk of dropping out due to their financial concerns.

On the other hand, economic fictions can also "'crowd out' rational expectations," and by "providing *seemingly* good reasons for specific decisions" end up "shaping action in unpredictable ways" (Beckert 2013: 222, author's italics). To borrow a phrase from Frye, inviting in "hopes and dreams" may not be efficient from an economics standpoint. For example, *Life Stage Value* takes for granted that investment in soft skills and social accreditation will open doors to potential employers. However, students often see a personal side to their investment that is unrelated to what a specific career aspiration is likely to pay. Viewing college as an "experience" has predictable implications for the types of consumption practices a student may view as "worth it." It is not within the scope of this article to discuss what should or should not count as legitimate expenditure, particularly when the sum of these practices equates to what is often perceived as a normative middle-class college experience. What is pertinent to this discussion is that some students who are participating in this type of campus culture, which is enabled by the entire university, are risking more in order to participate than others.

Likewise, on the surface, the logic behind the *Morality of College Consumption* could be seen as the most economically rational of the three narratives. Yet the students in the sample who tended to gravitate to *Morality of College Consumption* in their interview no more fit the rational borrower mold than any other students; what was distinguishable here was, rather, a tendency to be loan averse. This narrative actually speaks to a long history in US consumer society of separating "legitimate" uses of debt, which will ultimately serve a productive function for the borrower, from "illegitimate" uses, which enable hedonistic consumption in the present (Calder 1999; Horowitz 1985). Educational debt such as student loans used to be a go-to example of productive debt. The turn in higher education toward treating students as consumers, however, problematizes this status. It would be easier to argue that student loans subsidize luxury student housing than to argue that luxury student housing helps students get jobs.

Although often treated by sociologists as purely symbolic boundaries, moral distinctions have a foundation in the economic reality of the people who use them (Prasad, Hoffman, and Bezila 2016). What gets obscured in the *Morality of College Consumption* narrative is that if an identical pair of students each borrowed $10,000 in student loans and both ended up with identical career paths after graduation, their ability to repay would be the same even if one of the students spent the money on purely frivolous consumption. More important to students who gravitate to this narrative, I think, is that both of the hypothetical graduates would have received the same PFU credential even though one may be more deserved than the other. By opening up an education to *all* students who are willing to pay for it, the student loan system is seen as effectively subsidizing non-learning centered enrollments and increasing graduates, which decreases the value of a public college education for students attending for the "right" reasons.

This belief that, perhaps, not everyone should go to college is also apparent in the *College Imperative* narrative. A key contrasting tension for students who used this narrative, however, was a struggle between the idea of college as a right versus the idea of college as a privilege. These students saw themselves as strong students and hard workers who have *earned* the right to educational opportunity. They were also highly aware that if everyone who wants to go to college can go to college—and is willing to pay the bill—that flood of college graduates will eliminate the value of the credential, which cycles into a need for students such as themselves to seek additional credentials at an additional cost. The other possible outcome is that increased demand will continue to push up costs, driving non-wealthy students out of higher education, and continuing to imperil the faith these students have, so far, placed in the idea that higher education and meritocracy are entwined.

Mary Douglas argues that what constitutes acceptable risk in society is the result of collective and socially constructed belief surrounding what exactly counts as legitimate harm and to whom (Douglas and Wildavsky 1983). Acceptable risk is therefore a politicized construct and often a moralized one as well (Douglas and Wildavsky 1983). An economist might very well point out that the risk of debt-based educations can be calculated, which would undermine the uncertainty-centered argument presented in this article. This economist would be hard pressed, however, to find a student (or a graduate) who believes that calculable predicted earnings are going to pay their monthly student loan bill after the 6-month grace period has expired. The general belief among student borrowers is, instead, that they will just "figure it out."

The foundation of that belief is trust. Trust in a future that has been imagined using widely available public discourse that says going to college is an investment so borrowing, within reason, will be okay. In order for student loans to be seen as an "investment in your future," attending college must be seen as optional: a choice, and one that comes with an acceptable level of risk. Yet at least according to this study's findings, many current students do not see attending college as a choice and they do not see the amount of resources—borrowed or otherwise—they are spending on college as something that constitutes an acceptable risk.

It will be worth examining whether this finding on "contested" imagined futures extends beyond the public university setting of this particular study. Taken as it is, findings from this article suggest that the "success" of socially coordinated economic fiction may depend on a social consensus that is, ultimately, based on the political tenability of its underlying logic. The logical conclusion of an ever higher number of college graduates and growing array of college options is simply educational inflation and a more sophisticated means of sorting elite graduates into the most desirable occupational positions (Meyer 2001). Student loans have played a successful financial part within college-for-all policy goals that are intended to increase college enrollment (Perna, Kvaal, and Ruiz 2017). Many enrolled students, however, will not graduate, and many students who fail to graduate will leave their time in college with debt. Across 4-year institutions, the current non-completion rate is estimated at 40% (NCES 2016). Does this fallout constitute acceptable risk? To answer that question would certainty be a political statement.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This article applied Beckert's theory on the causal role of economic fictions in contemporary capitalism to a socially pertinent empirical case: student loans. By highlighting how a specific economic fiction supporting this policy is interpreted by individual actors, findings are used to demonstrate how the economic fictions that support a particular policy can have “unpredictable,” and even contested, effects. In equating student loan-use with investing in the future, the “prop” that supports debt-based financial aid evokes an interpretative framework that—if not explicitly inviting in “hopes and dreams”—leaves the window open for them. At the same time, borrowing is as an individualized financial endeavor that students and their families are undertaking at their own risk.

WORKS CITED


Baker, William. 2017. "Aspirations: The Moral of the Story." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 38(8):1203–16.

Beckert, Jens. 2013. "Imagined Futures: Fictional Expectations in the Economy." *Theory and Society* 42(3):219–40.

Beckert, Jens. 2016. *Imagined Futures : Fictional Expectations and Capitalist Dynamics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Calder, Lendol. 1999. *Financing the American Dream: A Cultural History of Consumer Credit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Carnevale, Anthony P., Ban Cheah, and Hanson Andrew R. 2015. *The Economic Value of College Majors*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

Deterding, Nicole M. 2015. "Instrumental and Expressive Education College Planning in the Face of Poverty." *Sociology of Education* 88(4):284–301.

Dewey, John. [1922] 2007. *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology*. New York, NY: Cosimo Classics.

Douglas, Mary and Aaron Wildavsky. 1983. *Risk and Culture: An Essay on the Selection of Technological and Environmental Dangers*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Dynarski, Susan. 2002. "The Consequences of Lowering the Cost of College: The Behavioral and Distributional Implications of Aid for College."

Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. 2011. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes, Second Edition*. University of Chicago Press.

Emirbayer, Mustafa and Ann Mische. 1998. "What Is Agency?" *American Journal of Sociology* 103(4):962–1023.

Frye, Margaret. 2012. "Bright Futures in Malawi's New Dawn: Educational Aspirations as Assertions of Identity." *American Journal of Sociology* 117(6):1565–1624.

Gross, Neil. 2009. "A Pragmatist Theory of Social Mechanisms." *American Sociological Review* 74(3):358–79.

Henry, Paul C. 2005. "Social Class, Market Situation, and Consumers' Metaphors of (Dis)Empowerment." *Journal of Consumer Research* 31(4):766–78.

Horowitz, Daniel. 1985. *The Morality of Spending : Attitudes toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875-1940*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Jaquette, Ozan, Bradley R. Curs, and Julie R. Posselt. 2016. “Tuition Rich, Mission Poor: Nonresident Enrollment Growth and the Socioeconomic and Racial Composition of Public Research Universities.” *The Journal of Higher Education* 87(5):635–73.

MacLeod, Jay. 2008. *Ain't No Makin' It : Aspirations and Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood (3rd Edition)*. Boulder, CO, USA: Westview Press.

Meyer, John W. 2001. “The Evolution of Modern Stratification Systems.” Pp. 1116–25 in *Social Stratification: Class, Race, and Gender in Sociological Perspective*. Vol. 4th, edited by D. B. Grusky. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Mische, Ann. 2009. “Projects and Possibilities: Researching Futures in Action.” *Sociological Forum* 24(3):694–704.

National Center for Education Statistics. 2016. *Digest of Education Statistics*.

Paulsen, Michael B., St John, and Edward P. 2002. “Social Class and College Costs: Examining the Financial Nexus Between College Choice and Persistence.” *The Journal of Higher Education* 73(2):189–236.

Perna, Laura W., James Kvaal, and Roman Ruiz. 2017. “Understanding Student Debt: Implications for Federal Policy and Future Research.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 671(1):270–86.

Prasad, Monica, Steve G. Hoffman, and Kieran Bezila. 2016. “Walking the Line: The White Working Class and the Economic Consequences of Morality.” *Politics & Society* 44(2):281–304.

Strand, Michael and Omar Lizardo. 2015. “Beyond World Images Belief as Embodied Action in the World.” *Sociological Theory* 33(1):44–70.

Stuart, Guy. 2003. *Discriminating Risk: The U.S. Mortgage Lending Industry in the Twentieth Century*. Cornell University Press.

Tavory, Iddo and Nina Eliasoph. 2013. “Coordinating Futures: Toward a Theory of Anticipation.” *American Journal of Sociology* 118(4):908–42.

Weinberger, Michelle F., Jane R. Zavisca, and Jennifer M. Silva. 2017. “Consuming for an Imagined Future: Middle-Class Consumer Lifestyle and Exploratory Experiences in the Transition to Adulthood.” *Journal of Consumer Research*.

Willis, Paul E. 1981. *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Winston, Gordon C. 1999. “Subsidies, Hierarchy and Peers: The Awkward Economics of Higher Education.” *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 13(1):13–36.

# LIST OF TABLES

# APPENDIX B — THE DEBT SOLUTION: ORIENTATIONS TO DEBT AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY'S COLLEGE STUDENTS


## ABSTRACT

A large-scale expansion of credit is enabling democratized access to higher education. This policy solution leaves it up to individuals to use debt to navigate their way to the economic future that a college education can provide. Yet the central role of debt-based aid in the student experience has gone examined. This article outlines an original concept, orientations to debt, which is a framework for understanding differences between students in how they approach and relate to the use of debt-based aid. Data come from 178 longitudinal in-depth interviews with students and graduates of a public university who were strategically selected from a larger survey. Among other implications, findings suggest that variations in student orientations to debt, such as a perception that loans always cause harm or that a loan is not worth accruing for certain college activities, are a likely source of the known ability of debt-based aid to alter educational outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Consumer credit can operate as a political economic solution to the problem of social inequality (Prasad 2012). In the US case, large-scale expansions of credit have historically functioned as a critical means of equalizing access to social resources, such as the government-facilitated expansion of mortgage markets in the 1960s that fueled home ownership increases (Hyman 2012; Prasad 2012). The "debt solution" is a way of increasing access to desirable social goods, such as housing, while still prioritizing the orientation of consumers in a liberal marketplace (Prasad 2012). Indeed, credit-financed homeownership in the US has been considered so foundational to securing a stable economic future for so long that it is difficult to imagine any rendition of the American Dream without it.

Eventually, the same might be said of a college degree. The expansion of credit over the last decades to nearly all potential student borrowers has fueled federal college-for-all policies (Perna, Kvaal, and Ruiz 2017). The increases in college costs and student debt loads that have resulted are indisputable, yet whether they signal a need for a policy change is subject to debate. Research at the Brookings Institute, for example, suggests that since the late 1980s increases in college debt load are less than increases on college returns (Akers and Chingos 2014). However, even if accurate, these returns will come only to those who graduate. Asking individuals to fund higher education with loans has the secondary effect of individualizing responsibility for a needed labor market credential while transferring most of the risk onto the student (Dwyer, McCloud, and Hodson 2012). Existing research has repeatedly demonstrated that debt-based aid may deter college entry and persistence for at-risk students (Dwyer, Hodson, and McCloud 2013; Dwyer et al. 2012; Goldrick-Rab 2016; Mortenson 1990; Perna 2000).

Securing a baseline understanding of how individual students navigate a debt-based financial aid environment is critical for contextualizing existing research on student loans, as well as the longer-term outcomes that are only beginning to be captured in survey research. Toward this end, this article puts forth an original concept, referred to as *orientations to debt*, which is a framework for understanding differences between students in their (dis)comfort with borrowing and in how they approach and relate to debt-based aid in college. These orientations cannot be reduced to total student loan amount; rather, they are informed by lived experiences with economic (un)certainty and financial control and the information to which a student has access in the present

I designed this concept through an iterative qualitative analysis of 178 longitudinal interviews gathered from the 2015-2016 graduating cohort of a public flagship university. The sample was drawn from a larger survey of registered seniors, and it includes both borrowers and non-borrowers. Interviews were collected at two points in time: first during participants' senior year of study and again approximately 18-22 months after graduation.

I find that student orientations to debt vary along four overlapping but analytically distinct dimensions, all of which are proposed to have effects for student borrowing and the overall student experience: *Trust*, which encompasses the student's perception that a loan is likely to cause them harm; *Aggressiveness*, which refers to the student's perception of what aspects of the college experience justify greater financial risk; *Financial Knowledge*, which is a measure of the student's observed level of knowledge regarding money and finance; and *Perceived Family Support*, which represents the student's belief that they will be able to turn to their family for support if they were to encounter hardship after college.

Together, these dimensions speak to the (dis)comfort, or *non-material burden*, that students experience from using student loans to fund their education. The non-material burden of borrowing is best characterized as psychological and existential: a sense that loans are "looming," which often continues after graduation. My findings suggest that (dis)comfort with borrowing is a likely source of the known ability of student loans to alter trajectories while students are in college (e.g. dropping out), as, for many students, orientations to debt are constantly interacting with the setbacks and successes that they face during their time in college.

After college, results became more complicated, as graduates had confronted the *actual* material burden of their loans, in addition to dealing with evolving views regarding the role borrowing to pay for college was going to play in their lives moving forward. I use the word "actual," because, as students, the majority of these participants had not yet experienced earning and spending "adult-size" amounts of money despite being offered adult-size debts. Lacking a practice-based foundation for relating to debt, students instead "imported" their views from their lived experiences, as well as cultural knowledge gathered from whatever their sources were at hand.

Given their lack of a practice-based foundation for relating to debt, the majority of participants had been unable to form accurate pictures of the impact that using (or not using) student loans was going to have on their immediate lives after graduation. Thus, after graduation, the money these students had borrowed became "real." This activation of the "realness" of debt *as money* subsequently affected how they perceived the "size" and burden of their total loan amount. For some graduates, the total loan amount they had borrowed, which was only an abstract number in college, was realized as more manageable than they had expected at the time of the first interview. For other graduates, the amount was now realized as less manageable.

This finding on practice-based understandings suggests that the current structure of financing higher education may be based on a fundamentally flawed understanding of how young adults in college relate to money and finance. In addition to the material and psychological impact student loans are having on *every* student who faces an individual responsibility for their borrowing, asking these students to navigate a debt-based financial aid environment *before* they have gained a concrete sense of what repayment will actually be like may be putting students who are, for various reasons, less shielded from the non-material burden of borrowing at a disadvantage.

In the sections that follow, I first discuss the likely effects of debt-based aid on the college experience, followed by a brief discussion of how individual orientations to debt might vary according to literature within economic sociology and anthropology. This section is followed by a description of the larger study design and methods. The findings section is a detailed presentation of the orientations to debt concept and how it is proposed to function in college. This findings section is followed by an extended presentation of how orientations to debt *qualitatively shifted* after college. In the conclusion, I discuss implications of these findings and suggest possible avenues for future research.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

### *1.1 Student Loans and College Trajectories*

Under current higher education policy, debt-based aid ideally allows students who are not resource-advantaged to complete a college education on a more even financial playing field with students who have more resources. Yet existing research suggests that debt-based aid is likely to be affecting the *type* of experience students have while in college. For example, Yurk Quadlin and Rudel (2015) use survey data on student time-use to argue that having outstanding loan debt in college may effectively "polarize" the college experience, leading to notably different levels of engagement in college life. The authors find that students cluster into three categories: serious students, inactive students, and socially engaged students. Students with debt are more likely to be in either the serious or inactive category.

Due to the limitations of quantitative analysis, the authors can only speculate as to the mechanisms through which this happens. However, they propose that if the effect is indeed causal, it may be because carrying debt operates as an impetus for greater educational responsibility for some students, while for others debt operates as a liability that decreases motivation for participating in college life. Why this divergence might occur is precisely the sort of mechanistic processes that can be usefully unpacked through in-depth qualitative analysis of student orientations to debt.

