

SELLING THE VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY  
A MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF MARKETING FOR ONLINE  
LEARNING

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by  
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# SELLING THE VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY

The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the  
dissertation entitled

SELLING THE VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY:  
A MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS OF MARKETING FOR ONLINE LEARNING

presented by Eric Ludwig,  
a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,  
and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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**Dedication**

To Rachel, for her motivation and love  
To Xavier, for the goofiness, giggles, and warmth of a 4-year old  
To mom and dad, for a lifetime of love and patience

“Deep in the human unconscious is a pervasive need for a logical universe that makes sense. But the real universe is always one step beyond logic.”

Frank Herbert, *Dune* (1965)

“The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.”

bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (1994)

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### **Abstract**

When marketing online degrees, institutions are simultaneously telling a story about what it means to be a student at that institution *and* about what it means to be an online learner. This study is an attempt to investigate and interrogate those stories, to analyze how we talk about online learning and to explore whether that linguistic framing is consistent with a broader socioeconomic critique of academic capitalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Using critical discourse and multimodal analysis, I examined the institutional websites devoted to the promotion and marketing of online programs at 18 public universities with high exclusively online enrollment (>4,000). This project describes the consistencies and contradictions embedded in the language and visual artifacts used to market and sell online learning to prospective students in the United States. I explored how these discourses reinforced and reconstituted broader social and lived realities of labor, time, and space.

Placing online higher education as a phenomenon within the social context of neoliberalism, and academic capitalism, this study contributes a much-needed critical perspective to the intersection of two areas of inquiry in higher education research, online learning and institutional marketing.



## Chapter 1

Online learning is not a new phenomenon in American higher education. Colleges and universities have been leveraging communication technologies to deliver instruction for over 20 years (Simpson & Anderson, 2012; Sumner, 2000). Well before the Y2K scare, before the ascendancy of social media platforms, before the iPhone and the ubiquity of mobile devices, institutions were exploring how the internet and personal computer could supplement on-campus coursework (Harasim, 2000). Distance education – the act of delivering instruction to those separated by space and (often, but not always) by time – has its pedagogical roots most evidently in the correspondence courses of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, its technological roots more recently in the development of educational radio and television (McIsaac & Gunawardena, 1996; Moore & Kearsley, 2011; Simpson & Anderson, 2012). Online learning is the most recent version in that lengthy history, an evolutionary form that allows us to imagine seismic shifts in the how and for whom of higher education. But, we must temper that hope and enthusiasm with a healthy dose of skepticism and historical perspective; we must analyze the bold claims and rosy promises of institutions and higher education systems critically and contextually.

Although public nonprofit institutions, largely because of their overall size and share of the higher education student population, have traditionally enrolled the majority of online students, for-profit institutions managed to capture public attention through rapid growth, political maneuvering, and a deluge of marketing in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Allen & Seaman, 2006, 2007; Beaver, 2009; Kelly, 2001; Rovai & Downey, 2010). In 1999, Jones International University, the first fully online for-profit institution in the United States, received accreditation from the North Central Association

for Colleges and Schools (Jones, 1999). Throughout the 2000s, large for-profit providers, like the Apollo Group, owners of the University of Phoenix, saw rising stock prices and burgeoning interest from Wall Street investors intrigued by the sector's short- and long-term potential for growth and profitability (Brown, 2004; Kamenetz, 2005). Increased demands for educational access, rising tuition costs, and a changing labor market collided during the personal computing revolution. This intersection of institutional concerns and technological promise opened up a discursive space for the for-profit educational providers to fill.

Those for-profit institutions leveraged online programming to fuel expansion, and that expansion was critical to attracting the eye of investors and private equity (Fried & Hill, 2009; Tierney & Hentschke, 2007; Wilson, 2010). The for-profit industry was actively involved in lobbying for the repeal of the Higher Education Reauthorization Act's 50% Title IV rule, which limited the proportion of students an institution could enroll in distance education programs and still be eligible to receive Title IV federal funds for student aid (Dillon, 2006; Kamenetz, 2005; Lederman, 2005). Distance enrollment could not exceed 50% of an institution's total enrollment, thereby placing an upper bound on the growth of online programming. Despite these regulations, the number of students enrolled exclusively in online programming at for-profit universities quadrupled from 2002-2006 (Allen & Seaman, 2007).

In 2005, the passage of the Higher Education Reconciliation Act included the repeal of the 50% rule and institutions were free to expand their distance programming without consideration for how it might impact federal student aid (Derreth, Hulbert, Montgomery, & Snyder, 2016). For the largest for-profit providers and nonprofit

institutions, the 1992 50% rule marked a ceiling on continued growth in online enrollment. As McGuire (2012) noted, the repeal of the 50% rule opened the hypothetical spigot, removing limits on the federal aid dollars available to students enrolled in online programs. And indeed, by 2009-2010, for-profit institutions, now unchained by Title IV limitations, capitalized on the removal of those legislative barriers. They continued their upward trajectory, with a significant portion of that remarkable growth concentrated in online and blended offerings (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Lederman, 2010; Wilson, 2010).

For-profit providers promised to bring corporate efficiency and business-like practices to a stale, anachronistic higher education (Tierney & Hentschke, 2007). This vision conveniently aligned with the characteristics of academic capitalism and the expansion of privatization rhetoric throughout the 1990s and has been, unsurprisingly, adopted as the discursive and operational norm across higher education (Giroux, 2002; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). But, for-profit universities were not the only beneficiaries of federal deregulation.

At non-profit colleges and universities, online education had become an important component of short- and long-term institutional strategy and enrollment management (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Hanover Research, 2015). As enrollment in traditional on-campus programs began to slow or decline, many institutions turned to online programming to fill in the gap, but prospective students had many more potential programs and institutions to choose from (Deming, Lovenheim, & Patterson, 2016). It is within this context of privatization, profit maximization, and unabated enrollment growth that we must also examine the widespread adoption of online learning as a strategic initiative at nonprofit institutions.

Between the fall of 2005 and the fall of 2009, total online enrollment expanded across *all* institutions from an estimated 3.2 million to 5.6 million students, a 75% jump in just 4 years (Allen & Seaman, 2006, 2007, 2010). Although that enrollment was highly concentrated across a small number of institutions, it was clear by the end of the decade that online learning had gained solid traction across the higher education landscape (Moore & Kearsley, 2011).

Students have continued to enroll in online courses and degree programs at record numbers and a small group of nonprofit institutions (e.g., Southern New Hampshire University, Liberty University, University of Maryland Global Campus) now enroll a majority or all of their students online (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman., 2018). At many public and private nonprofit institutions, this upward trajectory in online enrollment has buoyed stagnant or declining student numbers in traditional on-campus programs (Seaman et al., 2018). In the fall of 2016, over 6 million students were taking at least one course online; over 3 million were enrolled exclusively at a distance, i.e., they were completing all of their coursework online or did not physically attend on campus.

Meanwhile, a handful of large for-profit universities like ITT Tech and Corinthian closed their doors amid federal investigations and financial difficulties (Puzzanghera & White, 2016). The private for-profit sector as a whole shed over 200,000 online students (21%) from 2012-2016 (Seaman et al., 2018). Nonprofit institutions, by and large, have embraced this opportunity and moved to incorporate online learning into their strategic plan and enrollment management strategies, hoping to capitalize off of continued student interest and growing dissatisfaction with for-profit providers (James, 2011; Seaman et al., 2018; Wilson, 2010).

Despite the gains of nonprofit institutions since 2010, for-profit providers have not fully ceded that space to their institutional counterparts. In 2017, for-profit universities still occupied 11 of the top 20 and 19 out of the top 50 spots on a list of the institutions enrolling the largest number of students exclusively at a distance (Seaman et al., 2018). Of colleges and universities enrolling *only* online students, the profit-seeking presence is even more distinctly felt, with a full 50% of the top 50 institutions in that category labeled as for-profit. When we look at institutions where students take at least one online course, but are not necessarily enrolled in a fully online program of study, nonprofit institutions fare much better (Seaman et al., 2018).

This discrepancy between partial and fully online enrollment density suggests the possibility that nonprofit colleges and universities have done better at incorporating online learning into the fabric of their traditional on-ground curriculum or on-campus experience, but still lag their for-profit competitors when it comes to attracting fully online undergraduate and graduate students. Possible explanations for this discrepancy include the outsized marketing budgets of for-profit institutions (Katzman, 2016; Lee, 2012), which undoubtedly aim to target adult and non-traditional students who might be more interested in an online program, rather than a face-to-face degree with online courses mixed in.

An increasingly competitive marketplace, fueled by the austerity of state governments, has likely necessitated a change in attitude and motivation by nonprofit institutions (Bok, 2003; Hoxby, 2014; Mitchell, Leachman, & Masterson, 2017; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). We might argue that institutions have turned towards online learning as an answer to the challenges presented by a higher education system

with unceasing demands for more enrollments, more revenues, and more accountability (Deming, Goldin, Katz, & Yuchtman, 2015; Kelchen, 2018; Ubell, 2017). And, this trend is unlikely to taper off, as external pressures and demographic changes, like a decline in the traditional college-aged population (Grawe, 2017), force institutions to adopt more aggressive and costly enrollment and marketing strategies to attract students to their physical and virtual campuses (Katzman, 2016; Saul, 2016).

Online learning has become a dominant, ubiquitous form of educational delivery across America's colleges and universities with nearly one-third of all students taking at least one online course (Seaman et al., 2018). Its influence on higher education can no longer be ignored; it is permanent, embedded in institutional rhetoric, strategic planning, and faculty work (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Lederman, 2019; Seaman et al., 2018).

And, yet, the for-profit/nonprofit designation is an important component in understanding the growing attention paid to online education. The ascendancy of large for-profit providers and their push into online programming exacerbated concerns – or elicited praise, depending on your perspective – about the increased privatization of American higher education and its impact on educational quality (Deming, Goldin, & Katz, 2013; James, 2011; Moore & Kearsley, 2011; Morey, 2004; Wilson, 2010). A significant portion of faculty continue to view online coursework and online degrees with skepticism (Lederman, 2019; Lederman & McKenzie, 2017) and a small subset of administrators are interested in moving beyond online programming as an enrollment generator towards a more nuanced, intentional, and strategic approach to growing and sustaining online learning efforts on campus (Liebermann, 2018; Seaman et al., 2018; Straumsheim, 2015; Ubell, 2017). Critical scholars and practitioners have also expressed

concern over disparities in student outcomes and academic support and questioned institutional motivations, attempting to add depth and context to the ongoing conversation (Liebermann, 2018).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Although for-profit institutions have been wildly successful courting students to enroll in online programs, questionable recruitment and marketing tactics coupled with alleged predatory lending behaviors culminated in the post-recession swarm of litigation and scandal affecting the for-profit industry (Bauman & Blumenstyk, 2018; Cottom, 2017; Shireman, 2017; Taylor, 2010). Stories of student loan default, poor employment outcomes, and aggressive recruiting tactics moved into the public view (Lee, 2012).

Although these institutional behaviors were not limited to students enrolled in distance programs, online learning was a convenient site for the continued privatization of higher education. The supposed flexibility and freedom it offered non-traditional students was an indispensable selling point, an image of access and innovation key to the for-profit package (Cottom, 2017; Miley, 2009).

The nature of distance education, students separated from instructor and institution by time and space, should force educators and administrators at traditional nonprofit institutions to grapple with their pedagogy and their policy. Online learning exists at a sort of cultural and political flashpoint: it represents the *possibility* of technological innovation and disruption, while also igniting fears over educational quality and dredging up resistance to institutional change (Lederman, 2019; Noble, 1998). As online learning has become more visible, more influential, and more strategic, higher

education has also faced increased pressures for accountability and transparency from students, parents, and lawmakers (Kelchen, 2018).

The expansion of online learning and its acceptance as a legitimate and valuable alternative to classroom instruction have occurred parallel to another social and cultural development: our absolute immersion in a digital world through mobile technology and expanded internet access (Hampton, 2016). This virtual experience is an inherently technocratic and corporate creation coupled with a powerful story of human progress and change through technological innovation (Banks & Gil, 2019; Morozov, 2014). It leverages social media to feed our desire for connection and meaning in an atomized world; it promises solutions to the world's most pressing environmental and humanitarian crises; and it convinces us that we can have whatever we want, whenever we want through an ecosystem of digital platforms and always connected devices (Joseph, 2018; Salesforce, 2017). These hopeful, utopian claims obscure the pervasive surveillance and digital marketing infrastructure that commoditizes and tracks every action we take in our virtual (and, increasingly, physical) worlds (Christl & Spiekermann, 2016; Kennedy & Moss, 2015).

Some scholars are skeptical of the promises of online learning, for the learner, as well as the institution; McPherson and Bacow (2015) argued that virtual instruction might further exacerbate institutional inequality, impact student learning and educational outcomes, affect the distribution and sustainability of academic labor, and shift our understanding of intellectual property. McPherson and Bacow's critique might be seen as an outlier, but there are other voices expressing concern over the promises, influence, and consequences of educational and computing technology in primary, secondary, and post-



secondary education (see, e.g., Caufield, 2017; Gilliard, 2016, 2017; Morozov, 2014; Stommel, 2014; Veletsianos & Moe, 2018; Watters, 2017b), as well as empirical research that raises some questions about the connections between virtual instruction and student achievement (see, e.g., Jaggars & Bailey, 2010; Protopsaltis & Baum, 2019; Xu & Jaggars, 2014).

Teaching and learning are only one plot point in this rather complicated story of institutional behavior, student access, and student choice. Higher education and its institutions do not exist outside of the dominant social phenomena that continuously shape our culture, our politics, and our world. Certainly, colleges and universities have not been ignorant of the prevailing trends in digital advertising and of mobile device usage among prospective students (Higher Education Research Institute, 2014; Lenhart, 2015; Perrin & Kumar, 2019). Institutions develop, maintain, and promote websites to create a “story” about what it means to apply, attend, and graduate from their institution (Saichaie & Morpew, 2014). Websites and their creators, encourage students to embark on a comparative journey, to measure or judge the validity and value of their “story” against other institutional competitors. The continued commodification of and competition for students requires this degree of digital presence from institutions (Fairclough, 1993; Hanover Research, 2015; Katzman, 2016; Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009).

In the fall of 2009 alone, the for-profit industry spent \$4.2 billion on recruitment and marketing efforts, some institutions upwards of a third of their entire institutional budget (Lee, 2012). Meanwhile, nonprofit institutions have adopted corporate marketing techniques, like lead aggregation, call centers, targeted digital advertising, and

automation to attract new students (Blumenstyk, 2006; Hanover Research, 2015; Marcus, 2016). Unsurprisingly, nonprofit colleges and universities have shifted institutional energy towards building brand recognition and funneled more resources into marketing budgets over the last decade (Hanover Research, 2015).

These tactics, although smaller on an institutional scale, mirror the efforts of for-profit institutions to saturate the public discourse. Mautner (2005a) predicted this crossover: “as organizations become more like businesses, they also talk more like them. Conversely, business-like language influences structures and practices” (p. 27). The spread of for-profit strategies to non-profit institutions portends a potentially significant shift in institutional priorities and could open higher education’s gates even wider to private, for-profit consultants and corporations; their influence will further shape the narrative and the reality to align with their interests and desired outcomes. Indeed, Google has now entered the lucrative college-choice marketplace with a tool that aggregates college and university data, allegedly in an effort to make “it easier for prospective students to search for that perfect college” (Zhou, 2018). Institutional marketing and websites are a logical addition to an entire information ecosystem built on the premise that selecting a postsecondary destination is, at its core, a capitalistic exercise in choice and consumption.

### **Purpose**

In his work on depictions of institutional diversity, Saichaie (2011) argued that websites are digital representations of university branding and strategic marketing, and thus are important sites for the kind of exploratory qualitative research that critical discourse analysis (CDA) encourages. Institutional marketing and messaging tell a

specific story to prospective students about what they should expect to *receive* from a college or university in *exchange for* their tuition dollars. It is a transparent transaction, evident to both parties involved. It frames the student as a potential customer, a buyer of an institutional brand and an educational service (Anctil, 2008). This turn is not merely linguistic; it mirrors the broader commercialization of higher education and the neoliberal drive towards the privatization of the public sphere (Bok, 2003; Giroux, 2003; Harvey, 2005; Lynch, 2006; Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009).

When marketing online degrees, institutions are simultaneously telling a story about what it means to be a student at that institution *and* about what it means to be an online learner. This study is an attempt to investigate and interrogate those stories, to analyze how we talk about online learning and to explore whether that linguistic framing is consistent with a broader socioeconomic critique of academic capitalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Online learning is not inherently good or bad, but we must not limit our analysis to the relatively narrow context of American higher education. We must also explore what it might tell us more broadly about our social and cultural moment, where we might identify plenty of “social wrongs” (Fairclough, 2013). We must ask what these changes say about the present and future of our colleges and our universities and the students they claim to serve, for social structures and institutional policies are not value-neutral.

Following Fairclough’s (1989) theoretical framework for critical discourse analysis, I have framed my research questions not only to examine the “naturalised” language and unquestioned assumptions of online learning, but also to, as Rogers (2013)

suggests, explore complexities and contradictions in the discourse. Additional sub-questions are addressed in Chapter 3.

1. What are the dominant "naturalised" discourses used to market online education programs at public nonprofit institutions with significant (i.e., in the top 100) exclusively online student populations?
2. What discursive strategies (visual, textual) do these institutions employ to attract new students?

Online learning is linked to a larger social and cultural structure with dominant ideologies and networks of power, which in turn influence the motivations and decisions of colleges, universities, and institutional actors. As Purvis and Hunt (1993) wrote, discourse analysis offers us a theoretical tool "to grasp the way in which language and other forms of social semiotics not merely convey social experience, but play some major part in constituting social subjects (the subjectivities and their associated identities), their relations, and the field in which they exist" (p. 474). CDA is a valuable theoretical construct and methodology through which we can critically examine how language, seemingly benign and mundane, can gradually congeal into a dominant, unquestioned narrative.

### **Overview of Theoretical Framework**

Colleges and universities are embedded within a fluid social structure that rests on a complex interplay between action and ideology. Language is a medium through which ideology and action can be connected, simultaneously influencing (and being influenced by) what we think, what we do, and what we believe (Fairclough, 1989, 2013). Discourse gives us a window into how our values shape and are shaped, a dialectical force that influences (and is influenced by) how we think, behave, and make decisions (Fairclough,

1989, 2013). It illuminates relationships between power and social structures, showing us how “any social practice is made anew and, at the same time, is imbued with its history and tradition” (Rogers, 2013, p. 71). In this case, discourse analysis can be considered “both theory and method” (p. 73).

In this study, I attempt to pair the theoretical underpinnings of critical discourse analysis with the more localized theory of academic capitalism. The theory of academic capitalism posits that institutions of higher education, beginning roughly with the end of the Reagan-era, started behaving more like corporations, engaged in market-like activities to generate additional revenue, increase external visibility, and compete for students (Bok, 2003; Fairclough, 1993; Giroux, 2002; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Colleges and universities have not only acted more like corporations, but they have become more entrepreneurial in their external orientation, seeking out partnerships, collaborative opportunities, and contractual relationships with for-profit consultants, regional businesses, and multinational corporations (Jessop, 2017, 2018; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

The privatization and corporatization of higher education has fundamentally restructured the how and for whom of higher education. Depending on one’s perspective, academic capitalism might be a welcome addition to a higher education starving for organizational efficiency and an injection of the competitive spirit, or it might be seen in a more sinister light, as a nearly half-century long project to alter the citizen’s relationship to the state (Giroux, 2002, 2003). Academic capitalism did not suddenly spring up out of the ether; it is a consequence of a neoliberal ideology obsessed with markets, management, and consumerism (Harvey, 2005; Olssen & Peters, 2005).

In the context of higher education, Walker (2009, 2014) described the consequences of this ideology on teaching, learning, and academic labor. She analyzed how online learning rests, or balances ever so tenuously, on a fundamental tension between short-term obligations and long-term aspirations (Walker, 2014). This dichotomy further elevates time as both the defining practical constraint and the linguistic reference point of modern life.

Echoing Fairclough (1993) and his early work on CDA, I explore how neoliberal discourses of time, labor, and individuality have influenced the narratives around online learning. I extend the theory of academic capitalism to a critical analysis of how institutional websites and digital marketing portray the role and responsibilities of the individual student, the role and responsibilities of the institution, and the promise(s) of online learning.

### **Methods Overview**

In order to conduct this critical discourse analysis, I used purposeful sampling techniques to identify a rich sample of 18 public, nonprofit institutions that enroll a large number of students in fully online degree programs or only at a distance. Each of these institutions were in the top 100 nationally for students enrolled exclusively online at nonprofit schools, based on fall 2017 data retrieved from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) (NCES, 2017). From this sample, I collected text and multimedia from institutional websites for analysis. Mautner (2005b) pushed for the inclusion of “web-based corpora” into the field of critical discourse analysis, which has predominantly dealt with written and spoken texts. In this project, I focus exclusively on that medium, examining web-based efforts related to online academic programming.

Given the ephemerality of web-based data (Mautner, 2005b), I collected data over a 2-week window in June of 2019 to allow for additional linguistic and visual data that might be added to institutional websites.

Critical discourse analysis does not necessarily have an agreed upon method for collecting data or conducting analysis (Rogers, 2011). In the case of this study, I believe it is important to distinguish between three elements of the research process when discussing CDA to bring clarity to the research design. The broad, overarching methodological framework is Fairclough's (1989) model, which moves from description to interpretation to explanation of the linguistic and visual data in the corpus. Secondly, during the data collection phase, CDA theorists recommend building a corpus that is manageable in size, but thematically and discursively dense (Fairclough, 2013). A smaller corpus allows for a more intense, rigorous examination of the data; this approach is consistent with the methodological considerations of other qualitative research methods (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Rogers (2011) stressed the importance of adopting sampling procedures that are consistent with the underlying research questions and encouraged researchers to explore "counter examples, surprises, and to consider if their claims are trustworthy" (p. 72).

Finally, during data analysis – the descriptive and interpretive phases of the Faircloughian (1989) process – I used a combination of analytical techniques from critical discourse analysis and multimodal analysis to guide the linguistic analysis of text and the visual analysis of static images and multimedia respectively. This project seeks to join these two critical methodological frameworks together, to examine the individual stories, meta-narratives, and contradictions embedded in the language and visual artifacts

used to market and sell online learning to prospective students in America's public universities.

### **Significance**

Institutional efforts to market online learning offer a few promising opportunities for this type of critical analysis. Digital marketing – websites, social media, and targeted digital ads – has now replaced print materials as the vehicle for institutional branding and marketing. Institutional websites have become the virtual face for institutions, important for making first impressions on potential students (Carnevale, 2005; Hanover Research, 2015; Saichaie & Morpew, 2014). But as Saichaie and Morpew (2014) noted, the majority of research on institutional marketing has been produced by consulting firms or businesses with an interest in higher education marketing.

Robust scholarly research with a solid empirical footing (and without potential conflicts of interest) is scant. Furthermore, there is no existing research that examines the intersection between online learning and digital marketing, or any analysis of how modern conceptualizations of labor and time have bled into how institutions think about and portray online learning, or how and why students might want to learn through that medium. In general, an influx of critical scholarship into both online learning and institutional marketing in higher education research would be a beneficial addition to the current body of literature.

### **Outline of the Study**

In Chapter 2, I give a brief overview of the history of online learning as a means to deliver postsecondary education in the United States before examining the broader body of literature on student outcomes and experiences with online programs and



courses. Chapter 2 also includes a summary of research on marketing (both print and digital) in higher education. I conclude with an outline of the theory of academic capitalism and examine its logical connections to online learning and educational consumerism.

In Chapter 3, I delve into methodology, describing the theoretical foundations and practical applications of critical discourse analysis and multimodal analysis. This section also includes a more detailed explanation of methods: sample selection, trustworthiness, and analytical frameworks. I also add a brief discussion on the scope of CDA and multimodal analysis and tackle additional criticisms or limitations of CDA as a research methodology.

Chapter 4 deals with data analysis and findings. This chapter is heavy with linguistic and visual examples from the corpus and is primarily concerned with the description stage of Fairclough's (1989) methodology. Lastly, I bring back the findings from the linguistic and multimodal analysis and work to weave them into a more coherent social analysis. This is the final piece of the Faircloughian method, explanation, which will comprise the majority of Chapter 5. In this phase, the researcher attempts to explain how these discourses align with, reaffirm, or contradict broader social discourse(s). It is an attempt to connect the discourse(s) of online learning, as seen through the web-based marketing of public universities, not only to universal conversations, but also to analyze how those discourses might serve to reinforce systems of power or structures of inequality. In the end, the purpose is to investigate how these discourses might, as Gee (2011) wrote, "illuminate problems and controversies in the world....illuminate issues

about the distribution of social goods, who gets helped, who gets harmed” (p. 10). I also include a discussion on recommendations for future research at the end of Chapter 5.

This study contributes a much-needed critical perspective to the intersection of two areas of inquiry in higher education research, online learning and institutional marketing. I attempt to place online higher education as a phenomenon within the social context of neoliberalism, and academic capitalism. For the sake of transparency, it is also important to close this introduction with a disclosure about my positionality as a researcher: I work in higher education supporting online and digital learning efforts at a 2-year public institution. I include a more detailed reflection on my own positionality, experiences, and potential biases at the end of Chapter 3.

While I am highly critical of the expanding influence of private for-profit and corporate forces within higher education over the last quarter century, I also recognize that online learning has a role to play in broadening access to college, delivering education beyond physical campuses, and supporting short- and long-term institutional growth. But how we do that – and who stands to benefit – is the ground to be contested.

## Chapter 2

Higher education at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century has been marked by the powerful forces of neoliberalism and globalization (Altbach, 2016; Giroux, 2002; Olssen & Peters, 2005). Colleges and universities have had to face down unrelenting government austerity with competing demands for innovation and accountability, while also attempting to expand access and adapt to increased rates of participation (Altbach, 2016; Doyle & Zumeta, 2014; Giroux, 2002; Kelchen, 2018; Leachman & Masterson, 2017). Although not equally influential or extant across the world, these social and economic phenomena have altered how postsecondary institutions approach growth and sustainability. As the structural and financial dynamics have changed, our social discourse has moved away from higher education as a public good towards higher education as an individual pursuit and private commodity (Altbach, 2016; Bloom, Hartley, & Rosovsky, 2007; Labaree, 1997; Mattes, 2017; Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

Neoliberalism is, at its core, an unwavering belief in the efficacy and righteousness of market capitalism and the preeminence of the private sphere (Chomsky, 1998; Harvey, 2005). It is an *ideology* with social, political, and economic consequences for the rich, the not-so rich, and the poor. Chomsky (1998) explained that the “basic rules” of neoliberalism are to “liberalize trade and finance, let markets set price (‘get prices right’), end inflation (‘macroeconomic stability’), privatize” (p. 20). Neoliberalism’s adherents advocate that we entrust, empower, and enrich private actors at the expense of the state and the public good. Profit-seeking or profit-maximizing behaviors are taken as necessary to ensure competition and innovation; progress and

regulation that would otherwise impede the desired outcomes is seen as burdensome (Chomsky, 1998; Giroux, 2002; Harvey, 2005; Olssen & Peters, 2005). It follows then that any regulation or imposition of government controls is *ipso facto* antithetical to the neoliberal project.

In discussing the impacts of neoliberalism on higher education, Olssen and Peters (2005) used the concept of regulation to draw a distinction between classical liberal and neoliberal conceptions of the state and of the individual. Classical liberalism, often associated with strands of western libertarianism, implies a “negative conception of state power in that the individual was taken as an object to be freed from the interventions of the state” (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 315). However, Olssen and Peters argued that in neoliberal economic and political philosophy, the state is a lever to pull, an indispensable ally in creating and sustaining the “conditions, laws and institutions necessary” to maximize corporate profitability and expand the influence of private markets (p. 314).

In this retelling, the state opens up space for the aspiring individuals to produce and consume, *to become entrepreneurial*. Although Stevenson’s original formulation as “the pursuit of opportunity beyond resources controlled” (as cited in Eisenmann, 2013) broadly fits this form of faculty entrepreneurship, a contextually specific definition might be more beneficial. Here, we can turn to Etzkowitz (2017) for additional guidance. In the academic capitalist regime, the entrepreneurial university (and, by extension, its faculty) becomes “an economic actor in its own right” (Etzkowitz, 2017, para. 1). Faculty researchers are “often eager and willing to direct, or participate in, programmes [sic] of research and development, aiming at commercial application” (Etzkowitz, 1983, p. 198). This faculty entrepreneurialism more closely resembles the “emergence of the

professional scientist working in a group in industry” than it does the work of the “traditional academic scientist” (Etzkowitz, 1983, p. 199).

Harvey (2005) highlighted the key outcome of the neoliberal worldview: “to redistribute, rather than to generate, wealth and income” (p. 159). It is critical here to note that Harvey is referring to the upward redistribution (and concentration) of wealth rather than the downward or broad redistribution of wealth through progressive taxation or robust social welfare programs. Redistribution can occur indirectly through financial austerity – like state governments slashing appropriations for public colleges and universities, or the federal government reducing grant dollars available for university research and development – or through regressive tax policy that diverts money away from universal programs and public sector initiatives, like affordable and accessible higher education, and instead funnels resources to powerful corporations and the already affluent. States, politicians, and capital have endeavored to further this upward financial redistribution through the privatization of the public space and the commodification of public goods. Higher education has been a primary target.

### **Theoretical Framework: Academic Capitalism**

Writing in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Slaughter and Leslie (1997) developed the theory of academic capitalism to describe how higher education as a whole had not only been influenced by neoliberal policy-making, but had also started to adopt its associated language and practice. The authors set out to examine how colleges and universities were incorporating or testing out the “market or market-like behaviors” of private, for-profit actors; research, and funding for that research, was aimed more explicitly at “building links with the private sector” (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997, p. 61).

In their original work on the topic, Slaughter and Leslie traced this transformation back to the Nixon administration, specifically to the changes in institutional and student aid stemming from the 1972 Federal Education Amendments. This legislation – most famously known for the introduction of Title IX – also fundamentally altered the financing of American higher education. In redirecting federal dollars away from institutions and towards federal financial aid for students, the federal government effectively shifted the monetary burden of earning a degree away from the state and onto the individual (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Slaughter and Leslie also identified the 1980 Bayh-Dole Act, which removed restrictions on an institution's ability to generate revenue from patenting and technology transfer, as a watershed moment in academic capitalism's origin story.