Additional likely effects of debt-based aid can be inferred from the ability of student loans to enable cost-dependent pathways through college that may otherwise remain unavailable to an individual student. For example, consumption-oriented activities build social and cultural capital, in addition to providing networking opportunities, which can later be converted into economic gain (Bourdieu 1984; Erickson 1996; Rivera 2012; Stuber 2009). For example, in her research on "cultural matching," Rivera (2012) finds that once an initial credential bar is met, employers screen applicants for cues regarding cultural fit with the white upper-middle class culture of the firm. The ability to accumulate cultural experiences while in college may therefore reward some young adults with an advantage in accumulated cultural capital, as well as human capital, as they transition into the labor market.

While debt-based aid does have a positive function for some students, including on enrollment and persistence, it also has known negative effects on others. The relationship between debt and dropping out is of central importance, given that these students will subsequently face a higher risk of default on their loans (Gladieux and Perna 2005). Some measure of loan aversion likely plays a role in this process, but loan aversion is both poorly defined and poorly understood in part because existing research is based on survey data (Goldrick-Rab and Kelchen 2015). As with so much of the research on student loans, work that does exist suggests that the effects of loan aversion on student outcomes are, again, mixed (Baker, Andrews, and McDaniel 2017; Goldrick-Rab and Kelchen 2015). Establishing a baseline foundation for understanding student subjectivities toward debt could go far in unpacking the mechanisms that lie behind these complicated relationships and what can be done about them.

### *1.2 Debt in Action: Brave New Financial World, or Ticket to Social Mobility?*

Regarding potential sources of individual variation in orientations to debt, research in economic sociology would suggest that variation in how students approach borrowing would be related to individual orientations to financialized risk. As financial markets have expanded their role in the general economy, a "finance culture" has emerged at the household level (Baker, Andrews, and McDaniel 2017; Goldrick-Rab and Kelchen 2015). In theory, finance culture requires individuals to adopt the orientation to debt and financial risk-taking necessary to take advantage of the "brave new world" of economic opportunity created by increasingly sophisticated financial tools available for household consumption (Fligstein and Goldstein 2015). Building off the insights of Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), comfort with debt may now be an additional component of upper-middle-class culture that is differentially rewarded by the institutions that structure higher learning.

Alternatively, an anthropologically-derived understanding of how students would approach borrowing would suggest that, as an exchange of credit between society and an individual student, debt will be approached like a bridge that allows the student to reach an otherwise unattainable social location. Peebles (2010), for example, notes that credit and debt constitute a "dyadic exchange" between individuals and society that bridges both social locations and time. Extensions of credit can therefore be a means through which societies use reciprocal obligations to facilitate mobility between social groups. This relationship between credit and social mobility is, in fact, even reflected in the debt solution to redistributive policy: just as debt-facilitated home ownership provides a "ticket" to the middle-class, student loans provide a ticket to college and the social mobility it provides. In this regard, individual orientations to debt are likely to be mediated by aspirational identities and life goals just as much as they are by assessments of financialized risk.

## 2. DATA AND METHODS

### *2.1 Study Setting*

This article grew out of my larger study on Paying for College, which took place in two phases and was designed to examine how approaches to paying for college, particularly student loan-use, interact with pathways students have taken through college and their plans for the future. Its public university setting provided an ideal case with which to begin a qualitative investigation of how debt-based aid is affecting US students. Public universities are historically charged with equalizing access to higher education and are, as such, wrapped up in American dream-type narratives regarding education and social mobility (Rosenbaum 2001). Democratized access for less resource-advantaged students in state schools, combined with steady decreases in state appropriations for grant aid and tuition subsidies, creates a relatively high debt load for students relative to their career prospects (Dwyer et al. 2012).

Critical to the present analysis, socioeconomic diversity on the campus is high, and students often have some degree of flexibility in their borrowing decisions. This flexibility is due to a combination of factors, including the relatively moderate tuition and low cost of living in the local area, as well as peculiarities in financial aid packages that occur through the federal process of calculating and awarding financial aid. Since the university is actively recruiting affluent out-of-state students from nearby states, students taking a financially modest route to their degree must coexist with those who have chosen or have been afforded the option to spend more.

*2.2 Phase 1: Online Campus Survey with In-depth Follow-up Interviews*

Over the 2015-2016 academic year, I issued an invitation to participate in an online survey on Paying for College that held the possibility of being selected for an in-depth in-person interview to a random sample of 4000 registered seniors stratified by college division. Given known response rates to other campus surveys, my target realized sample was 1000 individuals at an expected response rate of 25%. Achieved sample size was 975 individuals with a response rate of 24.4%. These survey data were combined with registrar data on the student's college and major.

The survey was distributed in four waves in order to stagger recruitment over the academic year. Survey questions covered demographics and family background; living arrangements; hours worked; uses of student loans, parental resources, and other sources of aid; as well as a final question asking if the student would like the chance to be selected for an in-person follow-up interview. Additionally, the survey included two attitudinal measures on the meaning and purpose of college and an experimental vignette measuring willingness to take a relatively financially risky post-college internship. Prior to each interview, I reviewed the participant's survey answers and integrated these responses into the interview protocol.

In total, 111 seniors were interviewed during the first phase. Demographics are included in Table 1. These interviews were semi-structured in format, conducted face-to-face, and averaged eighty minutes in length. The protocol itself was designed to elicit discourse surrounding (1) how pathways taken through college—including major choice, residency changes, lifestyle and consumption habits, and struggles and achievements—interact with the means by which students are paying for college; and (2) the student's perception of the risk and social legitimacy of borrowing (or not borrowing) to pay for a college degree. Major topics included: family background and decision to attend college; aspirational goals; pathways taken through college; strategies, rationales, and justifications for using loans and other types of financial resources; perceptions of student loan risk; strategies for repayment; and post-college plans. After each interview, I wrote an analytical memo to revisit my study expectations, formulate emerging expectations, and document the non-verbal and ethnographic details of each encounter.

This study embraced an iterative approach to qualitative data collection and analysis. Throughout the data collection period, I maintained a pool of potential interview subjects that was continually updated as survey results came in. For each week of active data collection, I selected approximately seven to twelve subjects for interviews according to a theoretically driven sampling logic. This logic ensured sufficient variance in student characteristics such as parental income and education, race/ethnicity, gender, Pell grant status, residency status, college major, total expected borrowing amount, and so forth. When the pool of available interview subjects exceeded research needs for a given category, I selected subjects in a random manner. In order to avoid any potential scheduling bias on my part, subjects were offered interview times between 8am and 9pm, weekdays and weekends, and were able to schedule in advance as well as last minute.

I designed the Phase 1 recruitment material with an eye toward diversifying motivations for study participation. Recruitment language appealed to students on three distinct levels: (1) money; subjects were compensated $20 cash for their time; (2) status; recruitment materials were personalized as much as possible, including identifying each student by name, and emphasizing phrases like *your participation*, *your perspective*, and *you were selected for a follow-up interview*; and (3) altruism; I appealed to potential subjects as a fellow university student conducting a research study on a socially important topic. Informal debriefing with subjects at the end of each interview suggested that this technique was at least somewhat effective in diversifying motives for study participation.

Survey result demographics compared favorably with available data on the university student body. Among survey respondents, 80% indicated willingness to participate in the follow-up interview. Rates were slightly higher among females than males, and lower for students in the School of Engineering. After accounting for non-response to interview invitations, the achieved response rate for the in-depth Phase 1 interviews was 65%. Non-response occurred primarily during peak times of the semester. No additional variation by categories of interest was found.

Interviews for both phases of this study were audio recorded[6] and transcribed by either a professional transcription service or myself. Transcriptions were coded within MAXQDA computer-assisted qualitative coding software using a mix of both open and closed techniques. When more functionally appropriate, Excel and Microsoft Word were also used to organize study data and do exploratory open coding. Given that the meaning of written text is, at times, ambiguous, each interview transcription was integrated with its corresponding audio file within MAXQDA in order to retain as much of the original meaning as possible.

### *2.3 Phase 2: Longitudinal In-depth Interviews*

The second wave of interviews was conducted over the 2017-2018 academic year. Each participant in the main interview sample[7] was contacted on a rolling basis for

---

[6] Five participants chose to decline permission to record the first interview, in which cases I took extensive written notes. All second interviews were audio recorded.
[7] For various reasons, nine of the original interviews were considered peripheral.

participation in the second interview; 67 of these 102 participants completed the second interview, resulting in a retention rate of 66%. Overall, minority students and middle-class students were slightly less represented in the follow-up sample compared with the original sample (see Table 1 below); when comparing borrowers only, these discrepancies are reduced but not eliminated. Higher-than-average borrowers were also slightly more represented in the follow-up. Second interviews were conducted via Skype, FaceTime, or over the phone, depending on the participant's preference, and lasted approximately ninety minutes each. To reflect graduates' new work and schedule circumstances, participants were compensated with a $50 gift card in the second interview.

Table 1: Sample Demographics

*Time 1*

| Gender | | Class | | Race | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| M | F | MC | WC | W | O |
| 47% | 53% | 55% | 45% | 50% | 50% |

| Total Loan Amount | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| $0 | $1 < $19,999 | $20,000- $29,999 | $30,000 + |
| 24% | 23% | 31% | 22% |

*Time 2*

| Gender | | Class | | Race | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| M | F | MC | WC | W | O |
| 45% | 55% | 48% | 52% | 57% | 43% |

| Total Loan Amount | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| $0 | $1 < $19,999 | $20,000- $29,999 | $30,000 + |
| 24% | 25% | 24% | 27% |

The second interview protocol again included a number of semi-structured questions to ensure a degree of uniformity across respondents. Overall, however, I adopted a more open-ended and participant-specific approach. This change allowed me to capture the wider variety of experiences and circumstances among recent graduates as compared to when they were seniors. A more open-ended approach also allowed me to probe respondents regarding specific plans and beliefs they had described during the first interview. Interview topics included general transitions out of college; employment and current career plans; money and financial circumstances; student loan bills and dealings with loan service providers; and ongoing perceptions of debt. I also revisited topics covered during the first interview, such as the meaning and purpose of a college degree, and expanded our coverage of prior familial experiences with money and debt.

Analytical interview memoing was used again for the second phase of the study. Prior to beginning each second interview, I reviewed the participant’s Phase 1 data, including a complete re-listening of our first interview. In addition to noting topics of emphasis to probe in revisit, I also noted the participant’s post-graduation aspirations and goals, job and living arrangement plans, and, if applicable, student loan repayment strategy, which allowed me to formulate expectations for each of these longitudinal interviews in an analytical memo. Following each interview, I returned to this memo to revisit these expectations, formulate new study expectations, and, again, document ethnographic and non-verbal details.

*2.4 Analytical Approach to the Orientations to Debt Concept*

Since I am proposing that individual dispositions toward debt are based in culture, inform action, and vary, the orientations to debt concept mimics Bourdieu's theory of practice (1977). Even at an early state of analysis, it was apparent that differences in student dispositions toward debt were likely to have had consequences for their overall educational experiences. For example: distrust of student loans as a legitimate financial tool -> declining loans offered in financial aid package -> increased paid work hours -> reduction in study time, and so on. I continued developing the orientations to debt concept through coding and analytical memos.

The second wave of interviews provided an empirical opportunity to test the *durability of these dispositions*. Each follow-up participant was “scored” for the four dimensions on a 3-point scale, based on their answers to specific interview questions as well as multiple inductive readings of their interview as a whole. As noted, I reviewed the participant’s Phase 1 material prior to beginning the second interview. This process allowed me to “predict” possible student-specific outcomes. For example, low financial knowledge at time of senior year -> confusion over loan repayment options after 6-month grace period expires -> initial struggle with setting up repayment plan.

Rather that enduring after graduation, however, I found that orientations had *qualitatively shifted* now that participants had gained a more practice-based understanding of money and finance and were engaging with the frustrations and successes of their initial job market searches. This emergent finding prompted me to revisit my prior expectations on the source of these dispositions and form new expectations regarding the role of lived experience and practice-based understanding of money and finance. Given these Phase 2 findings, I returned to the dataset and did a side-by-side, before-and-after comparison of the 67 participants who completed both interviews. The orientations to debt concept I am presenting in this article was therefore created through an iterative analysis of *both* time points.

## 3. FINDINGS: ORIENTATIONS TO DEBT

In this section I describe the four dimensions of orientations to debt one-by-one, as well as how these orientations may be challenged and evolve while students are in college. This section is followed by a discussion of how these dimensions qualitatively changed after graduation. Study participants were scored as “low,” “medium,” or “high” for each of the four dimensions according to the initial interview. When I refer to “low-trust students” or “higher-aggressiveness choices,” I am referring to the relative place of participants along these scales during their senior year of college. All supporting quotes from participants are given using an assigned alias. In order to protect anonymity without sacrificing contextual detail, some features of participant situations and backgrounds have been changed.

It should be noted that the orientations to debt concept is intended to shed light on differences among students in their willingness to use loans and their comfort with borrowing, because these differences are proposed to matter for students’ ability to take full advantage of higher education as a social mobility pathway. This objective is not synonymous with aiming to explain *why* students borrow. The following analysis assumes that students borrow in order to meet costs they view as legitimate, and that financial aid packages are an (more or less) accurate representation of the amount of money a student is likely to need in order to meet their cost of attendance.

*3.1 Trust*

As a dimension of student orientations to debt, *Trust* encompasses the student's perception that a loan is going to cause them harm. The harm a student anticipates may be material or it may be psychological. This dimension shares a conceptual and empirical similarity with loan aversion, but it is distinct in that Trust is not based on whether a student borrows or does not borrow; rather, Trust refers to how the student perceives *student loans*, regardless of whether the student is borrowing or not. As conceptualized in this study, low-trust students did sometimes have loan debt, but the amount was always significantly less than what the student had been offered in their financial aid package.

When compared with their peers, low-trust students generally believed that student loans, like all debt, are "bad" and financially dangerous. Students who were ranked as high-trust, in contrast, believed that student loans are a "good" type of debt that serves a legitimate purpose when used responsibly and as intended. Lower-trust students in the middle category were generally wary of student loans and more anxious about debt than high-trust students, but they were not avoiding accepting their loans to a point of financial detriment or significant loss of college opportunities.

As an example of a low-trust student, consider Alessandra, a low-income and first generation student who had received several need-based grants to attend the university. In combination with her paid work, she had managed to avoid borrowing for all four years of her degree path. Like many low- and lower-trust students, Alessandra told me that she "hate[s] loans, like, it stresses me out." When we were discussing her background, she talked about money troubles she went through growing up. She viewed these troubles as stemming from a parental divorce that left her mother solely responsible for the mortgage on the family home her parents had built. As she explained, "my mom needed to pay the mortgage and stuff like that, so we couldn't really do anything." Now, she explained, her own situation is different because she herself is in charge and independent:

> Their whole lives [my mom] always had the lower paying job. When they got divorced he made her buy it off him, so basically she has to pay the whole mortgage and stuff like that. When you're growing up it's kind of hard cuz your friends are buying stuff even if you go to, like, the little grocery store after school. I feel like I was more stunted, like, for money, when I was younger, and I couldn't really do anything with my friends. Now I can. I have my own job and I can do it on my own. I don't depend on anyone. Then, I was really, like, sad and lonely.

In order for Alessandra to accomplish her goal of graduating debt-free, she had lived at home and commuted from sophomore through senior year. Freshman year, however, she moved into the dorms on campus because, as she explained, she was excited to be starting at the university "with a full ride" and "wanted the whole experience." Yet after the dorm expense, her grants had not been nearly enough to cover a meal plan, and she found herself scrambling to come up with enough money to buy food. Although she knew she had been offered loans, she did not see borrowing as an option:

> I'm not gonna get a loan just to have more freedom. That was the only reason I was gonna need that more money. I mean, yeah, the eating, but it

> was, like, I wasn’t starving, like (pause) for more than a couple hours a day or, like, you know, like I wasn’t really sst—I didn’t get malnourished.

For students like Alessandra, the “freedom” that would have come from having more money was not worth the stress of being in debt. After her freshman year experience, she moved back home.

Thus another way to look at the Trust dimension is as a representation of whether the student is focused on the negative, constraining side of a student loan or its positive, enabling side. Indeed, the most common factor across low- and lower-trust students in the sample was acute or disruptive prior experiences with economic uncertainty. The university sits in a state hard hit by the Great Recession. Approximately one third of the interview sample reported unsettling familial experiences with economic uncertainty at some point in their past, such as sharp changes in lifestyle, periods of frequent calls by debt collectors, utility shutoffs, abrupt moves, home foreclosures, or parental bankruptcies.

Josh is another low-income and first generation student who had experienced all of the above events through one or the other parent: packing up and leaving a rented apartment in the middle of the night, calls from debt collectors, bankruptcy, foreclosure. The up and down he went through before and after the Great Recession, which for these students occurred in Middle School into early High School, might have felt the worst though, as he explained:

> High school it was really bad. I remember growing up young, money was always a problem, but it was just always a problem so it wasn't weird to me. Then in middle school, my dad started doing better and he was a

> manager. So he was making good money while my mom was still not. So it was weird. I'd go to my dad's house, and we had a house. So at least that was new…. But then he got laid off and our house got foreclosed.

Like Alessandra, Josh had enough in grants and scholarships to cover tuition, but had to make significant sacrifices during his time in school in order to cover his living expenses without borrowing in any amount. Living at home had not been an option: "when I turned 18, my parents were, like, 'Go.'" So Josh found other ways to make it work. He took a 35-hour a week retail job freshman year. When he realized that plan was not sustainable if he was going to succeed, he switched to picking up as many hours as he could at odd jobs during the semesters, but continued his full-time landscaping work over the summers, and he rented a large closet in a house shared with his friends for $150/month. Like Alessandra her freshman year, however, Josh had the most trouble with food:

> Usually I have class till like 2:00 or 3:00, and then I have [club] at 4:00, or 5:00, or 6:00. But I have homework to do. So I just stay on campus…. There's no affordable food on campus. It's the most stressful expense, especially because it's consistent, and it's not a benefit. I mean it keeps you alive and that's a benefit, but there's no immediate satisfaction in it. It's just like, 'Ugh. I have to spend money.'

Despite the stress, Josh insisted that the student loans he was offered were not an option because accepting that debt now meant sacrificing his freedom later.

For obvious reasons, low-income and first-generation students were more likely to have encountered economic uncertainty when they were younger across the board and over prolonged periods of time. However, students with middle-class backgrounds, too, reported feeling uncertain, displaced, or worried at some point early in their life, often during a period in which a parent was laid off or struggling with credit card debt, a home mortgage, or medical bills, or during a time in which parents were going through a separation or divorce. For these students, experiencing economic uncertainty had not been a constant throughout their youth, but rather an abrupt change in lifestyle that usually occurred, from their perspective, quite suddenly.

High-trust students, in contrast, trusted in their future ability to handle their loans in one way or another without the loans coming back around to "bite" them in the end. Although many of these students did report their families being relatively secure financially, this did not necessarily mean their families had been shielded from debt; instead, high-trust students had often had the opposite secondhand experience of debt being "fine" or "the way it is." Amanda, for example, explained that she received borrowing advice from her mother, who had dealt with loans of her own: "a couple of years ago my Mom kind of broke down like how much I would be paying every month for student loans. So she kind of said, like, right out [of college] I would be [paying] like $500/month and that was based on hers." Amanda would go on to explain that her loans "don't really bother me" except sometimes at the beginning of the school year, and when that happens, "I just talk to my Mom about it." While non-first generation students were more likely to be getting this type of concrete reassurance from parent/s, the sample did contain high-trust first generation students who had found concrete (or sometimes non-concrete) reassurances elsewhere that borrowing for college "would be okay."

*3.2 Aggressiveness*

*Aggressiveness* refers to the debt-based financial risk a student is comfortable incurring in order to fund their college experience and aspirational goals. US college students face an ongoing series of choices that affect the ultimate total cost of their education. As noted in the methods section, this university is in many ways a microcosm of those choices through its low-to-moderate costs, public mission, large percentage of out-of-state students, and socially diverse student body. Whereas Trust refers to the student's perception of student loan debt itself, Aggressiveness captures the student's view of what constitutes an acceptable risk given what the student is hoping to get from their college experience.

For example, for some students, an out-of-state education may be worthy of added costs because greater distance from home, or the reputation of a particular program, is seen as a core part of the kind of college graduate they hope to become. This aspirational element is critical to what distinguishes this dimension from Trust. One might also look at Aggressiveness as the student's willingness to "bet" on their aspirational ambitions by using loan money that the student realizes *could* be avoided if they were to, instead, sacrifice a particular college-related ambition or sacrifice another in its place. For example, a student may trade receiving a larger parental allowance for their decision to remain in state, or they may decide to remain living at home if it means they will be able to complete all four years of their education at a university as opposed to beginning at a community college.

Only three students in the sample had made a college choice decision I coded as a high-aggressiveness choice. All three of these students were white females, and they were all out-of-state, mostly non-scholarship, first generation students who chose the university well aware it meant that they would accumulate a substantial loan burden by the time they graduated. As Ellen explains, however, she was attracted to the national reputation of her program, which is much higher than what she saw as available to her in her home state. Her costs had ended up being even more than she originally expected, as she was completing a $5^{th}$ year due to a number of her dual-enrollment credits not being accepted by her program and failing to secure a mandatory internship position on time. Although Ellen was angry about the added cost of her $5^{th}$ year at the time of the first interview, she did not regret her decision to go out of state because, as she put it, "why should the quality of your education be dictated by where you are born?"

As Ellen's question illustrates, aggressive choices usually reflected the student's beliefs about what exactly constitutes their version of a non-negotiable college experience. In today's college environment, variation in what is seen as an ideal college experience often comes down to consumption-related choices. At the time of their senior year, students in the sample tended to have clear opinions regarding what college-related costs are likely to be worthwhile, whether those costs revolve around living arrangements, leisure time, Greek Life, formal and informal socializing, studying abroad, etc.

Consumption choices in college are not just "lifestyle" decisions, however, as the sum of these choices dictates the connections, cultural capital, and personal growth a student will be graduating with. In the quote below, for example, Amelia explains why she was willing to take out student loans to fund her two study abroad programs, even though she would have graduated debt-free without them. She struggled with her decision to borrow at the time, but in a low demand major field such as hers, she explains, you have to make yourself stand out if you want to succeed after college:

> Certain majors are in higher demand than others …. If you're gonna do—let's say humanities—you gotta do that and more. You gotta be better than an average student …. If you wanna make it in a major like [mine]—there's a lot of us—I feel a lot of pressure. How am I gonna get a job when there's a million of us out there? That means I gotta make myself stand out.

For students like Amelia, who had a mix of aid that covered her cost of tuition—including Pell grants, scholarships, paid employment, and a small parental allowance—borrowing choices like these are an option, as long as the student is willing to exercise it. Similar "payoff in the long run" versus "not worth it" arguments were given regarding living arrangements, transportation decisions, fraternity/sorority membership, and keeping up with peers.

Involvement in academic clubs, organizations, internships, and overall time to study can also be affected by more or less aggressive orientations to student loans. The middle section of the interview protocol addressed college experience, and the section ended with a series of extracurricular and time-use oriented questions. By the end of these questions, students in tighter financial situations would often respond (with humor or with annoyance) in variations of "no, I have to work," "I can't afford that," or "that costs *moneeey*." The experiences of these students call attention to the fact that student loans can affect college pathways in part through their ability to increase the amount of money a student has *without* increasing the hours they are working for pay. In other words, in college, it is not the old adage that time equals money, but rather that money equals time.

The Aggressiveness dimension can therefore have direct implications for opportunity-related experiences a student is able to access in college. In fact, some students in the sample described increases in how aggressive they became toward borrowing as they got more familiar with what would be required of them in college and what habits and experiences correlate with college success. For these students, a shift occurred post-entry when they realized that the financial stress they were putting themselves through by not accepting all or a greater portion of the loans they were offered was holding back their success in school.

Edward, for example, is a charismatic first generation student from "one of those towns where you hate it, you hate it, you hate it. You leave, and then someday, somehow, you end up back." At the time of his senior year, Edward had high corporate ambitions, was studying for the GMAT, and "would not be satisfied with anything less than making it to the top of wherever I end up." As a freshman and into his sophomore year, Edward had attempted to work multiple jobs to support himself; he was overextended, and his poor GPA was putting him at risk of losing a second need-based grant. He remembers the moment when he was looking at his grades and he realized: "if I don't make a change, I'm going back." An initial decision to take out a small loan to retake and replace the grades in two of the courses he had failed grew into decisions to accept enough in student loans to let him meet his living expenses while focusing on internships, networking, and jobs that would advance his eventual career path.

Aggressiveness has additional implications for college outcomes and student persistence in the form of allowing the “opportunity” for a student to graduate. Students who are trying to trust in the positive side of their loans may confront unexpected costs or circumstances that will push them to the edge of what they had expected to borrow. The $5^{th}$ year is the most common example. More than a third of students in the sample were either completing a $5^{th}$ year or described a decision not to switch to a more desirable major because it would have led to a $5^{th}$ year.

In the case of Ellen, she had attempted to secure the required internship on time, but had difficulty finding one on her own. Although she had asked administrative staff for help, she was told it was the responsibility of the student and, essentially, to “figure it out.” Stories such as Ellen’s were echoed by other students in the sample who felt their timely progress was impeded when they were not given needed information, or were given the wrong information, by university staff to whom they had gone to for help. Other students faced the $5^{th}$ year after repeated academic struggles with advanced math and science classes that are required for their aspirational career path, and, of course, the progress of some students had been delayed for non-academic reasons.

Interview data can only capture one side of these stories. However, the personal stories that these students presented in their interviews highlighted the increased vulnerability that falls on students who lack informal college-related advice from parents, or a stand-in support group, within a large university system that often feels uncaring and overwhelming. Regardless of student background, the mishaps and mistakes that are made in college literally “add up” for some students in the form of extra classes, extra years, lost opportunities, and lost scholarships. By design, the students in this study’s sample had persisted, but it is certainty conceivable that many students confronting adverse situations have chosen *not* to accept the alternatives, not to keep going, and, consequently, not to persist.

### *3.3 Financial Knowledge*

*Financial Knowledge* is relatively straightforward compared with the prior two dimensions. Students who were ranked high in financial knowledge had a relatively sophisticated understanding of money and finance compared with their peers. Few students in the sample were aware of the interest rates on their student loans or the amount their monthly payment was likely to be on a standard 10-year repayment plan. However, high-financial knowledge students knew the exact amount of their total loan amount, as well as the proportion that was subsidized versus unsubsidized, were usually aware of their credit score and how credit scores work, and they articulated differences between types of credit according to distinctions such as high/low interest, repayment structure, and available consumer protection options.

In theory, students who are high in financial knowledge could be predicted to be "better" borrowers. Having more precise information should give the student greater awareness of the real-world impact of their borrowing decisions and thus, perhaps, instill a greater sense of responsibility. For various reasons, however, including the structure of the financial aid system as a whole and the involvement of parent/s, these students were not making their borrowing decisions under conditions that would make this assessment possible. Without having actual knowledge of their income and budget conditions after college, any picture a student could paint of the impact borrowing was likely to have for them after graduation remained distorted or incomplete.

However, students with more financial knowledge were able to create *better* pictures. They were able to create these better pictures because they were using concrete and accurate knowledge when they imagined what it would be like when trying to fit a $X/month payment into their budget, when they were wondering what they might do if they could not afford a loan payment one month, or when they were trying to assess whether it was realistic, or even prudent, to pay off their loan debt within 1-2 years after graduation. Without concrete and accurate knowledge, these future images were instead created using past experiences and the experiences of others (usually parent/s) and information that was just "in the air."

Perhaps for this reason, I often found that students with higher levels of financial knowledge tended to be feel more secure in their borrowing.[8] Whether a cause, an effect, or just an association, students who were observed to know more about their loans were usually also coded as feeling more comfortable with their loans overall and more in control. The Financial Knowledge dimension was therefore strongly associated with Trust. Again, low-trust students, in general, equated *all* types of debt together as bad and likely to harm. Students with higher levels of Trust usually distinguished student loans as a *distinct* and relatively good type of debt. They were able to make this distinction between "good" and "bad" debt by using their concrete knowledge base—or, in some

[8] The exception in the sample was four student borrowers who were both highly knowledgeable of money and finance and highly opposed to allowing any form of indebtedness into their life for any longer than was absolutely necessary. Three of the four students participated in the follow-up, and all three had executed, or were close to executing, their plans to eliminate the loan debt as quickly as possible.

cases, the student was simply told that student loans were a good type of debt by someone they themselves trusted.

Sophia, for example, is a first generation student who was graduating from PFU after transferring with an associate's degree from a community college near the small town she grew up in. She worried a lot about her loans, and had even dropped out of the community college in the middle of one semester because she did not think she could keep affording to go. When we were talking about what changed, she told me about her father and how he had likened her future loan payment to a car payment:

> I really didn't want to take out any loans, but my Dad told me that sometimes it's the same cost of a car, because most of my friends have jobs and bills but their cars are nice. And they have a better car than mine—I have an old car—but they don't have an education. That's what my Dad says: because education is better than having a brand new car. And I will pay for it just like a car.

As demonstrated in this quote from Sophia, the association between Financial Knowledge and Trust appears to be in how this knowledge can shift a student's sense of the power they have as a borrower relative to the power the loans are going to have over them. Similar descriptions of change were given by students who had learned more about loans, money, and finance from a financial aid counselor, a new step-parent, a part-time job, a class, or their own research.

*3.4 Perceived Family Support*

Finally, as a dimension of orientations to debt, *Perceived Family Support* represents the student's belief that they can rely on their parent/s for money or a place to stay if they find themselves struggling financially after college. Some students were confident that they had this support; other students were confident that they did not. A third category saw this support as an option only of last resort, because either their parent/s would probably do it despite the student believing their parent/s could not afford to do it, or because the relationship between student and parent/s was strained.

As a matter of stratification and life trajectories, having a family-provided safety net is most relevant after college, when recent graduates face the economic uncertainties of prolonged job searches, job instability, and lack of savings. As a dimension of orientations to debt, however, Perceived Family Support may also be relevant while students are in school through an indirect process. Similar to how Financial Knowledge is likely to function, it is possible that higher levels of Perceived Family Support may help to decrease the degree of uncertainty students experience from their loans, leaving less overall insecurity and stress as a result.

By design, every student in the study sample was expecting to be the person solely responsible for their student loan amount. Although some students did say that their parents would "oh, definitely" or "for sure" help them with a loan payment if they asked, as opposed to answers such as "ehhh, maybeeee" or "I guess I could call them up and beg them," there were no students in the sample who were expecting to be 'dialing up Dad' on a regular basis at the time of the first interview. Yet there is a subjective difference between knowing you have financial help if you need it and knowing that you are on your own, whether a student is going to need that help or not. Students who indicated that they lacked family support often had stronger coding for stress, anxiety, and fear in relation to their borrowing and in relation to their finances overall.

There is not enough in these interviews to suggest that the noted association between loan stress and lack of Perceived Family Support was direct, beyond generic statements made by these students about their loans, such as “that’s all on me.” However, some of these students did provide strong descriptions of emotional distress during times in college when they needed financial help and were unable to get it. Although it was not said, it is possible that, as with Trust, when these students look out to their futures and imagine their lives after college, the “weight” of what they imagine is informed by these prior experiences of being financially powerless.

Shannon, for example, was one of only a handful of students who took me up on my offer to meet her at an alternative location for the initial interview. When I arrived early on the other side of campus the cluster of community tables all contained at least one student, already parked and studying. I held off on sitting, thinking that one of the tables might open up before she arrived. When Shannon did arrive only a couple of minutes later, she introduced herself to me, surveyed the area, approached a stray student at one of the tables off to the side and politely asked this student if she wouldn’t mind choosing another table, instead.

Like Josh, Shannon had a lot of responsibility in her house growing up. Her mother struggles to be “present,” and her father is the angry-expressive type but “not when I’m there.” Shannon’s dream had always been to go away to college, and she was one of the students in the study sample who had faced times when she was *not* able to get enough loans offered to her in her financial aid package to cover her expenses. After high school, a close friend of the family had offered to help Shannon pay for college, since her father would not. And the family friend did, until he abruptly changed his mind partway through her sophomore year, saying that maybe his investment isn't worth it and accusing her of not trying hard enough. Shannon eventually convinced him to let her find cheaper housing for next year in an effort to reduce her costs, hoping that he would then continue to help. He agreed, she did, and after signing the yearlong lease with two of her friends, she called him up to tell him how excited she was and he informed her: he was not helping her any longer. Shannon called a suicide hotline for the first of what would be several times that year.