The authors contended that these legislative changes, coupled with the broader social and economic forces of neoliberalism, reshaped the relationship between students and an institution, and between an institution and its faculty (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). In their original investigation, Slaughter and Leslie examined specifically how academic capitalism had manifested itself through the process of technology transfer, i.e., how the patents, products, and ideas of university faculty encouraged a closer, more mutually beneficial bond between industry and research institutions. Faculty, especially those working at intensive research universities, were encouraged to place less emphasis on teaching and more emphasis on applied research and product innovation; they became akin to “state-subsidized entrepreneurs” increasingly involved in “corporatist funding arrangements” (p. 206). Meanwhile, institutions became more reliant on student tuition to

cover operational and instructional expenses, all while spending fewer of those dollars on teaching and learning.

Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) expanded on this initial concept to explore how academic capitalism had permeated institutional operations and strategic thinking, from intellectual property to intercollegiate athletics. In their follow-up to Slaughter and Leslie's (1997) thesis, Slaughter and Rhoades investigated how "the theory of academic capitalism moves beyond thinking of the student as consumer to considering the institution as marketer" (p. 1). Their book is a thorough accounting of how academic capitalism advanced beyond institutional research and technology transfer to the wholesale "commodification of higher education...in virtually all fields and classrooms in all types of institutions" (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004, p. 11).

Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) noted that the commodification and corporatization of the academy did not *just happen*, i.e., institutions were not passive bystanders in higher education's metamorphosis from a "public good knowledge/learning regime to an academic capitalist knowledge/learning regime" (p. 28). Colleges and universities sought out relationships and opportunities that further eroded the border between public and private sector. They stressed that academic capitalism is not an invisible, unavoidable force working inconspicuously behind the scenes. It requires the active participation of "groups of actors – faculty, students, administrators, and academic professionals – using a variety of state resources to create new circuits of knowledge that link higher education institutions to the new economy" (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004, p. 1).

We might best summarize academic capitalism as the manifestation of neoliberal hegemony within the realm of higher education, resulting in a "culture that mimics the

market economy and values rational self-interest over the search for truth and intellectual progress” (Kezar & Bernstein-Sierra, 2016, p. 330). Academic capitalism is not an isolated phenomenon. In the United States, it has fueled a fundamental restructuring of the relationship between students and institutions, between academic labor and institutions, and between institutions and the state (Jessop, 2017, 2018; Kauppinen & Cantwell, 2014; Rhoades, 1998; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Walker, 2014). It has influenced how we teach, learn, and research. It has reshaped academic work – both what it is, who does it, and how it is compensated – and amplified a culture of educational consumerism (Kezar & Bernstein-Sierra, 2016; Rhoades, 1998; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Walker, 2014).

Although the influence of the academic capitalism regime varies across countries and regions, the “commodification of knowledge” across higher education is inescapable (Kauppinen, Mathies, & Weimer, 2014, p. 249). Recent scholarship has attempted to expand the application of this theoretical construct to a more detailed analysis of higher education, globalization, and the neoliberal state (Kauppinen, 2012; Slaughter & Cantwell, 2012; Kauppinen & Cantwell, 2014).

### **Online Learning and Academic Capitalism**

Although online learning is often couched in the rhetoric of personal freedom and flexibility, it theoretically allows institutions to reach additional students who might not otherwise have access to postsecondary education (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2019). Those students might not be able to physically attend class because of professional or personal obligations, or they might simply prefer to learn at a distance. Regardless of individual student motivations, institutions have looked to expand their student enrollment through



distance learning as a strategic counter to decreased funding and stagnant enrollment (Allen & Seaman, 2016).

The last decade of online enrollment growth has been concentrated largely at public colleges and universities, while for-profit institutions, beset by lawsuits and dogged by questions over quality and rigor, have experienced a rather precipitous decline in their online enrollments (Cottom, 2017; Seaman et al., 2018; Shireman, 2017). In fact, Ortagus and Yang (2017) found evidence for why a good portion of this growth was concentrated at public 2- and 4-year colleges and universities. The researchers set out to determine whether public institutions ramped up online learning efforts in response to decreases in state funding. Across all public 4-year institutions, they found that a 10% decrease in state dollars presaged a roughly 3% increase in online enrollment. Public institutions historically relied on state appropriations to fund a large portion of their budget, but significant declines in that funding stream have precipitated a shift towards student tuition dollars as a primary revenue generator (Doyle & Zumeta, 2014).

Although the theory of academic capitalism might predict that institutions will leverage technology to expand potential student markets and find alternative paths to generate revenue, online learning has received less traction at the most elite and highly selective institutions. Of the top-100 institutions in online enrollment in the United States (NCES, 2017), only one university (Johns Hopkins University) was included in the top 10 of the *U.S. News & World Report* National University Rankings (U.S. News & World Report, 2018). Johns Hopkins was also the only American university of those high enrollment online institutions to make its way into the top 100 of the *Times Higher Education's* World University Rankings (Times Higher Education, 2018). More

strikingly, the majority of the most elite, highly ranked institutions in the United States have very few students enrolled only online, and when they do, it is almost exclusively in graduate programming (NCES, 2017).

Ortagus (2017) theorized that institutional perceptions regarding degree scarcity, rankings, and reputation might impact an institution's decision whether or not to offer online programming. He argued that online learning undercuts perceptions about the eliteness of an institution or the value of individual enrollment slots at that institution. However, because of budgetary constraints, public and less selective institutions might have little choice whether or not to explore alternative learning modalities to attract new students. Hoxby (2014) made a similar case, namely that the stated benefits of online education (e.g., increased access, enrollment growth, lowering costs) are not necessarily of paramount interest to the venture capital mindset of most well-endowed highly selective or elite institutions. Meanwhile, non-selective institutions are, according to Hoxby, "paid up front for the education that they provide" and as a result can "afford to be fairly indifferent as to whether students are well prepared or are underprepared and drop out midway" (p. 528). For Hoxby, this means that less selective institutions are more likely to take risks – both with regards to student retention and institutional reputation – because of their reliance on tuition dollars to fund their instructional and logistical operations.

In addition to leveraging online education as a learning modality to expand student enrollments, institutions have also formalized partnerships and inked contracts with for-profit consultants, educational technology companies, and marketing and advertising firms to increase exposure, boost institutional reputation, rapidly grow

program enrollments, or stake a claim to a future avenue for research and instructional innovation (Harris, 2018; Mattes, 2017; Perry & Katz, 2018; Zimmerman, 2018). Kamath (2015), writing on behalf of global education consultant Tyton Partners, estimated that online program managers (OPM) – private consulting firms that promise to help institutions grow online enrollments through contracted services like marketing and online course design – generated nearly \$1.5 billion in revenue in 2015 with significant growth expected in the future.

Mattes (2017) investigated the OPM marketplace and conducted a review of publicly available contracts. She warned that the influence of privately held or publicly traded OPMs on public institutions exposes students “to the same risks as for-profit colleges,” while also creating an environment in which OPMs “have a financial interest in pressing public institutions to enroll as many students as possible for as high a price as possible, regardless of how well students are prepared for the specific educational program or the quality of the program itself”. Institutions continue to seek out highly visible partnerships with technology companies and online learning vendors: learning management systems, web conferencing software, anti-plagiarism programs, virtual monitoring solutions, eportfolio and badging opportunities, and online tutoring services represent just a few of the categories that have received interest and money from colleges and universities, as well as venture capitalists (Watters, 2017a). These examples are illustrative of the convenient marriage between institutions, corporations, and for-profit entities as they all attempt to extract as much knowledge and revenue as possible from the online learning marketplace.

In 2017, Purdue University announced that they had acquired the for-profit Kaplan University and its 30,000-plus students. Purdue president and former Indiana governor Mitch Daniels said of the decision: “I don’t know where online is going, but I want this University, when I’m long gone, to be a leader, to at least be prepared to compete” (Seltzer, 2017). Following its acquisition of Kaplan, Purdue rebranded their online venture as Purdue University Global, in step with other prominent institutions’ (e.g., Penn State World Campus, Colorado State Global Campus, BYU Pathway Worldwide, University of Maryland Global Campus) attempts to tie online learning to transnational presence.

Knowledge as a private good to be bought, sold, and competed for – formalized through educational credentials, research, external partnerships – is essential to the academic capitalism regime. Kauppinen and Cantwell (2014) discussed how information communication technologies (ICTs) and educational technologies “have made possible the securing of external revenues in the form of online education and transnational mobile students” (p. 141).

Although international student mobility is not new to higher education, Kauppinen, Mathies, and Weimer (2014) underscored how the international student market represents the logical extension of the “commodification of knowledge,” whereby students “are seen as actual or potential commodities that carry, or will carry, within themselves another form of commodity, namely, knowledge” (p. 249). Although existing data (Seaman et al., 2018) do not confirm this as a trend, online education could encourage a wave of virtual transnational student mobility. We can apply Altbach’s (2016) “center” and “periphery” dichotomy to theorize how governments and institutions

located at the “center” – i.e., powerful Western, English-speaking, or post-industrial nations in the Global North – might seek to tap into and acquire new “vessels of knowledge” through academic programming and instruction delivered virtually to the “periphery” – i.e., predominantly non-English speaking countries considered to be in the Global South (Kauppinen et al., 2014, p. 247).

For powerful Western nations at the “center,” online learning could promise a transnational, revenue-optimizing, growth-maximizing strategic endeavor; for less powerful nations at the “periphery” (Altbach, 2016), online learning could represent an internal, sustainable, accessible, demand-relieving alternative to face-to-face (F2F) instruction. Whether online learning morphs into a powerful tool to further exacerbate discrepancies in power and prestige within and across countries, systems, and institutions, or into a democratizing, equitable, empowering venue for teaching, learning, and research likely depends on how we counter the dominant discourse and politics of our day.

### **Academic Capitalism’s Paradoxes**

Whether through the “discourse of student choice” or through a growing pool of contingent academic labor, online learning is a convenient outlet for institutions to explore anew the language and practice of academic capitalism (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004, p. 41). Walker (2009, 2014) offered a unique application of this theory to life, labor, and learning in higher education, examining how academic capitalism has transformed individual and institutional perceptions of time in the academy. Drawing on the work of social theorist Manuel Castells (2004, 2010) Walker argued that the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, aided by the expansion of information communication technologies (ICTs), has seen the continued “commodification and compression of time” (Walker, 2014, p. 58). In

academia, time is now marked by “mobility, flexibility, and immateriality” (Walker, 2014, p. 59). In this academic capitalist knowledge/learning regime, we “engage in continuous self-improvement, self-surveillance, and self-promotion.” We look towards “the future as the new frontier, something wide open to be colonized” (Walker, 2014, p. 63).

Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) wrote about how the discourse and reality of academic capitalism reflected an attempt to “valorize” virtual instruction (p. 22). Walker’s theory provides an explanation for that glowing rhetoric: online learning, as we imagine it to be now, and in the future, promises a solution to an unsolvable problem. The compression of time in higher education – whether affected through fundamental shifts in how we communicate, how we work, or a complex mixture of both – is symptomatic of broader changes in our perceptions and expectations of community, the state, and interpersonal relationships (Hampton, 2016; Houlden & Veletsianos, 2019; Walker, 2009, 2014). Perhaps, that is why we read about the future of higher education: a future in which there are no physical campuses, just institutions, instructors, and learners connected by an increasingly complex array of devices, platforms, and networks and joined in the pursuit of professional advancement. But to fashion online learning as an antidote to the problems created by our ever-busier lives, as the skeleton key that will unlock personal opportunities and pedagogical innovation, ignores an inescapable reality: we are given tools to be more productive, to make our lives more flexible, more convenient; meanwhile we are expected to be more efficient, to complete more tasks, to be constantly available. The question is whether online learning – and how we talk about its possibilities and its power – negates these paradoxes or reinforces them; as

institutional practice, does it emphasize and reaffirm the “reconstruction of social life on a market basis” (Fairclough, 1993, p. 141)?

## **Online Learning**

### **Definition of Terms and a Brief History**

Before reviewing the literature on online learning, we must clarify terms.

Distance education or distance learning – though often used synonymously with online learning – more broadly encompasses any instruction delivered to learners who are separated by physical space from an institution or the delivery of instruction (Moore & Kearsley, 2011). Online learning, meanwhile, is merely a means or outlet to deliver education or instruction to learners *at a distance*. Among administrators, instructors, and scholars in higher education, there appears to be little consensus on defining and applying these terms.

Moore and colleagues (Moore, Dickson-Deane, & Galyen, 2011) found significant inconsistencies in the scholarly literature and among conference participants with the usage and interpretation of distance learning, online learning, and e-learning. Thus, we often see these terms used interchangeably, but distance education remains the overarching organizing concept under which online learning exists. For online learning, Allen and Seaman (2006) adopted a threshold of 80%: at least 80% of the instruction in a given course or program must occur online, either synchronously (in real-time, e.g., a live webinar) or asynchronously (not in real time, e.g., a discussion board). For the purposes of this study, I focused on institutions enrolling students exclusively at a distance, in which case most, if not all, of the instruction occurs virtually.

The history of distance education, through correspondence education, educational radio and television, and community extension initiatives, stretches back to the pre-industrial era and continued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century until its intersection with computer technology and the expansion of online learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Harasim, 2000; Moore & Kearsley, 2011; Saba, 2011). But information communication technologies (ICTs) and the internet changed the possibilities of distance education. With television and radio, interaction was unidirectional and passive; with the web and a desktop, laptop, or mobile device, interaction *can be* multidirectional and participatory.

Although in recent years we might have talked about online learning in higher education as revolutionary, it has been a part of university instruction for over 3 decades. Harasim (2000) traced the beginning of online courses back to the mid-80s. Beginning with the growth of computer networking and the emergence of e-mail in the 1970s through the advent of the World Wide Web in the early 1990s, she offers up an early history of online education as the “new learning paradigm” (p. 41).

Sumner (2000), writing at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, offered a critical look at educational technology and distance learning and foresaw how markets and capital might influence the rhetoric and reality of online education. She argued that these alternative learning modalities have been too often captured by the “system” (i.e., corporate globalization). Drawing on Habermas’s theory of communicative action, Sumner made the case that the future success and power of online learning would depend on whether or not educators and administrators leveraged technology to create truly collaborative, reflective, and democratic learning spaces. She predicted that the multidimensional and



synchronous communicative capabilities of ICTs presented the possibility of “flexible, intimidation-free, norm-respecting participation” (p. 280).

However, Sumner, quite presciently, concluded with the image of an alternative future that has seemingly come to fruition: “in this way, the larger context of corporate globalisation [sic] promotes system-serving forms of distance education. Distance educators become more interested in advertising and sales, and alliances with corporations, than in establishing interactive educational environments where students can learn their way out of community problems” (p. 281).

Selwyn (2007) was similarly cautious, making the case that ICTs – and the concomitant promise of pedagogical and institutional innovation – had been captured by technocratic and establishment forces in higher education, thus sanitizing them of their true democratic and revolutionary power to build better, more inclusive, more critical, and more collaborative spaces for teaching and learning.

Online learning is now an established feature of higher education in the United States. According to recent data, over 600 institutions have more than 1,000 students enrolled exclusively in online coursework (NCES, 2017). In the fall of 2006, about 3.5 million students took at least one course online (Allen & Seaman, 2007). By the fall of 2016, that number had ballooned to over 6 million college students taking at least one course online in the United States. Over 3 million of those students were enrolled exclusively online. In fact, enrollment in online degree programs has continued to increase, while enrollment in F2F and traditional on-campus degree programs has been stagnant or seen a significant decline (Seaman et al., 2018).

### **Online Student Demographics**

Because of data limitations, discrepancies in definitions, and inconsistencies in institutional reporting, it can be difficult to get an accurate picture of who is taking courses online and how those students are performing (Ortagus, 2017). In spite of these challenges, we can point to a few recent studies that give us a clearer picture of online learners in U.S. colleges and universities.

In a 2017 study, Ortagus (2017) used data from the National Postsecondary Aid Study (NPSAS) to test three hypotheses related to online students and national enrollment trends. He found some evidence that certain demographic characteristics that might imply individual time constraints (e.g., full-time employment, parent, married) were positively correlated with an increase in online enrollment. Minority and low-income students were also less likely than their White peers to enroll in online courses. Recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2018) offer a different portrait at the program-level, suggesting that students from underrepresented populations were more likely to be enrolled in fully online programs relative to their representation in on-campus programs.

Additionally, Ortagus (2017) confirmed that community college and for-profit institutions were more likely to enroll students in online courses and programs. Ortagus's research built upon the work of Radford (2011), who also found that community college students and students with part- or full-time employment were more likely to take courses and programs at a distance.

National data point to a few interesting trends: 1) students are enrolling in both undergraduate and graduate courses and programs online; 2) nearly 70% of those enrollments are at public institutions; 3) over half of students taking an online course

were supplementing that instruction with on-campus learning; 4) over 80% of exclusively online students at public institutions reside in the same state as the institution they attend (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Seaman et al., 2018).

Beyond the annual online learning report published by Babson Research Group (Allen & Seaman, 2003-2017; Seaman et al., 2018), problems with institutional data and reporting make a regional, national, or cross-institutional analysis difficult. Prior to 2012, the NCES's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) did not include data on distance education enrollments (Allen & Seaman, 2016). Today, IPEDS does include aggregate enrollment numbers for students taking courses at a distance, but more detailed demographic data on online learners has only recently started to become available. Additionally, national retention and persistence data disaggregated by delivery modality are not available through NCES.

### **Online Student Motivations**

Despite these limitations, we can still look at institutional data, case studies, and other research to gather a better understanding of who online students are, why they choose to take online courses and programs, and how they perform in that modality. For example, Jaggars (2014) explored why students choose online courses at the community college level. Using data collected from student surveys and semi-structured interviews, Jaggars found that flexibility, convenience, and time savings were the most important reasons students cited for taking an online course. These students were predominantly non-traditional, i.e., they were older, working full- or part-time jobs, and often had dependent care responsibilities. Others also cited transportation limitations that prevented them from making it to campus regularly.

Bejerano (2008) discussed the uptick in on-campus students taking online courses, hinting at the underlying assumption that those courses are easier or less rigorous. Jaggars's (2014) findings did not support Bejerano's thesis; the rigor of online courses was not necessarily a deciding factor for students, as many felt that online courses were more difficult than a face-to-face alternative, while also suggesting that they left their more challenging or important (read: non-elective) courses for the classroom. These responses represented a paradox: students choose online courses because of the supposed convenience and implied time savings, but often find themselves spending more time doing work in that modality. A few students also identified the lack of physical interaction as a benefit of online learning environments.

Ilgaz and Gulbahar's (2015) research, albeit in a very different geographical and institutional context, leaves the reader drawing similar conclusions. The researchers conducted multiple surveys of online learners at Ankara University measuring both readiness and satisfaction with online learning. They began by identifying four key factors to e-learning preparedness, which they call "e-readiness", and outlining components to e-learning satisfaction ("e-satisfaction"). Students expressed that individual responsibilities or constraints (economic, personal, familial, professional) were a main driver in their decision to choose online delivery. Few participants cited their preference for online or e-learning as influential. Other research offers confirmation of this conclusion: online learners do not always choose to learn online because they want to, but often because they have to. Students regularly identified convenience (both temporal and geographical) and program flexibility as influential in their decision to learn online (Harris & Martin, 2012; Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2016).

In many cases, we are left to infer why students decided to take an online course or program *after* they have enrolled or even after they have dropped out. Arbaugh (2004) found that student learning experiences tended to improve most significantly between the first and second online course and that additional online experiences also increased the student's "perceived ease of use" within an online course. However, beyond the second online course, student satisfaction with their online experiences remained relatively constant. Willging and Johnson (2009) tracked 3 cohorts from an online human resources master's program at the University of Illinois. Students cited convenience and flexibility as reasons for starting an online program, but also regularly identified lack of time, scheduling conflicts, and challenges with full-time employment as barriers to completion or reasons for leaving the program.

These findings suggest the possibility that once the novelty of learning online has dissipated, learners must still grapple with the same challenges and barriers to attaining a degree. Unfortunately, online learning does not empower students to build more hours into the day; to negotiate with inflexible employers; or to deftly juggle personal, professional, and academic responsibilities. For less academically prepared students, learning online might actually exacerbate disparities in academic success and degree completion. Although overall student enrollment trends might appear encouraging, a large, somewhat inconclusive body of literature suggests that we need a bit more nuance when discussing the role that technology and online learning play in providing access and quality postsecondary education for all (Hart, Friedman, & Hill, 2015; Johnson & Cuellar Mejia, 2014; Xu & Jaggars, 2011, 2014).

### **Outcomes and Online Learning**

Scholars often allude to the “no significant difference” phenomenon (Russell, 2001) regarding comparisons between learning outcomes in online and face-to-face settings. Russell summarized the existing empirical evidence, which suggested “no significant differences between alternate modes of education delivery” (National Center for Distance Education and Technological Advancement, n.d., para. 1).

For the purposes of this study, I am not necessarily concerned with questions over whether online learning is equal to or better than to face-to-face learning. As Russell (2001) documented, there is plenty of empirical evidence to suggest that, with successful design and facilitation, online and blended instruction can produce “statistically equivalent learning outcomes” (Means, Bakia, & Murphy, 2014, p. 22).

After examining 232 peer-reviewed articles on distance learning published from 1985-2002, Bernard et al. (2004) came to the same conclusion. As with much of the other research on online learning, the situation is quite complex and highly context-dependent. Technology functions as a medium to deliver instruction, and there are other important variables (e.g., instructor presence, student characteristics, learning conditions) that can impact student success and achievement in both the physical and virtual classroom (Means et al., 2014).

But, recent research on course effects, student achievement, and employer perceptions of degrees earned fully online paints a slightly more complicated picture of the successes and failures of online learning in U.S. higher education. When discussing academic achievement and online learning, it might help to distinguish between short-

term (course-related) outcomes and long-term (degree-related, employment-related) outcomes.

### **Course Effects**

Scholarship focusing on course-related outcomes has tended to cluster around a few performance-related variables (e.g., course grade, assessment grade, course persistence). Generally speaking, these studies aim for a randomized controlled trial or quasi-experimental design comparing outcomes between an online and face-to-face version of a course. However, this has involved both ethical and practical hurdles for researchers and practitioners. Bernard et al. (2004) noted the challenges with methodological rigor and quality of the body of literature under examination in their earlier analysis.

Howell, Laws, and Lindsay (2004) provided an early look at the research on completion rates for online courses. Pointing out some structural flaws in the research design of prior studies, they expressed skepticism that students in online courses were actually completing courses at a lower rate than their F2F counterparts. Howell et al. (2004) did importantly note that completion rates are contextual and highlighted the demographic differences between learners across modalities, but, contrary to their original skepticism, issues with retention and persistence of online learners are now well documented in the literature, (Bawa, 2016; Means et al., 2014).

In a meta-analysis of 176 studies containing a treatment and control group, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) (2009) concluded, in line with Russell's (2001) summary, that there was no significant difference in learning outcomes between online and face-to-face instruction. This analysis included studies from primary, secondary, and

postsecondary settings. However, in a response to the meta-analysis, Jaggars and Bailey (2010) questioned the methods and conclusions of the DOE's work. Of note, very little research included in the meta-analysis examined a comparison between semester-length face-to-face and online courses. The studies meeting those conditions showed mixed results and, at times, questionable research design. Jaggars and Bailey (2010) stressed that although we might see some evidence of equivalent outcomes across learning modalities, those results do not mitigate other potential negative long-term effects of online coursework, particularly among low-income and underprepared students.

Coates, Humphreys, Kane, and Vachris (2004) give us an example of this type of quasi-experimental study design, and their findings confirm some of the suspicion that Jaggars and Bailey (2010) expressed in their rebuttal to the DOE. Using data collected from a standardized economics exam and survey instrument, Coates et al. found that face-to-face students performed significantly better than their online counterparts. Students were enrolled in introductory level economics courses at 3 different institutions; researchers controlled for possible self-selection bias and found that students who selected into an online section performed better than a "randomly selected individual with identical observable characteristics" (p. 545).

This final point is a crucial one, as much of the debate in the literature centers on controlling for the self-selection bias of online learners, i.e., is the "no significant difference" phenomenon (Russell, 2001) the result of some predisposition or characteristic that makes students more likely to select into an online course? Johnson and Cuellar Mejia (2014), in their study of online course takers in California's 2-year institutions, answered this question unambiguously: "once we control for a full set of



student characteristics (including overall grade point averages [GPAs]) and institutional factors, we find that online course success rates are between 11 and 14 percentage points lower than traditional course success rates. In addition, we add that online learning does nothing to overcome achievement gaps across racial/ethnic groups—in fact, these gaps are even larger in online classes” (p. 2).

There might be additional non-observable student traits that contribute to a student’s decision to enroll in an online course, but identifying and isolating those factors has proven difficult. Cochran, Baker, Campbell, and Leeds (2014) underscored the need for a closer examination of non-demographic characteristics or behavioral traits that might contribute to student persistence in online courses.

Xu and Jaggars (2011) analyzed course completion, course outcomes, and subsequent persistence among students within the Virginia Community College System taking their first math or English course (“gatekeeping” courses) online. They found a significant negative impact on withdrawal rates and course grades, even after controlling for learner characteristics. Their conclusion attempted to confront the tension at the heart of most experimental or quasi-experimental studies comparing online and F2F outcomes. In short, online learners tended to “have stronger academic preparation,” which might lead to results that “underestimate the negative impacts of the online format on course outcomes” (p. 362). This effect appears to extend beyond performance in an initial online course, as students who had taken an online course early in their degree program were less likely to persist to graduation than those who had opted for exclusively F2F coursework.

In a follow-up study of course outcomes in Washington, Xu and Jaggars (2014) examined data from nearly 500,000 online courses and 50,000 students across the state's 34 community and technical colleges. They found, similar to Johnson and Cuellar Mejia (2014), that the achievement gap for underprepared students and minority students actually widened in online courses, leading them to conclude that "if this pattern holds true across other states and educational sectors, it would imply that the continued expansion of online learning could strengthen, rather than ameliorate, educational inequity" (p. 651).

Kaupp (2012) uncovered similar results when examining the relationship between online course taking and the White/Latino achievement gap in the California community college system. Hart et al. (2018) reaffirmed the findings of Xu and Jaggars (2011, 2014), Kaupp (2012), and Johnson and Cuellar Mejia (2014). Using fixed effects to control for potential biases resulting from student preferences, college-level and course-level differences on their model, Hart et al. explored the impact of modality on learning outcomes across 200,000 unique student records in the California community college system. Across their sample, they found that "students are significantly less likely to complete courses when they are taken online and less likely to achieve a successful (pass/A/B/C) result" (p. 17). There is also some evidence that these trends are not isolated to the community college setting, but affect student performance at 4-year institutions as well (Krieg & Henson, 2016). Cochran et al. (2014) also focused on demographic and student characteristics that may or may not affect online course completion. Drawing on undergraduate student data from a large public university, the researchers found,

somewhat intuitively, that students who had previously withdrawn from an online course are more likely to withdraw from future online courses.

In contrast to the conclusions of the aforementioned researchers, James, Swan, and Daston (2015) contended that their findings called into question prior reservations about modality and learning outcomes. But, James et al. did not accurately summarize Jaggars and Xu's (2011, 2014) work, nor were their conclusions consistent with their own findings. Moreover, it is important to note that Xu and Jaggars (2011, 2014) and Hart et al. (2015) used data from individual community college systems (Virginia, Washington, and California), which are more likely to have consistent definitions and data collection procedures across institutions than data from the membership-model of the Predictive Analytics Reporting (PAR) framework used by James et al. (2015).

Fully online programming, even after controlling for other learner characteristics, lagged behind both blended and F2F alternatives in James et al.'s (2015) study. At 4-year institutions, the researchers observed only small differences in retention rates across learning modalities after controlling for other variables. But, when looking across all samples, students were more likely to be retained when blending their coursework and least likely when taking all courses online. James et al.'s research might encourage further investigation of learner outcomes across modality, but they do little to undermine the rigorous system-level studies of others (Hart et al., 2018; Johnson & Cuellar Mejia, 2014; Xu & Jaggars, 2011, 2014).

Course-level data can be an important indicator of individual course quality, design, or instructor presence; pedagogical strategies and differences in instructional quality can also account for the variation in course outcomes and student achievement

discussed above. Studies on the academic outcomes of online course takers have important implications for how we think about students who enroll in fully online academic programs. Many students will take an online course or two over the duration of their on-campus academic program, but this study is concerned primarily with how institutions market fully online degree programs as an alternative to or replacement of traditional face-to-face academic programming. Most institutional websites promoting online learning focus on degree-bearing programs, rather than individual courses. In this case, questions about student performance, persistence, and employability during and after the completion of an online program hold value for our analysis.

### **Program Outcomes**

As with course-level studies, the limited scope of institutional data and reporting make a regional, national, or cross-institutional analysis complicated. Additionally, extrapolating from course-level findings to program-level outcomes can be a difficult task. What is the difference between an online-course taker and an online program student? Do the limitations, struggles, or successes of online course takers translate to the experiences of exclusively online students?

At the median, the existing body of research suggests that retention in online programs and courses lags behind F2F alternatives (Bawa, 2016; Hart, 2012; Layne, Boston, & Ice, 2013; Lee & Choi, 2011; Patterson and McFadden, 2009). Hart (2012) analyzed roughly 40 peer-reviewed studies (1999-2009) on online learner persistence and attrition. Academic preparation (e.g., prior GPA, experience with online learning), attitudinal disposition (e.g., goal-oriented, highly motivated), program structure (e.g., flexibility, workload), course design, and external support were consistently identified as

“facilitators” of persistence. Barriers included external factors (e.g., financial difficulties, family dynamics, employment changes), lack of social interaction and poor communication, and access to reliable technology. Numerous other researchers (Bocchi, Eastman, & Swift, 2004; Boston et al., 2009; Holder, 2007) have tried to pin down why some students complete their online programs and why others do not.

Shea and Bidjerano’s (2014) work suggested that some online learning to supplement face-to-face coursework – i.e., blending an academic program – might be beneficial for a certain subset of students, but incorporating a handful of courses into an on-campus degree program is not the same as electing to take a program fully online. Despite their fairly optimistic conclusions, James et al. (2015) did find some evidence of increased attrition in fully online degree programs vis-a-vis blended or on-campus alternatives, especially at 2-year institutions.