Eventually, Shannon's father agreed to take out a Parental Plus Loan, which meant that she did not have to drop out of the university as she had so feared she was going to have to do—although the delinquent debt from the broken apartment lease was still on her credit report. As I did from Shannon, I heard often from students about the frustration of FAFSA using their parent/s' income and assets to determine their aid eligibility regardless of whether the parent/s were helping the student or not. As Micaela, another student, had phrased FAFSA's assessment, "yeah, I mean, I guess my Dad has money, but that money isn't going to Micaela."

Although some of these students focused on the perceived arbitrariness of this FAFSA determination, others focused on how it felt to be placed at the mercy of their parent/s willingness to take out a Parental Plus Loan, or to be on the losing side of the oft-repeated perception that the campus is overflowing with students whose parents are paying for whatever it is that they want. One of these students even used his experiences with the financial aid office to draw an emotion-based connection between how college is currently financed, issues of meritocracy, and a specific understanding of individual worth:

> Putting the burden on parents that, you know, it used to be parents would pay for it cuz, well, it's just your education: 'of course.' And if they didn't, you could do it. Now, if your parents don't pay for college, you know, they don't love you, you're poor, why are you even going to college?

Lucas had worked in the financial aid office during one of his semesters in college, fielding phone calls from parents calling on behalf of their children and upset that a balance remained despite amounts they had already paid, or the loans that had already been accepted: "my child can't do this or that. So we offer them a parental. Usually they take it. Sometimes they can't."

As an alternative to providing increased public funds for higher education, the debt-based solution to college access does provide an individually based solution. Politically, this solution may be fair enough: the children of parents who have earned the ability to help their children with college are given that help; the children of parents who have not earned this ability are provided with the reasonable alternative of paying for college with debt. But some families are now doing both. Further, students often have different levels of recourse when it comes to the consequences of borrowing, including the seemingly straightforward ability to move back home after college. In other words, some individual students are more individualized than others.

# 4. QUALITATIVE SHIFTS IN ORIENTATIONS AFTER COLLEGE

As mentioned, the before-and-after design of this study captured a qualitative shift in how participants viewed their student loans, as well as money and finance in general, after graduation. The shift in how participants viewed their student loans was precipitated by a change in how income and expenses, including a student loan bill, are experienced after college—i.e. regular, fixed, and personally earned—as compared with how money and expenses, including debt-based aid, were experienced in college: abstract, irregular, and not personally earned. For purposes of presentation, I have again separated findings into the four dimensions: Trust, Perceived Family Support, Financial Knowledge, and Aggressiveness. With the exception of my initial discussion of Steven, all supporting quotes given in this section are from the after-graduation interview.

## *4.1 Trust*

At the time of the first interview, low- and lower- trust students were often focused on how they would "attack" their student loan debt through severe adjustments to their life and consumption habits (e.g. "surviving on ramen") in order to eliminate the weight of their loan burden as quickly as possible—or, they were anticipating the opposite dynamic: tethered to a loan burden over which they had no control. As Steven had quietly explained to me during the first interview, this fear had been born out of his past experiences: "money really scares me, um, just with like my family background, like, I've never had a lot." So Steven became a finance major, and he learned. He learned how to control it and how to "dominate" it, and eventually, he explained, he realized that he should be looking at the loans he was offered like they were liquidity:

> The biggest thing I realized is I wasn't thinking right about, like, liquidity. So I was trying to, like, not have the interest payments, but there's a certain value to having enough liquidity that if something does happen I have a bit of a safety net rather than what happened last winter when, you know, my costs increased and I ran out of money, and I just couldn't do anything about it. But if I had taken out that full amount of loans, I would have been okay for a little bit longer. So, I've had to—like, liquidity, I've had to pay for it in college [in accumulated interest], because I just don't have the capital.

Yet to Steven, who saw himself as an outsider compared with more wealthy students at the business school, the loans still sometimes felt like something to be embarrassed of: a marker that he had grown up poor and was not able to control money.

By the time of the follow-up interview, the goal of attacking their loans as quickly as possible was one that the majority of these participants had since relaxed or let go. For some of these graduates, the relaxation of this goal was more forced than it was for others, as money is one of those things that "when you don't have it, you don't have it." Regardless, however, the changes I observed in Trust were deeper than the amount of disposable income the graduate held at their disposable; in fact, if anything, those who were *more* financially secure now appeared more comfortable with the idea of *not* aggressively reducing their total loan amount.

When I spoke again with Luis, for example, he had obtained a well-paying programming job with a highly respected company in San Francisco shortly after graduating. Instead of paying off his loans within the first year, as he'd planned, he'd "gone on a bit of a spending spree," and we talked about how he was adjusting to being one of those people that "can spend money:"

> There was another person on my team who was kind of similar to me. And we would just be like, 'Oh, hey, we just got paid. We should just go buy this thing because we can.' We did. And in that day you feel good. And then the next day, you're just like, 'What am I doing?' But then you kind of just—I would just buy dinner, or whatever, and it would feel better. Or something like that. It would just be like, 'Oh, I can spend this money.' And I've never, ever had money like that.

We also revisited the anxiety and fear Luis had once felt toward student loan debt, an orientation which he, like Steven, saw as growing out of his past experiences: "I was just so ready to worry about money…. I guess I'm just in a different place in life or whatever and I don't have to think about things like that. I mean, it's not that big of a problem now which is crazy." Luis, whose single mother had gone through multiple bankruptcies, would go on to explain that, even though he knew he was developing a useful skill in college, borrowing had still felt like a "gamble" because even in school, "I was doing web development, making websites for $7 an hour. And I was like, 'Man, this is what it's going to be like after school. I'm screwed.'"

Shifts in dispositions like the one described by Luis were not just among graduates who had been afraid of borrowing and then obtained high paying jobs after graduation. Shannon, for example, was one of the participants who were dealing with a total loan amount that was significantly more than what she had thought she had borrowed at the time of our initial interview. Yet even though the loan amount was fifty percent larger, she was not nearly as worried about her debt as she had been back when she was a student. Since graduating, Shannon had obtained the job she had always wanted in a secure but low paying field. She had also learned how to consolidate her loans through the correct government website and enroll in an Income-based Repayment Plan. When we talked about what has changed, she explained that when she first went to college she had a fundamental misunderstanding, not only about how financial aid worked, but also her own ability to handle debt as an adult:

> I mean, going into college, I didn't really realize—I still don't always understand—how the money gets placed [on a Bursar’s account]. And so my understanding when I went into college—which was wrong—is that you can just get the loans for the amount you can't pay. And so I just expected to get all the loans and eventually have to repay them. And so I never really paid attention to the amount because I didn't have another option. So now, after I have an income and I see this number, I see that it's about a year's salary for me and that that is an amount that, were I to buckle down and save and stick to a budget, I could pay off. Whereas beforehand, it was kind of a, ‘Yeah, I'll just always be in debt.’

Like many other graduates, Shannon then went on to explain that the money she had borrowed for college never felt very real to her, in her words: “because I never saw it. It was always from this account to that account, from here to there. It was never like, ‘I have this money.’” Now, she explained money is different to her because “I see it in my bank account. I know it's there.”

Of course, many graduates who were now experiencing the “concreteness” of money they had borrowed for school were dealing instead with an *increase* in worry, fear, and anxiety over their loans when compared with how they had felt in college. Noah, for example, was paying for the loans in his name as well as his parents’ Parental PLUS loan, which together totaled over $900/month. He had looked into whether he “can just kind of merge them both together, but there's not really a lot of companies that want to do that without charging a fee.” Although his parents were willing to cover the Parental PLUS payment if he needed it, it was very important to Noah not to place this burden on them—something he had talked to me about during our initial interview. The situation got hairy for a while though, when he found himself working a commission-based sales job while still searching for better work after graduation:

> I never missed my parents' bill, so that was always there. So that was that chunk of money there. Thankfully, I don't have a car payment, so that's good. But I was late a couple times on my personal student loans because I had it designated to other places and I said, ‘If it dings my credit or what have you, I still have this company that's going to say, 'Okay, we're not going to penalize you until you reach this amount of time.' So as long as I get back within that certain amount of time, then I'll be okay.’

I had coded Noah as a high-trust student from our initial interview, and during this second interview, he even used the word “hurt” to describe how he felt toward the situation with the Parental PLUS loan. He had not known, he said, that these loans were going to affect his parents’ credit report until he found out it was a factor in whether or not they would be able to retire that year. It was at that point that he realized: “these [loans] are mine but they can't do anything about it. I can't do anything about it." Just as some participants who had worried that betting on borrowing would result in a financial straightjacket were instead pleasantly rewarded, other study participants who had trusted in the ability of debt-based aid to lead to a better life were struggling with the possibility that it would not.

*4.2 Perceived Family Support*

Most adults know what it is like to experience at least a brief sense of economic uncertainty, even when they are not financially marginalized. These experiences need not be particularly acute or unsettling, but more like a pang following routine internal thoughts regarding consumption ("maybe it's time to just get a new car?"), housing ("but we can hold off fixing the roof another year?), retirement ("am I contributing enough?"), providing for children ("did we budget enough for back to school clothes?), and so on. If the adult is financially marginalized, these types of questions are sharper and closer to matters of survival; they are worse.

As recent graduates, I found that the type and degree of economic uncertainty participants were experiencing had usually changed, but it was never gone, even for graduates who were doing okay or even well financially. Resolving one uncertainty typically revealed a door to a second uncertainty with lower stakes. For example, instead of worrying *if* they were going to get a job, as they had as a student, a graduate might be wondering if the pay from this job is really enough. Instead of worrying *if* they could afford their loan payment, a graduate might be wondering just how much they were going to be sacrificing until it was gone and from where. Consistently, the options to choose from are consumption, housing, credit card debt, or savings.

For graduates who were materially struggling after college, the impact of having or not having family support while dealing with job and income insecurity was direct and consequential. Two students in the follow-up sample had officially defaulted on their student loan debt before the time of our second interview and several more had “missed a few payments” but were not yet in default. All of these students were among those I had coded as highly financially vulnerable based on their first interviews; in this particular regard, the loan repayment trouble they had faced was not entirely unexpected. Although I cannot be certain, I see it as quite probable that there are a number of similar cases among graduates who did not participate in the follow-up.

Charlotte is one of the follow-up participants who had defaulted. During the first interview, she had been finishing her degree in a social science while waiting tables for 30-40 hours/week, and she had just begun looking into graduate school because she knows that “you don’t get jobs in this field with a bachelor’s.” When I asked her when she knew she would go to college, she told me that she had realized the connection between education and personal independence when she was 12: “I remember seeing how my Mom had to ask my—depend on my Dad—for money for me and for just livelihood. And I remember telling her that I wanted to go to college so that I never had to depend on a man for financial stability.”

When we spoke at the follow-up, Charlotte was waitressing. A series of things had gone wrong for her since graduation: she had trouble finding a good job in the area around the university; her mother had nearly died from a lung infection and had to have emergency surgery; she herself was in an accident and was still dealing with the medical bills that resulted; and she had gone through a messy breakup with her long-term boyfriend after just signing an apartment lease to move in together. She was still paying for her half of this lease, but she was not living there. Since the breakup, she had moved into the house of a new boyfriend who was helping her out financially while she gets back on her feet: “he’s a good guy, stable, and I think he likes that I have a degree.” She had not given up on the idea of going back to school someday though, and she was hopeful she was going to turn her finances around, including the default. She had tried to keep up on the payments, she said, “but things kept coming.” The loans fell further away from her line of vision, and, one day, she was in default.

Moving back home after graduation was one way for graduates to gain more financial wiggle room and a sense of support in cases where good enough jobs had not materialized before the money ran out. Although for many graduates, having to move back home after college, “sucked,” as one of them put it, for others the experience was “totally supportive. They want me to be happy, they didn’t want me to feel rushed.” Whether moving back home was experienced positively or negative usually came down to matters of personal pride and family relationships. However, several graduates from smaller towns or rural areas talked about staving off this option for as long as possible in part due to a lack of opportunity and insularity in these locations, which can add to the sense of personal defeat, as Sophia explained: “there's no future here. It's a very small town. We are only 5,000 people here, so it's very small, so there are no jobs. It's just a very small town. Everyone knows each other.”

The location of a graduate's home may then be an important factor for considering the long-term aggregate consequences of using debt-based aid to fund educational opportunity. This possibility was highlighted by the experiences of graduates who had moved to large coastal cities after obtaining career-relevant jobs. Kayla, for example, had borrowed aggressively in college in order to execute her dream of making it as a PR consultant in New York City. Although she had known it was going to be tough, the cost of living in the city had been a more bitter pill than she had expected—even if, "at the end of the day," it still means she will be able to pay off her loans more quickly:

> … a lot of my friends were like, 'Oh my God. You live in New York City. You probably make so much money.' And I was like, 'Yeah. But only because it costs so much more money to live.' And the upside is that, at the end of the day, the leftover money is more than what somebody in [home state] would have just because it costs more to do things here. So it just makes sense that I would obviously have more. But it still goes to all the students loans. And I'm thinking to myself, 'No, I don't want to leave New York City,' but if for any reason I ever had to or ever wanted to, I could only go to a really expensive city because I would have to make enough money which means I have to pay as much to live, but I would need to bring in at least as much as I do now if not more. And that would be hard to do at my level in where I'm at in my career. I couldn't really go to a state that's a lot cheaper to live in and be like, 'You still have to pay me New York prices.' They'd be like, 'No. No thank you.' [laughs]

Kayla had noticed that many of the young people she worked with were from that area and still living at home, which meant her new peers were often able to allocate income that would otherwise go to rent to their student loan payments, savings, or consumption. A number of graduates who had grown up in the university state and since moved to cities like New York, San Francisco, Seattle, Boston, Los Angeles, and Washington DC made similar observations. As opportunity structures go, debt-based aid may again be "doubling down" on advantage: here, in the advantage that comes with being able to move back to a home in the center of a high-powered local economy.

### *4.3 Financial Knowledge*

Regarding the Financial Knowledge dimension, I found that the assumption that borrowers are comfortable making their present financial decisions based on an anticipated future financial state continues after college. The post-graduate version of this expectation begins with borrowers choosing from among the eight different repayment plans available to them, whose pluses and minuses are presented through the lens of whichever loan servicing company they happened to have been assigned. Some of these loan-servicing companies were perceived as more helpful than others. Nelnet, for example, was typically given a relatively high grade such as, "at least a B, probably a B+, maybe an A-, actually;" Naviant was not.

Luis had found out that he was actually behind on his loan payments when he "randomly" remembered his grace period had probably expired; notifications from Great Lakes had been going to an email account he no longer used. Melissa's Perkins Loan, which she did not know she had, had gone to collections during a time period wherein she had paid off the entirety of her other student loans. Caitlin had initially chosen forbearance when she could not meet the amount she owed on a Standard Repayment Plan, which was an option Nelnet "had made really easy to see," before she realized several months later that she had the option to enroll in one of several other payment plans that would cover her accruing interest with a lower monthly payment. Stories like these are common.

Even for graduates like Connor, who had begun his career path in a federal government job that requires high attention to detail, and who had knowledgably discussed the various payment plans that he knew would be available to him as a student, the loan servicing website he uses strikes him as oddly difficult to navigate: "everything's available, but you're still not really sure why you had to click so many buttons. And I'm still not really sure what menu I found it on, so next time I do it I'm still going to have to go look through the whole website. You know?" Connor went on to provide a lengthy and humorous articulation of how, even with accurate financial knowledge, it is still impossible to know what plan is *actually* best for you because that decision would require a differential equation that factors in future income and specific plan eligibility:

> The monthly rate for the standard repayment and the monthly rate for the graduated repayment would be too high. … So income-based was definitely the way to go. And then it became a question of which plan to utilize because they have Income-Contingent and Income-Based and the PAYE and the REPAYE. And I honestly don't know what the difference is. At the time what I did was I put all of my information in for each one and then found out what the monthly rate would be and what the overall

> rate would be at the end of 20 years. And I went from there to decide where to go. In hindsight, I realize it's really a differential equation because you have to accommodate for how your income will increase over time and what that will do to change whether or not you're even eligible for the 20-year repayment. But at least I had a sense of which the best plan was [laughter] for my current status then.