Moving beyond more general analyses of learner outcomes, Kramarae (2000) invoked the concept of work shifts to explore how women’s experiences with distance learning might be more complicated than we assume. The “third shift” implies that distance learning occurs outside of a woman’s first (full-time employment) and second (household labor) shifts. Kramarae amplified the voices of women who described “how they grapple individually, often in isolation, with time constraints so they can unobtrusively squeeze distance learning into their already packed work and family lives” (p. 3). Her research provided a template for future scholars interested in a more critical analysis of the muddy intersection between online learning, race, gender, and class.

Müller (2008) traced the lineage of her work back to Kramarae’s analysis (2000) and continued with this line of gendered inquiry. She conducted a qualitative case study,

somewhat of a rarity in the current body of literature, to examine how and why women persisted or dropped out of online programs. Participants identified juggling multiple responsibilities as the biggest contributing factor or barrier to their continued studies. More critical research like this would be a valuable addition to the field. Discrepancies across demographic groups force us to grapple with the possible unanticipated consequences associated with online learning and to answer whether online learning really makes a college degree more accessible for disadvantaged and underrepresented students (McPherson & Bacow, 2015; Xu & Jaggars, 2014).

### **Employer Perceptions of Online Learning**

Beyond course-level and program-level outcomes, we must also address how employers value degrees or academic credentials completed online. In this arena, it can be difficult to isolate the effect of for-profit institutions on employers' overall perceptions of degrees earned online. Between 2000 and 2010, enrollment at for-profit institutions grew from roughly 4% to over 10% as a share of total postsecondary enrollment; a large portion of that growth was concentrated in online programs targeting adult, first-generation, and underprepared students (Deming, Goldin, & Katz, 2013). Moreover, for-profit institutions plowed upwards of 35% of their total net revenues back into program marketing, advertising, and new student recruitment for online programs (Rovai & Downey, 2010). Cottom (2017) has written extensively about the rise of for-profit institutions, their questionable recruiting practices, and the unsettling experiences of students of color. Marketing saturation and meteoric growth, paired with poor student outcomes and increased public scrutiny, could have led to a tenuous association between the quality (or lack thereof) of online degrees and for-profit institutions.

Now over a decade old, Adams and DeFleur's (2006) study of employability and online credentials remains an important contribution to the body of literature on postsecondary credentialing and educational delivery. Adams and DeFleur's focus was not on the "quality" of online learning, but rather "on the acceptability of degrees earned online" (p. 33). Surveying hiring managers in a number of major metropolitan areas, the researchers found a clear bias against hiring candidates who had completed their degree online.

Adams and DeFleur (2006) created three categories of hypothetical applicants: one with a degree awarded by a college or university with 100% face-to-face instruction; one with a degree awarded 100% online by a "virtual university;" and one awarded by a college and university through a combination of face-to-face and online instruction. The labeling of a "virtual university" could be read as a nod to large for-profit online institutions that dominated the discursive space of online education throughout the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Citing Adams and DeFleur (2006), Columbaro and Monaghan (2008) highlighted a number of studies that showed an employer preference for degrees earned in a traditional F2F setting (or bias against degrees earned exclusively through online instruction). Importantly, they noted that these studies rely on a hypothetical: what *would* employers do? Erden and Tekarslan (2014) asked a similar question regarding employer intent, but in a different geographical context. In examining Turkish employers' perceptions of degrees earned online, they provided additional evidence of latent employer bias. The researchers carried out a survey of hiring managers and found a marked preference for degrees earned in a traditional F2F format.

Deming, Yuchtman, Abulafi, Goldin, and Katz (2016) attempted to get at the non-hypothetical: what *do* employers do? Using fictitious resumes to apply to jobs across five large metropolitan areas, Deming and colleagues focused their analysis primarily on differences in institution type and modality of instruction. They found, unsurprisingly, that prospective candidates with online degrees from large *for-profit* institutions were far less likely to be contacted by potential employers in the business sector. Deming et al. (2016) did not differentiate solely between instructional modality, making it possible that the bias against graduates of large for-profit institutions is just that: a bias against large for-profit institutions, rather than a skepticism of the validity or value of online degree programs.

Unfortunately, scholars have primarily focused their research around online universities, rather than online programs offered at traditional non-profit institutions. However, Kineer's (2014) work offers a path forward for this type of research. Healthcare recruiters were asked to indicate their preference for learning modality and institution type for nurses earning a Registered Nurse-to-Bachelor of Science in Nursing (RN-to-BSN) degree. Recruiters showed clear bias against an online degree earned at a traditional non-profit institution vis-a-vis a face-to-face degree, in some cases even preferring a F2F degree earned at a for-profit institution over an online degree earned at a non-profit institution. This could point to discipline-specific expectations or assumptions – e.g., nursing education that demands clinical experience requires hands-on learning and exposure. Additional research might also explore how certain professional occupations – because of required experiences or the complexity of the subject matter – might privilege or downgrade degrees completed fully online. The results of Grossman and Johnson's



(2015) study show a similar employer preference for degrees earned through traditional on-campus coursework within the field of accounting. Although more research is needed in this area, the existing evidence does show a clear preference for academic credentials earned in a traditional classroom setting.

Today, the vast majority of 2- and 4-year non-profit institutions offer online courses and degree programs and the distinction between a “traditional” and “virtual” university has largely dissipated. Some large non-profit universities with traditional origins, like Southern New Hampshire University and Liberty University, have further confused this typology. Echoing the prior efforts of some its for-profit competitors, Southern New Hampshire has been vocal about its aim to create academic programming and “microcredentials” that are explicitly tailored to the needs of industry and prospective employers (Blumentzyk, 2018). The increasing acceptance of work-from-home or remote work arrangements (Indeed, 2018), coupled with the volume of online degree programs and online program graduates, could potentially affect employer attitudes towards educational credentials earned in the future.

However, at this juncture, accurately deciphering and predicting employer preferences requires a bit of context and a lot of speculation. What is certain is that, across the United States, more students are choosing to take online courses and enroll in exclusively online degree programs (Seaman et. al., 2018). And, despite faculty and administrator concerns regarding learning outcomes and student access, institutions, with the assistance of industry, are investing more resources and personnel in attracting and enrolling online students through pervasive and persistent digital marketing and advertising efforts (Hanover Research, 2015; Katzman, 2016). The internet has become a

contested space brimming with institutional branding, targeted marketing, and digital advertisements – a virtual marketplace full of potential online students.

### **Digital Marketing in Higher Education**

During the 1980s, amid increased enrollment pressures and cuts in state funding, institutional marketing budgets exploded and colleges and universities allocated additional financial resources and personnel towards enrolling new students (McDonough, 1994). Fairclough (1993), in analyzing various print documents from British universities in the early 90s, described a “fracturing of the boundary between the orders of discourse of higher education and business as regards advertising, and a colonization of the former by the latter” (p. 149).

Early research on institutional marketing focused on print materials, similar to Fairclough’s (1993) example cited above. In the United States, the college viewbook stood as an example of visual and textual branding; it was designed to tell a compelling story attractive to the prospective student (Durgin, 1998; Hartley & Morpew, 2008; Klassen, 2001). Hartley and Morpew (2008) undertook a content analysis of viewbooks, examining the stories that institutions told about themselves and the purpose of higher education. They noted the similarity in imagery and messaging across an institutional sample of viewbooks, which regularly emphasized student life and picturesque campuses, but “made no attempt to explain what higher education is for” (p. 685). If the viewbook did contain a statement about the value or purpose of a degree from the respective institution, it was often wrapped in a promise of economic, career, or individual benefits. Likewise, Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) recalled Boyer’s claim that these brochures and

printed materials, like the viewbook, were designed to be “more visually appealing than informative” (p. 287).

At the end of the 1990s, institutions started moving towards web-based marketing and advertising to supplement print materials (Hossler, 1999; Kittle & Ciba, 2001; Strauss, 1998; Poock & Lefond, 2001). A significant portion of the limited research on institutional marketing situates print and digital materials within the framework of the college selection process, i.e., how do prospective students perceive marketing materials and how does it influence their decision to attend (or not attend) a particular school. Unsurprisingly, students increasingly use institutional websites to explore and filter through colleges during their selection phase (Burdett, 2013; Hanover Research, 2015; Hossler, 1998; Poock & Lefond, 2001; Ramasubramanian, Gyure, & Mursi, 2003; Strauss, 1998). Researchers have also examined how institutions leverage specific social media platforms, like Facebook, to engage prospective students or “stakeholders” (Clark, Fine, & Scheuer, 2016; Peruta & Shields, 2017).

Wohn, Ellison, Khan, Bliss, and Gray’s (2013) examination of how first-generation students use social media to navigate the college selection process belongs to a relatively small genre of contemporary research on digital platforms, social media, and the internet in higher education marketing. Their findings suggest that individual social media usage could be a beneficial tool for first-generation students by connecting them to professional resources and personal networks that might fill in potential knowledge gaps, help them sift through information, and decipher application and aid requirements. Students activated their own peer communities through digital networks like Facebook for support and guidance throughout the process. Institutional presence or support was

not mentioned as a contributing factor, but the authors did offer a suggestion that institutions become more directly engaged in these sorts of digital spaces as an indirect means of recruiting students and increasing visibility.

In general, the body of literature on traditional and digital marketing in higher education is rather scant (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Saichaie, 2011). What does exist in popular media and academic scholarship suggests an environment in which institutions are spending more money on marketing and devoting more time to its implementation, while also adopting aggressive customer service strategies and recruitment tactics from the corporate world (Blumenstyk, 2006; Katzman, 2016; Saichaie, 2011; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

In outlining the relationship between academic capitalism and student recruitment, Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) correctly predicted what would happen when “higher education becomes more of a commodity to be marketed and consumed” (p. 284). They warned that institutional marketing would ultimately lead colleges and universities to create “a marketplace in which there are preferred, exploited, undervalued, and overlooked customers” (p. 295). And to capture prospective students in this marketplace, institutions needed to respond with an intense focus on marketing, branding, and excellent customer service (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

Employing a similarly critical lens, Saichaie (2011) conducted a discourse analysis of institutional websites, exploring what linguistic and visual representations of college and student life tell us about the value and purpose of higher education. Both Saichaie (2011) and Saichaie and Morpew’s (2014) findings reaffirm the perception that colleges and universities act as distributors or grantors of credentials, as sites for

vocational and professional preparation. Their line of research offers a critical analysis of institutional marketing, examining how institutions describe the purpose and benefits of postsecondary education as a private good for individual consumption.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 2, I summarized the origins and influence of the academic capitalist knowledge/learning regime and reviewed its connections to the ideological foundations of neoliberalism and associated policy-making in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries. I then reviewed the scholarship on online learning in higher education and considered how the research on learning outcomes and employer preferences might lead us to be a bit more skeptical of how institutions and popular media have portrayed the promises and possibilities of online learning. In a comprehensive summary of the existing research, Protopsaltis and Baum (2019) agreed with that skepticism, arguing that online learning is “far from the hoped-for silver bullet” (p. 1). In the final section of this chapter, I explored how institutional marketing has expanded into the digital space and evolved to include more aggressive strategies and techniques to capture new students. Because of intense competition for student enrollments and the retreating financial support of the state, colleges and universities in the United States have had to deal with saturated markets and explore new avenues for revenue generation.

Online learning is a relatively new and intensely contested frontier in an endless search for new sources of institutional revenue and the identification of untapped student markets. In spite of concerns about student achievement and student learning, online education continues to occupy privileged discursive space in our institutions and in the public. In this regard, how colleges and universities frame and sell the benefits and

realities of online learning represents an ideal opportunity to explore the changing discourse(s) of academic capitalism.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a methodology with which we can investigate the intersection of language and power (Fairclough, 1989), in which we can explore the connections between seemingly disparate phenomenon and the dominant discourses which tie them together. What is the dialectical interplay between the ideology of neoliberalism and the realities of academic capitalism and the expansion of online learning as an institutional phenomenon? More specifically, I ask to what extent does the textual and visual language of online learning, as it is marketed at public universities in the United States, acts as a conduit for the introduction of new ideas, narratives, and social trends into the discourse(s) of academic capitalism?

### Chapter 3

In the following study, I employed critical discourse analysis (CDA) and multimodal analysis as methodological and theoretical frameworks (Fairclough, 1989, 1993, 2012, 2013; Gee, 2011, 2014; Kress, 2004, 2012; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Rogers, 2011, 2013; van Dijk, 1993) to examine the discourse, both linguistic and visual, of online learning in U.S. higher education as seen through the discursive practice of digital marketing. Using data collected from institutional websites to market online programs at public universities, I analyzed linguistic texts and visual representations of online learning and explored what those narratives, assumptions, and ideas might tell us about the why, what, and who of online learning.

In the Faircloughian (1989, 2013) sense, discourse links the individual text, what he refers to as the discursive event, to social action or social practice; it can help us explain a “complex social event within relations of power and domination” (Fairclough, 1993, p. 136). American higher education is undoubtedly complex: a patchwork of public, private, and for-profit institutions funded through a fragmented system of state appropriations, federal financial aid, and student tuition dollars (Altbach, Gumport, & Berdahl, 2011). And, as social institutions, colleges and universities have long done more than simply provide access to educational experiences or act as grantors of educational credentials. Higher education institutions, especially elite public and private universities, play an unmistakable role in replicating our existing social and racial class hierarchies (Hurwitz, 2011; Mullen, 2009; Posselt, Jaquette, Bielby, & Bastedo, 2012; Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001). And, as Cottom (2017) has chronicled, for-profit institutions have likewise benefited immensely from creating an underclass of academic institutions— what

she labeled “lower-ed” – that have profited from predatory practices targeting underprepared students and students of color.

Whether it is at an Ivy League institution, an elite public institution, a regional public university, a small private liberal arts college, or a massive for-profit conglomerate, we have settled on selling college as the ladder to individual social mobility, as a consumer good that can be bought and sold, as the remedy to individual struggle and the key to individual prosperity (Giroux, 2002; Kezar & Bernstein-Sierra, 2016; Labaree, 1997; Saichaie & Morpew, 2014). But, there are qualitative differences in what is being marketed and “sold” – and who has access to that “product” (Taylor & Cantwell, 2018).

In this analysis, I aimed to explore exactly how online learning, as it is marketed at these select public institutions with high exclusively online student enrollments, works as a part of this “complex social event,” how it builds on or influences the dialectical relationship between discourse and social practice in American higher education. What do public colleges and universities tell prospective students about the benefits and the promises of online learning? What do those embedded narratives tell us about the interplay between our broader social discourse and observable social phenomena beyond the physical and virtual walls of our institutions? As Rogers (2011) explained, critical discourse analysis is ultimately an investigation into and a critique of power, and “marketing provides us with a large body of knowledge of powerful techniques” (p. 9). As I outlined in Chapter 2, the justification for online learning rests on its ability to deliver access and choice to current and prospective students, but we must square those alleged benefits with the uneven experiences and disparate outcomes of online learners.



How does institutional marketing draw on existing discourse(s) to reconcile or circumvent this tension?

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

As a research methodology, critical discourse analysis (CDA) is inherently transdisciplinary (Van Dijk, 1993; Wodak & Meyer, 2014). CDA endeavors to connect or mediate “ between ‘grand theories’ as applied to larger society and concrete instances of social interaction which results on texts to be analysed” (Wodak & Meyer, 2014, p. 23). Drawing on theoretical and methodological roots from the humanities and social sciences (Rogers, 2011), CDA is a project to uncover the subtle interplay between the language we use and the structures and systems that contribute to an unjust, unequal world. Van Dijk (2013) preferred to categorize CDA not as a distinct research methodology, but rather as a “social movement of scholars using a wide variety (usually, but not exclusively, qualitative) methods of discourse analysis” (p. 176). It is in this focus on discourse as the textual representation of the social order – the insistence that language is not value-free – that CDA reveals its origins in critical social theory.

Not all textual analysis is explicitly critical, and Rogers (2011) is careful to underscore what makes critical discourse analysis indeed *critical*. Researchers have used language and text as sources of data and target for empirical investigation, as seen through quantitative content analysis or grounded theory research (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000). As with other approaches to research, our epistemological and ontological commitments point to the methodology we choose and the questions we ask of the world and of our data.

In this regard, Wodak and Meyer (2014) placed critical discourse analysis as an outgrowth of critical social theory, as both a social movement and a critical methodology that is explicitly “oriented towards critiquing and changing society as a whole” (p. 6). Van Dijk (1993) differentiated between critical and non-critical analysis, arguing that the work of CDA, in attempting to uncover and explain the “crucial role of discourse in the reproduction of dominance and inequality,” is and was an “admittedly and ultimately political” endeavor (p. 252-253).

Rogers (2011) traced the philosophical roots of CDA back to critical linguists like Bakhtin, DuBois, and Voloshinov and to critical social theorists like Gramsci, Foucault, and Said. From the critical theory of the Frankfurt School – likewise, a social movement situated within a specific historical context – to the work of postmodernist, feminist, and Marxist scholars, the philosophical and methodological underpinnings of CDA are deeply embedded in an ethic of resistance, emancipation, and justice (Fairclough, 2013; Rogers, 2011, 2013; Wodak & Meyer, 2014).

Given the diverse philosophical roots of CDA, it is difficult to pin down an agreed-upon methodological approach or to identify an established set of methods to guide a research agenda. In fact, Rogers (2011) encouraged aspiring researchers to avoid “strict categorization” of CDA and its associated methodology(ies). She did, however, follow the development of critical discourse analysis as a methodology back to three contemporary theorists: James Gee and his socio-cognitive approach; Norman Fairclough and the dialectical foundations of discourse; and Gunther Kress and his work on social semiotics and multimodality. In this project, I drew primarily on the work of Fairclough

and Kress for linguistic and visual analysis, respectively, but also incorporated certain tools for data analysis from Gee (2011, 2014).

### **Fairclough's CDA as Methodology**

In describing the purpose and assumptions of CDA, Fairclough (2013) distinguishes between descriptive and critical discourse analysis, arguing that the former approach elides the relational and dialectical aspect of all discourse. A critical analysis of discourse “brings into the complex relations which constitute social life” (Fairclough, 2013, p. 3); it illuminates how discourse functions as a tool to solidify power, to reaffirm the status quo, or to quell resistance. Gee (2011) echoes van Dijk's (1993) description of what is *critical* about critical discourse analysis; he is forthright in his explanation of the aims, origins, and assumptions of the methodology. He argues that the discourse analyst must adopt a critical stance because they cannot avoid that “language itself is...political” (Gee, 2011, p. 9).

Methodologically, we can identify varying assumptions and approaches about how one does CDA, but at its core, CDA is a critical examination of how “discourse reflects and constructs the social world through many different sign systems” (Rogers, 2011, p. 1). Fairclough's (2013) later work moved one step beyond examination towards a more emancipatory research program that “addresses social wrongs in their discursive aspects and possible ways of righting or mitigating them” (p. 11).

The questions we ask and the data we collect are informed by our own epistemology and ideology. The critical discourse analyst is not concerned with an appearance of objectivity, but rather in explaining how language, power, and ideology work together to reproduce social structures and institutional systems (Fairclough, 2013).

Gee (2011) argued that CDA “can illuminate problems and controversies in the world. It can illuminate issues about the distribution of social goods, who gets helped, who gets harmed” (p. 10). The critical discourse analyst should attempt to examine how language reifies hegemony, to illuminate “the effects of texts in inculcating and sustaining ideologies” (Fairclough, 2011, p. 123).

Over time, individual discourses wed themselves to social practice and social structures, reinforcing or recreating beliefs, ideas, assumptions, and systems of power. We can no longer distinguish discourse from social reality, the two together have established an ideological baseline that our language must adhere to. Fairclough (2013) labeled this process “naturalization:” the dialectical fusion of discourse and reality into an unquestioned “non-ideological common sense” (p. 31). Discourse does indeed have an inherent ideology, but through the act of naturalization it appears to become *non-ideological*. For example, consider the conversation around college affordability in the United States. The framing of affordability – whether through the lens of student debt, tuition increases, financial aid, or institutional bookkeeping – already concedes that public post-secondary education should cost something, that it should not be a public good accessible to all citizens free of cost. It has been naturalized. To “denaturalize” is the “objective of a discourse analysis which adopts ‘critical goals’” (Fairclough, 2013, p. 30). As Wodak (2011) wrote, the purpose of critical theory – and by extension critical discourse analysis – is to “root out a particular kind of delusion...to ‘demystify’ discourses by deciphering ideologies” (p. 51), even when those discourses appear to be without ideology or non-ideological.

To achieve the interpretive and explanatory aims of CDA, we must pair its critique with an analytical approach that is both rigorous in its design and transparent in its objectives. In some of his foundational writings on the subject, Fairclough (1989, p. 109) sketched out an overarching three-step framework for engaging with CDA:

1. Description: a “linguistic description” of the text (written or visual)
2. Interpretation: an examination of texts from the perspective of the participant (i.e., not the analyst), or “of the relationship between the text and the interaction”
3. Explanation: synthesizing the description and interpretation into a larger social analysis (Janks, 2005)

In the following section, I walk through each of these phases and explain how I incorporated them into research design.

### **Description**

Halliday’s (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1985/2014) systemic functional linguistics heavily influenced Fairclough’s approach to textual analysis (Rogers, 2011; Wodak & Meyer, 2014), which built a theoretical foundation for language use that “is oriented toward choice and privileges meaning makers (language users) as agents making decisions about the social functions of their language use” (Rogers, 2011, p. 6).

Informed by the work of Halliday, Fairclough (1989, 2013) created a typology for thinking about the different linguistic and social layers of discourse. At the most rudimentary level, we have the text itself, which is part of the discursive event, or the actual “instance of language use” (Fairclough, 2013, p. 96). The discursive event consists of three separate components: the text itself; the act of producing, distributing, and

interpreting that text (i.e., *discursive practice*); and the social context, or social practice, within which the discursive event is situated (Fairclough, 2013). Beyond the discursive event, Fairclough (1989, 2013) also considered how discourses were interconnected or operated beyond the individual discursive event. Here, he coined the term *interdiscursivity* to explain the connection between and across discourses.

The text is the site of analysis within a discursive event, encompassing not only individual pieces of written or spoken language, but also representing the visual, including static images and multimedia. During the description stage of Fairclough's (1989) methodology, I conducted a linguistic analysis of individual texts using the ten questions Fairclough provided in his original description of the methodology. These questions focus on three separate, but interrelated, linguistic categories: vocabulary, grammar, and textual structures. Under the first two linguistic categories of vocabulary and grammar, Fairclough aligned most of the individual questions with one of three social or communicative objectives or values present in a text: experiential, relational, or expressive. Using the chart below, recreated from Fairclough (1989, p. 113), we can identify how these linguistic values connect to larger discursive and social structures. For example, Fairclough summarized relational value as “a trace of and a cue to the social relationships which are enacted via the text in the discourse” (p. 113).

Dimensions of meaning	Values of features	Structural effects
Contents	Experiential	Knowledge/beliefs
Relations	Relational	Social relations
Subjects	Expressive	Social identities

The full list of questions can be found in Appendix I. Using Fairclough's (1989) linguistic framework outlined above, Janks (2005) developed a simplified rubric for data analysis, which Saichaie (2011) employed in his study of representation on institutional websites. I drew on her work (Janks, 2005) when necessary to supplement data analysis during the description stage.

In addition to Fairclough's (1989) ten questions, I also integrated Gee's (2011, 2014) data analysis toolkit to supplement the description, interpretation, and explanation of linguistic texts. He developed an intricate set of tools to assist with linguistic data analysis, a list of questions to ask of our data that seeks to reveal those connections between discourse and reality. He identified seven building tasks of language, or how we use language to discursively shape, interpret, or build these elements of our existence. Gee then connected those seven building tasks of language – how we use language to construct the world around us – to six separate tools of inquiry. Tools of inquiry are merely analytical devices for the researcher to interpret and contextualize, to situate and expand on the seven building tasks of language.

Combining the two items leaves us with 42 possible questions that we can ask of our data. For example, we might ask how identity is constructed – the expressive value in Fairclough's outline – or created through the use of a particular grammatical device or word choice. In later work, Gee (2014) condensed this matrix into a set of 28 tools for critical discourse analysis. He does not expect that the analyst thoroughly applies every individual question to each text; he admits that a detailed analysis would likely only deal with a subset of questions. The purpose of our research and the questions we ask dictate the tools we select or incorporate into our analysis. These tools maps nicely onto

Fairclough's (1989) value system and suggested set of questions for analysis. Rogers (2011) highlighted the fluidity and the significant theoretical overlap between various methodological approaches to CDA; Gee's analytical framework will add clarity and additional depth throughout data analysis.

### **Interpretation**

While Fairclough (1989) offered a clear process for data analysis in the descriptive phase, he left Phase 2 a bit more flexible and open to the analyst. Naturally, one might think that the interpretive phase of CDA would encompass the interpretations of the researcher or analyst themselves, but Fairclough described a more contextual, nuanced approach to interpretation. In Phase 2, the researcher should focus on the "interpretation of texts by discourse participants" (Fairclough, 1989, p. 141), not merely on their individual interpretation. Fairclough does remind the reader of the "essential similarity" (p. 141) between the analyst and the participant – the analyst is *ipso facto* a participant – and that the analyst must be cognizant of their own positionality throughout the interpretive stage.

In Phase 2, researchers consider the analyses from Phase 1 – the text and discursive event itself – through the lens of a potential participant (i.e., a reader, or viewer). According to Fairclough (1989), Phase 2 consists of interpretations "generated through a combination of what is in the text and what is 'in' the interpreter" (p. 141). To provide further explanation on how we should go about identifying the "it" of the participant, he coined the term "member resources" (MR). We can use background knowledge as a shorthand for MR, although Fairclough did consider that term "unduly restrictive" (p. 141). In essence, member resources are the sum of what a participant



brings – personal experience, knowledge, assumptions, biases – to the interpretation of a text.

Fairclough (1989) broke the process of interpretation into two interrelated fields: textual and contextual interpretation. He did, however, underscore the dialectical and generative relationship – rather than linear or causative – between textual and contextual interpretation. Textual interpretation refers to the intersection between the linguistic properties of the text and the participant's interpretation of those properties. Fairclough considered four progressively complicated domains of textual interpretation: the surface of utterance (i.e., how the participant turns words into the act of speaking or reading); the meaning of the utterance (i.e., how the participant assigns meaning to individual words and phrases); textual coherence (i.e., how the participant then connects individual utterances across a text to build meaning); and the point or theme (i.e., how participants then comprehend the text in its entirety). In the final domain, the participant draws on their MR through a number of interpretive tools or procedures, like organizational or typological schemes, representational or identity frames, and conversational or discursive scripts, to make meaning of the text.

In the second field of contextual interpretation, we explore the social and situational context of the text. We need to consider what is happening (the content), who is involved (the subjects), in what social relationships, and how language mediates or shapes that context (Fairclough, 1989). Additionally, discourse is built not through an individual text or discourse, but across texts and discourses. It is both *intertextual* and *interdiscursive* (Fairclough, 1989, 2013). A text does not exist alone, and participants draw on or reference historical and contemporary texts to make meaning.

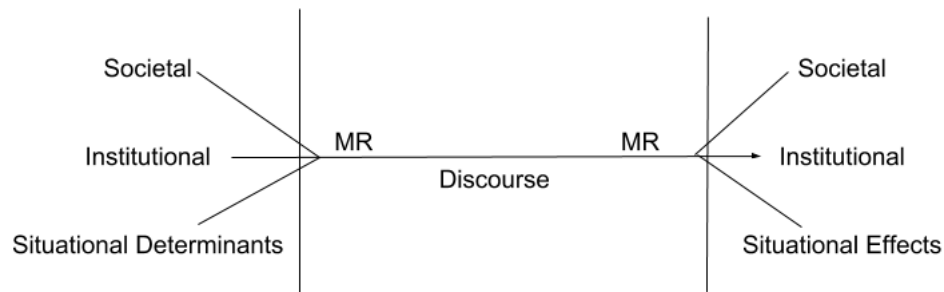
In analyzing how a participant might interpret context, we must also acknowledge that “participants in any discourse operate on the basis of assumptions about which previous (series of) discourses the current one is connected to, and their assumptions determine what can be taken as given in the sense of part of common experience, what can be alluded to, disagreed with, and so on” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 145). Fairclough ended his explanation of the interpretive phase with three guiding questions, in which the researcher examines the contextual interpretation, the textual interpretation, and then closes by considering how these fields of interpretation might vary based on the identity and positionality of the participant.

In Phase 1, we discussed how we can use grammatical analysis to describe the linguistic properties of an individual text. In explaining Phase 2, Fairclough (1989) described the close link between interpretation and explanation (i.e., Phase 3), that both phases “can therefore be seen as two successively applied procedures of unveiling, or demystification” (p. 141).

### **Explanation**

Although Fairclough (1989) described a clear connection between interpretation and explanation, he did distinguish between the two phases. Whereas the interpretive phase primarily handles how a participant “processes” discourse through the interpretation of a text or texts, the explanatory phase focuses on the reproduction of discourse beyond the participant. The objective is “to portray a discourse as part of a social process, as a social practice, showing how it is determined by social structures, and what reproductive effects discourses can cumulatively have on those structures, sustaining them or changing them” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 163).

In doing so, Fairclough asked researchers to consider three levels of social organization in their analysis: situational, institutional (or organizational), and societal. At each level, the participant is calling up their own MR to interpret, and potentially, reproduce or reshape existing discourse (image adapted from Fairclough, 1989, p. 164):



In accordance with this model, Fairclough (1989, 2013) suggested approaching the final phase of explanation by identifying the determinants (i.e., power relationships); ideologies (i.e., assumptions, beliefs, naturalized discourses); and effects (i.e., does it amplify or counteract existing narratives?) operating at each level.

Throughout this process, researchers must decide themselves how far and how wide their explanation might go (Fairclough, 1989). As with other research methodologies – but perhaps more acutely with CDA because of the criticisms of selection or ideological bias associated the methodology – there is risk in attempting to make sweeping sociological or institutional generalizations based on limited data (Rogers, 2013). As critical discourse analysts, we should build off of the data uncovered during the descriptive and interpretive phases and work to place those findings within the broader body of confirmatory or contradictory evidence.

### **Multimodal Analysis**

It might be helpful to think of multimodal analysis as a broader, more inclusive, form of critical discourse analysis. We tend to think of CDA to be the discrete study of

language (both written and spoken) as an artifact of a social and cultural phenomenon. Multimodal analysis extends beyond a linguistic examination; it suggests that CDA must also grapple with visual modes of representation as conduits for social communication (Kress, 2004; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Machin, 2013), that “language, whether as speech or as writing, is one means among many available for representation and for making meaning” (Kress, 2012, p. 37).