The situation looks even more complicated to Connor, who is having moderate difficulties making ends meet in his high cost-of-living city, when he is weighing the potential career paths he sees ahead of him: continue in the public sector, and perhaps be eligible for Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF); switch to the private sector, which would pay more but eliminate the possibility of PSLF; or begin a PhD program, in which case, “do I decide to go into deferral? Do I continue to pay?”

At the time of the follow-up, Chloe was in a similar situation to Connor in multiple ways. She had moved to a higher cost-of-living city, as she was planning to do when we had first spoken. She had a job within her science-based field, although the job was not everything she had hoped it would be, and she was dealing with the fact that the job did not pay well relative to the high cost-of-living. Again as with Connor, she and I had talked during the initial interview about her desire to go to graduate school, but right now, she explained, she just isn’t ready: “I just want to work for a little while. And I want to tackle student loans. I want to build up a savings. … I definitely want to go to grad school, because I think, like, the end-goal dream is to be a university professor, a PI in my own research. But I don't know. I'm not in a rush.”

Chloe and Connor also had roughly the same amount of student loan debt, but Chloe had not made a payment yet. Since graduating, she had deferred her loans twice, "which really sucks, but I had no money." She had heard that forbearance might be an option for her, and it ended up being a really easy thing to do, she explained:

> Just given the financial situation I was in and not even having an extra $100 a month to put toward anything, much less $400. So it was just kind of the obvious thing, after I heard about it. … [Naviant] had made it really easy, I mean, they make it really easy. Of course they do, because then they get more money out of you in the end. So I just went online and just clicked the options, and then I did it again six months later.

During the time of the second interview, Chloe was scheduled to begin repayment at the next month. She was in the process of choosing from among the different repayment plans, trying to figure out which structure is best for her situation. She was feeling overwhelmed though, even though she had called a few times to talk to someone in person, and she was frustrated.

Chloe is working for a non-profit, and like many graduates who were feeling overwhelmed by the realization that their loans were relatively high when compared with typical pay levels in their desired fields, she was feeling a little "bitter," as she explained, "it's like an emotional thing, not just a financial thing:"

> It just sucks that it costs that much. … I think it would be different if I had chosen a different career path. Then I could make more money right off the bat, but this is what I want to be doing. And I work for a nonprofit right now, and there's a lot of other, great nonprofits that I'd love to work

> at around here, too. And I think this is also the nature of research in certain fields, and so unless I go into industry, which I guess I suppose I could for a little while, I think I just foresee this never really being something where I'm like, 'I've got nothing to worry about.'

The choices that graduates are facing may seem straightforward when reduced to words on a page. In their actual lives, these choices are being made in the fluctuation of time. Graduates who are not yet financially stable know that interest is accruing on their accounts *every day*. They think about whether they are happy at their jobs, they compare their lifestyles to the lifestyles of their peers, they think about their larger financial goals, and they wonder if maybe things will just turnaround next month or next year. They get advice from parent/s and significant others, who may or may not have accurate information, and they learn what they can from a loan-service provider that may not have a borrower's financial interest in mind.

### *4.4 Aggressiveness*

Given the piecemeal approach that factored into so many students' borrowing decisions and the clarity of hindsight, I had expected a number of graduates to speak openly about wishing they had borrowed more or, more often, borrowed less. Although this sometimes happened in a veiled way, I more often found that borrowing decisions from the past were over. Done. Yet one graduate in the sample did state overt regret over his borrowing decisions: Josh, the first generation student noted above, discussed at length the stress and anxiety through which he had put himself while in school in order to satisfy his aversion to debt.

Josh was on the path he had laid out to me when we first spoke: he had moved to New York City after graduation, had already gotten a few writing gigs, and had found a decent enough paying day job when he got to the city after emailing his resume to "everyone in my contact list. All of them." But Josh was also receiving treatment for the panic attacks that had started when he was college. Although he still doubts he would have made a different decision, "even if Jesus himself came around and told me it was okay," looking back, he said that knowing money as he does now, "I would have been able to afford that $200/month payment, and maybe, you know, I wouldn't have had to sleep in a closet."

As students, dispositions toward loans had been loosely coupled with what participants were expecting to gain from college. As graduates, loans were now firmly welded to the perceived value of their degree; otherwise, as one more frustrated graduate put it, "what am I paying for??" Whether a graduate currently felt relatively positive or negative toward their loans therefore corresponded with whether they saw themselves as using their degree, how tight their finances were, and whether the graduate appeared to be internalizing or externalizing the obstacles they had faced. Although zero graduates expressed that they "like" their loans, some nevertheless characterized their personal ability to make that payment every month as something that "actually feels kind of good," or "like I accomplished that this month." These students were expressing pride. It was a pride toward what they've accomplished, *including* the financial pride that comes with making a payment that represents that accomplishment.

Zoe, for example, is a first generation graduate who had recently received her second promotion at a large corporation, and with that promotion, was approaching a six-figure salary mark. When I asked Zoe, who I had considered a high-aggressiveness borrower in our first interview, what she felt like she is paying for when she makes her $400 adjusted income plan payment every month, she answered: “I feel like where I'm at today, like I'm paying for having the job that I do and being able to do the things that I do.” Those things had included making a down payment on a house she had financed in her name for her parents to live in throughout their retirement.

Paige, another graduate, was also proud of where she had eventually gotten to, as just the second person on both sides of her family to get a degree and the first “to go the distance the first time around.” But she had faced some setbacks along the way. Freshman year, Paige had gotten involved with a “bad guy,” and she was one of the study participants who had had to change her approach to borrowing for school when things changed. In her case, she had officially lost her merit scholarship sophomore year, despite retaking and replacing the grades for her failed classes, which is a situation that ended with her drawn out administrative appeal being officially denied.

Consequently, Paige had had to borrow to meet her tuition while working to pay for living expenses, and she had struggled a bit to find her way after graduation. The job she initially had to accept had not worked out, and she eventually found herself working in a grocery store for minimum wage in order to meet a bare minimum of expenses. So that had gotten rough, she explained, because the money was just not enough:

> I had a car payment, I had student loan payments, I had rent, I have a dog. There were so many things that were like, ‘Holy crap. I can't sustain this. I can't do this.’ … Unfortunately, I had to do the whole, ‘I have no job. I can't pay my loans right now.’ But it was kind of a relief to be able to be

> like, 'okay, I don't have to pay this additional whatever a month, because they're not going to be like, ‘I don't care if you don't have a job. I'm just going to take all your money.’ So that was kind of nice, but it was also stressful. Right now, a lot of what I'm doing is trying to focus on getting back on my feet, because not having a very—a job that didn't pay very well for a while really took its toll on my finances, like credit card debt and stuff, because you're like, ‘Okay, I have a credit card. I'll use this to live off of for a while, because I have no money.’

A couple months before our interview, though, Paige had finally gotten a break: an opening had come up with a company she had always wanted to work for and she got it. The work came with benefits, she had a company phone, and she was traveling—something she had always hoped to do as part of her job. The company even has opportunities for international travel, if she works her way up.

When we first talked about her loan payment in this second interview, Paige had joked that she “cries a little inside” when she makes it. When I returned to the subject later in the interview, she explained what she meant a little further:

> When you graduate, you're like, ‘Yeah, I'm finally done. I've done it. Don't have to go to class anymore. I don't have to study anymore. I'm done. …. But then, six months later, you're like, I'm not done.’ I still have 10 years of this left … I mean, you are done, like you're done with school, you're done with taking classes, you're done with all those things, but you're still paying for it, years down the road. … it’s frustrating when it’s two years later and you're working a good job, and you're doing all these cool things,

> and it's still like, 'Oh, no. You need that $300 to pay this,' where that could go towards your retirement, or your savings, or a cool trip. There's a lot of things that you could do with that kind of money, especially over a year.

Paige took a lot of responsibility for the financial situation she was in. In both interviews, she had been harder on herself than I thought she deserved. The feeling Paige had been joking about came from knowing that despite how hard she had worked and how far she had come and how proud her family was of her for graduating, she still was not quite done.

There is an element of *time* that Paige is pointing to, and it is something that nearly all borrowers in the follow-up sample had tried to put their figure on. As Caitlin, who was doing well and on the business-related career path she had wanted, explained to me, it is difficult to evaluate decisions from the past when these decisions have led you to where and who you are now. Wishing you had done something differently would be like wishing you were someone else. At the same time, a student loan payment forces you to think about the past every time you make that payment. There is therefore something peculiar in student loan debt in that it collapses three different points in time: "it's like you are paying for your past and your future but in the present." There is no way to go back and make different choices, there is no way to know the future, and there is no option to sell if you find you cannot afford it or want something new.

At the heart of this issue, student loans *are* a debt solution that is allowing individuals who may otherwise be unable to afford a college education, or a particular type of college education, to participate. As a debt solution to social inequality, student loans are bridging people between one social location and another. As Peebles points out, however, a social exchange of credit will also require that *those who receive* “labor to build the increment demanded by the future in exchange for actions from the past” (2010: 230).

Caitlin would go on to say that even though it feels good when she makes her payment every month, because she’s financially able to do it and she is happy with where she is at in her life, something about her loan payment still feels off. Caitlin had been one of the five students who had declined permission for me to record the initial interview. Yet I had remembered how hard Caitlin had worked to keep up appearances with her peers in the business school, and what it had felt like to her to be delinquent on her sorority dues, and it occurred to me that perhaps what was still weighing on Caitlin about her loans was that they are like an entry fee for the life she is living now.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Transitions into young adulthood are known to be fraught. It is entirely possible, and I hope likely, that a positive financial change is just around the corner for graduates like Chloe, and for all the graduates in the sample who were still waiting for their desired career paths to materialize. The statistics on outcomes for college graduates *over time* support this likelihood. Indeed, it was clear even from the follow-up interviews that the timing of our interview mattered. Had I completed an interview with some of these graduates only months prior, I would have found them more hopeful, or more despairing, regarding their current employment and loan repayment situation.

Rather than emerging from a methodological flaw, this finding highlights the reality for recent college graduates: job setbacks, financial insecurity, and low wealth are a feature of life for many young people in their 20s, even when they have a degree and are statistically likely to accumulate greater financial and career certainty over their life course. Some of these graduates were already well on their way to positive outcomes; others were further behind. More may have caught up by the time of this writing.

One solution to the instability of initial post-college entry would be to follow the example of other countries that automatically enroll borrowers in income-based repayment, as proposed by Dynarski (2015). This change would go far in eliminating the disparities in initial job outcomes, resources, and emotional support that leave some recent graduates scrambling to find an immediate remedy they can live with—or figuratively running away from the problem—while other graduates can afford a more relaxed approach. For students who are in college, reform would be more complex, barring, of course, larger changes to the US higher education system as a whole. It is possible, however, that simply knowing a future payment will be *exactly* a percentage of income would provide students who are still in college with a more tangible, and thus more secure, foundation to imagine everything that is to come.

The parameters of the study should be kept in mind when considering the findings of this article. In designing an in-depth, qualitative before-and-after examination of how contemporary students within one college cohort at one public university experience debt, the goal of this research is not to measure outcomes or to produce findings that are generalizable to all US students. Rather, the goal was to gain a better understanding of how debt-based aid is affecting students on a subjective level, in order to identify possible mechanisms through which current educational policy may contribute to unequal outcomes for graduates down the road. In future research, findings from this study can be examined for greater or lesser prevalence among categories of students already known to be at increased risk of negative outcomes, such as first generation students, minorities, and women, and tested for their generalizability to additional higher education settings.

The opportunity to collect longitudinal, in-depth qualitative data is rare, however. In the US educational system, a large-scale expansion of credit is enabling democratized access to higher education. The debt solution leaves it up to individual students, and their families, to use these loans to navigate their way to the more secure economic future that a college education can provide. Yet this article's findings on orientations to debt suggest that some individuals may be more fortified for that journey than others. As 18-22-year-olds, these students evaluate the risk of borrowing, often semester-to-semester, using the jobs they hope to get and the understanding and support they have at hand. There will be no going back. Futures always lie ahead.

WORKS CITED


Baker, Amanda R., Benjamin D. Andrews, and Anne McDaniel. 2017. "The Impact of Student Loans on College Access, Completion, and Returns." *Sociology Compass* 11(6).

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *G.1. Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre and Jean Claude Passeron. 1990. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. SAGE.

Cohen, Lizabeth. 2003. *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*. New York : Knopf : Distributed by Random House.

Davis, Gerald F. 2009. *Managed by the Markets: How Finance Reshaped America*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.

Dwyer, Rachel E., Randy Hodson, and Laura McCloud. 2013. "Gender, Debt, and Dropping Out of College." *Gender & Society* 27(1):30–55.

Dwyer, Rachel E., Laura McCloud, and Randy Hodson. 2012. "Debt and Graduation from American Universities." *Social Forces* 90(4):1133–55.

Dynarski, Susan. 2015. "For the Poor, the Graduation Gap Is Even Wider Than the Enrollment Gap." *The New York Times*, June 2.

Erickson, Bonnie H. 1996. "Culture, Class, and Connections." *The American Journal of Sociology.* 102(1):217.

Fligstein, Neil and Adam Goldstein. 2015. "The Emergence of a Finance Culture in American Households, 1989–2007." *Socio-Economic Review* 13(3):575–601.

Gladieux, L. and Laura Perna. 2005. *Borrowers Who Drop out: A Neglected Aspect of the Student Loan Trend*. Report #05-2. San Jose, CA: The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.

Goldrick-Rab, Sara. 2016. *Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream*. Chicago ; London: University Of Chicago Press.

Goldrick-Rab, Sara and Robert Kelchen. 2015. "Making Sense of Loan Aversion: Evidence from Wisconsin." Pp. 317–77 in *Student Loans and the Dynamics of Debt*. Kalamazoo, US: W.E. Upjohn Institute.

Hyman, Louis. 2012. “The Politics of Consumer Debt U.S. State Policy and the Rise of Investment in Consumer Credit, 1920–2008.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 644(1):40–49.

Mortenson, Thomas G. 1990. “The Impact of Increased Loan Utilization among Low Family Income Students.”

Peebles, Gustav. 2010. “The Anthropology of Credit and Debt.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39(1):225–40.

Perna, Laura W., James Kvaal, and Roman Ruiz. 2017. “Understanding Student Debt: Implications for Federal Policy and Future Research.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 671(1):270–86.

Perna, Laura Walter. 2000. “Differences in the Decision to Attend College among African Americans, Hispanics, and Whites.” *The Journal of Higher Education* 71(2):117–41.

Prasad, Monica. 2012. *The Land of Too Much: American Abundance and the Paradoxof Poverty*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Rivera, Lauren A. 2012. “Hiring as Cultural Matching: The Case of Elite Professional Service Firms.” *American Sociological Review* 77(6):999–1022.

Rosenbaum, James E. 2001. *Beyond College for All: Career Paths for the Forgotten Half*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Stuber, Jenny M. 2009. “Class, Culture, and Participation in the Collegiate Extra-Curriculum.” *Sociological Forum* 24(4):877–900.

Yurk Quadlin, Natasha and Daniel Rudel. 2015. “Responsibility or Liability? Student Loan Debt and Time Use in College.” *Social Forces* 94(2).

# LIST OF TABLES

# APPENDIX C — LIONS AND TIGERS AND BEARS: USING METAPHOR TO EXAMINE COLLEGE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR LOAN DEBT

ABSTRACT

A pressing challenge facing higher education policy is how to help at-risk students navigate a debt-based financial aid environment. In order to address this challenge, a better understanding of how debt-based aid is able to affect students in both positive and negative ways is needed. This article draws from work on the dual ability of debt to enable as well as constrain and cognitive linguistic theory to present a unique methodological framework that uses metaphorical reasoning—specifically, animal metaphors—as a proxy for student perceptions. Data come from in-depth interviews with 82 student borrowers. Results of this analysis were 'mapped' with student demographic characteristics, as well as two additional dichotomous variables inductively formed from the interview data: perceived family safety net, and prior disruptive financial event. Among other pertinent findings, female students are overrepresented in the more fear-based metaphor categories, as were students who had gone through a disruptive financial event. Class background was not found to be particularly relevant. When considered in conjunction with the rest of the interview data, results suggest that financial knowledge and familiarity with the positive side of credit and debt may increase student comfort with borrowing.

INTRODUCTION

In the US, access to credit is now a cornerstone of democratized access to higher education. Regarding the impact of this policy change on issues of educational inequality, existing research suggests a complex relationship exists between debt-based aid and student outcomes wherein student loans can have both positive and negative effects. For example, debt-based aid has been found to negatively affect likelihood of matriculation among at-risk students (Heller 2008; Perna 2000), but moderate debt-use has also been shown to positively affect college completion (Dwyer, McCloud, and Hodson 2012; Dwyer, Hodson, and McCloud 2013).

Regardless of the effects of debt-based aid on student outcomes, the current higher education context is such that many students face a "trade-off" between accepting debt and facing the labor market without a degree (Dwyer, Hodson, and McCloud 2013). It is well established, however, that students who borrow but do not graduate face a higher risk of default than those who do (Perna, Kvaal, and Ruiz 2017). Thus one of the more pressing challenges facing higher education policy is how to help at-risk students navigate a debt-based financial aid environment in a way that balances the positive potential of borrowing with the very real increase in risk these students will face when they do borrow (Perna, Kvaal, and Ruiz 2017).

In order to address this challenge, a better understanding of how debt-based aid is able to affect students in different ways is needed. Yet despite a growing body of work on the topic, the majority of research on the issue remains focused on student outcomes that can be directly measured from existing survey datasets (Baker, Andrews, and McDaniel 2017). This article takes a different approach that prioritizes the *meaning* of student loans from the perspective of individual students. Drawing from the economic sociology literature on the dual ability of debt to enable as well as constrain, I present a unique methodological framework that uses metaphorical reasoning—specifically, animal metaphors—to directly examine students' subjective understandings of their loan debt. Data come from in-depth interviews with 82 student borrowers who were strategically selected from a larger survey of seniors at a public flagship university.

This metaphorical framework is based on a cognitive linguistics approach to language. Cognitive linguists argue that, as a function of language, metaphors semantically map a relatively concrete source domain, such as a "battlefield," with a relatively abstract target domain, such as "love," in order to embed the target domain with a particular meaning: e.g., love is a battlefield (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). In the present study, the relatively abstract target domain is a student's student loans. The relatively concrete source domain is any animal with which the student is familiar, such as a bear:

> I would say like a bear. They will walk around, and sometimes they're just calm, and they're gonna do their own thing. They're gonna be there, you still gotta watch out for 'em. But other times, you're being attacked. And there's nothing you can do. Except lay there and just kinda do the defense thing that they tell you to do.

As seen in this example, the animal question gave students a ready lexicon for discussing their loans, which was both an abstract concept and a sensitive subject, in a manner that was playful and relatively judgment free. Analytically, I treat these metaphors as a proxy for student perceptions that may otherwise be difficult for them to express—or which may otherwise be difficult for a researcher to access. By provoking a more from-the-hip response than would be elicited from a routine interview question, the animal question challenges a common critique of interviewing as unable to access deeper levels of consciousness (see, Pugh 2013; Vaisey 2013). These answers were analyzed in conjunction with the body of interviews as a whole. The results provided a rich and revealing portrait of student perceptions of the role these loans play in their lives: as a domestic chore, object of fascination, source of harm, or a constant and incessant burden.

Findings are organized into four categories: *Domestics*, which reflects a sense of stewardship over a loan; *Wild Things*, which reflects the fascination, foreignness, and unpredictability of a loan; *Evils, Insects, and Pests*, which reflects the ability of a loan to cause harm; and *Elephants and Monkeys*, which reflects resignation or avoidance of a loan. After categorization, these results were checked for correspondence with class, race, gender, and total loan amount, as well as two inductively formed dichotomous variables: perceived family safety net, and prior disruptive financial event. Among other results, I find that female students are overrepresented in the more fear-based categories of *Wild Things* and *Evils, Insects, and Pests*, as were students who had gone through a disruptive financial event. Class background is not particularly relevant. When considered in conjunction with the rest of the interview data, results suggest that financial knowledge and familiarity with the *positive* side of credit and debt may increase student comfort with borrowing.

Findings serve two larger purposes. First, they demonstrate the methodological utility of a focus on metaphorical reasoning, including the importance of "boundary answers" to logics of categorization. Second, findings contribute to a budding overlap between the sociology of education and economic sociology literatures. Debt-based aid may have become a typical component of a college financial aid package, but student loans are still loans. These loans must be applied for by the student (FAFSA), accepted by the student, and paid for by the student in origination fees and interest. The agency involved in this process implies that student loans can be studied like any other consumer object, in which the meaning individuals see in an object will impact whether they "buy" it and how they use it when they do.

A consumption-oriented approach to student loans is of value to both sub-disciplines. For sociologists of education, focusing on consumption will draw analytical attention to how young adults view the economic risk that comes with accepting debt—even when this debt is a relatively "good" type. For economic sociologists, using student loans to pay for college is an increasingly normative financial practice; as such, student loans provide an excellent case with which to consider how contemporary individuals use credit and debt to facilitate their social mobility and aspirational goals.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

### *1.1 Debt-based Aid and Horizontal Stratification within Higher Education*

Much of the existing research on the student loan issue comes from public policy research. However, sociologists are examining college costs with increased interest. As overall educational levels have increased, so also has horizontal stratification stemming from differences in the quality of the educational institution people attend and in the types of experiences they have while attending (Gerber and Cheung 2008). These experiences may relate to gender or field of study (Gerber and Cheung 2008; Quadlin 2017), the extent to which a route through college follows a traditional and uninterrupted course (Gerber and Cheung 2008; Goldrick-Rab 2006), or the networks in which students become embedded, such as the professional and party cultures that are available to more resource advantaged students (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). As a matter of social mobility and educational advantage, college is no longer just about *if* you go, but also where you go and how.

Increasing horizontal stratification in higher education has sharpened the ability of student loans to operate as a double-edged sword, particularly for less advantaged students. In addition to the problems that may result for students when they do borrow, *not* borrowing—otherwise known as loan aversion—creates its own sources of educational disadvantage. Educational policy research reliably demonstrates that loan aversion is a college access problem particularly for low-income and minority students (Heller 2008; Olson and Rosenfeld 1984; Mortenson 1990; Perna 2000). Once enrolled, reluctance to accept loans may add to the structural disadvantages these students face in college, since moderate debt use has been shown to reduce financial anxiety and social deprivation (Drentea 2000).

Students who are reluctant to borrow may also work more hours to compensate for that decision, thus reducing the time these students have to give to pursuing their degree, and, in turn, possibly increasing their time to degree or likelihood of dropping out (Perna, Kvaal, and Ruiz 2017). In short, students who have the most to gain educationally from moderate debt-usage are simultaneously less likely to borrow and more likely to suffer adverse effects if they do borrow. At an applied level, developing a better understanding of why this happens will be of use to practitioners who are seeking ways to intervene before potential adverse effects occur.

*1.2 Using Economic Sociology to Better Understand the Duality of Debt-based Aid*

The subarea of economic sociology that focuses on credit and debt provides insight into how student loans are able to function both positively and negatively for students even at non-excessive levels of borrowing. The ability of credit and debt to enable as well as to constrain at the individual and household level is a central theoretical line within this literature (see, for example, Dwyer 2018). When the terms credit and debt are used separately, “credit” typically signals the more positive enabling side of this relationship and “debt” the more constraining negative side. In the case of student loans, for example, while typically referred to in the media as “student loan debt,” these loans are a government-facilitated extension of credit that is “enabling” borrowers to purchase higher education.

For young people, using credit can be viewed as “investment in status attainment” and generate feelings of mastery and self-control (Dwyer, McCloud, and Hodson 2011). This relationship may be mediated by the attainment of a “distinctive” or highly personal object (Yi-Wen and DeVaney 2001). In addition to the ability of credit to facilitate the purchase of a desirable object, the enabling side of credit has also been linked to life events such as starting a family and owning a home. Nau, Dwyer, and Hodson (2015) propose that in the context of fertility decisions both mortgage debt and credit card debt operate like “fellow travelers” in that these types of debt accompany borrowers on a path to family life. The authors suggest the association between these two types of debt and starting a family signals that particular types of debt may be more or less normative at different points in the life course.

Similarly, in a qualitative UK-based study of how home owners view their mortgage, Cook, Smith, and Searle (2009) find the majority of borrowers to be “at home” with this particular financial instrument. These authors also take an animal metaphor-based approach, finding that most homeowners describe their mortgage as a domestic animal, like a dog. However, as the terms of the interviewee’s mortgage become more aggressive or more flexible, the chosen metaphors tend to become more wild or more in need of care and attention. The authors conclude that their findings reflect the fact that carrying this type of debt is a “normal” fact of life in homeownership societies.

Taken together, this existing research would suggest that some students are likely to see a source of empowerment in their student loans given the positive connotations of getting and receiving a college education. Indeed, federal student loans are a rare example of a lender extending credit to a borrower without requiring a credit check. Given that over two-thirds of US college students will have borrowed in some amount by the time they graduate (TICAS 2017), it is possible that these borrowers, too, will see their loans as “domesticated”—that is, a normal financial feature of their adult lives.

At the same time, borrowing for college does involve financial risk. Although federal student loans do not require a credit check, the borrower’s future income does provide a source of collateral. Educational loans typically cannot be discharged in bankruptcy proceedings, and the federal government is entitled to garnish wages and withhold tax refunds and Social Security payments in order to recoup losses. Thus while student loans may appear positive in that they enable any student (criminal convictions aside) to pursue their educational endeavors, loans can also constrain future economic mobility and purchasing power, particularly under suboptimal outcomes such as when a borrower drops out of college or becomes underemployed.

The ability of debt to constrain is therefore also of consequence for understanding student perceptions of borrowing. Although not examining student loans specifically, a subset of research on credit and debt has examined the effect of general household debt on mental health. This research has found a correlation between credit card debt and lower self-reported health (Meltzer et al. 2011). Higher debt-to-asset ratios have also been linked to higher self-reported levels of stress and depression (Sweet et al. 2013). Meltzer et al. (2011) found that after controlling for other factors individuals with debt were twice as likely to think about suicide. These negative health consequences of debt are doubtless relevant for understanding how students see loans, especially given that the majority of students are young adults with relatively little experience managing household and personal finance.

### *1.3 Expectations for Metaphor Results*

The above literature was used to build a simple initial prediction framework: (a) given that borrowing in moderate amounts has been repeatedly demonstrated to pay for itself—and more—over the life course, students may choose animals that are relatively harmless, or even helpful, to describe their loans; this result may also be more pronounced among white and middle-class students, if we were to infer an inverse relationship among these students from the loan aversion literature; (b) given this existing research on loan aversion, as well as known negative psychological impacts of carrying debt, students may use animals that are unpleasant or dangerous; this result may be more pronounced among minority and low-income students.

## 2. STUDY AND SAMPLING DESIGN

This article uses a subset of data from a larger mixed-method study designed to examine how the 2015-2016 graduating cohort of a public flagship university (PFU) has approached paying for college. Particular emphasis was placed on these students' subjective orientations to loan-use. The university is located in a state that has a relatively low cost of living and average graduate debt levels remained slightly below the national 2016 class average of $28,400 (College Board). For various reasons, many PFU students have some degree of flexibility in controlling their costs and total borrowing amount (e.g. choosing to live closer to campus or further away, working more or less hours for pay, etc.). Although some students in the sample reported being offered less in student loans than they needed, the sample contained a greater number of students who had declined part or all of the loans they were offered in their financial aid package.

The study began with an invitation to participate in a short online survey that held the possibility of being selected for an in-depth in-person interview, which was issued to a sample of 4000 registered seniors. This sample was drawn from a list obtained from the university registrar's office and was stratified by college division. A target response rate of 25% was determined based on known response rates for other surveys issued at the university, as well as the tendency of online surveys to achieve lower response rates relative to in-person or mail surveys. A 24% response rate was achieved, yielding 975 individual responses. The survey included a number of demographic variables, as well as questions on financial aid use while in college, work hours, residency status, and living arrangements. Resulting data was used to screen and select potential interview subjects.

From these 975 responses, 111 students were selected for interviews (84 total borrowers and 27 non-borrowers). Primary selection criteria included race, class, gender, and total expected loan amount upon graduation. Interviews lasted approximately 80 minutes and covered topics such as family background, motivations for attending college and choice of major, college experience, cost and consumption strategies, and financial aid use. The interview included several structured open-response questions, including the focus of this article: the animal metaphor question. This question was adapted from Cook, Smith, and Searle (2009) and phrased as: "If your student loans were an animal, what kind of animal would they be?" Two borrowers in the sample were not asked the metaphor question. Demographic data for the resulting 82 borrowers is contained in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographics

| Gender | | Class | | Race | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| M | F | MC | WC | W | O |
| 47% | 53% | 49% | 51% | 50% | 50% |
| Total Loan Amount | | | | | |
| < $19,999 | | $20,000- $29,999 (average) | | $30,000 + | |
| 30% | | 41% | | 29% | |

Each interview was transcribed within MAXQDA qualitative coding software and coded according to an iterative process that used both open and closed coding techniques. For purposes of this article, the animal metaphor sections were separated, open-coded, and, eventually, organized into the final four categories presented here. Although the animal metaphors are the main focus of this article, findings are informed by qualitative analysis of the entirety of the interview data.

An additional benefit of using metaphors as a proxy for student perceptions is that results can be mapped for correspondence with subject demographics and other variables of interest. Table 3 shows the distribution of interview cases by race, class, and gender as well as the two additional dichotomous variables: whether the student felt their family could provide a safety net if they needed one, and whether the student described their family having gone through a negative and disruptive financial event prior to their starting college. These disruptive financial events included: parental job losses and separations, home foreclosures, parental bankruptcies, significant medical costs, and periods where the student went hungry or dealt with a prolonged utility shutoff in their home.

## 3. FINDINGS

Metaphor categories are named according to the thematic elements that define them, e.g.: *Domestics* and responsibility; *Wild Things* and unpredictability; *Elephants and Monkeys* and burdensomeness; *Evils, Insects, and Pests* and poisonous. Dogs have been placed with cats, lions with tigers, spiders with snakes, elephants with monkeys, and so on, as summarized in Table 2 below. As will be discussed, the *Evils, Insects, and Pests* category aligns most closely with the literature on loan aversion. The *Domestics* category is consistent with the results we would expect if Cook, Smith, and Searle's (2009) finding on home mortgages apply to how these borrowers see their student loans. To illustrate the logic of categorization and coding process in more detail, I discuss two metaphor answers at length before continuing on to the full results.

Table 2: Metaphor Category Results Summary

| Category | Animals | Themes |
|---|---|---|
| Domestics<br>26%<br><br>*20 cases* | dog (9), cat (2), mouse (2), cow (1), puppy (1), exotic fish (1), goldfish (1) [pet] capybara (1), teddy bear (1), [hunted] deer (1) | • Responsibility<br>• Domesticity<br>• Caretaking<br>• Companionship<br>• Tasking<br>• Chore-like |
| Wild Things 28%<br><br>*25 cases* | lion (5), bear (4), tiger (4), wolf (2), anteater (2), jaguar (1), hyena (1), dangerous mammal (1), shark (1), mustang (1), poisonous colorful frog (1) | • Unpredictability<br>• Ruthlessness<br>• Ferocious<br>• Stalking<br>• Powerful<br>• Attraction<br>• Beauty |
| Elephants and Monkeys<br>24%<br><br>*19 cases* | elephant (4), elephant in the room (3), monkey (2), hippo (2), raccoon (2), mongoose (1), honey badger (1), sloth (1), jackass (1), angler fish (1), and buffalo grass (1) | • Burdensome<br>• Growing<br>• Large<br>• Annoying<br>• Heckling<br>• Incessant<br>• Unmanageable |
| Evils, Insects, and Pests<br>22%<br><br>*18 cases* | snake (5), spider (3), vulture (2), fly (2), scorpion (1), komodo dragon (1), wasp (1), mosquito (1), fungus (1), piranhas (1) | • Poisonous<br>• Elusiveness<br>• Biting<br>• Insistent<br>• Hidden<br>• Insidious<br>• To-be-killed |

Table 3: Distribution of Cases by Variables of Interest

| | Domestics 26%<br><br>*20 cases total* | Wild Things 28%<br><br>*25 cases total* | Elephants and Monkeys 24%<br>*19 cases total* | Evils, Insects, and Pests 22%<br>*18 cases total* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Race | | | | |
| White, *41 cases* | 24% | 24% | 27% | 24% |
| Other. *41 cases* | 24% | 37% | 19% | 19% |
| Sex | | | | |
| Male, *38 cases* | 34% | 21% | 29% | 16% |
| Female, 44 *cases* | 16% | 39% | 18% | 27% |
| Class | | | | |
| Middle Class, *40 cases* | 28% | 28% | 23% | 23% |
| Working Class, *42 cases* | 21% | 33% | 21% | 24% |
| Loan amount | | | | |
| Below Average, *25 cases* | 24% | 29% | 12% | 38% |
| Average, *34 cases* | 29% | 35% | 24% | 12% |
| Above Average, *23 cases* | 17% | 26% | 35% | 22% |
| Perceived Safety Net | | | | |
| Yes, 47 *cases* | 26% | 32% | 23% | 19% |
| No, 35 *cases* | 29% | 29% | 23% | 26% |
| Disruptive Financial Event | | | | |
| Yes, 43 *cases* | 16% | 23% | 26% | 32% |
| No, 39 *cases* | 33% | 38% | 21% | 8% |

*3.1 Logic of Categorization: The Importance of Boundary Answers*

All four categories include what I refer to as "boundary answers"—or answers that span multiple categories. While I ultimately placed every metaphor answer in one final category, the boundary-spanning properties of certain answers highlighted similarities and differences between the categories that were critical to my final analysis. As a demonstration, I discuss a "dog" answer from the *Domestics* category, followed by a "wolf" boundary answer that I ultimately placed in the *Wild Things* category. First, the dog answer:

> I guess a dog because they have the potential to follow you through life, for a very long time, and the potential to bite you if not befriend you sometimes. Befriend you because they're giving you something as far as school. Bite you because, well, they're a loan.