In addition to its consideration of non-linguistic forms of communication, multimodal discourse analysis “refuses the idea of the ‘priority’ of the linguistic modes” (Kress, 2012, p. 46). Gee and Fairclough discussed images and non-textual forms of representation, but they built their theoretical and methodological framework on the critical analysis of language (Rogers, 2011). Visual analysis often appears as an extra in the discourse analyst’s toolkit, rather than as a vital, indispensable addition.

Multimodal analysis is grounded in social semiotics, or the study of how we create, interpret, and make meaning through the use of non-linguistic signs (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Modality refers to the representational medium or *mode* of communication; the sign may be linguistic (spoken or written) or visual (static or dynamic). Visual signs, like language, are reproductions and representations of the social structure, of what is accepted, what is valued, of who has power and who does not.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) offered an analytical framework for the “grammar of visual design” (p. 2), an answer to the linguistic foundations of discourse analysis. It is a framework for visual analysis that we can use to examine the representation, interaction, and composition of visual artifacts in each discursive event (Kress & van

Leeuwen, 2006). The multimodal researcher can employ these concepts and definitions to describe and critically analyze visual elements in their data.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argued that trends in Western visual design would allow one to make certain generalizations about the relationship of objects to one another in an image. More specifically, that the “placement of the elements...endows them with specific information values relative to each other” (p. 176). The authors noted that not every image will adhere to these conceptual definitions or so neatly follow these patterns, but this framework is valuable in describing and interpreting multimodal texts, like marketing materials and websites. In the following section, I briefly outline each of the three visual metafunctions, which operate as the guideposts for Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) multimodal analysis, and address the corresponding visual elements that will guide descriptive data analysis. A short glossary of visual design terms from Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) is included in Appendix II.

### **Visual Metafunctions**

In the ideational metafunction, we are concerned how an image presents relationships internally – between people, between things, or between processes. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) suggested two overarching representational structures within this metafunction: either an image employs narrative to represent relationships, or it uses conceptual structures to build relationships. Within these two categories, we can explore how the image implements a narrative or conceptual structure through certain visual traits or design elements. In a narrative structure, we consider the relationship between participants or objects within the image and whether the depicted process or interaction is transactional or non-transactional. The fundamental element of the narrative structure is

the vector, which is an (often invisible) “oblique line, often a quite strong diagonal line” connecting participants, objects, or processes (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 59). This might be a gaze from one participant to the next, or more explicitly a visible marker (like an arrow or a line) pointing in a specific direction.

In the conceptual category, we will find images featuring “participants in terms of their more generalized and more or less stable and timeless essence, in terms of class, or structure or meaning” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 79). Conceptual representations classify, organize, or symbolize relationships through the structure and design of an image. This might include overt visual architecture (e.g., an organizational chart) or subtle visual ordering schemes. In this study, I focused on the analytical purpose of conceptual representation, which often includes posed photographs in which “persuasion is foregrounded, instruction and exposition are backgrounded” (p. 90).

As we move to the interpersonal metafunction, we also shift slightly into the interpretive phase of Fairclough’s (1989) model. In this metafunction, we examine “the relations between the producer of a (complex) sign and the receiver/reproducer of the sign” (Kress & van Leeuwen, p. 42). Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) explained the interpersonal through two underlying questions: how does an image establish its relationship and interaction with the viewer, and how does an image impart authenticity, credibility, or reliability? They then identify several visual design elements under each of these questions, including gaze, angle, color, contrast, and clarity.

The final visual metafunction, the textual, is more consistent with the descriptive phase of this methodology, as it focuses on static visual components of image composition. As with written or spoken texts, images must “cohere both internally with

each other and externally with the context in and for which they were produced” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 42). To develop that internal and external cohesion, visual producers employ compositional features like placement, alignment, framing, and salience to create visual hierarchies or structures within an image and throughout the text.

Fairclough (1989) described values (i.e., experiential, relational, or expressive) associated with language use and how those values were located in certain grammatical markers or linguistic features of a text. Similarly, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) used Halliday’s (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) term of “metafunction” to explain how “the visual, like all semiotic modes, has to serve several representational and communicational requirements” (p. 141). Saichaie (2011) noted the consistencies between CDA and multimodal analysis, highlighting how Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) method could work in concert with Fairclough’s approach to CDA. Multimodal analysis fits nicely within that methodological framework, where the researcher moves from a description of the text, to an interpretation of that discursive event within its discursive context, to a broader social analysis or explanation (Fairclough, 2013; Janks, 2005; Machin, 2013; Saichaie, 2011; Titscher et al., 2000). CDA and multimodal analysis are complementary, rather than antagonistic.

CDA reminds us that discourse does not exist in a vacuum. It is created and it creates. It is shaped and it shapes. It is built and it builds upon. Whether we draw on the CDA toolkit of Gee or employ a multimodal approach to our research, or both, we must aim to “explore the tension between these two sides of language use, the socially shaped and socially constitutive” (Fairclough, 1993, p. 134).

### **Method**

I chose to situate CDA within the tradition of critical qualitative inquiry and critical social theory and attempt to adhere to those methodological and theoretical guidelines (Denzin, 2017; Wodak & Meyer, 2014). In this approach, we must understand the role our epistemological framework plays in shaping our research; how our worldview influences the questions that we ask, the data we select, and how we analyze and interpret those data. When adopting critical discourse analysis as a research methodology, we must be clear about our objectives, rigorous and transparent in the work of uncovering the dialectical relationship between language and social reality and challenging structures and systems of power.

### **Data Sampling and Collection**

Confronting budgetary challenges stemming from decreased funding, increased competition, a robust economy, and an aging population, many universities have sought to grow exclusively online enrollment to offset losses in traditional full-time enrollment (Deming et al., 2015; Deming et al., 2016; Grawe, 2017; Seaman et al., 2018). To meet enrollment targets, institutions have turned to dedicated branding (e.g., naming, logos), digital marketing (e.g., social media advertising), and a strengthened web presence to attract potential students (Hanover Research, 2015; Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2018). If colleges and universities do not have the resources or personnel to handle marketing and new student recruitment internally, they can engage for-profit consultants, like an online program manager (OPM) to build, launch, promote, and grow new online programming (Carey, 2019; Kamath, 2015; Mattes, 2017). This influx of institutional dollars into



digital branding and web-based marketing led Hanover Research (2015) to argue that the institutional website “should be considered the ‘ultimate brand statement’” (p. 3).

Institutional websites, given their prominence in university admissions, recruitment, and marketing (Poock & Lefond, 2001; Ramasubramanian, Gyure, & Mursi, 2003; Saichaie & Morphew, 2014; Saichaie, 2011), offer a significant source of textual and visual data to analyze. Mautner (2005b) encouraged researchers to expand CDA to include an examination of web-based corpora and pointed to the sheer volume of data available on the internet as a site for future discourse studies research. She also highlighted fundamental differences between web-based and printed texts, like linearity, permanence, and access. Institutional websites exhibit some of these traits: they change often, are nearly ubiquitous, and can be sprawling and disorganized. However, Mautner (2005b) agreed that these digital spaces could tell us more about our discourse and social reality.

Given some of the challenges associated with working with web-based corpora, I needed to limit the initial analysis to those areas that consistently appear across institutions and are related specifically to new student enrollment or recruitment in online programs. I identified three separate content areas or subpages that appear consistently across the sample: an online landing page, institutional advantages (e.g., why choose institution X?), and online student testimonials. Testimonials were often woven into other content areas or subpages.

Those three content areas are the primary sources of textual data and visual artifacts for this study, and were chosen because of their frequency across institutional websites (not just those in the sample) and their discursive value: they are most

prominent in telling a story about why a prospective student should pursue an online degree at that institution. In these content areas, we can observe the formation of the discursive relationship between the institution and the prospective student, or an attempt to articulate what is special or unique about learning online, from both the perspective of the institution and the filtered perspective (i.e., institutions choose which students to interview, and which testimonials to publish) of the student.

Fairclough (2013) did not provide much guidance on sampling in CDA, but did suggest that researchers should build a “rational research programme [sic] which makes possible the systematic development of knowledge and understanding in the relevant domain” (p. 51). Although there is no standard methodological approach to sampling in CDA (Rogers, 2013), Wodak and Meyer (2014) agreed that most projects identify and analyze “typical texts”. Whatever the sampling procedure, Rogers (2013) recommended transparent justification for sampling decisions. Mautner (2005b) echoed that sentiment, and further suggested that researchers clearly align sampling with the theoretical and practical purposes of the study.

In the case of this project, I limited data selection to public institutions and focused on the colleges and universities enrolling the most students exclusively online. In their foundational work on academic capitalism, Slaughter and Leslie (1997) originally focused on the effects of market and market-adjacent influences on public institutions. Although private institutions do enroll a large number of exclusively online students, an analysis of public institutions would seem to be more consistent with the theoretical framework guiding this study, namely an examination of how we might expand our contemporary understandings of academic capitalism and the neoliberal drive towards the

institutional privatization of the public sphere. Moreover, public institutions enroll nearly 70% of all distance learners across the United States (Seaman et al., 2018).

To allow for a deep examination of textual and visual data necessary for CDA and multimodal analysis, I held the sample to 18 institutions. Mautner (2005b) encouraged researchers to expand their sample “to boost the credibility of both their evidence and the conclusions drawn from it, and thus counteract one of the criticisms perennially levelled at CDA, about the paucity, unrepresentativeness and supposedly agenda-driven selection of its data” (p. 815). Gee (2014) understood, however, that even the most rigorous discourse analysis will not be able address every linguistic detail and investigate each discursive event (Fairclough, 2013). In this study, I could have expanded the sample to 30 institutions, but I would have likely sacrificed depth and detail to complete data analysis. Furthermore, the texts in this sample are broadly representative – i.e., “typical texts” (Wodak & Meyer, 2014) – of public university websites promoting online learning and online degree programming.

As of the fall 2017, these 18 institutions each enrolled at least 4,000 students exclusively via online programming and each was included in the top 100 of all non-profit institutions for exclusively online enrollment (NCES, 2017). To put that in context, fewer than 600 institutions nationwide enroll more than 1,000 students exclusively online; median exclusively online enrollment among the top 1,000 non-profit institutions in the United States is 1,129 students (NCES, 2017). As Seaman et al. (2018) highlighted, a relatively small group of institutions are dominating the distance education landscape. Enrollments are highly concentrated at the top: roughly 5% of all reporting institutions

enroll nearly half of all online students (Seaman et al., 2018). Each institution within the study sample falls in that top 5%.

The institutions in this sample were not exclusively online, i.e., they still enrolled a majority or near-majority of students via traditional on-campus programming. From there, I further limited selection to 4-year degree-granting institutions, as student recruitment, marketing, and enrollment processes might look quite different for 2-year open-access or non-selective institutions. 2-year institutions were also more likely to focus on offering online courses, rather than exclusively online programs (Garrett, Legon, & Fredricksen, 2019).

Additionally, because graduate programming is a potentially important growth area for exclusively online coursework at public institutions (Seaman et al., 2018), I only considered institutions labeled as master's colleges and universities or doctoral universities according to the most recent update to the Basic Carnegie Classification system (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2018).

Master's and doctoral programs are often discipline contained, i.e., learners are not required to complete general education requirements outside of their area of study, and, by definition, attract students who have already completed an undergraduate degree. Because of these constraints, the development, implementation, and administration of online graduate programming should, in theory, be simpler to initiate and manage. Building and managing fully online graduate programs with only 10-12 courses and more experienced students should require less curricular planning, administrative coordination, and student support than cobbling together 120 credits of coursework across multiple academic areas typical of a bachelor's degree. Furthermore, undergraduate students are

more likely to blend their academic programming (i.e., a combination of face-to-face and classroom coursework) than their graduate school peers, who are more likely to enroll in a program offered exclusively online (Garrett et al., 2019; Seaman et al., 2018)

Of the top-100 non-profit institutions, 35 were 4-year public colleges or universities offering master's degrees or higher; over half of those institutions are included in this study. The decision to limit selection to high online enrollment institutions is consistent with the theoretical assumptions about discourse and power: these institutions are, at the moment, the most successful public colleges and universities at attracting and matriculating students who decide to study exclusively online. We can thereby assume that they have been able to effectively leverage their institutional web presence and craft a particular message that is attractive to potential learners. Although I did restrict this study to public institutions within the top 100 of exclusively online enrollment, the institutional websites in this study represent “the sort of social practice that is common place or naturalized” (Rogers, 2013, p. 72).

Below is a list of the sample institutions, a URL for its primary online landing page, and the in-text abbreviation used for each institution. Some institutions have multiple landing pages for online programming (e.g., graduate or undergraduate programs), so I identified URLs through a simple Google search using the terms “online” + “institution name” and selected the most popular, non-promoted or non-sponsored result. I navigated to the institution's primary .edu website and other digital marketing (e.g., social media accounts) to confirm that the landing page was indeed the desired site for marketing and promotion related to online learning. Each institutional website

contained data relevant to each of the three content areas identified above (landing page, institutional advantages, and student testimonials).

Data were collected over a two-week period during the summer of 2019. I saved and uploaded all web-based data to ATLAS.ti's cloud-based software for the collection and analysis of qualitative data. Additionally, I used SketchEngine, a digital platform for web-based data, for basic descriptive data on the corpus (e.g., total word count, total documents in the corpus, etc.). In the table below, the CC column denotes the Basic Carnegie Classification, according to the most recent 2018 update (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2018), with "R" as doctoral university, research-intensive (1 to 2, with 1 being most intensive), and "M" as master's colleges and universities.

Table 1 Study Sample		
Name (In-text Abbreviation)	CC*	Landing Page URL
Arizona State* (ASU)	R1	asuonline.asu.edu
University of Texas at Arlington (UTA)	R1	academicpartnerships.uta.edu/
Pennsylvania State - World Campus* (PSU)	R1	worldcampus.psu.edu
Colorado State - Global Campus* (CSU)	R1	csuglobal.edu
University of Central Florida (UCF)	R1	www.ucf.edu/online
Troy University (TROY)	M	troy.edu/online
East Carolina University (ECU)	R2	online.ecu.edu
Northern Arizona (NAU)	R2	nau.edu/online
University of Florida* (UF)	R1	ufonline.ufl.edu

Oregon State University (OSU)	R1	ecampus.oregonstate.edu
University of Cincinnati (UC)	R1	online.uc.edu
Old Dominion University (ODU)	R2	online.odu.edu
Utah State University (USU)	R2	usu.edu/online
University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB)	R1	uab.edu/online
Arkansas State University (AKSU)	R2	astate.edu/online
Ball State University (BSU)	R2	bsu.edu/academics/collegesanddepartments/online
University of Alabama (UA)	R1	bamabydistance.ua.edu
Northwestern St. University of Louisiana (NSU)	M	nsula.edu/ensu
<p>Note: <i>*These institutions have created separate entities with federal data reporting requirements.</i></p>		

### Data Analysis

In addition to this study's overarching research question, I developed 3 sub-questions to focus data analysis.

1. How does the text(s) center the labor of online learning?
2. How does the text(s) frame the benefits of online learning?
3. How does the text(s) depict the relationship between the student and the institution?

Informed by the theoretical framework of academic capitalism, these sub-questions further align data analysis with theory. Given the sheer amount of text and potential approaches to data analysis, I relied on these sub-questions to keep my analysis centered on the naturalized discourses and social realities of neoliberalism and academic capitalism. Other theoretical frameworks would have likely yielded disparate approaches

to data sampling, collection, and analysis. Whether it is CDA or multimodal analysis, both approaches start with the micro, with the structural details of the individual textual or visual element and move outward. I describe the process for linguistic and visual data analysis extensively in outlining the description phase of Fairclough's CDA and the visual metafunctions of Kress and van Leeuwen's framework above.

To guide linguistic analysis, I used Fairclough's (1989) ten questions for textual description. Fairclough's questions for analysis focus on how a given text uses certain lexical and grammatical elements and employs specific textual structures to make meaning. For example, how does a text use personal or possessive pronouns (e.g., *we/our, you/your, they/their*) to illustrate relationships? How does a text employ synonyms, metaphor, or euphemism to signal experience or code ideology? Or what does the structure, genre, or formatting of a text tell us about the desired reader or the intended reaction? Additionally, I incorporated questions from Gee's (2014) tools for inquiry in an iterative process to bring clarity or depth to the analysis when needed. I have included the full list of analytical categories and associated examples from Fairclough (1989) and a select list of questions from Gee (2014) in Appendix I.

For multimodal analysis of visual elements, I used Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) framework. During this process, I examined the composition (i.e., the textual metafunction) of visual artifacts, which includes the framing, alignment, and placement of objects, and the salience or weight given to those objects within an image. In addition to the textual metafunction, I analyzed how images construct relationships internally (i.e., between participants or objects within the image) and externally (i.e., between the image and the viewer or participant) using a variety of visual design elements (e.g., color,



vectors, gaze). In Appendix II, I have included a list of the visual metafunctions, associated visual concepts, and attendant explanations that drove visual analysis.

These two separate forms of data analysis can work symbiotically throughout Fairclough's (1989) framework. In developing and refining this method, I was influenced by the work of Saichaie (2011), who also incorporated the work of Fairclough and Kress and van Leeuwen into his study of university websites. As for data coding, Saldaña (2016) noted that "some research genres, such as discourse analysis, may not employ coding at all but rely instead on detailed transcription notation and extensive analytic memos about the data" (p. 47). However, I did adopt certain first-cycle coding methods (Saldaña, 2016) to organize and categorize linguistic and visual trends in the data.

Saldaña (2016) likened coding to a heuristic device that is inextricable from the act of analyzing data. Because of the methodological approach of CDA, it is necessary to analyze not only individual texts, but the entire text, or discursive event. This includes the formatting, structure, and placement of linguistic and visual elements, as well as how those elements interact with each other and influence our interpretation of the text as a whole.

As part of this process, I analyzed linguistic texts based on Fairclough's (1989) questions for analysis, supplemented by and Gee's (2014) tools for inquiry when necessary. This process resulted in analytic memos, descriptive codes for vocabulary, and explanatory tags for regularly occurring linguistic or grammatical elements. I followed a similar approach simultaneously for the analysis of visual data, in which I identified and labeled prominent visual design elements throughout the sample. With both linguistic and visual data, I marked passages that were not relevant to the questions guiding this study

as N/A (“not applicable”). On coding visual data, Saldaña (2016) described visual data analysis as a “holistic, interpretive lens guided by strategic questions” (p. 42). In the case of this study, Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) framework for multimodal analysis informs the “strategic questions” that I asked of the visual data.

From there, I returned to the initial results of that discourse and multimodal analysis and engaged in a form of pattern or focused coding (Saldaña, 2016), in which I identified themes from the codes and analytic memos developed during first-cycle coding of linguistic and visual data “to develop a coherent synthesis of the data corpus” (p. 149). I then stepped back from individual elements within the text to look at the text and the corpus as a whole, to consider whether there were thematic contradictions or inconsistencies within a text and across texts.

As both Fairclough (1989, 2013) and Gee (2011, 2014) reminded us, CDA is an iterative, organic process that moves back and forth “from context to language and from language to context” (Gee, 2011, p. 20). This requires that we systematically and regularly examine and revisit our assumptions and explanations as we progress through the analysis. As part of the analysis and in line with recommendations for methodological transparency and honesty, I kept a researcher’s journal to document the research process and to chronicle my own decisions and interpretations.

### **Trustworthiness**

Criticisms of CDA, and of other critical methodologies, often suggest that this methodological approach to research compromises the position of the scholar as an impartial reporter of truth, or that the researcher chose a particular project or research question on political or ideological grounds (Rogers, 2013; Wodak & Meyer,

2014). However, the critical discourse analyst would counter that language is not a “neutral and objective conduit of description of the ‘real world’” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 55) and, as such, neither can the critical study of language be. It must attempt to interpret and explain – two inherently subjective exercises. Moreover, Van Dijk (1993) argued that the critical discourse analyst “should take an explicit sociopolitical stance” (p. 252) and that their research should strive to gather “insight into the crucial role of discourse in the reproduction of dominance and inequality” (p. 253).

Although Davies and Dodd’s (2002) commentary is not specific to the work of CDA, they offer an important perspective on how we might frame critical qualitative research to address scholarly criticisms and methodological concerns. Qualitative researchers should endeavor to create a new language to assess the quality of their work and must be honest and exhaustive in their explanations of research design and analysis. Wodak and Meyer (2014) argued similarly that the “classical concepts of validity, reliability and objectivity used in quantitative research cannot be applied unmodified” (p. 31). We must talk about ethics and transparency; we must clearly state how our epistemology and experience influence our decisions and engage in a nuanced conversation about how “a sense of responsibility, accountability, partiality, and subjectivity” (Davies & Dodd, 2002, p. 285) can contribute to more insightful and meaningful qualitative research.

Gee (2011) turned the conversation of methodology and data analysis into a discussion on how to appropriately evaluate the authenticity and trustworthiness of CDA research. Although he used the term validity, Gee offered a definition that might be considered at odds with more traditional conceptions of research validity. He noted that

doing CDA research is an inherently interpretive exercise, “an interpretation of the interpretive work people have done in specific contexts” (p. 122). For Gee, validity in CDA is not cloaked in the language of positivism or objectivity. As such, Gee landed on a definition for validity that more closely resembles a combination of rigor and trustworthiness: a critical discourse analysis is *valid* insofar it is the result of a rigorous and transparent methodological approach to research that leads to data analysis and findings that we can deem trustworthy.

He recommended that to achieve rigor and trustworthiness in critical discourse analysis, the researcher must address four conditions: convergence, agreement, coverage, and linguistic details. In short, initial efforts to ensure trustworthiness in a critical discourse analysis should show that “the answers to a number of questions...and linguistic details converge to support the analysis” (Gee, 2011, p. 124). Coverage of external or related data and agreement with other discourse analyses can further strengthen the trustworthiness of a given study. Ultimately, we must be sure that we are “open, no matter how confident we are in our hypotheses, to finding evidence that might go against our favored views” (Gee, 2011, p. 20). Below is a description of each of these conditions and an explanation of how I have considered that condition in the design of this study:

- *Convergence*: as the researcher progresses iteratively through the descriptive and interpretive phases of data analysis, results of linguistic and visual analysis converge to support or refute a given hypothesis or theoretical argument. In this study, I examine the visual and textual language of online learning as it is marketed at public institutions through the theoretical framework of academic

capitalism. Do the results of the descriptive and interpretive analysis converge to suggest that these discourses of online learning function as an extension, or perhaps evolution, of the discursive and ideological foundations of academic capitalism? In Chapter 5, I consider the issues of convergence and agreement – discussed below – as I connect the descriptive and interpretive analysis into a broader institutional and societal explanation.

- *Agreement*: the answers to our questions are grounded in or consistent with other discourse analysis research that confirms “how such social languages actually can function in such settings”; likewise, our findings align or agree with the work of non-CDA researchers. The study is grounded in the actual detailed analysis of language, rather than surface-level interpretation. Additionally, the justification for research and the explanation are supported by (or agree with) other academic research in sociology, economics, psychology, and other relevant disciplines. In Chapter 2, I outlined research on academic capitalism, online learning, and higher education marketing that form the theoretical framework and conceptual basis for this study. Additionally, I have pointed to similar analyses of web-based texts and higher education discourse(s) and provided a detailed explanation of the methodology guiding this study.
- *Coverage*: the analysis is applicable or relevant to an examination of similar linguistic or visual data. As discussed in the sampling section, these data sources are fairly representative or “typical” of the genre. However, Rogers (2013) cautioned against overgeneralizing or implying transferability of findings. In Gee’s terms, we achieve coverage when our method of analysis would be

applicable to similar sorts of data. In this case, would the underlying research methodology and analysis conducted in this study be applicable to similar CDA research in different contexts (e.g., private institutions, for-profit institutions, other forms of institutional marketing)?

- *Linguistic details*: our analysis of discourse is deeply tied to the “details of linguistic structure”, i.e. grammar, syntax, vocabulary, intonation, dialect and other linguistic vehicles. This study leans on the descriptive phase developed by Fairclough (1989, 2013) and the multimodal framework of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). Halliday’s (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) systemic functional linguistics forms the backbone of these approaches to linguistic and semiotic analysis. This condition is closely aligned with agreement.

We, as researchers, are realistically bound by the limitations of time and sanity. In spite of those constraints, we must constantly strive to expand and deepen our analysis and be sure that our work focuses on the grammatical structure and contextual purpose of language. Echoing the perspective of Gee, Fairclough (2013) argued that discourse analysis is not just “general commentary on discourse, it includes some form of the systematic analysis of texts” (p. 10).

### **Researcher Positionality**

In theory, the researcher is able to distance themselves from the object under analysis, to be an analyst, rather than a participant. But, the reality is more complicated. Fairclough (1989, 2013) and Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) reminded readers that the analyst is a participant, and with that must come awareness about the role that our own biases, assumptions, and ways of looking at the world influence our interpretations of

texts. Fairclough (1989) wrote a bit more existentially on this desired divide, arguing that in fact “it is only really self-consciousness that distinguishes the analyst from the participants she is analyzing” (p. 167).

Here it is important to address my own history, positionality, and potential biases. I have worked in higher education for over a decade, as a graduate instructor, a researcher, an adjunct faculty member, and most recently as an administrator. I completed my second master’s degree exclusively online and I have taught online and blended courses at multiple institutions. I support the institutional development and evaluation of online and blended programs and courses; including the training and professional development of faculty; the procurement and maintenance of educational technology(ies) to facilitate that instruction; and the identification and implementation of policies, interventions, and technologies to support students who are learning at a distance. I do this work at a relatively small 2-year institution in the upper Midwest.

My current institution faces continued enrollment challenges, as do many public institutions in areas with stagnant or declining populations. My position was originally created to drive new enrollment through the creation of a standalone unit devoted to online programming. Given my concerns over online course quality and learning outcomes – especially for this institution’s student population – I remodeled the position to focus on supporting our faculty and students and to improve the existing programs and courses that we already offer online.

Rogers (2013) included reflexivity in her list of qualitative touchstones that should guide CDA researchers, but she differentiated between true self-reflexivity and reflexivity for the sake of appeasement. In the latter, she argued, researchers engage in

superficial attempts at reflection and self-examination simply to address potential concerns over trustworthiness. Genuine reflexivity, she wrote (Rogers, 2013), “is when researchers take their analytic frame and turn it on themselves as researchers and participants in the study” (p. 72). I kept a reflective researcher journal throughout the research process, and throughout Chapters 4 and 5, I include a more detailed discussion examining my own role as researcher *and* participant.

### **Limitations**

There are practical limitations to the sample and data collection methods that I employed. I limited my analysis primarily to institutional websites, but social and digital media platforms are also valuable sites for textual and visual data. Additionally, this study contains only a small subset of public institutions within the United States, meaning that I did not examine the language of private institutions, for-profit universities, 2-year community or technical colleges, or higher education institutions located outside of the United States. I also did not explore how institutions that were less successful at enrolling online students approached the marketing of their online programs. Although the sample does contain institutions who utilize an online program manager (OPM), I do not attempt to compare across the sample between OPM and non-OPM institutions.

Other limitations are related primarily to the nature of web-based data. Given that institutions modify content and redesign websites regularly, web-based content is fluid and time-bound, or ephemeral, as Mautner (2005b) labeled it. I collected data over a 2-week period in the summer of 2019, but a different or longer data collection window might have resulted in different linguistic and visual texts. Moreover, as Mautner (2005b) noted, in collecting and saving “web-text offline in a particular linear sequence, the



analyst imposes her reading, which she must be aware is one of only countless possibilities” (p. 820).

In the process of collecting the data, I imparted my own interpretation on the text; I made decisions about which texts I thought were important or valuable, and which less so. I chose three content areas, but another researcher might have selected different content areas, selected a different sample of institutions, highlighted different texts, or interpreted those texts through a different epistemological framework. In saving those texts and then analyzing them as static documents, I imposed my own reading, as Mautner explained it above, thus obscuring the various possibilities of how another reader might experience the text. Additionally, I made specific decisions regarding methodology and data analysis that influenced research design. Fairclough’s methodological framework, as I have applied it, is one of many approaches to critical discourse analysis.

In this study, I explore the language and visual symbols – the written text, the visual artifacts – used to market and recruit new students to online degree programs. In spite of these limitations, the purpose of this analysis is not to investigate correlative relationships or to generalize findings to other potentially related cases, but rather to describe and interpret (Fairclough, 1989, 2013) a portion of the textual and visual language used to market and sell online learning in American higher education and to link those discursive practices to the social structures and naturalized discourses of power and hegemony.

We will turn now to the actual descriptive, interpretive, and explanatory work of critical discourse analysis. In Chapter 4, I will present the results of linguistic and visual

data analysis using the methodological framework described throughout this chapter.

And, finally, in Chapter 5, I will attempt to explain and situate those findings within the theoretical framework of academic capitalism and the naturalized discourses of neoliberalism.

## Chapter 4

In Chapter 3, I outlined the historical and theoretical foundations of critical discourse analysis; described Fairclough's (1989) three-step framework for discourse research guiding this study; and explained the underlying research methods that would drive data sampling, collection, and analysis. As a reminder, the primary research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. What are the dominant "naturalised" [sic] discourses used to market online education programs at public nonprofit institutions with significant (i.e., in the top 100) exclusively online student populations?
2. What discursive strategies (visual, linguistic) do these institutions employ to attract new students?

Additionally, in the data analysis section in Chapter 3, I discussed research sub-questions that would inform data analysis procedures. I utilized these sub-questions to organize the results of linguistic and visual data analysis in this chapter:

1. How does the text(s) center the labor of online learning?
2. How does the text(s) frame the benefits of online learning?
3. How does the text(s) depict the relationship between the student and the institution?

The data corpus in this study contained more than 45,000 words and over 150 images collected across a sample of 18 institutional websites. I have divided this chapter into two primary sections, in which I will address the descriptive phase of Fairclough's 3-phase methodology as it relates to both linguistic and visual data in the sample. In the first section, I will explain the results from the linguistic description of texts, and in the

second, I will turn to multimodal analysis to describe the visual data in the corpus. For reference, I have included a data dictionary in Appendix I and II.

### **Linguistic Description: Overview**

As Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) looked to Halliday's systemic functional linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1985/2014) to inform their framework for multimodal analysis, Fairclough (1989) also drew on Halliday's theories of language and grammar to build his approach to critical discourse analysis. Both methodological approaches to semiotic analysis focus on three aspects, or what Halliday originally called linguistic metafunctions, that influence how we make meaning through signs: the ideational, the interpersonal, and the textual (Chandler, 2017; Fairclough, 1989, 2013; Halliday & Matthiessen, 1985/2014; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Fairclough framed his 10 questions for the descriptive stage of critical discourse analysis around these linguistic metafunctions with the goal of identifying how words and grammar worked to create and reproduce meaning.