This answer clearly describes a domesticated household animal, a companion, although the student noted throughout the interview that the loan must be handled properly. In partial contrast, the "wolf" answer below also speaks to a tangible and helpful benefit being received from the loan; however, this student stresses that the loan wants something from her in exchange, and that the loan is the "alpha" in the relationship:

> It's an animal that's definitely helpful, but it wants something in return. It's like a wolf, but like the alpha of the pack, because it's like: 'I'm gonna lead you, I'm gonna lead you, and I'm gonna help you out. We're gonna get to all these different locations, but, like, you need to do things for me in return.' And that is interest—so, yeah.

A beneficial relationship was a theme to some degree in both the *Domestics* and *Wild Things* categories. I ultimately placed the wolf answer with *Wild Things* because lack of total control within the relationship emerged as a key distinguishing feature between these two categories as my analysis continued.

At the same time, by partially spanning the two categories, the "wolf" answer helped to analytically highlight an element that the *Wild Things* and *Domestics* categories had in common that the other two categories lacked. In both *Wild Things* and *Domestics*, the animal was often seen as *present with the student and moving forward* with them in time, although the wild animals did so at a greater distance from the student than the domestic animals did. This common future orientation was usually not present in the other two categories. Instead, the *Elephants and Monkeys* answers often reflected that students saw their loans as holdovers from the past that were *slowing them in the present*. In a similarly distinctive manner, *Evils, Insects, and Pests* answers usually indicated *a future threat* the student will need to eliminate. I include a full description of least one boundary answer for each category in the findings below.

### *3.2 Domestics*

This first category includes dogs and other pets and animals that one might encounter in the home. These answers are consistent with the findings of Cook, Smith, and Searle (2009) on borrower comfort with a financial instrument as a routine feature of household finance. Answers are also consistent with the stated intention of debt-based aid: to help, provided the student is responsible. Student loans will be a component of most borrowers' household budget moving forward for 5-10 years, if not longer.

Financial aid discourse at both the federal government and school level stresses that responsible borrowing requires stewardship and responsibility; in practice then, managing household debt is (ideally) not unlike owning a pet.

Below, a student compares taking care of a loan to taking care of any other household payment. He chooses a “big dog” because while it does have a noticeable presence, the dog is not difficult to manage:

> I would say like a dog. Like a big dog. I look at it like they’re there, it doesn’t bother me that much. Maybe it should. But, I mean, the way they’re set up, if you don’t have the money, you pay however much you pay every month, like a car payment or utility payment or whatever. I don’t see it being that large of a deal.

This is an ideal answer in that it reflects a high degree of comfort with these loans, as well as a high level of familiarity with household finances. Both of this student’s parents have master’s degrees and a great deal of experience in the real estate market; at the time of the interview, this student was living in a house that had been purchased by his family using a home mortgage.

Within this category, variability in answers revolved around the degree of care, ownership, and trust felt toward the animal, whether the student wanted this animal, and to what degree it served a positive function for the student. For example, the student below also compares his loans to a dog, but in this case, he chooses a German Shepard has not been exercised:

> I’d probably say it’s like a German Shepherd that doesn’t get exercised enough. So like you leave it in the house—like it’s fine if you’re there, it’s

> a wonderful dog—but when you leave the house you don't exercise it enough. So it kind of tears things up, and, like, pees on the carpet, and it's a lot work when you come back to the house. But overall it's not a bad animal. It's just not getting enough exercise.

This quote reflects a responsibility owed toward the animal and the possibility of having to clean up after it; however, the student's answer still reflects ownership of its behavior.

In addition to responsibility, the *Domestics* category was defined by emphasis on the work involved in taking care of the loan, with the ultimate conclusion that the student can handle it—even if the student does not necessarily want to handle it. One student explained that her loans were like a dog because she would "like to have a dog but they're kind of a lot of work." Another student explains that she is choosing dog because she "hates" dogs. When probed about her answer, the student justifies it using a description that reflects distaste for the care involved: "well, not only am I scared of them. I hate everything about them. I hate that they shed, I hate that they lick, I hate that they poop. I hate how they smell."

For several students, the care and responsibility felt towards the loan was specifically downgraded to a smaller domestic animal. For example, one student compares his loans to a cat because he is not "too" concerned: "you know, it's there, and it knocks over some pots and pans and stuff like that, but it's not anything that I have to be too concerned about." In these smaller animal answers, the level of responsibility the student is expressing can be seen as lower than with a dog, but the responsibility remains with the student.

Even when “not a huge issue,” answers within this category describe animals that nonetheless have to be taken care of by the responsible person in the house, like a mouse. A mouse, as one student explains, is an “an insignificant animal that can be annoying but shouldn’t be;” or, as another puts it, “I don’t notice it’s there, but one day I’m gonna have to take care of it—or else, suddenly, you know, everything will be a mess in the house.” A mouse is something that should be addressed, and it is rather easy to deal with, but a mouse can easily be overlooked. A mouse is not unexpected, unpredictable, or foreign; like the other answers in this category, a mouse is domestic even if it is a nuisance.

A few students in this category described their loans as unwanted and/or boring household pets, such as a “goldfish,” because a goldfish is “less fun than a hamster but still obnoxious.” These unwanted pets had either outlasted their usefulness or did not serve their owner to begin with. For example, one student humorously describes the principle of sunken costs by comparing his loans to an exotic fish: “kind of like an exotic fish. A really expensive fish of some sort. It’s like I don’t need that fish, and I’m probably putting more money into it than I really need to—like, why did I get this fish? But I can’t let the fish die so I need to still take of it.”

*Summary: Loans as Helpful but Requiring Care*

In the *Domestics* category, loans are seen as helping the student on one side but requiring care on the other. Male students are disproportionately represented within this category, which was 65% male. Students within the category also tended to be relatively knowledgeable regarding household finance. Again, if we accept the premise of debt-based aid as federal policy, these answers best represent what these loans should be to the student. A dog is much like the fellow traveler noted by Nau, Dwyer, and Hodson (2015) in that it is present with the student as a non-equal companion as the student moves forward to a larger life goal. Even so, there does remain some ambivalence about the relationship with debt present in this category. Some answers reflect ambivalence about whether the student is ready and able to handle the responsibility that comes with borrowing; others reflect ambivalence about the continued presence of these loans after graduation.

*3.3. Wild Things*

In similarity with the *Domestics* category, *Wild Things* answers were typically animals that were "with" the student. However, these animals were "out there" in the external environment as opposed to with the student in the home. These animals are likely to be encountered in a manner the student cannot control; they are attractive, but unpredictable; foreign, rather than domestic; and they are capable of harm but not necessarily going to act on this capability. Variation occurred around the ferociousness of the animal, its likelihood of attacking, its distance from the student, and its amount of attractiveness and draw.

Students in this category generally acknowledged that their loans had helped them, but their answers emphasized the *other* side to the loan—the side that demands interest and payment. For example, this student explicitly justifies his "bear" answer by noting that: "there are two sides to a bear. You see the soft cuddly side and that's the part that helps you when you're going through college, but then there's the more ferocious and demanding side of the bear that comes after you graduate." Thus a key feature that distinguishes the *Wild Things* answers from *Domestics* is the lesser degree of control indicated over the relationship and lack of predictability. Wild animals have a positive side to them, even a helpful side, but they are not tame; in fact, most are capable of great harm.

The emphasis in these answers on how the animals are *capable* of harming the student is an important contrast with the *Evils, Insects, and Pests* answers. In the latter category, students usually indicated they saw the animal (or insect or reptile) as inherently and consistently harmful. In contrast, the *Wild Things* answers usually implied the student was safe—for now—but the student was uncertain as to whether safety would continue, particularly after graduation. For example, one student explains that she is choosing "lion" because "they sneak up on you—it's like, oh, they could be really restful for a while. And that's during your 4 years in college."

Yet many students in the *Wild Things* category also spoke of an attractiveness or draw that these animals have for them, precisely because of the latent power the animal contains. For example, the following student explicitly links the attraction of her animal to the attraction she herself feels toward money when explaining that her loans are like "one of those poisonous really colorful frogs, cuz like, it's money, like that's gonna come to you, so it's really beautiful. But if you don't handle it the right way, it's gonna kill you. Or it's gonna do some damage. So that's definitely how I'd explain it." This element of attractiveness was not present in any of the other categories.

*Summary: Loans as Attractive, Foreign and Powerful*

Answers in the *Wild Things* category reflect a heightened level of wariness and decreased level of confidence when compared with answers in the *Domestics* category. Yet these answers are also a perfect capture of the duality of debt: the animals are on one side sources of fascination; on the other, they are sources of fear. While these animals are dangerous and capable of inflicting great harm, most of the time, these animals do not harm people. It is rare to encounter a truly wild animal in daily life. Thus the overriding theme within this category is not so much fear of loans as it is wariness stemming from unfamiliarity.

Of all four categories, *Wild Things* contained the largest discrepancy in gender at 68% female. Minority students were also overrepresented in this category at 60%. Like *Domestics*, *Wild Things*, too, are a bit like fellow travelers, except these travelers are currently seen as foreign and estranged. The students in this category usually saw these animals as oriented along a forward path and they did not know what to expect. In this way, the answers reflect an uncertainty that is born out the student loan system itself: since students do not engage with their loans as a bill prior to graduation, what to expect must be inferred with knowledge gathered from other sources. It is quite possible that loans may become more analogous to domestic animals for these students once they graduate and start repayment.

*3.4 Elephants and Monkeys*

The name of the third category, *Elephants and Monkeys*, reflects two primary thematic elements that dominated this category: loans are unmanageable in size or temperament; loans are an internal bother that the student would prefer not to confront. "Annoying" is a central theme within this category. A sense of intrusion will come up again in *Evils, Insects, and Pests*. Unlike what will be seen in the *Evils, Insects, and Pests* category, however, there was no talk of these animals as threats that need to be killed. The majority of *Elephants and Monkeys* animals are wild, but most of them are not ferocious. As with *Domestics*, these animals are usually "in the room" with the student, but the animals are not now nor have they ever been companions.

Descriptions in this category usually included words like "large," "difficult," and "annoying" and were often accompanied by phrases such as "you don't want to deal with it" or "seems small at first." Thus perceived size *and* avoidance of a problem are key elements within this category. Time and slowness play a special part here as well, through descriptions such as "slow moving" or "slow growing." The perception within this category is that loans are something the student initially thought would be small and manageable, or at least off in the distance, but the loans have grown and they grown fast—but also, not *exactly* fast, as one student struggles to explain:

> What's coming to mind is, like, a very specific animal, something like: an elephant. An elephant, because, you know, it is slowly moving, but I've noticed that they do add up quickly. They do add up quickly, especially, you know, if you're not keeping a really strict budget of where your money's going. And you end up using up, like, either the whole amount of your loan, or, over the four years, although it seems like a small amount, it adds up. And by the end, I'll have this lump sum of twenty-thousand dollars.

This slowness is also connected to the sense of burdensomeness that distinguishes the *Elephants and Monkeys* category. For some students, the fact that student loan debt is accumulated in relatively small chunks semester-by-semester has been reassuring. Now, however, as these students approach graduation, the loans are all of a sudden standing in front of them, large and immovable, again kind of like an elephant:

> I'd say an elephant. It would definitely be an elephant. They're slow moving—trying to get anything done with them is impossible—they grow quick, and once they get that big, it's really hard to move 'em around, or try and go around them, or just live them period, so—I'd say an elephant.

This burden can also feel crushing, as another student explains:

> I feel like if I say elephant, maybe that'll say that I feel like it's crushing down on me, which I would say, I would probably say elephant, because I have to pay that back, is the thing, and not only that, I have to start paying that back soon. I think I have, six to nine months after graduation, so I have to find a job—not only that, I have to find a job that's able to afford, you know, make enough to pay that back and still live at the same time—so, yeah, I'll say elephant.

These quotes demonstrate the element of avoiding what is *not* avoidable, which so strongly distinguishes this category.

In fact, three students chose to explicitly tie their "elephant" answer directly to the well-known avoidance idiom "elephant in the room." These answers appear to be coming from a place of low confidence in the student's ability to repay, which is in turn connected to a bubbling fear rising to the surface as the student gets closer to graduation:

> For me, lately, an elephant. Because, especially over, um, Christmas break, I just randomly, like, was like: 'holy crap, I have to pay back student loans next year. Like what do I do?' And so it's like the elephant in the room. I'm always thinking about it, I'm always scared.

*Elephants and Monkeys* answers thus describe a perception that student loans are always present and always an unwanted presence. As one student explains: "I would say something annoying, something like a Howler monkey, because you're always—like, it's always just like a thing that you're thinking about, you know. And, so, yeah, it's annoying."

Finally, several answers within this category highlighted a perception that the loans were in some way taking from the students. The perception that a loan requires resources, especially in the form of interest, was present in every category, but only a handful of students metaphorically tied these resources to what an animal eats. The following student, for example, chooses to compare his loans to a hippo because, eventually, it is like he will be feeding a one-ton animal:

> They start out, like the babies, they're very cute, like, 'oh, they're not gonna be that bad,' like, cuz this little guy is cute—looks just like a wet dog or something like that—and then they get bigger, and bigger, and like, as I graduate, it gets bigger. And then I have to start feeding for this little baby hippo, and then eventually it becomes 400-800 pounds, and one ton, and I don't know what to do with it.

Also using a food analogy, a second student chooses "raccoon" because of a video she saw in which a raccoon snuck up to a dog food bowl and stole a handful of the food:

> I'm thinking of like a specific video that I saw—it was, like, the raccoon just like walked up to the dog food and just like snatched two handfuls and then, like, ran away. And it was like super casual and quiet. Just like, 'oh, okay, I'm supposed to be here' and then ran. And I kinda feel like that's how it is. It's like, 'oh, yeah, everyone takes out loans to pay for school,' like it's cool, like it's fine. But then once I get, like, a job and stuff, and I'm gonna have to pay them off—so, yeah.

A key factor in *Elephants and Monkeys*, which of all the categories contained the highest percentage of students with above average loan amounts, is not just that the loans actually exist, but that the amount currently feels unmanageable. This subjective—although sometimes literal—sense of size will be further discussed in *Evils, Insects, and Pests*. As seen in some of these quotes, *Elephants and Monkeys* answers often reflected a perception that the loan payment coming due to the student is somehow unexpected or unfair. While it is therefore possible to see in these answers as indicating a lack of full responsibility, they are more indicative of the fact that students often felt that they were told that borrowing for college would be "fine," yet they do not necessarily *feel* like they are going to be fine now that graduation is getting closer.