In the following section, I describe the linguistic data within the context of each sub-question, detailing the results from a rigorous analysis of the lexical and grammatical features of the text. To stay consistent with Fairclough's (1989) questions for descriptive analysis, I address how the words, and then grammar, in the data sample subtly (or overtly) shape and communicate experience, frame interpersonal and institutional relationships, and depict truth and reality. In Chapter 5, I will turn to exploring how "discourse participants" might possibly read, interpret, and interact with the text (Fairclough, 1989, p. 143).

### **Linguistic Description: The Labor of Online Learning**

The discourses and realities of labor, whether it is compensated or uncompensated, carry ideological and practical weight (Donham, 1999; Harvey, 2005; Greenhouse, 2019; Marx, 1976/2010; Weeks, 2011): who works, how do they work, when do they work, and for whom do they work? Answers to these questions are wrapped up in social realities, and the dialectical nature of discourse (Fairclough, 1989, 2013) means that language influences and is influenced by how we work and how we talk about work. In this section, I will discuss how the institutions in this sample used language – words and grammar – to portray the labor of online learning.

#### **Words & Phrases**

Fairclough (1989) suggested that words could have experiential, relational, and expressive values, and that those values could be communicated through word selection, context, and usage. When analyzing the use of words and phrases throughout the sample, I focused on how the text employed synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms, and symbolic language (e.g., metaphors, idioms, analogies, euphemisms) to refer to a concept, idea, or belief explicitly or implicitly. Additionally, I examined how the texts used formal or informal language, or how word placement and choice might elicit comparison or encourage readers to draw on certain schema or typologies for classification.

In the case of labor and work in higher education, I identified three primary themes that appeared regularly through the lexical choices of the text and its producers: flexibility of time, flexibility of space, and the presence of individual struggle. We could categorize some of the vocabulary discussed throughout this section as also relevant to or

addressing the benefits of online learning, but I have chosen to include the topic of flexibility in the section on labor for reasons that I hope become apparent.

Words expressing a concern or interest in time were omnipresent throughout the sample, most commonly this vocabulary expressed online learning as synonymous with educational flexibility that “fits your life” (CSU), that allows you to “fit education into your life” (UC), or that occurs on “your terms” (Troy, UF). This flexibility provided learners with the ability to study and learn “at your own pace, on your time” (UF). Not only did time signal an element of choice, but also an element of expediency and convenience.

Learners can “fast-track” (UTA) their degree program, “finish faster” (UTA) or “as quickly as possible” (BSU), while also completing their work “in their spare time” (Troy). Throughout the sample, temporal flexibility was often associated or used interchangeably with a student’s need for time management or ability to balance or adjust when the work of learning occurs to meet the demands of a busy life: “with your schedule, not against it” (UC) or “at times that are most convenient to you” (PSU). In student testimonials, flexibility language seemed more commonly to imply the ability to shape or choose when and how to do the work, rather than the option to accelerate coursework.

Often, place is framed as being local and global. You can study “from any location” (UA) while “in bed” (UTA), or wherever “you can squeeze in some extra studying” (UC). This could be “from your home or office” (PSU); but you will have access “no matter where you are in the world” (UAB), “whatever the time, wherever the place” (ODU), or “from any location” (UA).

This is also seen in program titles: Colorado State Global, Penn State World Campus, Northwestern State Global Campus, Oregon State e-Campus. Whether through a reference to “global citizenship” (UAB) or a call to “change” (UCF) or “transform the world” (UTA), institutions throughout the sample imply that online learning is not necessarily just a local or geographically limited phenomenon. As I will discuss below in grammatical tendencies, not only is virtual space described as not bound by state or national borders, but it is also referred to explicitly in its contrast to physical campus spaces.

Lexical references to place and time – specifically in the student’s ability to achieve flexibility by choosing (or fitting in) when and where to do academic work – are abundant throughout the sample. However, flexibility discourse occurs quite often alongside a vocabulary of individual struggle and sacrifice. The texts regularly use metaphor or euphemism – what Fairclough (1989) would categorize as belonging to the experiential and relational value of words – to describe the difficulties and obstacles that students had to overcome to complete coursework and earn a degree. In the section on the benefits of online learning, I look more closely at how individual struggle is positively associated with identity formation.

In some cases, the textual description of struggle was vivid and explicit: the process of completing a degree online while tending to other professional and personal responsibilities was “emotionally draining” (OSU), “tough on all of us” (PSU), “difficult to balance,” “felt impossible” (UTA), and represented a “personal sacrifice” (NSU). This vocabulary was most common throughout testimonials, where students spoke of the challenges that they encountered and ultimately overcame. Students regularly described

the unique times and places and the unconventional strategies they utilized for studying and doing the work of online learning in the presence of those personal and professional obstacles.

Quotes from student testimonials are a particular genre within this sample, but other texts were more euphemistic in the description of academic work and student labor. Individual conflicts and time constraints became more about the ability to “balance” and “juggle” various obligations – whether at home or at work. The labor of online learning was partially about completing the academic work, but being successful was equally, if not more so, an act of time management, contingent on the ability to prioritize, schedule, and do without certain conveniences and comforts. This meant identifying opportunities to “maximize your downtime,” “optimize your vacation time,” “develop great time management skills” (UC), “establish a balance” (ODU), “juggle real-world responsibilities” (CSU), and “manage everyday commitments and adult responsibilities” (AKSU). In Rose’s testimonial, we see this through the use of metaphor to describe how she manages her time and obligations; she is “well acquainted with having a lot on her cafeteria tray” (UTA).

These words and phrases soften the more human description of personal conflict, guilt over missing parenting and family obligations, and individual resolve expressed through testimonials. In the linguistic description of sub-question 2, I will look more closely at how the discourses of individual struggle embedded in this sample are also expressed as a private good, as a program associated with identity formation and individual betterment.



### **Grammatical Tendencies: Time, Space, & Struggle**

According to Fairclough's Hallidayan linguistic framework (Fairclough, 1989, 2013; Halliday & Matthiessen, 1985/2014), grammar also operates according to these ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions. In describing linguistic features in the text, I lean on Fairclough's 10 questions and Halliday's underlying framework of systemic functional linguistics, and focus my analysis on the most salient or frequently occurring grammatical structures and components. My analysis of grammar throughout the text underscored the lexical themes of time, space, and struggle identified above; it also brought forth a more complicated, yet theoretically consistent, conversation about academic labor to the forefront.

Before analyzing to the way in which the texts use grammar to frame who is responsible for the labor of teaching, I describe how the texts use grammar to deepen the discourses of time, space, and struggle discussed above. Throughout the sample, we regularly encounter the use of negation – what Halliday (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1985/2014) commonly referred to as polarity (see also, Janks, 2005) – to set up contrasts between online and on-ground learning. In some regards, online learning becomes the antithesis of traditional on-campus classroom instruction, in the way that it expands definitions and possibilities of space and time for students. Below are a few examples of how negation illustrates this dichotomy (word marking negation has been italicized):

- With online learning, “there are *no* potential productivity or resource conflicts from your employer” (ODU)
- You have the “ability to work full-time *without* sacrificing [my] education” (ECU)

- You can “earn your degree *without* sacrificing your professional life” (UC)
- You can complete your degree “*without* traveling to a physical campus” (AKSU)
- You can take classes “*no matter* where you live” (OSU) or “*no matter* where you are in the world” (UAB)
- You can “choose *not* to attend” a physical campus location (PSU)
- You “*don’t* have time to spend 4 hours in the library 5 days a week” (UC)
- “A brick-and-mortar institution *wasn’t* going to work” (PSU)
- “We understand that *not* every student can put his or her [sic] life on hold to go back to college” (CSU)

The texts use other grammatical elements to redraw the spatial boundaries of virtual learning. We are told that the online learning experience at Oregon State means that “our campus map is planet earth.” This is a form of predication, known as a thematic equative (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1985/2014; Janks, 2005) that equates the subject with a predicate, typically following the verb *to be*. In the Hallidayan interpretation, the thematic equative simultaneously stresses the theme (our campus map) and the rheme (planet earth) by making them interchangeable and synonymous. We see a similar tactic with the University of Central Florida, where “your home meets your university.”

The freeing up of time and space should, in theory, create more flexibility for the student. But, here, a close study of clause structure and other grammatical features throughout the sample complicates the nature of that flexibility and reinforces the discourses of individual struggle referenced above. In these cases, the clause is primarily delivering a message through the ordering and structure of the sentence (Halliday &

Matthiessen, 1985/2014), with stressed elements appearing at, or near, the beginning of a sentence and/or clause.

In student testimonials and other texts throughout the sample, we see how clause structure – whether through simple coordinating clauses, or more complex subordinating clauses – can be used to list student obligations, or to provide a hierarchy of student responsibilities: “Generally, I come home from work, eat dinner with the family and then sequester myself in my room to do school work” (PSU). The paratactic structure of this sentence (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1985/2014), along with the ordering of clauses, suggests that the act of completing school work actually comes last, after the student has been able to fulfill other commitments and family obligations.

We see a similar foregrounding of time constraints in Josh’s testimonial (BSU): “*Since Josh is always pressed for time*, he enjoys how Ball State’s online bachelor’s in business administration program has allowed him to work at a pace and in an environment that is best for him.” The theme of this sentence – which Halliday called the “element that serves as the point of departure of the message” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1985/2014, p. 89) – is Josh’s time limitations, highlighted through the placement of the subordinating clause at the beginning of the sentence. In Orman’s testimonial, we read the following: “As an unemployed father of three, Orman Mortan III needed a path forward” (OSU). Foregrounded through its location in the sentence, Orman’s dual status as unemployed and as a father functions as the theme or message stressing his struggle and sacrifice.

We encounter another example of how texts vary and adjust clauses and sentence structure to simultaneously describe the collision of temporal flexibility and constraint in

Raven's testimonial (ODU): "I can do [class work] on my own time. I can do it at three in the morning. I can do it on my smart phone. It's my world, and my world is crazy busy." Subsequent simple sentences without linking conjunctions – combined with the modal verb "can" – suggest the possibility of flexibility, but this choice is undercut by the final sentence of the quotation. Using clauses, conjunctions, and other discursive strategies to highlight or stress an individual's personal obligations or caregiving responsibilities occurred regularly throughout the corpus. Raven's flexibility only occurs within the framework of her "crazy busy" world, meaning it is a flexibility inherently limited by the "crazy busy" nature of her daily life.

Through the use of the textual theme ("truly successful online students") and relational modality ("you need"), we see how time management – in spite of this promised flexibility – becomes the expectation and the obligation of the student: "*Truly successful online students* force themselves to develop good time management skills. *You need* to consciously set aside time to study at regular intervals during the week" (UC).

This tension between flexibility as imagined versus experienced represents an important paradox of online learning in the academic capitalist regime (Walker, 2009, 2013): the time/labor paradox. We will return to the time/labor paradox during the interpretation and explanation stages.

### **Grammatical Tendencies: Academic Labor**

In addition to the themes of time, space, and struggle, I also uncovered how grammatical agency and grammatical voice (i.e., active or passive) also characterized (or obscured) the *who* and *what* of academic labor. More definitively, the texts consistently framed academic labor – i.e., the act of teaching, instructional planning, and student

contact – as institutional. The academic labor of full-time and adjunct faculty was subsumed into a more universal institutional identity or departmental function.

Throughout these texts, agency is rarely individual, rather it is communicated through a nondescript subject, like a “program” or institution that “offers,” “provides,” “creates” or “delivers” something.

The most common tendency throughout the sample was to utilize the institution (formally, or informally as “we”) as the grammatical subject of the sentence:

- “Troy University Online provides students with a comprehensive, competitive education they can complete anytime, anywhere.”
- “UF Online provides an unparalleled education.”
- “CSU Global understands that your career goals and academic journey are specific to the future you desire.”
- “In 2008, A-State launched its online education system...”
- “By creating a completely online program, ECU has created an opportunity for me to learn and grow.”
- “eNSU has helped me achieve my goals.”
- “USU-Online made classes easy.”
- “UCF designed its online degree programs...”
- “We want to help you tell a legendary story.” (UA)

In some cases, the institution would act as a possessive modifier or pronoun of the grammatical subject, or as the psychological subject (the theme) of the sentence (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1985/2014):

- “UTA’s program provides the knowledge you need and the flexibility our busy lives require.”
- “A UF education will help you develop invaluable skills.”
- “Our online program provides an opportunity.” (USU)
- “ASU Online: Learning happens where you are.”
- “ECU’s degree completion program changed my life.”
- “Without eNSU, I would not be in school.”

When the institution was not functioning as the grammatical or thematic subject (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1985/2014), I identified other linguistic tendencies that further hide who is responsible for the academic labor of teaching. This could be through the use of the passive voice or a passive participial phrase: “a life reinvented by education” (ASU), “this is accomplished by” (UCF), “our accredited MPA was created” (AKSU), “designed for working adults” (CSU Global), “education designed” (ODU), and “our online programs are designed” (ECU).

Alternatively, the text might simply replace or supplement the institution as an actor with a more generic, ambiguous grammatical or psychological subject: “a strong education to prepare you” (ODU), “highly ranked programs prepare you” (ODU), “the #GatorsOnline Advantage pushes you to succeed” (UF), “the framework of UF Online allowed me” (UF), “the NAU Online experience is built around you” (NAU), “enrolling at UAB will allow you” (UAB).

When faculty appear in the text, it was most often as the logical subject of the sentence in a passive formulation, what Halliday (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1985/2014) called the doer of the action, or as the object of a preposition: “still taught by the same

high caliber professors” (USU), “taught by faculty” (PSU), “access to the same award winning faculty” (UAB), “access to adaptive curriculum, renowned faculty” (AKSU), “he learned under faculty” (OSU). There were instances when faculty functioned as the grammatical or thematic subject in a clause or sentence, but those occurrences did not develop a clear narrative around who is responsible for the academic labor of teaching, mentoring, and student learning. When institutions highlighted faculty work, it tended to be within the context of institutional prestige and legitimacy, rather than naming them as the primary actors in the delivery and facilitation of online instruction.

### **Linguistic Description: The Benefits of Online Learning**

With sub-question 2, I examined how the texts used words and grammar to portray the benefits or outcomes associated with enrolling in and completing an academic degree program online. Informed by the theoretical framework of academic capitalism, I expected that the discourse of education as a private good would be ubiquitous throughout the sample. The naturalized, common-sensical language of higher education as an individual investment permeated the texts, but it was coupled with a rhetoric of personalization, choice, and individual identity formation.

### **Words & Phrases**

In the prior section, I addressed the concept of temporal and spatial flexibility and how those terms appear throughout the sample. Flexibility – choosing when, how, and from where to study – could also be considered an inherent benefit of online education, but I elected to include that analysis under the labor sub-question, as I felt there were important intersections between the framing of individual flexibility and the labor of

learning online. The language of personalization and choice described in this section shares many commonalities with the concept of imagined flexibility catalogued above.

Personalization and choice were commonly woven into metaphorical or symbolic descriptions of travel or wandering. Enrolling in a program, taking classes online, or graduating might be characterized metaphorically as a “path” (BSU), a “story” (UA), a “journey” (BSU, CSU, UTA), a navigable “course” (UF), or a “positive turn” (Troy). In other cases, the language was more explicit about the meaning of personalization: it could entail a “custom learning experience” (CSU), a “customizable track” (BSU), or allow learners to “customize their experience” (AKSU); it could be “specific to the future you desire” (CSU), “adjusted to fit your needs,” “built around you” (NAU), or designed “from scratch” (CSU).

Choice and personalization become essentially synonymous: both were options that allowed you to do college “on your terms” (CSU, UF, Troy, UC) or “in your control” (NAU). The overlap here between flexibility and choice discourse is apparent. However, as I will elaborate on in the grammatical section to follow, flexibility language is primarily exhibited through circumstantial adverbial, adjective groups, or preposition phrases, whereas institutions tended to communicate choice and personalization through much more direct means, like mode and modality (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1985/2014).

Pursuing your degree online is about more than just being able to choose; it is also an act of individual identity formation and self-improvement. In this case, metaphorical and idiomatic language obscure more explicit discourses of education as a private good for individual consumption. Learners are encouraged to select an institution or enroll in a program because it represents an opportunity for individual reflection and betterment, an



existential chance to move beyond self-imposed or societal limitations and barriers. You can:

- “Rise with the tide” (UA)
- “Transform your life” (OSU)
- “Pursue your greatest ambitions” (NAU)
- “Pursue [my] passions” (USU)
- “Tell a legendary story” (UA)
- “Walk right up to the edge where every limit will be tested” (UF)
- “Unleash [their] full potential” (UCF).

These programs promise to give you, the student, an “instant edge” (BSU) to put your career ambitions “within reach” (UA, AKSU), or to “make your career dreams a reality” (CSU). In addition to the vocabulary used throughout these examples, there are obvious grammatical tendencies that I will address in the following section. Although the use of symbolic language to describe online education as a tool for individual self-improvement is common in the corpus, overt references to career progression and professional advancement are more salient. The examples cited above function symbolically or euphemistically, linguistic devices that make the underlying message potentially more palatable to prospective students. Research on student self-authorship and student identity formation suggests that this metaphorical framing might be an effective strategy to encourage student persistence and academic success (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Landau, Oyserman, Keefer, & Smith, 2014).

The language of higher education as a private good for consumption is unmistakable and scattered consistently across the 18-institution sample. An abridged list

of examples illustrates how institutions and student testimonials described the purpose of enrolling in an online program and attaining a degree:

- To “prepare you for your career” (UF)
- To “land your dream job” (CSU)
- To “enhance your personal brand” (UF)
- To “open up [my] career opportunities” (USU)
- To “improve [their] business acumen” (OSU)
- To “make your mark in the corporate world” (UF)
- To “prove to your employer that you are worth more” (UC)

In a drop-down menu with a title of “What’s your Goal?,” Utah State offers three possible answers to that question, all presented in the imperative: “qualify for work,” “find a meaningful profession,” or “advance your career.” Pursuing a degree online is an “investment in you” that provides a “career return” and offers “tremendous value.” The consistent invocation that you must “earn” your degree or “acquire” skills supports this framing. Describing higher education as a public or social good did appear occasionally in the sample, but it was almost always within the context of global innovation or as precipitating some ambiguous idea of personal or social change (e.g., “fulfilling their role as global citizens,” UAB; “unleash the potential to change the world,” UCF; “it’s a calling to a greater purpose,” UF).

There are multiple potential interpretations and explanations for the parallel expression of higher education as both metaphorical identity formation and practical occupational preparation. I will discuss those in more depth in Chapter 5, but first, I

analyze how the texts utilize grammar to express or communicate these themes of personalization, identity formation, and professional advancement.

### **Grammatical Tendencies: Individual Benefits**

Grammatical structures and elements also played a key role in articulating the individual benefits of enrolling in and completing an online degree program. In my analysis for sub-question 2, verbal mood, linguistic modality, and polarity surfaced as the most evident and relevant grammatical constructs.

The imperative (i.e., a command) and interrogative (i.e., a question) moods appeared regularly; incorporating command and question into the grammatical fabric of the text has the effect of demanding action or asking for information from the reader (Aijmer, 2016; Halliday & Matthiessen, 1985/2014). Mood and modality operate within the relational metafunction of the text, in which the clause functions as an informational exchange mechanism between the producer and recipient (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1985/2014).

Prospective students were consistently urged to initiate a process that could positively impact their future. The question functioned similarly in asking interested students to consider their range of choices, to understand enrollment as an individual act, or to imagine a different future:

- “Earn your degree on your schedule.” (AKSU)
- “Join more than 6,000 DE students from every county in North Carolina and revisit the dream.” (ECU)
- “Invest in your future today.” (OSU)
- “Never stop your upward journey.” (OSU)

- “Turn your limits into milestones.” (UF)
- “Get the degree you want to land the job you want.” (USU)
- “Why choose? Why put your career on hold?” (UAB)
- “Do you really have what it takes?” (UF)
- “What do you want on your resume?” (UA)

Halliday (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1985/2014) described modality as a linguistic feature that “construes the region of uncertainty between yes and no” (p. 176). Polarity – or grammatical negation – defines where the “yes” and “no” lie, and modality occupies the area in the middle. Modality, which Fairclough (1989) categorized as relational or expressive, is most commonly expressed linguistically through the use of modal auxiliary verbs that communicate possibility, probability, obligation, or truth. Adverbial and adjective groups can also signal modality (Aijmer, 2016; Fairclough, 1989; Halliday & Matthiessen, 1985/2014; Janks, 2005).

In the case of expressive value, Fairclough (1989) argued that polarity and modality could be displayed through other verbal groupings, specifically in the way that non-modal verb tenses can represent “claims to knowledge,” authenticity, or “categorical truths” (p. 129). He provided the example of how news articles or journalistic reporting often utilized the present or perfect tense to “support[s] a view of the world as transparent...without need for interpretation and representation” (p. 129).

In the sample texts, we see how modality and polarity can communicate both possibility and certainty, and set the boundaries of our interpretation. The quotes below are examples of how these grammatical elements subtly reinforce the themes of

individual personalization, identity formation, and advancement. I have underlined the modal auxiliary, verb phrase, or negating word that signals modality or polarity:

- “You will find what a tremendous value you get for your degree, certificate, or license.” (BSU)
- “You will come away ready for your next life and career challenges.” (BSU)
- “A UF education will help you develop invaluable skills, so you can excel.” (UF)
- “It’s knowing that everything that wasn’t possible, is here for the taking – right now.” (UF)
- “You can do this.” (PSU)
- “I would not be in the position I am in today without University of Cincinnati Online’s MS Sport Administration degree.” (UC)
- “Earning a bachelor’s or master’s degree online can increase your salary, help you get a promotion, or secure your dream job.” (UC)
- “With certifications, specializations, and other stackable credentials, you can showcase your knowledge before earning your full Bachelor’s or Master’s degree.” (CSU)
- “When you earn your degree from The University of Alabama, you don’t have to worry.” (UA)
- “TROY can help put you on the right path.”
- “There’s no reason to settle for A or B. Choose both. Choose UAB.”
- “Wherever the road takes Rose, she should be ready for just about anything given all that she managed to balance during her time as an online master’s program student.” (UTA)

These quotes represent only a small cross-section illustrating how altering modality and mood were common in articulating that online learning was defined as a private good with predominantly (and sometimes exclusively) individual benefits. These discourses are naturalized not only through linguistic modality, but also through the use of words, phrases, and other grammatical features present in the corpus. In the following section, I will turn to the final sub-question, in which I describe the vocabulary and linguistic details used to frame the relationship between the current or prospective student and the university.

### **Linguistic Description: The Student/Institution Relationship**

In addition to examining institutional descriptions of the *how* and *why* of online learning, I also analyzed the language of relationships, specifically how higher education institutions communicated status, power, and exchange vis-à-vis the student and other institutional competitors. In his discourse analysis of general institutional websites, Saichaie (2011) uncovered a consistent expression of higher education as a private good and the use of transactional language to explain the relationship between student and institution. Given this study's theoretical framework, I expected institutions to adopt a similar, and potentially more unequivocal, language of transaction and consumption to explain individual and institutional roles and relationships in the world of online learning.

This did in fact turn out to be the case; framing degree pursuit and attainment as an explicit transaction between student and institution was embedded linguistically and visually throughout the sample. Under sub-question 2, I discussed how words and phrases were used to explain the benefits of online learning as an explicit form of exchange, an individual good purchased by the student. The student receives a product (i.e., the degree)

– sometimes this is expressed metaphorically or symbolically as something other than a degree – by making an individual “investment.”

In attempting to sell a product or offer an investment opportunity, institutions went to great lengths to emphasize educational quality and differentiate their online degree programs from real and imagined competitors. Three additional themes emerged from descriptive analysis of both words and grammar, all tied directly to building a discourse of institutional legitimacy and prestige: establishing degree equivalency, remembering institutional history and spatial roots, and merging educational quality and institutional innovation

### **Words & Phrases: Institutional Legitimacy**

Descriptive analysis brought forth how institutions stressed legitimacy and stability by underscoring the equivalency of online degrees, reaffirming the importance of physical space and historical roots, and highlighting educational quality. Most evident throughout the sample was an attempt to equate or draw an equivalency between a degree earned through traditional face-to-face coursework and a degree earned fully online. Every institution in the sample made some direct or indirect claim of equivalency, most frequently by asserting that the degree or diploma a student earned would be the “same” or “identical” to one earned on-campus. Beyond the credential granted, institutions emphasized that the experience of learning online was also equivalent in quality and rigor. Students have access to “the same award-winning faculty” (ASU) and will partake in the “same academic learning opportunities” (CSU) with the “same level of support and networking opportunities” (UTA). Their experience will have “all the advantages” (BSU)

of an on-campus program, it will even be “exactly like a class offered on [our] main campus” (ODU).

Not only did institutions want to stress that students would receive “the same excellent education” (UAB), but also that students were considered part of the same institutional community and alumna body as on-campus graduates. Students were “equally valued members” (UC), all of whom were “sharing in the academic journey” (NAU). If they enrolled and graduated, they would also be able to label themselves a “Trojan,” to “join the Pack,” to become a member of “Gator Nation” or the “Beaver Nation family,” or to identify as a “Penn Stater.” They would be a part of the same “nation,” “tradition,” or “elite network” as their on-campus peers, with all of the commensurate professional and personal benefits that membership would imply.

Establishing legitimacy went beyond foregrounding degree and experiential equivalency. Institutions continually referenced their traditions of online learning and the historical and geographical roots of distance education in their states and regions. Using adjective modifiers and circumstantial adjuncts like prepositional phrases (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1985/2014), universities described their histories as physical and virtual entities, regularly referencing when an institution was founded (e.g., “for over 130 years,” “since 1909,” “founded in 1888,” “200-year old premier institution”) and citing how long the institution has been offering online coursework (e.g., “spans 20 years,” “over 30 years’ experience” “one of the oldest online degree programs”).

With online coursework, institutions recalled the physical “roots” and “tradition” of distance education. Oregon State connected online learning to earlier forms of community education delivered “from the caboose of a train,” while Troy University



drew a direct line to the founding of its “first branch campus at Ft. Rucker in Alabama.” Penn State suggested that its history in online learning stretched back to the delivery of correspondence education before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (“since 1892...without traveling to a physical campus”). Utah State reminded readers of its status as “Utah’s land-grant university” with individual campuses scattered “throughout the state.” For UAB, online learning is “an extension of [its] dynamic traditional campus.” The juxtaposition of physical and virtual space, connecting online learning to an institution’s physical presence and campus places, is an overarching theme that I will return to during the visual analysis section of this chapter and in Chapter 5.

Lastly, institutions regularly used synonyms to signal prestige and academic quality. Words or phrases referencing quality of educational programming appear frequently. It might be “unparalleled,” “highly ranked,” “academically rigorous,” “high-quality,” and “academically authoritative.” Similarly, institutions explained their status and prestige comparatively. Universities might fashion themselves as having a “worldwide reputation” or one that “reaches around the globe.” They could also be “world-class,” “nationally recognized,” a “national trailblazer,” “widely regarded as a nationwide leader,” or have received “national and international respect.” Whether they used words and phrases to recall historical foundations, to champion institutional status and ranking, or to insist on the equivalency of credentials and experience, institutions regularly reaffirmed or stressed their own legitimacy, stability, and prestige. Grammar also played a role in communicating institutional legitimacy and stability, mainly through the use of expressive modality to signal the validity or authenticity of an institutional statement or to imply that what an institution did, has done, or will do in the future is

authoritative and true.

### **Grammar: Actors & Agency**

My grammatical analysis brought forth additional linguistic features that shaped the relationship between the institution and the student. I identified how clause structure and the selection of the grammatical subject foregrounded or empowered the institution and the educational process as agent, while relegating the student to a passive bystander or recipient of a process or an outcome. Alluding to the work of Halliday (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1985/2014), Fairclough (1989) categorized the signaling of agency and action as an expressive value of grammar. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) also incorporated Halliday's explanation of transitive clause structure (i.e., the identification of an actor, a process, and a goal) into their definition of relational structure in visual artifacts.

Institutions regularly positioned themselves or their educational product as the psychological or grammatical subject (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1985/2014) in relation to the student. The psychological subject might not necessarily be the grammatical subject of a sentence or clause, but it plays the role of a thematic subject. As explained earlier, Halliday considered the "theme" of the clause to be the "first group or phrase that has some function in the experiential structure of the clause" (p. 91). Theme and grammatical subject were often the same in the sample, except when replacing an institutional subject with a procedural subject or using it as a possessive modifier.

Below are examples of the institution or institutional programming functioning as grammatical subject and clausal theme. The grammatical subject is underlined:

- “CSU Global understands that your career goals and academic journey are specific to the future you desire.”
- “UCF designed its online degree programs.”
- “Troy University Online provides students with a comprehensive, competitive education...”
- “USU Online made classes easy.”
- “UF Online provides an unparalleled education.”
- “AState Online has given me the freedom to pursue my masters.”
- “eNSU has allowed me to have a full-time job.”
- “UTA’s program provides the knowledge...”
- “ECU’s degree completion program changed my life.”
- “NAU’s online degree programs...allow you to increase the return on your investment.”

In some cases, we see an educational process, outcome, or experience function as the grammatical subject or theme (or both). The grammatical subject is underlined and the theme italicized (if different):

- “Earning a bachelor’s or master’s degree online can increase your salary...”
- “Access to adaptive curriculum, renowned faculty, a global student body, research opportunities, and the world’s largest alumni network allows our students to thrive”
- “A flexible learning environment that allows you to study at times and places convenient to you”

- “*Rooted in tradition but looking to the horizon, ODUOnline’s strong partnerships, accomplished faculty, and expert advising and coaching prepare our students for their next steps.*”
- “*Access to our online degree and certificate programs allows you to be a part of..”*”
- “*“ASU Online: Learning happens where you are.”*”

This grammatical formulation occurred with regularity, and without exception, across the sample texts. Students – prospective, current, or graduated – were rarely centered as the grammatical or thematic subject of a sentence. They appeared more regularly as the direct or indirect object in a transitive exchange. In the examples above, notice how “you” or “students” receive allowance to partake in education or receive an institutional service. Similar to the grammatical placement of faculty work and agency, references to the student often appear in the linguistic background, like through a possessive pronoun or a prepositional phrase (e.g., “your salary,” “my master’s,” “my life,” “knowledge that will change your world,” “a great benefit for me”). The examples of agency above also illustrate how the institutional subject functions as a universal actor that obscures the work of academic labor for both students and faculty.

In these two cases below, the “I” subject is operating either as part of a subordinating clause in an unequal, hypotactic relationship (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1985/2014) or as a modifier in a complex subject.

- “*I love that ASU Online wants to be such a large part of that balance and see you achieve things academically and personally, which helps me be more motivated to accomplish my goals.”*”

- “The pride I have in achieving a master’s degree from CSU Global provided me with the confidence to attain the career plan I had envisioned.”

In both examples, student agency is framed as a result of an institutional process or as a way to connect the institution directly to the student’s success. Despite its location at the front of the sentence, the student-as-subject (“I”) sits in the background, trumped linguistically through an weighted clause structure that situates the university as the creator of the opportunity or the grantor of the credential.

Fairclough (1989) suggested that pronoun usage also carried relational meaning. In this case, institutions varied how and whether they used pronouns to create a more personal connection with the prospective student. Some regularly used first-person and second-person personal and possessive pronouns (“we,” “our,” “you,” “your”), while others opted for a more impersonal approach in using the institutional name or acronym and referring to students more generically or anonymously.

### **Visual Description: Overview**

I utilize Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) framework for multimodal analysis to describe images, media, and overall visual site design. Their model (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) also draws heavily from the tradition of Halliday’s (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1985/2014) systemic functional linguistics. They group elements of visual design, as Fairclough (1989) does with words and grammar, into the three Hallidayan metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual.

In this section, I will explain the results from the descriptive analysis of visual artifacts in the sample according to those metafunctions, while also discussing how those results tie into the presentation of the labor, benefits, and relationships of online learning.

I will devote the interpretation and explanation phases in Chapter 5 to a lengthier, more holistic discussion of the interplay between visual and textual elements in the corpus.

In general, institutional websites displayed very similar approaches to visual design, and visual elements tended to exhibit similar structural or aesthetic features. As discussed in the methodology section of this study, I collected data from a few primary locations: the institutional landing page for online learning, a page or section displaying student testimonials, and a page or section describing why a student should choose to study online at that institution. Certain institutions had more sprawling sites with multiple informational pages, while others managed to limit the structure to a few pages. Some pages were text heavy and included very few images, while others contained limited text, or text was layered over images. For the purposes of this study, I focused primarily on the analysis of still images and digital icons, and did not conduct a full visual analysis of institutional videos. I transcribed all multimedia (e.g., advertisements or marketing videos, student testimonial videos), but included the descriptive analysis of those transcripts in the linguistic analysis of text.

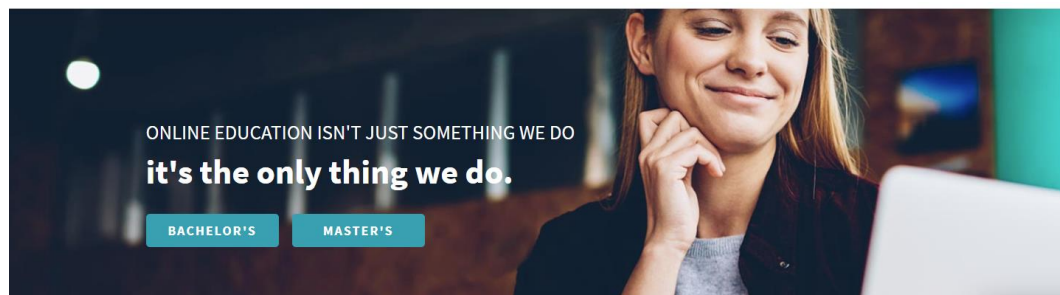
Institutions varied in how they utilized visual design elements and features to represent the ideas and relationships of online learning. In the following sections, I will attempt to highlight what consistencies (or inconsistencies) did exist, while also focusing on concrete examples that are relevant to the interests of this study.

### **Visual Description: Ideational Metafunction**

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) differentiated between two primary visual design techniques linked to the ideational metafunction: a narrative visual structure or a conceptual visual structure. A narrative representation contains an eyeline vector, what

they call a “visual proposition” (p. 64), and can depict a transactional or non-transactional process. In images containing a human subject, the eyeline vector “emanates” (p. 64) from the participant toward a goal or phenomenon: another object (human or non-human) in the image (or potentially off camera). Meanwhile, conceptual visual structures can be used to illustrate classificatory schema, to display an analytical process, or as a means of symbolic representation. Germane to the purposes of this study, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) considered posed photographs, commonly used for marketing or advertising purposes, to be analytical processes. Analytical processes in this genre typically contain a direct visual address and the human participant invites interaction and emotion between the depicted participant and the imagined viewer.

In the sample, we see a mixture of narrative and conceptual representations of students. Narrative representations regularly depicted a student as the reactor with an eyeline vector aimed at a computer, laptop, or work object (as the goal or phenomenon):



*Banner Image, CSU Global*

In other images in the sample, we see narrative representations with human subjects as the recipients of the eyeline vector. The banner image on the University of Cincinnati landing page contains a depiction of a mother holding her daughter with a direct vector connecting the two. A computer sits out of focus in the corner of the image. Another narrative representation depicts a coffee barista with an eyeline vector pointed toward a

customer located primarily off screen. This image accompanied a blog post titled: “How to balance online classes while working full time” (UC).

Physical setting and participant dress varied in these images, but the visual design was remarkably similar throughout. Unless the participant was pictured in a distinct campus space or in a natural environment with a panoramic view, the background was typically obscured or muted, with the participant foregrounded. I will describe additional design elements, like modality, perspective, and angle of these and other images under the relevant metafunction.

Occasionally, images straddled the definitional boundary between narrative and conceptual. In these examples, there was no direct visual address, but the eyeline vector clearly led to an unspecified goal or phenomenon out of the field. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) remarked, the “categories of visual grammar do not have clear-cut edges” (p. 95). I categorize these photographs as primarily narrative representations, but they do serve a conceptual function of eliciting imagination and emotion from the viewer:



*Utah State University*

The represented participant’s eyeline vector encourages the viewer to simultaneously imagine what the actor is thinking and what the actor is viewing off screen. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) agreed that the use of an eyeline vector without a clear goal or



phenomenon could “create a powerful sense of empathy or identification with the represented participants” (p. 68). Posed photographs with a direct address also appear in the visual corpus. These are more definitive examples of the analytical process Kress and van Leeuwen referenced in their discussion of conceptual representations.



*Ball State Online*

In their explanation of posed photographs as conceptual representations, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) wrote about the prominence of the visual gaze, whereby a “represented participant directly addresses the viewers and so establishes an imaginary relation with them” (p. 89). These images emit a purpose of persuasion through the carrier (i.e., the participant), which is to convince prospective students of the value of the thing they are representing (the carrier’s attributes):



*Utah State Online*

The carrier could be holding a diploma, wearing a cap and gown, donning university-branded clothing, or sitting next to a MacBook, but they are implicitly or

explicitly “giving a detailed description of the advertised product” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 89). Even the images with an eyeline vector pointing to an on-screen phenomenon appear posed, which “adds further artificiality” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 89) and more clearly places them within this genre of posed conceptual photographs.

While the representational structure of images communicates objectives and meaning, the content of those narrative and conceptual representations matters as well. Participants were regularly depicted in the act of conducting academic or employment-related labor, in the act of dependent care, or in the act of graduating. Highly stylized or modulated images of participants on campus or engaged in some sort of transitive mental processes, like thinking or seeing (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1985/2014) were also common. With the exception of someone caring for or spending time with a child, represented participants were almost exclusively depicted *alone*. While it is not easy to visually display the participants experiencing or enjoying temporal flexibility, the concept itself is implied through the circumstances and settings of the narrative and conceptual representations (e.g., not in a physical classroom, at home, at a coffee shop, at night).

In addition to posed photographs, we also see the use of conceptual representations to depict institutional time and physical spaces. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) would consider these to be unstructured analytical processes, in which the carrier or the whole (i.e., the institution) is not pictured, but the carrier’s attributes or the parts (i.e., campus buildings) are. Much like posed photographs, the effect of stylized

portrayals of campus is to reinforce the “alluring sensory quality of the advertised product as a whole” (p. 89):



*University of Florida*

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) considered timelines oriented along a vertical or horizontal axis to be visually conceptual and functionally narrative. Digital timelines on the web are even more difficult to label or categorize because of their interactivity and the merging of the visual and textual, but the effect remains: “rather than representing history as a gradual unfolding of events, they analyse [*sic*] it into successive stages with fixed and stable characteristics, stages which can then be treated as though they were things” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 94). Oregon State and CSU Global provide interactive visual and textual timelines to illustrate their histories in distance education; ECU includes a static timeline that details its “long history of educational opportunities away from the campus.” Whether through a timeline or an aerial shot of campus, conceptual representations of institutional time and space were present throughout institutional websites.

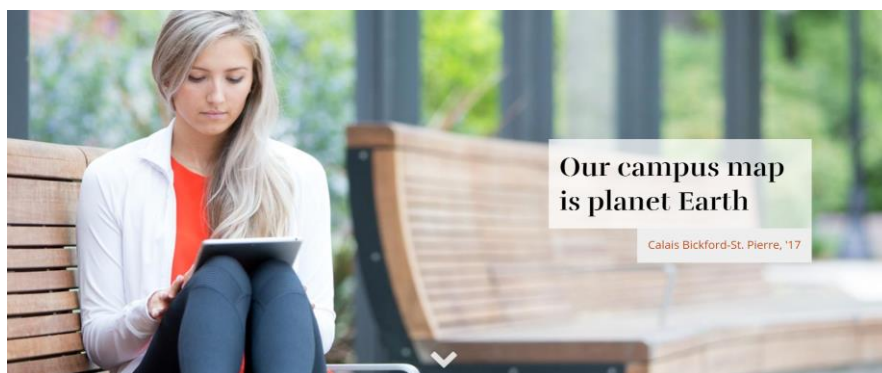
### **Visual Description: Interpersonal Metafunction**

The relational aspect of visual grammar occurs not only through the participant’s gaze, but also through other design elements like perspective, angle, frame, and modality.

Under the ideational metafunction, I indirectly covered how the depicted participant's gaze mediates the relationship between the producer and the viewer. The sample contained a mixture of images containing a participant directly addressing the viewer, and others opting for a narrative structure with an eyeline vector to an internal phenomenon or goal. A direct gaze functions as a form of visual demand, similar to how the imperative and interrogative verbal modes command action or seek information (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1985/2014; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). A narrative representation aims to tell a story, or to create space for the viewer to imagine what that story might be.

### **Angle & Frame**

Visual angle and frame can also work to influence the potential interpretation of the viewer. Angle references the vertical or horizontal positioning of the subject, while frame implies the proximity of the subject relative to the viewer (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Institutions adjusted angle and frame to shape the relationship between the viewer, the producer, and the visual artifact. A frontal horizontal angle with an intimate or close personal framing was used when depicting students with a direct visual address, to highlight individual student experiences, or to celebrate student accomplishments:

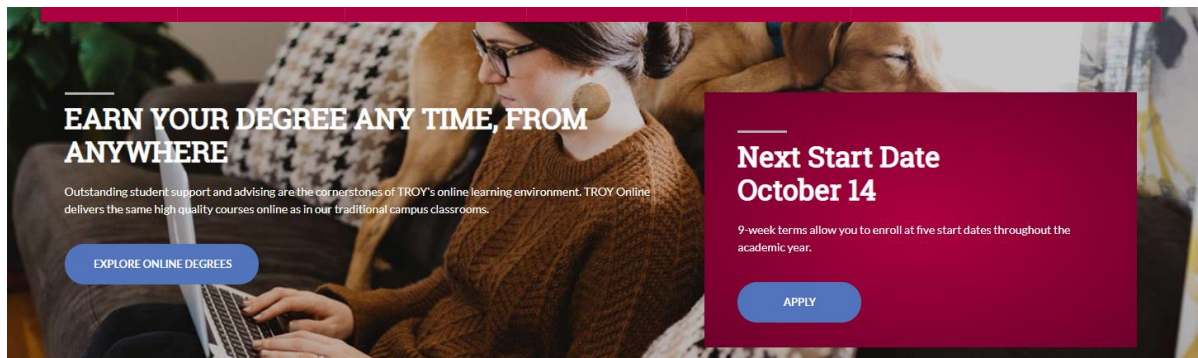


*Oregon State eCampus*



### *ASU Online*

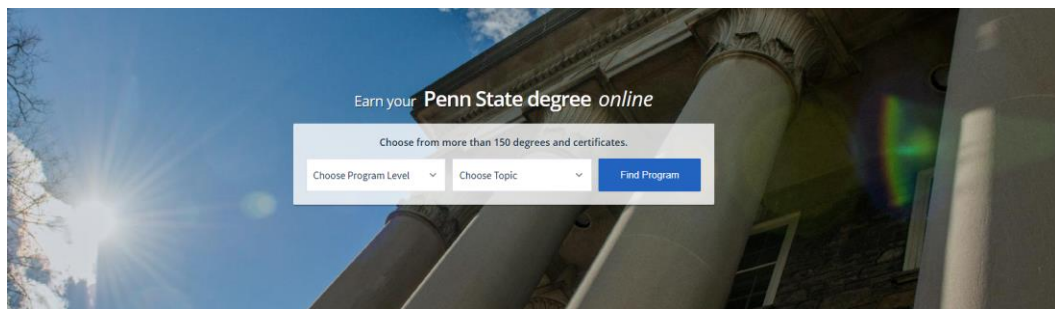
Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argued that the frontal horizontal view was the “angle of maximum involvement” and “oriented towards action,” while the oblique horizontal view created distance (or “detachment”) between the viewer and the represented participant (p. 145). The use of an oblique horizontal angle appeared typically when institutions used stock photography, or an anonymous subject to portray the “act” of learning online. In the banner image below from Troy University, horizontal angle and a slightly adjusted vertical angle create an almost voyeuristic, impersonal quality to the shot:



### *Troy Online*

Regardless of angle, most depictions of individual students were captured with an intimate or close personal frame, shrinking the social distance between the participant and the viewer (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

In the case of vertical angle, institutions played with this element mainly in shots of physical spaces on campus. Vertical angle can be used to suggest a power differential between producer and viewer, to invite the viewer to explore or reach out, or to create a more objective, impersonal depiction of an object or process (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). We see all of these potential interpretations in the sample. This banner image from Penn State World Campus utilizes an upward vertical angle to depict the columns of a campus building. Note not only the effect of the steep vertical angle, but also how that element is coupled with close framing and augmented by the natural (and likely digitally enhanced) illumination from the sun:



*Penn State World Campus*

UTA, UF, and ODU employ a similar approach with ground-level shots looking upward at the facade of a campus building. Meanwhile, Utah State used an aerial view of its physical campus to accompany a description of its history and roots in distance learning. Other institutions, like UAB, Oregon State, UCF, and Arkansas State, also included aerial or limited top-down views of campus spaces, often from a wide-angle or objective perspective:





*Utah State University Online*

Institutions consistently incorporated images of physical campus spaces, leveraging angle to elicit a particular interpretation or to suggest the parameters of the relationship between student and institution. How one reads the images above and makes meaning is a matter of interpretation, which I discuss in Chapter 5.

### **Modality**

Modality is an interpretive concept of visual grammar that influences how viewers assess the authenticity and reliability of what is depicted. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) suggested that modality “rests on culturally and historically determined standards of what is real and what is not” (p. 163). Changes in modality do not just influence our potential interpretation of the truth or validity of a visual artifact, but such alterations and abstractions in modality can also invite the viewer into a more contemplative state where we consider possibilities and imagine alternate realities (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In language, we have auxiliary verbs, modal adjuncts, and verbal tense to express modality; in visual grammar, we have color, context, brightness, and depth as elements to communicate the boundaries between the real and the ethereal.

Across the sample, medium to high modality depictions of institutional buildings, campus spaces, and students are typical, but adjusting or slightly lowering modality can also influence the potential interpretation of an image. Visual representations of campus spaces tend to be naturalistic, relatively unaltered digital photographs of buildings, grounds, and other physical areas: the aerial view of Utah State or UAB, the facade of a campus building at ODU, the wide-angle shot of Arkansas State's campus.

But, in other cases, institutions played with levers of modality to create a particular effect. The University of Florida's short video advertisement for UF Online opens with a panoramic, objective perspective of a barely lit campus at sunrise. UF Online added a hued photographic filter to most images throughout their site that decreased color differentiation and increased brightness. The example from Penn State's World Campus included above features the bright sun shining through the clouds, creating a sort of heavenly illumination. Oregon State's historical timeline opens with an image of a campus building, which shades from unsaturated black and white to fully saturated:

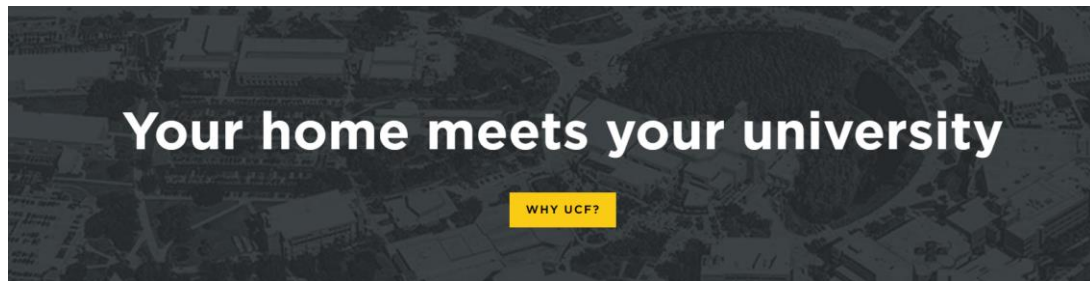
[Our history: An interactive timeline](#)



*Oregon State eCampus*



In one image, UCF includes a low representation, monochrome banner of cheerleaders at an athletic event as background to an “About UCF” text. In another image on the same page, UCF uses a monochrome aerial view of campus layered behind text that reads “Your home meets your university.”



*UCF*

As with angle and frame, modality in student depictions varied based on the subject, the setting, and the situation. Images of students studying or working tended to be high modality, with limited modifications to color. Adjustments to background and depth were regular, but tended to be minor alterations, like blurring the background to draw focus to the human subject. The interpretive effect, especially in the case of stock photography or depictions of anonymous students, is the creation of a sort of visual hyperrealism, marked by a sense of artificiality and detachment.

## How to Balance Online Classes While Working Full Time

BLOG

🕒 6 minute read



### *UC Online*

However, visual representations of student accomplishments (e.g., graduation, celebration) occasionally presented with noticeable moderations to lower modality. This was not consistent across the sample, but a select few examples illustrate how modality can be used visually to impart meaning, create atmosphere, or influence interpretation. This often occurred through adjustments to brightness, illumination, color, or depth:



### *ASU Online*

In the example above, background illumination increases brightness while also decreasing color contrast throughout the image. In another example on the Arizona State homepage, there is a group of students elevated above a city, with their backs towards the

viewer, as the natural illumination from the rising sun highlights their raised hands.

Oregon State's homepage includes a slider of seven images of online program graduates; in each photograph, we see a total absence of visual depth or the de-contextualization of background through color modulation and focusing.

ECU offers an example of how gaze, frame, angle, and modality can be woven into a complex digital image that strains the definitional and descriptive boundaries of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) framework.



*ECU Online*

In this image, an implied aerial view of the state of North Carolina – accompanied by a monochrome background, and images of state landmarks with low color differentiation – sits behind high modality portraits of students with a direct visual address and intimate personal frame. And, to the left, we read a slogan about the temporal flexibility afforded by ECU Online: “Where you are. Where you want to go.” This image simultaneously highlights the symbolic importance of physical space – of rootedness to a specific place – while also reminding the viewer that ECU Online actually removes the spatial limitations of learning. This visual summary, however, moves toward my own individual interpretation. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argued, decoding modality is inherently interpretive and subjective act, and, as such, I will leave further explanations of modality for Chapter 5.

### **Visual Description: Textual Metafunction**

The final metafunction of visual grammar, the textual, covers the overarching structure, function, and aesthetics of visual design. As with the ideational and interpersonal metafunctions, the textual metafunction also blurs the line between the analyst's descriptive and interpretive work. We are not examining specific elements of an individual image, but are analyzing an image and images as part of a whole, the ways in which institutional websites dedicated to online learning “cohere both internally with each other and externally with the context in and for which they were produced” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 43).

The description of the textual metafunction is communicated through visual composition. This includes how visual elements are stressed or weighted (i.e., salience); how elements relate to one another through placement and alignment (i.e., information value); and how visual elements, like straight lines, divide or bring elements together (i.e., framing). In this section, I will focus mainly on the salience and information value of visual elements as part of the larger structure and composition of institutional website design. While institutions did use lines and horizontal markers to separate and combine visual elements, I found framing was commonly used as a generic feature of web design and content organization, rather than as a device to mediate meaning between the producer and the viewer.

#### **Salience**

All institutional landing pages contained a prominent banner image with heavy visual weight. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) would have marked these banner images, because of their size and placement, as visually salient. In some cases, institutions

utilized multiple large or page-width images, inserting additional high-salience images to break up or separate content farther down the vertical length of the page. Banners almost always covered the majority of the horizontal width of the page, occasionally leaving a small amount of room for a simple clickable menu or layering an interactive menu over top of the banner. With a few exceptions (UTA, PSU, UF), the most salient banners displayed images of what appeared to be current students or graduates.

Institutions incorporated other web design strategies to make visual elements more salient to the potential viewer. Image sliders were common throughout the sample, often used to rotate banner images at the top of a page (e.g., ASU, UF, UAB, OSU) or to cycle through information without redirecting viewers to a new page. The image below from the University of Florida contains an image carousel that continuously rotates through student testimonials:



*UF Online*

In some instances, institutions were not quite as subtle in calling attention to information or demanding a viewer's attention. I regularly encountered chat windows, prominently displayed "Apply Now" buttons, information request fields, and even a pop-up window with an opportunity for an application discount:

**FREE APPLICATION CODE**  
A \$25 Value

**If it's time to make your career dreams a reality, we can help.**  
Complete the form below and receive a code to waive the \$25 application fee.

First Name \*      Last Name \*

Email \*      Phone \*

**GET APPLICATION CODE**

By submitting this form, I agree that CSU-Global may contact me about educational services by phone/text message. Message and data rates may apply. I understand that my consent is not required to attend CSU-Global.

\* Required Fields

*CSU Global*

When you navigate to the Colorado State Global landing page, your first interaction with the institution is a pop-up window that entices you with a deal to apply to the institution.

While these elements were not the most visually salient, institutions often utilized placement and forced interaction to demand viewer action – like requesting more information, rating an experience, or applying to the institution. Institutions also combined images and language to increase both linguistic and visual weight, often including a slogan or branded text over a banner image.



YOUR PROGRAM, YOUR FUTURE, ON YOUR TIME

*ASU Online*

Digital icons accompanied by text were also a regular feature; they functioned as visual representations to communicate institutional legitimacy or to illustrate certain concepts related to online learning. This might include a clock or calendar to symbolize time, a dollar sign to stand in for affordability, or a briefcase to communicate employability. Institutions displayed award badges and logos representing institutional accreditation (e.g., the Higher Learning Commission), national or international rankings, and industry or organizational awards. These items were sized and situated in prominent locations or appeared frequently for emphasis.

### Ranked Among the Best



*Troy University*

### Information Value

When Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) discussed information value, they were referring to how the placement and alignment of visual elements “endows them with the specific informational values attached to the various ‘zones’ of the image” (p. 177). They argued that we read text and images with a rubric evolved from our historical and social contexts, as well as linguistic traditions; as a result, we assign different values and meanings to elements depending on that interpretive rubric.

In my analysis, the concept of top/bottom – originally adopted from Halliday (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1985/2014) and modified by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) to

visual grammar – was most recognizable throughout the visual corpus. The top of the visual artifact symbolizes the “ideal,” which gradually gives way to the “real,” as the viewer progresses from top to bottom. In examining institutional landing pages holistically, I noticed the top/bottom dichotomy represented regularly both through text and visual artifacts. Banner images often displayed highly idealized illustrations of campus, representations of student life, or posed photographs of students doing academic work. These images gave way to institutional and programmatic information, sometimes highlighting institutional rankings, academic quality, student satisfaction, or other metrics of legitimacy. Toward the bottom of a page, viewers would encounter valuable information on topics like cost and affordability, student support, transferring credits, and veterans’ affairs.

This top/bottom relationship – combined with the visual weight afforded to images at the top of the page – draws the viewer to items or elements at the top, focusing their attention on the “ideal,” while delaying the “real.” Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) discussed other compositional structures that can impart meaning or informational value, like left/right or center/margin, but those were not readily apparent across the sample.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter, I have provided the results of linguistic and visual analysis of data, describing how words, grammar, and visual design function throughout the texts. Given the limitations of this scholarly medium and of my time as a researcher, I could not describe every lexical choice, grammatical structure, or representation of visual modality. Instead, I highlighted the grammatical and visual features that I believed were most salient and relevant to the questions and theoretical framework guiding this study.



Fairclough (1989) admitted that there was a complex, often non-linear relationship between the three stages of critical discourse analysis in his methodological framework. In the case of the descriptive and interpretive phases, a researcher's interpretation of the data influences how they assign weight or importance to individual excerpts from the text and determine which linguistic elements that they choose to describe. However, it is also the task of the analyst to first parse out their own interpretation, and then to attempt to explain a multitude of other potential interpretations, which may vary from their own based on the member resources and contextual realities of a diverse audience.

The descriptive stage “needs to be complemented with interpretation and explanation,” as those processes unpack the naturalized discourses embedded in the practical use of language and “link them to social struggles and relations of power” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 141). In Chapter 5, I will transition toward the interpretive and explanatory stages of this project, framing that discussion around the naturalized discourses uncovered through descriptive analysis.

## Chapter 5

In Chapter 4, I discussed the results of the descriptive stage of linguistic and visual data analysis; I attempted to organize those findings around this study's overarching research questions and sub-questions. In the interpretive and explanatory phase of the Faircloughian (1989) methodological framework, I will focus on an examination of how these discourses reproduce or counteract social context and realities. In particular, I will expand on the results from the descriptive stage, while also more clearly elaborating on how the results of linguistic and visual analysis connect to the themes of labor, time, space, and struggle.

The research questions and sub-questions of this study focused on uncovering and linking the "naturalized" discourses used to market online learning in U.S. higher education to broader social realities. Specifically, I set out to examine how public institutions that lead in exclusively online student enrollment expressed and advertised the labor, benefits, and relationships of online learning; to explore how those discourses recreate or counter the neoliberal status quo; and to expand understanding of how colleges and universities operate in the academic capitalist regime.

I have organized this final chapter into three primary sections based on research sub-question. In each section, I will first discuss the interpretation of text, not only my own interpretation, but the interpretation of a range of possible discourse participants. I will then draw a line from interpretation to explanation and attempt to situate each of the discursive themes within the appropriate context and the larger body of academic and popular literature. As Fairclough (1989) cautioned, it is ultimately the decision of the researcher as to how far and how wide they choose to extend their explanation. In the

case of my research, I have tried to connect these themes of labor, time, space, and struggle to broader “processes of struggle and to power relations” inside, and when relevant, outside of academia (Fairclough, 1989, p. 141). I will close this chapter with a discussion of the implications of this study and potential directions for future critical qualitative inquiry and discourse research in online learning.

### **Interpretation: Overview**

Fairclough (1989) argued that the act of textual interpretation was “generated through a combination of what is in the text and what is ‘in’ the interpreter” (p. 141). Whether the participant is interpreting and decoding linguistic or visual artifacts, they are making meaning of the text through the lens of their own experiences, knowledge, and assumptions — what Fairclough referred to as their “member resources” (MR). Certain “formal features of the text” function as “cues, which activate elements” of that participant’s interpretive lens (p. 141). In the case of print, or non-digital texts, the text itself might remain static, unchangeable, but the participant — the reader, the listener, the viewer — changes.

For example, Russian readers of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* (1869/2009) in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century approach the novel with a remarkably different set of member resources than their 19<sup>th</sup> Century counterparts; likewise, Tolstoy’s work has been translated into the world’s major languages, been the object of filmic and artistic adaptations, and is now part of an intertextual web of direct and indirect cultural and social references to the original source material.

The ephemeral nature of web-based texts does complicate the act of interpretation and explanation (Mautner, 2005). Websites and digital content are dynamic and

constantly changing; what we capture today might be gone tomorrow. However, Fairclough (1989) offered a path to guide researchers through this stage. Interpretation begins with the micro — the cognitive processing of written language, speech, and visual artifacts, the comprehension of the individual text — and proceeds to the macro: the placement of the text based on genre and intertextuality; the mapping of the text onto pre-existing mental schema, frames, and scripts; and, finally, the decoding and sense-making of the text based on social realities and context (Fairclough, 1989).

In explaining the interpretive stage, Fairclough (1989) proposed that researchers first describe the social order and social situation of the text — the contents, the activities, and the relationships — and then identify how participants might apply certain heuristic devices from their member resources to make meaning. He repeatedly underscored the importance of establishing “what interpretation(s) of situational context participants are working with, and whether there is or is not a single shared interpretation” (Fairclough, 1989, p.151). Throughout this chapter, I apply this model and utilize questions from Gee’s (2011, 2014) toolkit to isolate my own interpretation and identify other potential interpretations of the texts.

### **Interpretation: Participants**

With experience as a researcher, a higher education professional, an online instructor, and as a graduate of an online degree program, I likely do not represent the typical participant who would visit institutional websites devoted to marketing online learning to prospective students. However, as Fairclough (1989) stressed, the researcher cannot definitively identify or describe interpretations other than their own, for “these processes take place in people’s heads, and it is therefore not possible to observe them as

one might observe processes in the physical world” (p. 167). During the explanatory stage, the researcher can draw on social theory and empirical data to connect discourse to reality, but during the interpretive stage, it is “only really self-consciousness that distinguishes the analyst from the participants she is analysing [sic]” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 167). This requires that the researcher be transparent about their own assumptions and experiences and how those might differ from other participants. My interpretation already influenced the descriptive analysis of texts, as I cannot wholly detangle my own member resources, biases, and epistemology from the process of analyzing and describing data.

As such, my interpretation does not stand in for a “single shared interpretation” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 151). In addition to students, who I will address below, there are certainly other administrators, recruitment and admissions staff, university accreditors, donors and alumna, and for-profit consultants who frequent institutional websites to get a sense for trends in web design, marketing strategy, and institutional competition or to stay associated with their university community. Although these participants are not the focus of the research questions guiding this study, I do attempt to be mindful of how “a more powerful participant’s interpretation can be imposed on other participants” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 151).