Thus compared with the other three categories, *Elephants and Monkeys* answers reflect the lowest amount of control students see over their loans. It is this perceived lack of control that may lead some students to choose answers that reflect a sense that the loan is taking from them. The student below explained that she is choosing honey badger because of a well-known YouTube video about the honey badger who just doesn't give a care:

> I feel like it's kinda like that, because it's like: 'okay, well, I have these loans. Do I have any idea how I'm paying them off? No. But do the loans care? No. But do I need them? Yes.' So, yeah, I think it would be that way. I don't really see it as menacing, I'm not—for some reason, I'm not, like, super like: 'oh, my, God, what am I gonna do with all this debt?' Um (pause) I just kind of assume I'm gonna figure it out. And it hasn't really hit me, it's not gonna hit me until I start getting the bills. But, yeah, it's also kind of frightening at the same time.

As this student explains, accepting these loans did not exactly feel like a choice in the first place. If taking out loans does not feel like a choice, it is unsurprising that for some students it does not yet feel like a responsibility either.

*Summary: Loans as Needing Attention but Being Avoiding*

When considered holistically, all of the thematic elements within the *Elephants and Monkeys* category speak to a perception that loans are in some way limiting the ability of the student to move about freely. The limitation may be more or less literal, as with the idea that the loans are a physical burden, like an elephant, or more like a psychological burden, in that the student cannot get a moment of peace without being reminded about their loans, as if a monkey is heckling them. For these students, a direct confrontation with their loans is coming and many have doubts about their ability to handle it. It is worth noting that 58% of students in this category reported their family going through a disruptive negative financial amount, second only to *Evils, Insects, and*

*Pests*, and well above the *Domestics* and *Wild Things* categories, which had rates of 83%, 35% and 40%, respectively.

The answers in this category also speak to the fact that many students have avoided thinking about the responsibility of their loans for much of their time in college. From a policy perspective, it is possible to interpret this avoidance both positively and negatively. As the literature on both loan aversion and the health consequences of being in debt indicates, the stress that may result from students knowing they are in debt is likely to be a psychological burden for many students. Although more direct research on the topic is needed, the existing research does suggest being in debt may have a negative impact on student outcomes, at least for some populations. It is therefore possible that *not* thinking about loans and repayment may be helpful for students trying to focus on staying in school.

### *3.5 Evils, Insects, and Pests*

In contrast with the other three categories above, the final category, *Evils, Insects, and Pests* contains answers that are consistently and unanimously negative. Like the *Wild Things* answers, many of these answers refer to animals that can kill people; however, the *Evils, Insects, and Pests* answers are more associated with evil, harm, or the triggering of a phobia or fear. These students did not describe an "other side" of the loan that has helped the student get through school; instead, answers described an animal, insect, or reptile that will harm the student if it is not attacked or eliminated first.

The *Evils, Insects, and Pests* category aligns most closely with the literature on loan aversion. The student quoted below, for example, was working two jobs and living at home in order to avoid greater borrowing. She had also attempted to pay off the unsubsidized portion of her loans while she was still in school. For her, loans are like a “trapdoor spider:”

> It’s like one of those things where I feel like I could maybe forget about them and then really be screwed if I’m focused on other things. I put all my savings towards the unsubsidized student loan last year, to try and help pay that off, but I haven’t made any payments since. So I feel like once I actually do have to start making payments I might forget.

The student who gave this answer also talked about a disruptive negative financial event from her past during the interview, as did 83% of the students who gave answers that fell within this category. In her case, the event was a home foreclosure when she was young, and this student has a strong memory of a banker coming to her house and saying to her: “say goodbye to your house, little girl.”

In addition to the ability to harm, hiddenness was also a primary recurrent theme within this category. Rather than the loans being described as “stalking,” however, as sometimes came up in *Wild Things* answers, the hiddenness of these animals was connected to a sense of insidiousness. One student says his loans are like a “snake” because “it hides in the bushes, and then you graduate, and then they bite you in the butt.” Another says his loans are a snake, because in addition to being sneaky, snakes grow over time and the best way to eliminate them is to chop them to pieces:

> I would say they would be a snake. And it’s because they can sneak up on you, and, you know, they can get bigger, feeding off of time, as interest goes on. But my plan is to attack it in little tiny pieces. And just kinda

> keep chopping at it until it's all done.

Another student again chooses "spider" because it is something that "lurks in the background that you forget about and then it jumps out at you at the last moment." Thus what distinguishes these answers from potentially harmful animals like tigers and bears is the size and manageability of the threat. No student in the interview sample indicated that they would win a battle with a bear.

Thus, while reflecting a fear or phobia, *Evils, Insects, and Pests* answers nevertheless usually also reflected an ability of the student to handle it. An exception was the boundary answers in this category that spoke to a sense of being picked over, consumed, or devoured to death. For the two students who chose to answer "vulture," the loans were not only seen as creeping up on you later, but as creeping up on you when "you're vulnerable." As one of these students explains, this vulnerability is systematic and often exploited: "I think the process is predatory. I think that it's picking over people that don't have any other choice." In a similar vein, another student explains that the loans are like piranhas because you don't see the threat coming until you are devoured by it:

> You see 'em swimming around, and you think, 'oh, it's a nice little fish.' And then you get into the water and you are dead. They strip your flesh, and it, that's what it feels like, to have that much money—I mean, it's a pound of flesh. You know, it seems like a good idea when you're getting into it, and then you do it and get stripped to the bone.

Finally, one student said Komodo dragon "because they're poisonous and they wait for you to, you know, whither away, and then they slowly consume you." She went on to explain that she was choosing this answer over “lion or dragon” because “poisonous seems better. It’s a slow death.”

*Evils, Insects, and Pests* was the category that most corresponded with an actually smaller size of the student’s debt compared with other students. Fifty percent of students in this category had total expected loan amounts that were lower than average compared with 30%, 28%, and 16% in *Domestics*, *Wild Things*, and *Elephants and Pests* respectively. Correspondingly, the category also contained a disproportionate amount of students who had accepted significantly less in loan money than what they were offered through financial aid, despite financial adversity.

Regarding a student’s total loan amount, none of the metaphor categories reflect a one-to-one correspondence, whether it was below average, average, or above average. However, students across all four categories described a subjective sense of the relative size of their loan amount. In general, the size of the animal chosen more definitely reflected the student’s own subjective sense of *manageability and control* rather than reflecting an objective position of the student’s loan amount relative to other students in the sample. *Evils, Insects, and Pests* answers reflect the perception among many students that loans are an intrusion of something that should not be there and should be eliminated, as indeed many of these students have done.

*Summary: Loans as Present and Threatening*

The students whose answers fell within *Evils, Insects, and Pests* were more likely to have borrowed less than they were offered in financial aid every semester they were in college, even though that often meant struggling financially during school or foregoing additional resource-based opportunities. The loan aversion evidenced through this category was not entirely reducible to the student's socioeconomic background, however. Although socioeconomic background plays an associated role, many of these students were, on paper, solidly middle-class. It is therefore possible that the link between loan aversion and low family socioeconomic background may be through the increased likelihood that these students have already experienced the negative consequences of debt firsthand, and in a situation they could not control, rather than a relative lack of resources among low-income families only.

The answers that fell within this category did indicate these students saw themselves as having a relatively high level of control over their loans compared with the *Wild Things* and *Elephants and Monkeys.* However, this control lay in a heightened level of alertness on the part of the student, bordering at times on vigilance. These answers may indicate some students see power in their ability to attack, eliminate, or avoid their student loans, as opposed to the power of the caretaking role described in the *Domestics* category. Like *Wild Things*, this category was also skewed toward women (67%), which again suggests that women are more likely than men to associate loans with unpredictability and fear.

## 4. DISCUSSION

Debt-based financial aid is currently structured in a way that expects students to operate as ideal-type economic actors, balancing their approaches to borrowing in school with rational projections of what they can expect to earn from their degree in the future. These ideal actors would be expected to see their loans as financial objects with which they are comfortable and in control—domesticated, using the language of the present framework. However, the majority of college-age individuals have not yet had the chance to design a household budget, experience the day-to-day value of an adult-size paycheck, and manage consumer debt on their own. Thus for many students, loans are not seen as domestic but as wild and unknown. Others students have been primed by previous experiences to see all debt as insidious and likely to hurt. Finally, for some students, debt may be perceived as an obstacle that was not actively chosen and for which they are not ready to handle.

The relative irrelevance of class in structuring these findings is of note. Instead, lived experiences with the negative repercussions of debt, gender, and, to a lesser extent, race and lack of a perceived family safety net appear more relevant. When considered in conjunction with the rest of the interview findings, the lack of a strong class correlation may be due in part to the mitigating effect higher levels of financial knowledge have in increasing student comfort with their borrowing, as financial knowledge can be actively gained by students regardless of their background. In the larger study, low-income students who demonstrated high comfort with borrowing often reported learning about the positive side of borrowing through an academic class, a mentor, or an emotionally supportive parent or sibling. Indeed, as the present analysis is only able to focus on borrowers in their senior year, it is possible that low-income students who borrow and persist are categorically distinct from low-income students who do not.

This finding would be consistent with an inverse association between financial knowledge and loan aversion noted by Boatman and Evans (2017). In their large-scale quantitative analysis, the authors also note a possible association between loan aversion and prior experience with payday lenders among community college students. Results from the present study lend further support to the broader ramifications of their finding and suggest that it is not confined to only one subset of students or to one type of debt experience.

Regarding the gender findings, the interview data from this study is less clear. However, existing research has established that women face a greater student loan repayment burden than men, in part because they tend to borrow more, but also because women are overrepresented in lower-paying career paths (AAUW 2017). Thus the gender finding may be due to lack of confidence relative to men in expected earning power after graduation. A role for gender socialization also cannot be ruled out, particularly for the *Wild Things* category, as males have been found to be more confident than females in their own existing financial abilities (Danes and Haberman 2007).

A second possibility stems from the fact that male students are generally less likely to borrow than female students at a national level. Female students receive a higher relative return from a college degree than men, since the latter have more occupational possibilities that do not require a degree, which grants females an additional motivation to stay in school even if it means borrowing (Dwyer, Hodson, and McCloud 2013). In a similar vein as the class finding, it is possible that males who would otherwise be drawn to the more fear-based categories have instead chosen not to enroll, not to borrow any amount, or dropped out prior to senior year.

This last possibility speaks to one of the limitations of this study, which is that findings are confined to the perspectives of college seniors at one public university. By design, the study sample contains students who have persisted in college, despite adversity and any hesitations they may have had related to borrowing, and who are motivated and willing to participate in a research study on paying for college. The overall study design included extensive steps to reduce bias in the sampling and recruitment procedures, but a possibility of selection bias can never be entirely eliminated. Future research can examine whether findings from this study extend to additional higher education settings.

Additionally, the present analysis has been limited to student *perceptions*, as opposed to the material impact of debt-based aid. Existing research has demonstrated that the negative consequences of student loans fall more heavily on minority students, first generation students, and women. Absent a more progressive policy solution, financial education intervention by stakeholders may prove helpful for student populations known to be at greater risk, particularly education that stresses empowered economic decision-making while in school. More information on the control that graduates *can* exercise over their loans after graduation may also prove beneficial for helping these students get the most out of their financial aid package.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The majority of the existing multidisciplinary body of research on the student loan issue is focused on who borrows, who doesn't, who drops out, and who defaults (Baker, Andrews, and McDaniel 2017). This existing research typically takes a quantitative variable based approach. Research on student loans is certainly right to focus on socioeconomic status, race, and other traditional variables of sociological analysis, as access to higher education is foundational to social mobility in the US. However, this article has demonstrated that methodological approaches that prioritize the subjective view of the borrower may be more useful for understanding how these known effects of debt-based aid are actually occurring. Without consistent effort to develop this understanding, policy solutions consistent with the full mission of higher education may continue to move further out of reach.

# WORKS CITED

AAUW. 2017. “Deeper in Debt: Women and Student Loans.” Washington, D. C: American Association of University Women. https://www.aauw.org/research/deeper-in-debt/.

Armstrong, Elizabeth A., and Laura T. Hamilton. 2013. *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Baker, Amanda R., Benjamin D. Andrews, and Anne McDaniel. 2017. “The Impact of Student Loans on College Access, Completion, and Returns.” *Sociology Compass* 11 (6).

Boatman, Angela, and Brent J. Evans. 2017. “How Financial Literacy, Federal Aid Knowledge, and Credit Market Experience Predict Loan Aversion for Education.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 671 (1): 49–68.

Cook, Nicole, Susan J. Smith, and Beverley A. Searle. 2009. “Mortgage Markets and Cultures of Consumption.” *Consumption Markets & Culture* 12 (2): 133–54.

Danes, Sharon M., and Heather R. Haberman. 2007. “Teen Financial Knowledge, Self-Efficacy, and Behavior: A Gendered View.” *Journal of Financial Counseling & Planning* 18 (2): 48–60.

Drentea, Patricia. 2000. “Age, Debt and Anxiety.” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 41 (4):

Drentea, Patricia, and Paul J Lavrakas. 2000. “Over the Limit: The Association among Health, Race and Debt.” *Social Science & Medicine* 50 (4): 517–29.

Dwyer, Rachel E. 2018. “Credit, Debt, and Inequality.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 44 (1): 237–61.

Dwyer, Rachel E., Randy Hodson, and Laura McCloud. 2013. “Gender, Debt, and Dropping Out of College.” *Gender & Society* 27 (1): 30–55.

Dwyer, Rachel E., Laura McCloud, and Randy Hodson. 2011. “Youth Debt, Mastery, and Self-Esteem: Class-Stratified Effects of Indebtedness on Self-Concept.” *Social Science Research* 40 (3): 727–41.

———. 2012. “Debt and Graduation from American Universities.” *Social Forces* 90 (4): 1133–55.

Gerber, Theodore P., and Sin Yi Cheung. 2008. “Horizontal Stratification in Postsecondary Education: Forms, Explanations, and Implications.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 34 (1): 299–318.

Goldrick-Rab, Sara. 2006. “Following Their Every Move: An Investigation of Social-Class Differences in College Pathways.” *Sociology of Education* 79 (1): 67–79.

Heller, Donald E. 2008. “The Impact of Loans on College Access.” In *Student Aid Policies: What the Research Tells Us.*, edited by Sandy Baum, Michael S. McPherson, and Patricia Steele, 39–68. New York, N.Y.: College Board.

Kim, Dongbin. 2007. “The Effect of Loans on Students’ Degree Attainment: Differences by Student and Institutional Characteristics.” *Harvard Educational Review* 77 (1): 64–100.

Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Meltzer, H., P. Bebbington, T. Brugha, R. Jenkins, S. McManus, and M. S. Dennis. 2011. “Personal Debt and Suicidal Ideation.” *Psychological Medicine* 41 (4): 771–78.

Mortenson, Thomas G. 1990. “The Impact of Increased Loan Utilization among Low Family Income Students.,” February. http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED319285.

Nau, Michael, Rachel E. Dwyer, and Randy Hodson. 2015. “Can’t Afford a Baby? Debt and Young Americans.” *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 42 (December): 114–

Olson, Lorayn, and Rachel A. Rosenfeld. 1984. “Parents and the Process of Gaining Access to Student Financial Aid.” *The Journal of Higher Education* 55 (4): 455–80.

Perna, Laura W., James Kvaal, and Roman Ruiz. 2017. “Understanding Student Debt: Implications for Federal Policy and Future Research.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 671 (1): 270–86.

Perna, Laura Walter. 2000. “Differences in the Decision to Attend College among African Americans, Hispanics, and Whites.” *The Journal of Higher Education* 71 (2): 117–41.

Pugh, Allison J. 2013. “What Good Are Interviews for Thinking about Culture? Demystifying Interpretive Analysis.” *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 1 (1): 42–68.

Quadlin, Natasha. 2017. “Funding Sources, Family Income, and Fields of Study in College.” *Social Forces* 96 (1): 91–120.

Sweet, Elizabeth, Arijit Nandi, Emma K. Adam, and Thomas W. McDade. 2013. “The High Price of Debt: Household Financial Debt and Its Impact on Mental and Physical Health.” *Social Science & Medicine* 91 (August): 94–100.

The Institute for College Access & Success (TICAS). 2017. Student Debt and the Class of 2017. https://ticas.org/sites/default/files/pub_files/classof2017.pdf. Accessed March 5, 2019.

Vaisey, Stephen. 2013. “Is Interviewing Compatible with the Dual-Process Model of Culture.” *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 2 (1): 150–58.

Yi-Wen, Chien, and Sharon A. DeVaney. 2001. “The Effects of Credit Attitude and Socioeconomic Factors on Credit Card and Installment Debt.” *The Journal of Consumer Affairs* 35 (1): 162–79.

# LIST OF TABLES