Given the purpose and content of these websites (Saichaie, 2011; Saichaie & Morphew, 2014), the most regular visitors are likely to be prospective students seeking out additional information or interested in applying to an online degree program at one of the institutions, or to an academic program offered fully online by one of the institutions. Prospective students could be searching generically for programs at a specific institution (e.g., online learning at the University of Florida), or for online programs in a specific

discipline or occupation with or without a geographic qualifier (e.g., nursing programs online in Florida, or nursing programs online). How prospective students landed on an institutional website might influence their potential interpretation of its contents: specifying institution might mean that a participant is more interested in the qualities, reputation, or name recognition of that respective institution rather than a particular academic program. A prospective student who specifies program might potentially be more interested in the details of that program (e.g., cost, time to degree, graduate outcomes) over other attributes of the institution.

Although the lack of reliable historical data regarding online students complicates this interpretive work, I do believe it is beneficial to imagine the spectrum of prospective online students and how their interpretations might vary. In 2017, 1.65 million students were enrolled in exclusively online coursework at public institutions in the United States; of those 1.65 million, the majority were undergraduate students (NCES, 2017, 2018; Seaman et al., 2018). Compared to their on-campus peers, students taking courses or enrolled in a degree program exclusively online were more likely to be students of color, to identify as female, to be employed part- or full-time, and to be adults (i.e., older than 24) (NCES, 2018). While the proportion of students enrolled exclusively online increased across nearly all categories (i.e., race, age, gender, attendance status, and field of study), these traditionally underserved student populations are now overrepresented online vis-a-vis their fellow students enrolled in on-campus programs.

### **Explanation: Overview**

During the explanatory stage, the researcher is to take the results of interpretation and try to map those onto broader social realities and ideologies, to further unpack the

assumptions, beliefs, and values embedded in the discourse. Fairclough (1989) recommended an approach that started with the situational, then moved to the institutional, and ended with the societal context. At each level, the researcher should attempt to explain the determinants, ideologies, and effects of the discourse(s) and its relationship to structures and systems of power.

Given the dialectical nature of discourse, untangling determinants, ideologies, and effects can be a challenging, if not impossible, task. In this case, I have also drawn on the suggestions of Gee (2011, 2014) and a few additional questions from his tools for inquiry to assist in my attempts to analyze the interplay between the discourse and reality. A further description of Gee's tools for inquiry utilized in this study is available in Appendix I. Specifically, Gee asked readers to consider what the text(s) were saying about social goods and relationships (The Politics Building Tool), about the world(s) that a text was encouraging a participant to create or imagine (The Figured Worlds Tool), and about the connection between the text and dominant social discourses and ideologies (The Big "D" Discourse tool).

In Chapter 2's literature review and theoretical framework, I included a detailed discussion of the situational and the institutional context of online learning (e.g., discrepancies in student outcomes, trends in institutional marketing, history of online learning across higher education). In this chapter, I reconnect that situational and institutional context to the descriptive and interpretive findings, while also tying the explanation into the overarching discourses and realities of academic capitalism and neoliberalism.

### **Sub-Question 1: The Labor of Online Learning**

#### **Sub-Question 1: Interpretation**

As discussed in Chapter 4, institutions used a variety of grammatical and visual techniques to describe the work of online learning and to illustrate who is responsible for that work. Online learning is regularly depicted as an individual endeavor of the student, one requiring personal sacrifice while simultaneously offering flexibility. Students could mold their educational experiences to their own lives. Indeed, flexibility comes to be synonymous with both temporal and spatial choice. In theory, students can choose not only when they study and do academic work, but from where.

However, the personal flexibility afforded individuals through online learning was counterbalanced by frequent references to individual struggle and sacrifice. Testimonials regularly included narratives portraying how students had to prioritize and juggle work and family responsibilities, how they had to come up with creative locations and times to study, and how they had to forgo or delay other interests or opportunities. Images and media in the sample reinforced this theme, regularly showing students completing their academic work while also entertaining or caring for a child. Institutional descriptions often included advice on how to manage or balance full-time employment, personal obligations, and online coursework. For the individual student, the work (i.e., the contents) of online learning was framed more tightly around the parameters of flexibility, time management, and career preparation than around a holistic depiction of higher education as an engine for learning, civic engagement, social involvement, or the creation of shared knowledge.



To me, the work of online learning appeared lonely and isolating. Students were often pictured alone studying or staring at a computer screen. Group depictions more regularly included on-campus events (e.g., a football game, a student activity) with greater social distance and less intimate framing. Although there were occasional images of physical collaboration and interaction between students in the classroom, these are unlikely to be an accurate representation of what that would look like to a student studying exclusively *online*. Images containing multiple participants more often included a professional or workplace setting, or a parent simultaneously engaged in the work of caring for a child. The only constant relationship present and reiterated throughout the sample, both visually and linguistically, was between the student and the institution, not the student and the faculty, nor the student and their peers. The university becomes the collective, branded representation of faculty labor, acting as an avatar for the individual and collaborative work of teaching.

In one of his tools for inquiry, Gee (2014) suggested that researchers consider and examine what is and what *is not* present in the text. He called this the “Fill-in Tool,” in which we ask how the background knowledge and experience (analogous to Fairclough’s description of MR) would influence a potential participant’s interpretation of the text. As a critical researcher and someone with a keen interest on issues related to faculty labor and student learning, I am aware of employment and hiring trends in higher education over the last 30 years, specifically the shift toward contingent academic labor and the concurrent increase in managerial and administrative staffing over that same time period (AAUP, 2017; Carlson, 2014; Rhoades, 1998; Scott, Dizon, & Kezar, 2019). Where I see the backgrounding of faculty labor through visual and grammatical tendencies (e.g.,

through the use of passive voice, or grammatical subject selection, depiction of campus buildings and exterior spaces), another participant might be entirely unaware of that context or come to a different interpretation based on their own values and beliefs.

I assume that the vast majority of prospective students reading through institutional websites marketing online programs are not particularly interested in these compositional changes to labor in academia. Given that they are seeking out information on an online degree program, not the most recent literature in peer-reviewed higher education journals, these students are more likely to be interested in learning how a degree earned online can increase their earning potential, offer potential career and employment stability, and how they can complete that degree within the constraints and realities of their daily lives. However, prospective students might assume that when an institution references the “same” faculty, they are implying full-time on-campus faculty, rather than adjuncts or contingent faculty who might also have an on-campus assignment. In my own experiences as a prospective and then enrolled online student, I was expecting full-time program faculty to teach the majority of the courses in my master’s program. In fact, this was a question that I asked as I was considering potential programs. To my surprise, I interacted more regularly with adjunct faculty and they regularly taught in program classes.

How might the prospective student interpret their own labor? That depends heavily on their individual circumstances. Single parents who are employed full-time pursuing a Bachelor’s degree bring a different set of resources to interpretation than would a high-earning manager seeking an Executive MBA. Flexibility would likely carry different meanings to both of those potential participants. For the single parent, perhaps it

implies the ability to carve out a few hours in the evening after they have put their children to bed; for the manager, maybe it means they can study while traveling or integrate their coursework into their professional responsibilities. Using the Faircloughian (1989) terminology, prospective students will apply certain cultural scripts to their interpretation, drawing intertextually and on their own member resources, like individual experiences, television commercials, digital advertisements, and cultural references. The script then functions as a familiar frame of reference on which the participant can transpose, or make sense of, the textual depictions of being an online student.

And, to return to Gee's (2014) Fill-in-Tool, I believe that it is important to note that the student testimonials and descriptions present throughout the sample were hand-picked to attract potential students to apply and enroll. Institutions likely would not have included the words and images of students who dropped out after their first course, who could not manage the impossibilities of juggling and balancing their family and personal obligations, who could not afford the cost of continued enrollment, or who did not feel supported by the institution. Returning to Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) concept of information value, institutions might foreground the "ideal" through a prominent vertical placement (i.e., at the top), because they would prefer not to call attention to the real challenges and complicating circumstances that the prospective student might face, whether that be paying for the degree or finding academic support.

Where I, as a researcher, see an inherent tension between the frequent visual and linguistic illustrations of temporal flexibility, the regular descriptions of students struggling to meet personal and academic demands, and the realities of attrition and student learning in online learning across higher education (Bawa, 2016; Hart et al.,

2018; James et al., 2015; Johnson & Cuellar Mejia, 2014; Xu & Jaggars, 2011, 2014), a prospective student is likely not interpreting an institution's descriptions of online learning with that same experiential or contextual lens. However, in my interpretation, the discourses of student labor in online learning in this sample establish a diametric relationship between flexibility and struggle, what I have elected to label the time/labor paradox. Although institutions regularly describe online learning as offering flexibility, that flexibility discourse is regularly counteracted by discourses of individual struggle, busyness, and sacrifice. In the explanation section to follow, I will discuss how this time/labor paradox and the promises of flexibility within online learning represent an extension of Walker's (2014) academic capitalist time regime and explore how it might mirror similar discursive promises outside of higher education.

### **Sub-Question 1: Explanation**

Student testimonials across the sample reinforce the notion that learning online is difficult, and that success is a matter of perseverance and individual organization. In spite of the flexibility, students still have to fit the work of learning online into their busy calendars. In her theoretical analysis of academic capitalism, Walker (2009) described time as the new frontier — what she calls the “fourth dimension” — of globalization in higher education, in which the work and labor of faculty and students is “premised...on both justifying their use of time and seeking to outsmart it” (p. 485). In later work, Walker (2014) expanded on this concept and described how time “pervades our higher education institutions, our teaching, and our learning” (p. 56). Walker argued that the academic capitalist time regime manifests itself through a number of paradoxes that define the labor and experience of faculty and students.

Walker (2009, 2014) suggested that while we are promised flexibility and acceleration, those supposed benefits come with disclaimers: flexibility, but to what extent is that flexibility surveilled and managed; acceleration, but to what extent does that acceleration come at the expense of academic quality, depth, and equity? Lutes and Davies (2012) found that students enrolled in compressed courses – i.e., condensing a 16-week or full-term course to be delivered in a shorter or abbreviated (typically 8-week) term – generally reported spending less time on academic work relative to students enrolled in the same full-semester course. The amorphous and complicated model of competency-based education (CBE) also promises to accelerate a student’s time-to-degree by untethering time from learning, allowing students to hypothetically move at their own pace throughout a course and a degree program. There are numerous unanswered questions about who enrolls in CBE programs, how successful those students are and at what cost, and whether they actually complete degrees more quickly than they otherwise would have if they were enrolled in traditional term-bound program (Kamenetz, 2013; Kelchen, 2016).

These discourses — and paradoxes — of time and labor permeate the corpus. Institutions in the sample constantly trumpeted that students could earn their degrees quickly, that they have the choice to work whenever and wherever, but also subtly reminded students of the challenges and sacrifices that other online students had to make to pursue and complete their degrees. That flexibility and acceleration must come at the expense of their personal and professional lives, that they must give something up — time with family, rest, vacation, leisure — or more efficiently manage their responsibilities to earn their degree.

Houlden and Veletsianos (2018) asked to what degree these narratives and realities about the flexibility of online learning privilege certain student populations or communicate the normativity of certain experiences, i.e., to what extent “one’s access to particular spaces and time is dependent upon one’s freedom to negotiate larger forces that would give or would deny that access” (p. 7). Moreover, as the authors noted (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2018), flexibility is contextual: all students are working and living within the temporal constraints of a 24-hour day. They have fixed obligations, requirements, and expectations that they must tend to and take care of, regardless of the flexibility of their degree program. Their academic labor then is just another thing competing “for time and space to study in an already full schedule” (p. 7). A single parent who does their coursework at 9 PM after their children have gone to sleep is not necessarily exercising flexibility or choice in when they learn; they are simply slotting their coursework into the only available free time in their schedule. If the labor of learning did not occur at that time — whether it was online or in a physical classroom — it would likely not occur at all.

In her study on women learning online, Kramarae (2000) examined how some women felt conflicted by the multiple responsibilities competing for their time and energy. For some participants, online learning represented another task to be managed, requiring “more self-discipline and scheduling to maintain a space within the household for studying and learning.” Kramarae (2000) argued that, because “this space is not clearly demarcated by a specific class time and location,” gender roles and household responsibilities might make temporal and spatial flexibility more illusory (p. 33). The discourses of flexibility – supported visually by images of women students caring for

dependent children – reinforce the idea that learning online is another task to add to one’s checklist of professional and domestic responsibilities. Although it occurs virtually, it nonetheless must be completed within the same physical limitations of time and space as all of our other human obligations and interactions. The language and images in this sample do nothing to dispel or undercut Karamarae’s theory of the 3<sup>rd</sup> shift for women learning online; in fact, institutions do quite the opposite, often depicting or directly referencing women in caregiving roles:



Furthermore, Houlden and Veletsianos (2018) suggested that the discourse of flexibility shifts responsibility for failure primarily onto the student. Institutions expectedly highlighted the stories of perseverance and success overcoming odds; what is exempted — to fill in what is left out (Gee, 2014) — is the students who did not succeed. They were also given the flexibility of space and time. Houlden and Veletsianos (2018) might read their exemption, coupled with the regular descriptions of individual struggle and success, as a reference to the discourses of personal responsibility: “when the practices of flexible education become entrenched in a framework of the responsible individual (i.e. the autonomous subject), flexibility, once seen as a means to liberation, risks becoming oppressive” (p. 8).

In their original work on academic capitalism, Slaughter and Leslie (1997) referenced the “entrepreneurial university.” Flexibility discourses naturally expand on this concept in fashioning the student as entrepreneurial, as a self-enterprising individual who can make and own their choices about the present and the future. But, within entrepreneurialism exists also the risk of failure, shifted in this case away from the entrepreneurial university and onto the entrepreneurial student through the promise of flexibility and individual choice.

Beyond this tension between time and labor, Walker (2014) connected the discourses of flexibility to the realities of individual privacy and institutional surveillance, arguing that this supposed increase in the flexibility offered through online learning must be understood within the context of more invasive attempts by institutions to monitor what students were doing. Institutions do not directly reference monitoring and tracking students in the sample, but a quick glance at some of the trends in educational technology supports Walker’s thesis. Whether it is an emphasis on learning analytics and mining student data from a learning management system, identification of at-risk students through early alert platforms, or on policing student assessment and work through virtual test proctoring, institutions have coupled flexibility with technological tools and institutional reporting to track student behaviors (Gardner, 2019). In addition, other critical educators and writers like Watters (2014, 2017a, 2017b), Gilliard (2017), Stommel (2014, 2017), and Morozov (2014) have analyzed and critiqued how post-secondary institutions and PK12 school districts have implemented and incorporated educational technologies and digital tools that rely on more pervasive forms of surveillance and data mining.



With regards to our understandings of academic capitalism, these technologies offer institutions and for-profit companies new ways to track and understand student behavior, to collect and commodify knowledge and academic work, and to target and explore new student markets – often without the knowledge and or consent of the students themselves. The discourses and realities of flexibility exist atop and are made possible by a set of proprietary technologies – from learning management systems to early alert and retention monitoring software to plagiarism detection and remote proctoring tools – that function and rely on data collection as a business model (Nash, 2019; Raths, 2018; Strauss, 2019). As Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) suggested, “academic capitalism in the new economy involves institutions turning toward students as targets for the extraction of revenue...initiating marketlike and market practices and forming partnerships with business to exploit the commercial potential of students” (p. 279).

A desire for flexible work space and labor arrangements is not unique to higher education. Beyond the institutional context of higher education, remote work arrangements, flexible scheduling, and work-life balance initiatives are now commonplace (IWG, 2019). However, that flexibility of time and space afforded by work-from-home or remote work expectations can have unintended consequences that signal a “a deep transfer of risks and responsibilities from the company and its management to the individuals at work” (Taskin & Devos, 2005, p. 18). Full or partial remote or virtual work arrangements can impact an employee’s feelings of social connection or community (e.g., Golden, 2007; Morganson, et al., 2010; Taskin & Devos, 2005), their ability or inability — with potential differences based on the gender

identification of the participants — to detach or decouple work from personal life (e.g., Hartig, Kylin, & Johannson, 2007; Mann & Holdsworth, 2000; Taskin & Devos, 2005), and their levels of stress and anxiety (Hartig et al., 2005; Sardeshmukh, Sharma, & Golden, 2012).

In education, we know how important interaction, collaboration, and active learning are to student learning (Eyler, 2018; Michael, 2006), but, in the sample, universities tend to show learning online as a relatively solitary and individual act. Perhaps this stems from the difficulty in creating a compelling and persuasive visual depiction of community and collaboration in online learning, but the language and images universities used to describe and market online learning online stood out as a notable contrast to what we know about learning as being social and communal.

As with the promises of online learning, I am not arguing that employees might not enjoy or benefit from individual experiences of flexibility in virtual work and online learning arrangements. Instead, I believe that it is important that we interrogate how the broader discourse of flexibility ignores the differences and inequities in how individuals experience and enact flexibility in learning and work. More specifically, I find parallels between the discourses of flexibility in online learning and the rhetoric and reality of short-term or contracted labor relationships that have sprung up in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. In this precarious, non-permanent market for labor, sometimes, although not interchangeably, named the “gig,” sharing, or hustle economies (Friedman, 2014; Graham, Hjorth, & Lehdonvirta, 2017; Ravenelle, 2019, Thieme, 2018), workers are typically independent contractors without the benefits or security afforded to a normal salaried or hourly employee. Workers receive compensation based on their ability to

accept and complete tasks and (or) their willingness to share their resources (e.g., AirBnB, Uber) or skills (e.g., TaskRabbit). In the case of this study, both students and faculty, particularly adjunct faculty, might share similarities with the workers Ravenelle (2019) interviewed in her study. Both students and faculty are responsible for the work of learning and teaching online and might expect certain benefits or express certain frustrations about the flexibility and autonomy associated with online learning.

As Ravenelle (2019) chronicled, workers do not necessarily find the supposed flexibility of these work arrangements attractive, but are often drawn to them as a response to the insecurities and precarity of the modern labor market. They struggle to make ends meet — and often do not — driving for Uber, completing random household tasks for strangers through TaskRabbit, or renting out a bedroom of their apartment for AirBnB. While this does afford them some theoretical degree of temporal and spatial flexibility, workers often decide to join this informal economy out of necessity, rather than by choice. Supporting Houlden and Veletsianos's (2018) argument, Ravenelle (2019) documented how experiences of flexibility in the gig economy often depend on the privilege and status of the worker. These workers are “constantly competing for jobs in a ‘spot market’ that resembles a trading floor” (p. 36). Although by most accounts the actual number of workers employed through the gig economy remains relatively small, it is symptomatic of a “shifting of risk and liability as part of a larger casualization of labor” (p. 22). Both students and adjunct faculty exist within this hyper-competitive and less secure labor market, with the institution there to offer flexibility and opportunity through a digital learning platform.

Within the sample, universities clearly nod to the perceived intention of the student to further their professional career through job promotion or advancement, while also advertising that the institution offers connections and services that will help the student get ahead in that pursuit. It is a tacit acknowledgement that students work and will graduate into a hollowed-out, unequal labor market with a vanishing number of secure, reliable, and well-compensated jobs (Greenhouse, 2019; Ravelle, 2019). Adjunct faculty, many who have to cobble together teaching appointments across multiple institutions (Kezar & Bernstein-Sierra, 2016; Kezar & Sam, 2010), might find that the ability to teach online promises to free up time that they might otherwise spend in a physical classroom or commuting to campus. But that freedom might be counteracted by the potential uncertainty and relative compensation of their employment.

These shifts in the structure and recognition of academic labor are also evident in an analysis of visual and linguistic grammar. Although there is a lack of publicly available national or institutional data on online adjunct faculty, Magda, Poulin, and Clinefelter's (2015) recent survey work suggested that roughly a third of adjunct faculty teach online, and that well over half of all responding institutions have increased the proportion of adjunct faculty teaching online over the last 4 years. As Magda et al. (2015) did not disclose the names of the institutions in their sample, we do not know whether any of the universities from this study were included. However, their findings are consistent with the broader body of literature suggesting that institutions are relying more heavily on contingent and part-time academic labor for the work and responsibility of teaching and advising students (AAUP, 2017; Scott, Dizon, & Kezar, 2019). Given these relational dynamics, it is unsurprising that faculty, whether full- or part-time, are not the

active subjects influencing, leading, instructing, and mentoring students. Repeatedly throughout the sample, institutions replaced the work of faculty with a broad, faceless institutional identity (e.g., a slogan, a logo, a department, an initiative, an institutional name) or made that labor invisible through grammatical and visual constructs (e.g., passive voice, the object of a preposition, lack of visual representation). Jessop (2018) argued that as academic capitalism progressed across institutions and systems, it would involve “the quasi-commodification of mental labor as an input, including the separation of intellectual labor from the means of intellectual production” (p. 860). The language and visual artifacts of the sample discursively reinforce this distancing of faculty from their work, crediting institutions rather than individuals for the work of teaching, learning, and knowledge production.

At play here is a sort of unresolvable tension that has contaminated employment and labor relations inside and outside of higher education: a growing reliance on a temporary, short-term, or contracted workforce to drive down costs or satisfy the austerity regime, concomitant with the upward redistribution of compensation, benefits, and stability for those in the administrative and executive ranks (Greenhouse, 2019; Katz & Krueger, 2016; Ravenelle, 2019). Adjunct and contingent faculty, now comprising the bulk of the instructional labor in American higher education, are regularly undercompensated, underappreciated, and often lack basic workplace protections and employment security (AAUP, 2017, 2018, n.d.; Scott et al., 2019).

In this case, I would contend that this rhetorical sidelining of faculty labor is evidence of how the discourse reflects institutional and social realities, and then, in turn reinforces those structural and systemic realities through language. The shift towards

more contingent academic labor has left faculty – both full- and part-time – enjoying fewer labor protections and less robust employment benefits (AAUP, 2018; Rhoades, 1998). This has occurred as neoliberal policymaking fueled the consolidation of corporate and executive power and the erosion of organized labor outside of academia (Greenhouse, 2019; Harvey, 2005; Vachon, Wallace, & Hyde, 2016). Their lack of agency and subjective absence in the discourses of public universities marketing of online learning can be read as a symptom of that disempowerment, the reality being communicated through language.

Meanwhile, many prospective students exploring online degree programs as a means to “upskill” (Belsky, 2019; Educause, 2019) or advance professionally are working and seeking stability in the same labor environment as the adjunct faculty teaching them. Temporal flexibility through work and learning is sold as a panacea to our busy lives, an opportunity to find balance or to get ahead, but Fairclough (1989, 2013) would ask how and why social structures and power relationships create the need for flexibility and make our lives so busy in the first place?

While the platforms of the gig economy might provide short-term employment, contracted opportunities and advertise the flexibility of work, they are part of a broader social and economic framework that obfuscates the realities of labor and inequality in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Greenhouse, 2019; Piketty, 2014; Ravenelle, 2019). In his writings on the network society, Castells (2004, p. 174) described the concept of “labor flexibility,” the flipside of the flexibility promised to workers is the flexibility of employers to make decisions about the contracts, stability, and compensation of their workforce. Students might be pursuing an additional credential online to become more competitive in an

environment of maximum labor flexibility: the flexibility of their employer to find more skilled, more educated, or more productive labor at their expense; the flexibility of their employer to cut its workforce during a recession or slow growth period; or the flexibility of their employer to cut wages or reduce benefits. Universities in the sample consistently promoted their online programs as a path to professional advancement, as a means to “open up [my] career opportunities” (USU) or to “prove to your employer that you are worth more” (UC). Those same universities also wield the labor flexibility to replace open tenure-track positions with contingent or non-tenure track jobs and to combine sections and increase course sizes to save on instructional costs. For adjunct and part-time faculty, they are competing for instructional positions in a labor market with fewer permanent or tenure-track jobs relative to the pool of qualified applicants (AAUP, 2017, 2018, n.d.; Scott et al., 2019).

The logic and language of the gig economy launders the ideologies and objectives of neoliberalism — e.g., privatization, financialization, and the erosion of public spaces — through a discourse of individual autonomy, competition, hustle, and personal responsibility (Harvey, 2005; Ravelle, 2019; Spence, 2015; Wilson, 2017). These discourses are neatly packaged and repackaged into an unequal social and economic environment that demands unceasing work from its participants in the name of getting and staying ahead (Spence, 2015; Wilson, 2017). While online learning in public higher education is not the gig economy, there are similarities in how institutions treat academic work and how those institutions understand the external labor market of their potential students. In this study, those real-world similarities trickle into the language and images used to market and promote online learning.

## Sub-Question 2: The Benefits of Online Learning

### Sub-Question 2: Interpretation

I could have categorized flexibility as a potential benefit of online learning, but I chose to situate it under the labor sub-question, as I believed it aligned more closely with the tension between time and labor and the influence of academic capitalism on the work of teaching and learning. In Chapter 4, I identified how institutions framed online learning as opening up the possibilities of personalization and choice, while also discursively shaping the act of taking online coursework and the completion of an online degree program as an individual journey, thus creating opportunities for individual identity formation.

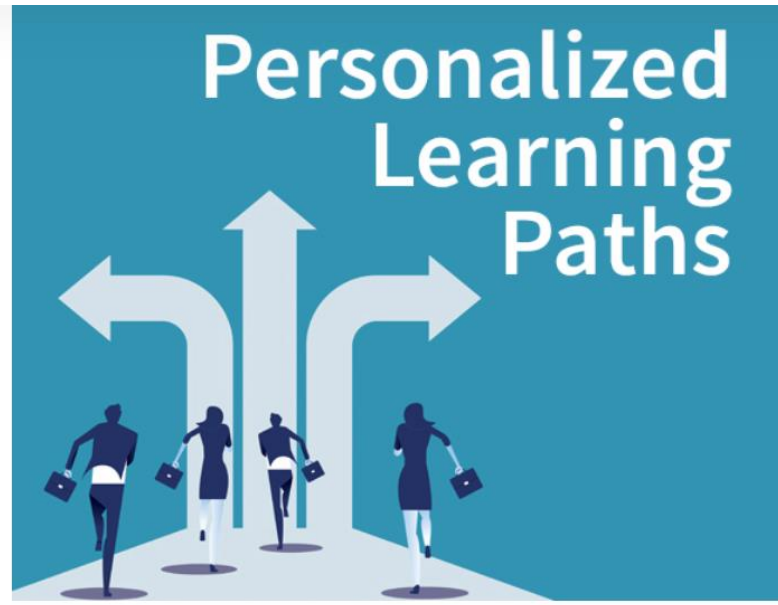
The contents of personalization extended beyond the supposed flexibility of when and where to complete the work of learning. Personalization signaled the ability to choose, to dictate not only the temporal and spatial parameters of when one would learn, but also the potential to select how, what, and to what end one might learn. This could mean the customization of a degree program, the acceleration or condensing of coursework (e.g., “efficient course timing,” UTA), the integration of competency-based or self-paced learning (NAU), or “personalized instruction” (eNSU). However, more often than not, institutions referenced personalization generically and ambiguously as something that would afford learners convenience, options, and an individual “fit.”

Although the institutional or individual activities that make personalization possible remain obscure or hidden, personalization is something offered *by the institution to the learner* through online learning. As stated above, what is left unsaid — what Gee (2014) would suggest that we fill-in — is how institutions are personalizing learning and



how that personalization shapes the student experience online. Universities are suggesting that these benefits of personalization and choice are not limited to the ability to decide when and where to study, but the reader is left to infer that these additional advantages are not fully available to on-campus students. Using the Intertextuality and Big “D” Discourse Tools (Gee, 2014), I might interpret personalization discourse as institutions nodding to broader trends or hot topics across higher education, like competency-based education, micro-credentialing, artificial intelligence, and adaptive learning (Educause, 2019); or referencing cultural discourse that suggests that the current structures and systems of education and higher learning are outdated, anachronistic, and in need of change (Morozov, 2013; Watters, 2015).

However, that context would likely be absent to the reader not versed in the innovations and failures of learning design and the conversations around pedagogical and institutional reform in higher education. A student pursuing an MBA or graduate degree in finance might be interested in personalization as an ability to specialize in a discrete area of policy or practice. This student might see the digital image on CSU Global’s homepage and imagine their potential career paths, doors opened up through their own choices — choices that CSU Global empowers them to make through personalization.



*CSU Global*

A non-traditional adult student returning to complete their bachelor's degree would be operating with entirely different contextual and experiential resources with which they would interpret institutional promises of choice and personalization. That student might enter their degree program with a prior experience of failure studying online at a for-profit institution in mind. For this student, personalization might be as simple as choosing to study in the early morning before work or the ability to opt out of commuting to campus for evening classes. Given the wide array of undergraduate, graduate, and certificate programs offered online, exclusively online students will likely have diverse interpretations of the rhetoric of personalization and choice based on their prior experiences and current life situations. The appeal of personalization discourse might lie in its ambiguity, to effectively speak to everyone and no one, all at the same time.

In my interpretation, the language and imagery of personalization and choice exist within a larger discourse of education as an act of individual identity formation.

Institutions communicate this through student testimonials, descriptions of expectations and requirements, and portrayals of student success and experience. These linguistic and visual texts link a student's educational "journey" and academic achievement to personal fulfillment, individual improvement, future aspirations, and professional advancement. And, once students have completed their degree program, they become part of an academic community, branded with logos and phrases circumscribing graduates within a network of alumnx, a "nation" of peers who can call upon a shared cultural and social identity. Outside of access to a professional network, rarely are the activities and relationships of online learning described as communal or distributed.

Universities occasionally reference the global and local impacts of their graduates, but the discursive framing still tends to invoke certain universal schema and scripts for individual-centric visions of leadership and change, like stressing how individuals can "unleash their potential" or "harness the comprehensive skill set" to "make the world a better place," "make an impact," or "transform the world in which they live." With the exception of broad references to scientific research and faculty expertise, institutions rarely specify the contours of that change and transformation, opting to leave it open to the interpretation of the reader. But, in invoking the global, institutions are subtly nodding to the "globalization of academic capitalism," to the ways in which higher education systems – and the universities within them – facilitate the "transnational flows of people, goods, capital, and information" through networks, technologies, and politics (Kauppinen & Cantwell, 2014, p. 139).

Prospective students might view this portrayal of online learning as a conduit for individual exploration and identity formation with a different interpretive lens. Students

enrolling in online programs are more likely to be older (i.e., not 18-24), to be employed full-time, to be from an underserved or historically underrepresented population, and to have dependent care responsibilities (NCES, 2018). Institutions did regularly feature the voices and stories of these students, highlighting their struggles and successes along the way. Institutions understand who their prospective students are, and thus create and utilize advertising as a means to “shape the perceptions and choices of consumers in the student marketplace” (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004, p. 283).

Students seeking an online degree likely have individual aspirations and professional goals that are motivating their pursuit of a postsecondary degree; a credential, whether earned on-campus or online, offers a path to a future that might be better, different, or unknown. In this regard, the linguistic and visual grammar of the texts foster an ambiguity, a hopeful uncertainty that might invite readers to imagine that future to be whatever it is they want. Institutions offer to step in with certainty and authority (e.g., articulated through linguistic modality), to facilitate and guide students towards that future. Embedded in these discourses of personalization, whether global or local, is the tacit understanding that academic capitalism simultaneously turns the student into both buyer and seller, as purchasers of a credential and as “vessels that carry economically viable cargo” (Kauppinen et al., 2014).

### **Sub-Question 2: Explanation**

In his critical discourse analysis, Saichaie (2011) examined “how colleges and universities use language to represent themselves to prospective students on their institutional websites” (p. 160). Although this study focuses on how institutions portray and represent the act and the outcomes of online learning — rather than on how they

represent themselves — there are similarities in how institutions communicate the value and appeal of going to college, whether that be on a physical campus or in a virtual classroom. Applying and enrolling at an institution is framed and experienced as a conscious act of consumption, a choice that prospective students make when weighing the available options. Institutions are targeting and competing for that prospective student through marketing, outreach, and brand awareness (Blumenstyk, 2006; Hanover Research, 2015; Katzman, 2016; Molesworth et al., 2009; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

In this study, I wanted to push beyond that understood and well-documented framework of student markets, private goods, and competition in academic capitalism to examine how contemporary discourses of consumption under neoliberalism might influence how institutions framed the benefits of online learning. Universities explicitly tying student learning and academic programming to career outcomes and professional advancement in online learning was unsurprising, even to the degree that the discourses of higher education as a private good outstripped mentions of the social responsibilities and civic engagement of institutions and its graduates. Saichaie and Morphew (2008) and Saichaie (2011) already documented this trend when examining university websites. The findings of this study confirm their prior research, as well as the significant body of literature connecting the privatization of higher education through the forces of academic capitalism and neoliberal policymaking (Fairclough, 1993; Fitzpatrick, 2019; Giroux, 2002; Jessop, 2017, 2018; Pasque, 2010; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), and suggest that the discourses of higher education as a private good are also

embedded in the institutional marketing and portrayal of learning and *earning* a degree online.

Moreover, I argue that the texts in this sample are evidence of how the depictions of online learning might be more open to or influenced by certain discourses about personalization, choice, and individual identity that move beyond this simple transactional account of higher education as a private good. Outside of the university, social theorists and researchers have explored how capitalism links consumer choices to individual identity through modern marketing techniques and brand awareness campaigns, i.e., that the purchasing decisions that we make — what we wear, drive, eat, drink, and, yes, where we go to college — say something about who we are, what we value, and to what communities we belong (or do not) belong (Bauman, 2005; Miles, 1998; Moran, 2014; Murakami Wood & Ball, 2013; Tomlinson, 1990).

In this sense, institutions attempted to discursively fuse the act of pursuing and completing a degree online to an individual's self-identity and sense of purpose. Choosing to study online and finishing your degree was more than an individual decision; it was reflective of initiative, perseverance, and motivation. Selecting an institution also meant opting into a community with a distinct brand, like belonging to "Gator Nation," joining "The Pack," or becoming a "Trojan," even if the advantages of membership in that community remained unclear or ill-defined. While graduates might theoretically gain access to a network of graduates and professional connections, I question to what degree that access is equitable. Do online students have the same access as on-campus students? Do students of color have the same access as White students? Do students studying humanities and liberal arts have the same access as their peers enrolled in an MBA? This

study does not answer those questions, but participants might interpret these statements as implying equivalent access to the same networks, especially given the other attempts throughout the corpus to draw equivalency between online and on-campus experiences. Future researchers might consider how access to and experiences with alumnx and professional networks might vary between on-campus and exclusively online students.

Furthermore, Bauman (2000, 2005) contended that this tethering of identity to consumption in modern capitalism eroded our sense of community, place, and stability by reducing the individual to the sum of their rapidly changing consumptive choices. In an essay on community in a world increasingly mediated by technology and influenced by brands, Brand and Gil (2019) argued that corporations and for-profit entities strategically utilize the metaphor of community because it “sells the idea that community is a service you can sign up for” (para. 2), rather than something you actually belong to, participate in, or experience. Institutions adopted a similar discursive approach to marketing and depicting community as transactional and commitment-free, an empty, calorie-lite version of community that demands little of the individual, while promising everything and nothing all at once.

In addition to the discourse of community, institutions also promised prospective students personalization and choice in their academic experience. Although what that personalization means remains relatively open to interpretation, I believe it would be helpful to locate that language within the broader discourse and realities of education and technology. In short, the rhetoric of personalization and choice further characterizes education as a private, consumable good that can be tailored to individual needs and

wants, often through the adaptations and capabilities of digital technologies and platforms (like a learning management system).

Watters (2017c) situated personalized learning within the historical arc of “post-war consumer capitalism” and the cultural resonance of “radical individualism,” arguing that personalization is “increasingly how we are sold things. It’s how we are profiled, how we are segmented, how we are advertised to” (para. 12). It does not matter that the definition and realities of personalized learning are amorphous, but that it can be sold and packaged as anything to anyone at any given moment, “a therapeutic and an ideological intervention, one that’s supposed to act as a salve in a system of mass education” (Watters, 2017c, para. 20). Within the corpus, institutions grammatically linked personalization to the ability to pursue professional opportunities or career advancement. ASU described how students could choose from “an online suite” of courses, which would “give professionals the boost they need;” CSU Global explicitly tied one’s “academic journey” to future outcomes; UC offers the ability to “take your career to the next level” through flexibility and customization.

Roberts-Mahoney, Means, and Garrison (2016) argued that discourses of personalized learning were functioning as a convenient cover for private interests to reshape public education to more closely “reflect narrow corporate-driven educational policies and priorities such as privatization, standardization, high-stakes assessment, and systems of corporate management and accountability” (p. 2). They continued, examining how the push for personalized learning further commodifies education, diminishes the role of the instructor, and seeks to quantify every student interaction and behavior. Rather than encouraging individual exploration and cherishing diversity, Watters (2014) asked to



what extent personalization was “reducing students from people to profiles” (p. 49). In the linguistic and visual data, institutions described how students can layer or stack credentials, skills, and experiences so “you can showcase your knowledge” (CSU). The decision to attend an institution, to choose an academic program, to “transform your life” (OSU), is an opportunity to build a profile, to “improve your business acumen” (OSU), to think about “what you want on your resume” (UA), so that you can “unleash your full potential” (UCF) and “land your dream job” (CUS). Beyond its own institutional brand, UF markets its own programs as a way to “enhance your personal brand.” Student headshots and close personal portraits scattered throughout the sample – from UF’s testimonials, to ECU’s banner image, to OSU’s rotating image slider – further create the impression that this is an act of branding and profile building, for the student and the institution.

### **Sub-Question 3: The Relationships of Online Learning**

#### **Sub-Question 3: Interpretation**

Universities regularly utilized language and images to emphasize and legitimize the role of the institution in its relationship with prospective students. In particular, universities called upon certain scripts (e.g., what does it look like to be a college student?) and frames (e.g., what does it mean to be a successful university?) that would be available to participants or potentially influence their interpretations.

As a researcher of higher education, a student with multiple graduate degrees, and the son of parents with advanced degrees, I have a set of member resources that inform how I interpret and think about public higher education. I have attended large public flagship institutions with beautiful campus grounds and vibrant campus

communities, but also worked at private and public institutions with small physical footprints and primarily non-residential student populations. I am familiar with college rankings systems like *Times Higher Education* and *US News & World Report*, and how those rankings systems create and recreate hierarchies and inequities across institutions and student populations (Bauman, 2019; Jessop, 2017). I am aware of why institutions consistently reference the frame of institutional rankings to establish legitimacy with participants, but I am also able to weight the value or importance of certain awards or forms of recognition. Other potential participants might have the context to associate name recognition with prestige or be able to draw on other intertextual references (e.g., *US News & World Report; Best Online Colleges*) for interpretation, but they might not have the background knowledge to assess the validity and meaning of various awards and badges scattered across institutional websites. Of the 18 institutions in the sample, 15 contained a visual or linguistic reference on the homepage to a ranking, award, or designation as a mark of differentiation or excellence for its online programs.

In this case, Gee's (2014) Context is Reflexive and Intertextuality Tools illuminate how universities highlight and participants draw on their intertextual knowledge and understanding of institutional rankings and status to reinscribe the primacy and relevance of those markers. Rankings are functioning as an intertextual symbol or linguistic marker to signify institutional legitimacy. Potential participants might not know exactly what it means for an institution to have "top-25 best online bachelor degree programs" (BSU), but the sheer ubiquity of references to rankings, awards, and recognition across the sample might suggest that it is the existence, rather than the content, of the ranking that matters.

Beyond the linguistic and visual references to institutional status, universities also went to great lengths to stress the equivalency of learning outcomes, student experiences, and institutional support between online and face-to-face degree programs. Chapter 2 introduced the extant literature on learning outcomes across instructional modalities, and the history and influence of the private for-profit industry on the public perception of online learning in the United States. When I read the language of equivalency and sameness in the descriptions of online programs, I draw on those member resources to do the work of interpretation. What I see is universities attempting to undercut or combat other potential interpretive frames that place online learning at public institutions in the same historical and contextual universe as large for-profit colleges that expanded rapidly through online programming in the early parts of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Cottom, 2017; Deming et al., 2013; Lederman, 2010; Lee, 2012; McGuire, 2012; Shireman, 2017; Tierney & Hentschke, 2007). Because of this checkered history, institutions appear to be trying to push back against an outdated cultural script that communicated that learning online is less than: less valuable than, less rigorous than, less real than. But, in my interpretation, the discourse of equivalency also reads as a tacit acknowledgement of those claims, an admission that those perceptions exist and are in need of reply. Discourse does not exist in isolation, it is part of an ongoing intertextual and historical conversation (Fairclough, 1989, 2013; Gee, 2011, 2014). Whether the discourse of equivalency is answering to a perceived reticence on the part of employers to accept credentials earned online, skepticism from faculty about teaching online, or a more universal questioning about online learning, it must be read and understood as functioning within the broader discourse and historical context. Intentional or not,

universities must be replying to a script that suggests a lack of equivalency, otherwise there would be no purpose of consistently and assertively referencing that equivalency.

Whether that script is empirically real or imagined does not matter; what matters is whether or not potential participants, i.e., prospective students, are bringing that script to the act of interpretation. In the case of earning a degree online, a participant's frame of reference for what an online institution is or is not — and what quality is associated with that online degree — could be influenced by the prevalence, power, and history of — and potentially their prior experiences with — for-profit providers and large, private or quasi-private national brands (see, e.g., Howarth & Stifler, 2019). I have discussed at length the history of for-profit providers in the online learning space, but large non-profit public (e.g., Purdue University Global, Arizona State University, University of Texas-Arlington) and private (SNHU, WGU, Excelsior College) universities now represent a significant portion of overall exclusively online student enrollment (Seaman et al., 2018). Whether through corporate partnerships, acquisitions, marketing spends, and recruitment and admissions procedures, large public and private universities' influence and involvement in online learning further obscures the traditional for-profit to non-profit distinction for prospective online students (Kamath, 2015; LeBlanc, 2013; Mattes, 2017; Seltzer, 2017). This signifies more than simple institutional engagement in “market” or “market-like behaviors” (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004); online learning has opened new avenues for academic capitalism to accelerate the “blurring of boundaries among markets, states, and higher education” (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004, p. 11; Kauppinen & Cantwell, 2012; Walker, 2009, 2014).

But, these institutions are all still operating and competing in the same knowledge economy reliant on national and transnational marketplaces for students, academic labor, and intellectual property (Kauppinen, 2012; Kauppinen et al., 2014). And that competitive marketplace demands that institutions differentiate themselves not only with regards to the value of the credential, but also to the extent that students enjoy their academic experience and feel supported (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). With institutional and public concern over online student retention and persistence, universities regularly reminded prospective students about the services and support they provide above and beyond expectations. Those services are “responsive” (CSU), “accessible 24/7” (UA), “elite” (UF), “exclusive” (UF), “dedicated” (UC), and “personalized” (UC). References to availability and breadth appear often throughout institutional descriptions of support services, which might be some combination of advising, mentorship, tools, resources, or career services.

In my interpretation, I connected descriptions of readiness, coverage, and student satisfaction to customer service discourses, suggesting that the role of the institution is not only to be the grantor of the credential, but also to provide product support and guarantee satisfaction *on the way to* and after one has earned a degree. Student testimonials reminded me of another genre of popular texts: overly positive online product or restaurant reviews. An important exception in this case is that the reader or potential student never sees negative or critical commentary. Old Dominion highlights high satisfaction and recommendation rates; other institutions (e.g., UC, ASU, UF) focus on impressive job placement rates. Some refer to the *U.S News and World Report's*

ranking of best online programs; others point out their status as a recipient of a military-friendly award.

In describing the first stage of academic capitalism, Jessop (2017) detailed how the entrepreneurial university might seek to improve institutional reputation or ranking through the creation of new products, the exploration of new markets, or the implementation of new methods of instruction. Displaying military-friendly digital icons, highlighting programmatic quality through assurance standards, and trumpeting the success of certain online programs are a means to establish that legitimacy and build institutional reputation through those means. Jessop described that the practical effect of this “growing global industry of standardization, accreditation, quality assurance, and benchmarking” was to drive “an accelerating treadmill of competitiveness that creates pressures to follow best practice and adopt the latest strategic recipes” (p. 861).

The evolution of academic capitalism as discussed above further erodes our distinctions between public and private goods and spaces. While I did complete my second master’s degree exclusively online, I associate “college” with a certain visual aesthetic, a colorful depiction of physical spaces and university life. The visual and linguistic data in the sample reinforced or played to that interpretive frame, recalling my memory of the physical and spatial experiences of attending college. Images of physical campus spaces headlined landing pages, hovered next to imperative calls to action, and backgrounded student portraits. Students who were in the act of studying or doing academic work were inside, regularly depicted in nondescript settings, like a coffee shop or a home office. These images often carried lower visual weight through placement or size.

However, the most salient images throughout the sample included high-resolution photographs and portrayals of physical campus spaces. Occasionally, an institution would feature a prominent campus building or physical location without human subjects, but accompanied by a text header about online learning:



*Old Dominion University*

In Chapter 4, I described the digitally created banner image for East Carolina University, which included an outline of the state of North Carolina with low color differentiation, layered over with prominent state landmarks and student portraits at close personal frame. Utah State featured an aerial image of its campus; Oregon State added a wide-angle shot of its campus union, shading from black-and-white to full color. Across the sample, high- and medium- modality images of campus spaces were more salient to my visual interpretation. Universities stressed the importance of physical settings, even though online students would not be likely to spend time in those academic buildings or on those campus grounds.

Even in the case of students graduating or reflecting on their successes, physical space played an important role, if only as a visual framing device. Students at Arizona

State clap and cheer with cap and gown, inside of what appears to be a football stadium; a Northwestern State University student peers out over the horizon, a mountainous panorama in the background; a Utah State student comments on her experiences as an online student, red rock cliffs spanning out behind her. Universities coupled the visual weighting of physical spaces with a linguistic emphasis on institutional history and geography, whether that was a tradition of delivering correspondence education “from the caboose of a train” (OSU), establishing “its first branch campus at Ft. Rucker in Alabama” (Troy), or being a “leader in distance education in North Carolina for over 70 years” (ECU).

Prospective students might interpret the visual salience and linguistic references to physical space differently, perhaps as reminders of an institutional history marked by stability, longevity, and presence. These universities exist, and have existed, as real physical entities with impact and influence in their communities and their states. But for prospective exclusively online students, why would this matter? To what extent are universities exploiting our desires or longing for shared public spaces or utilizing digital representations of those spaces as a means to market and sell, while simultaneously making those spaces and places less communal and less integrated into our individual experiences and social lives?

In my interpretation, institutions were referencing certain aesthetic frames for the physical space of a public university, while also hinting at cultural scripts regarding the role of a public institution to educate its state and regional population. I interpreted the emphasis on physical space, alongside marketing materials encouraging students to study



exclusively online, as another potential paradox to add to Walker's (2009, 2014) theoretical framework of time and space in academic capitalism.

### **Sub-Question 3: Explanation**

The marketing of online education as analyzed in this study largely ignores any sort of social good or communal benefit derived from public higher education — of which there are many (see, e.g., Bloom, Hartley, & Rosovsky, 2007) — instead leaning into education as private good for individual consumption, in a way more explicit than traditional higher education marketing. It does this while also attempting to draw connections or call on specific memories or cultural associations of college or campus life — of physical spaces in the public imagination — even though those are literally not a part of this particular student experience. Institutions depict campus buildings, grounds, and iconic structures (e.g., a football stadium, an arch or statue, a student union) “as a part of the ‘brand’ that then becomes part of one’s institutional identity” (Metcalf, 2012, p. 519).

I argue that the salience of physical space to market online learning stresses an important tension in our current reality: the longing for the real, the permanent, the non-technologically mediated, juxtaposed against the unmoored experience of our digitally mediated lives (Bauman, 2005; Nowland, Necka, Cacioppo, 2018). Our personal, professional, and academic lives play out increasingly in virtual spaces, mediated through and by information communication technologies (Perrin & Kumar, 2019), but physical spaces can still be powerful visual symbols. Walker (2009, 2014) explained how the academic capitalist time regime, influenced by structural and technological changes under capitalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, has paradoxically compressed and expanded our

perceptions and experiences of space and time. We can work with anyone, anywhere, at any time, even if it means occupying and sharing physical space together less frequently. The universities in the sample use the beauty and visual appeal of their physical spaces as marketing props, even as students continue to opt for the supposed temporal flexibility of online learning over the allure of attending a physical campus.

Gee (2014) asked analysts to consider how the text belonged to larger discourses, and how those discourses communicated particular ideologies, values, and beliefs. Neoliberalism — as ideology and as implemented through policymaking — pushes away the idea of public goods, community organizations, and shared spaces, instead opting for an atomized, privatized vision of the world (Harvey, 2005; Low & Smith, 2006). In his mid-90s essay, Putnam (1995) chronicled shifts in American life that presaged increasing loneliness, social isolation, and hyperindividualism. Whether evidenced by declining unionization, decreasing voter participation, or falling membership in community and social organizations, Putnam saw worrying trends in the erosion of “social capital,” or Americans’ ability and desire to access shared spaces, institutions, and organizations “that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (p. 66).

How might we attempt to explain this contradiction, the linguistic and visual depiction of physical space to market learning, learning that occurs away or apart from that physical space? As Metcalfe (2012) argued in her work on visual sociology in higher education research, the campus as a physical space “is part of the cultural milieu in which students and faculty co-construct their spatial aspirations for the campus and academic life” (p. 519). Institutions might recognize that physical spaces are visual representations of their past and present, just like narrative histories can function as textual reminders of

tradition and stability. Idealized photographs and portrayals of institutional spaces to market online learning contribute to and reinforce a certain discursive context: that space and place can also be objects of commodification in capitalist societies, for individuals to experience, recreate, and consume in the physical and virtual world (Britton, 1991; Miles, 1998; Murakami Wood & Ball, 2013; Smith, 2018).

The marketization and consumption of space must coexist with the realities of neoliberalism, that accessible public spaces like libraries, public parks, and university campuses are convenient targets for political ideologies and social policies antagonistic to the project of social goods and shared communities (Springer, 2011). In reviewing the work of Fitzpatrick (2019), Boyd (2019) connected the policies and realities of austerity and privatization to the influence and ideology of neoliberalism, where “the whole philosophical and political notion of public space crumbles” (para. 4).

I do not argue that institutions have adopted and expanded online learning intentionally to restrict access to physical and shared spaces, but, rather, that the visual and linguistic salience of physical space and presence in the sample — whether through images of campus, or through textual reminders of institutional histories — contradicts the realities of learning online. The discursive idealization of institutional spaces and histories as seen in this corpus can be convenient tools to market and promote university brands, but they reify notions of space and place as individual and private, as commodified and consumable, rather than open and public. Rather than deemphasizing the physical space of colleges and universities, the data in this study suggest that institutions are aware of the importance of their physical places and shared histories.

Finally, institutions trumpeted their own legitimacy and stability, whether by signifying merit through rankings and awards, by recounting past histories in distance and online learning through timelines and stories, or by drawing equivalencies between on-campus and online learning through comparative language. Institutions are not only attempting to attract new online learners, but they are competing against other institutions vying for those same students. Rankings and awards function as symbols of comparison, intertextual references to an international apparatus devoted to assessing, communicating, and reinscribing an institutional hierarchy of status and prestige (Jessop, 2017). This is a clear example of the dialectical nature of discourse (Fairclough, 1989, 2013), how discourse simultaneously is created (passively) and recreates (actively), how it reflects and shapes reality at the same time. Institutions tacitly acknowledge the symbolic value of institutional rankings, that participants are aware that such a ranking system exists — no matter how complex — and that it communicates and reinforces institutional status.

Likewise, institutional references to equivalency across learning modality addresses fears about the past and the present of online learning in higher education. The history of for-profit institutions and their role in the expansion of online learning across the United States are valuable context for understanding why institutions might be attempting to explicitly equate the outcomes and credentials earned online with those earned on campus. Although nearly a third of all instructors have taught online, there are still faculty who are reticent about teaching online or question its efficacy (Lederman, 2019). Students, identifying as consumers in the educational relationship, are concerned about the value their educational experiences and credentials will have upon graduation. Institutions are trying to convince both themselves, and their prospective students, that

learning online can be an equitable replacement for learning on campus, that an education completed online is as valuable, meaningful, and real as its implied opposite.

### **Concluding Comments & Future Directions**

In this study, I focused on a small subset of high online enrollment 4-year public institutions. Of the 18 institutions in this sample, all enrolled at least 4,000 exclusively online students (NCES, 2017). Moreover, I compiled and analyzed the data corpus with my own interpretive lens and member resources. I selected and examined specific elements of the linguistic and visual data, based on the research questions and theoretical framework guiding this study. In collecting and describing over 50,000 words and hundreds of images, I made choices, consciously and subconsciously, about which words, phrases, clauses, grammatical tendencies, and visual elements were most relevant to my analysis. Another discourse researcher might ask a wholly different set of questions, or bring an entirely different interpretive frame to the act of analysis.

This study builds off of recent critical discourse work by Saichaie (2011) and Saichaie and Morpew (2014) analyzing institutional marketing presences on the web. I believe it also contributes to the large body of research on the influences and evolution of academic capitalism on public higher education in the United States. Additionally, I explored how these discourses reinforced and reconstituted broader social realities of labor, time, and space as experienced in a world governed by the hegemony of neoliberalism. However, as I stress above, this is only one study examining the dominant discourses used to market online learning at public universities.

Future discourse analysts might consider expanding the sample to include private institutions, 2-year technical or community colleges, or institutions with low or middling

exclusively online enrollments. Researchers could also examine how institutions might be utilizing social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) and targeted digital advertisements, and compare those discourses to the language and imagery found on more traditional university websites. Additionally, other discourse analysts might explore how the language of innovation and disruption has seeped into institutional and social conversations about the future of higher education. Other CDA or multimodal research could focus on internal documents (e.g., strategic plans, mission statements) to explore how online learning and educational technology(ies) fit into institutional identity, culture, and strategy. Extending Metcalfe's (2012) application of visual sociology to an analysis of institutional marketing might add to our understandings of the role and prominence of physical and virtual spaces under academic capitalism.

Critical theories on race and gender would also offer additional lenses through which to describe, interpret, and explain these discourses of online learning. I mentioned briefly in this chapter Kramarae's (2000) research on women learning online; her work would, coupled with a theoretical framework that is "explicitly feminist" (Hart, 2006, p. 59), provide a valuable path forward for unpacking how gender norms and roles might color individual experiences of temporal flexibility and student and academic labor (see, e.g., Burke, 2013). Researchers could also draw on the foundations and scholarship of critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) to explore and investigate how language and images portray and privilege "whiteness" as dominant in online learning, rather than elevating the "racial and subordinate experiences of marginalized groups" (Hiraldo, 2010, p. 54)

In non-discourse work, researchers might also explore the increasing involvement of for-profit consultants and online program managers in the supporting, planning, and marketing of online learning across higher education (Mattes, 2017). There is also space for additional scholarship examining the details and decisions of institutional marketing, the connections between marketing strategy and spend (both quantitatively and qualitatively), enrollment management, and institutional decision making.

On the student side, researchers should employ more critical frameworks for examining the experiences of online students, specifically investigating how and why certain student populations (e.g., students of color, first-generation, women, undocumented students, single parents) decide to enroll in an online degree program and how they conceptualize success or failure. Follow-up or post-exit interviews with students who do not complete their programs would also enhance our understanding of student persistence and attrition in distance education. More qualitative phenomenological research on teaching online, specifically examining the experiences and interpretations of temporal and spatial flexibility, would be a valuable contribution to the existing research on contingent and part-time faculty. Contingent faculty might identify more directly with the precarity and insecurity experienced by workers in the gig and sharing economies who are promised similar benefits of flexibility and freedom at the expense of secure and reliable employment (Ravanelle, 2019).

Lastly, I believe we need to continue to interrogate the promises and realities of higher education – whether on-campus or online – and remember that student and faculty experiences are influenced by individual contexts, histories, and relationships. Institutional language might reaffirm or contradict our experiences, but discourse exists

in a constant, invisible exchange with the broader systems and structures of power that govern and shape our lived realities. As colleges and universities seek to spread their virtual footprint through online learning, higher education as a whole, not just in the United States, but across the globe, must be wary of seeing virtual instruction as a panacea to institutional ills and student challenges, a cure-all for stagnant growth, budgetary challenges, and unequal access. Institutions, administrators, and scholars must realize that the conversations that we have about online learning and educational technology – about how it will spur academic and economic innovation, increase access and bolster achievement, fuel an educational and intellectual revival through collaboration and personalization, and about how it is democratic and equitable – are inherently ideological. Those utopian visions are embedded in deeper sociocultural discourses about our labor, our time, and our relationships to each other (Morozov, 2014; Veletsianos & Moe, 2018; Walker, 2009, 2014; Watters, 2017b).

In writing about student markets and enrollment competition in academic capitalism knowledge/learning regime, Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) wrote that the purpose of institutional marketing was to “serve the interests of the institutions more than to serve the interests of the students” (p. 283). In this study, I attempted to describe and unpack how public universities marketed and sold online learning and to critically analyze what that might tell us about how institutions understand their prospective students and the world in which they study, live, and work. The discourses of online learning as described in this study not only reaffirm and expand on our theoretical understandings of academic capitalism as linked to and influenced by the political forces



and structural realities of neoliberalism, but also paint a rather vivid picture of a hypercompetitive world with unceasing demands on our time, our energy, and our labor.

**Appendix I: Definitions for Linguistic Analysis**

Table 2 Fairclough's (1989) 10 Questions for Textual Description		
Category	Value/Question	Examples or Explanation
Vocabulary	Experiential	Synonym; antonym; hyponym
	Relational	Euphemisms; formality vs. informality
	Expressive	Euphemism; classification; contrast
	Metaphor	Metaphor as "ideological attachments"
Grammar	Experiential	Agency and subject; causality; negation/polarity
	Relational	Mode; modality; pronoun usage
	Expressive	Modality
	Syntax	Textual cohesion; clause structure Parataxis: Hypotaxis:
Textual Structure	Interactional Conventions	Turn-taking, participant control
	Structures	Order, formatting, genre

Table 3

## Gee's (2014) Discourse Analysis Toolkit

Select analytical devices grouped loosely according to stages of Fairclough's methodological framework.

Stage	Tool	Explanation
Description	The Subject Tool	What is the subject of the sentence or clause? The direct object?
	The Vocabulary Tool	What words are being used? What is the etymology of those words (Germanic, Latinate)? The social function?
	The Integration Tool	How does the text use clauses to convey information? To foreground certain ideas, or background others?
	Topic & Theme Tool	What is the topic and/or theme of each clause and sentence?
Interpretation	The Fill-in Tool	What is not being said or what is being left out? What context (MR) to readers need to understand the text?
	Context is Reflexive Tool	How is the text creating or recreating context?
	The Intertextuality Tool	How is the text drawing on (overtly or subtly) other texts?
Explanation	The Politics Building Tool	How does the text/texts frame social goods (what and for whom)?
	The Figured World Tool	What narrative ("typical stories or figured worlds") does the text/texts invite readers to create?
	The Big "D" Discourse Tool	What larger social discourse does this belong to? What underlying ideologies (e.g., beliefs, values, assumptions) are included?

**Appendix II: Definitions for Visual Analysis**

Table 4 Kress & van Leeuwen (2006): Visual Design Glossary		
Metafunctions	Visual Concept	Examples or Explanation
Ideational	Relational Structure	How does the image depict relationships between subjects and objects internally? Can employ a narrative or conceptual structure.
Interpersonal	Viewer Positionality	How is the interaction between viewer and image constructed? Concerned with visual design elements like gaze, frame, angle, and perspective.
	Modality	Use of color and clarity to impart authenticity (or lack thereof). Includes color contrast, saturation, and modulation.
Textual	Composition	Use of visual design elements to create internal and external cohesion. Examples include placement, alignment, framing, and salience.

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### **Vita**

Eric grew up in the suburbs of Cleveland, Ohio. To the disappointment of his fellow Ohians, he attended the University of Michigan for his undergraduate work. As an undergraduate, Eric spent a summer in Berlin and an academic year in Freiburg.

After a few post-college years back in Cleveland, Eric left for graduate school at the University of Missouri. He built on his foundations in linguistics and the humanities, completing a master's degree in German Language and Literature. During that time, he also spent another year in Germany, this time working as a visiting instructor at the University of Marburg.

He started a PhD program in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, then stopped, then started again. In between, he completed a master's degree online in Information and Learning Technologies, with a focus on eLearning design and implementation, through the University of Colorado Denver. He continued his teaching career, with a stop at New Castle High School in New Castle, Indiana.

In 2014, Eric and his family moved to Wisconsin, where he returned to higher education to work in instructional and curriculum design. Over the next 6 years, Eric led efforts across multiple institutions supporting and improving online and digital learning. In May of 2020, Eric started as Teaching Faculty and the Associate Director of the Online EdD program in the College of Education at Florida State University.