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DePaul University

College of Education

News Flash: Content Framing of Higher Education during the COVID-19 Campus Closures

A Dissertation in Education

with a concentration in Educational Leadership

by

Sara A. Nelson

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

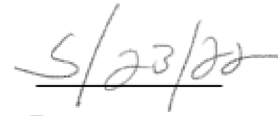
for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

June 2022

Signatory Page

We approve the dissertation of Sara A. Nelson



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Author Signature: Date: May 20, 2022

Sara A. Nelson

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic swept the world in a cascade of crises, impacting every industry and individual. This study sought to analyze the prevailing narratives of higher education news coverage during the initial crisis event of COVID-19, when colleges and universities around the world closed their doors and sent students home. Historically, higher education has not been well positioned by the media in times of crisis. A tarnished reputation can lead to direct and immediate loses in enrollment, funding, rankings, selectivity of students and the financial health of an institution. The framing of media narratives plays a direct role in how that dialogue plays out and whether or not an institution can emerge unscathed. This study is a quantitative content analysis of the 169 articles published by the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* between March 5, 2020, and June 3, 2020; when the COVID-19 pandemic forced campus closures around the world. The articles were coded by generic and issue-specific frames, source attribution, tone, valence, frequency, and themes. The overwhelmingly deleterious results provide guidance for university leaders and stakeholders in the wake of future crisis events and give further evidence to the power, responsibility, and privilege of journalists, especially in times of crisis, and the importance of wielding that power responsibly.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .... **IX**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .... **X**

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION **1**

COVID-19 AND THE ACADEMY 1

FOCUS AND SCOPE 4

RESEARCH QUESTIONS 5

SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPLICATION 5

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW **7**

COVID- 19 PANDEMIC TIMELINE 8

UNITED STATES HIGHER EDUCATION COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESPONSE 12

TRANSITIONING CAMPUSES TO REMOTE LEARNING DURING COVID-19 13

CRISIS COMMUNICATION AND REPUTATION 21

THE ROLE OF NEWS IN THE UNITED STATES 24

JOURNALISTS AND INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES 27

CONTENT ANALYSIS STUDIES OF NEWS COVERAGE OF HIGHER EDUCATION 29

FRAMES AND LANGUAGE 31

Conflict Frame *34*

Human Interest Frame *35*

Economic Consequence Frame *35*

Morality Frame *35*

Attribution of Responsibility Frame *36*

A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH: NEWS AS KNOWLEDGE 37

GAP IN LITERATURE 40

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY 42

RESEARCH QUESTIONS 42

HYPOTHESES 43

QUANTITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS 43

SAMPLE AND UNIT OF ANALYSIS 44

Variables *46*

Story Type 46

Sources 46

Generic Frames 48

Issue Specific-Frames or Themes 50

Coding *52*

Data Analysis *52*

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS 54

NEWS STORY TYPE 55

TONE OR VALENCE 56

TIMING 57

HYPOTHESIS 1 59

Word Count *59*

Number of Paragraphs per Article *61*

Frequency *62*

HYPOTHESIS 2 63

Hypothesis 3 67

Hypothesis 4 73

Summary of Findings 79

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION 81

Discussion 81

Research Question One: The implicit value statement of Character Count *83*

Research Question Two: The Problem of Voice, when outsiders tell your story. *85*

Research Question Three: What's in a Frame? *92*

Conflict Frame 93

Economic Consequence Frame 95

Attribution of Responsibility 99

Human Interest and Morality Frames 100

Research Question Four: Gametime for the Win *102*

College Sports 102

Student Experience 106

Financial Pressure 108

School Closure 110

Virtual Graduation 112

Transition to Online Modality 114

Standardized testing 115

Corruption 116

Limitations 117

Future Research 118

IMPLICATIONS 120

CONCLUSION 122

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page

1 News Story Type …………………………………………………………………...…56

2 Comparison of News Story Type by publication and the total sample ……….……...…56

3 Comparison of the overall tone between legacy news organizations and as a total ….…57

4 Timing of articles published by each legacy news organization during the 90-day review period……………………………………………..……………………….....…58

5 Word Count of All Articles …………………………………………………….....…60

6 Word Count Averages…….………………………………………………………...…61

7 Number of articles published by each organization …………………………...…...…62

8 Average number of sources per article …………………………………………………64

9 Frequency of Identified Sources ……………………………………………………...65

10 Comparison of Sources by each legacy news organization …………………………..66

11 Percentage of sources coming from outside of higher education personnel……………..67

12 Frequency of Generic Frames ……………………………………………………….....70

13 Frequency of Generic Frame Saturation ……………………………………………...…71

14 Comparison of frame saturation by Legacy News Organization……………………...…72

15 Frame saturation in relation to the whole by percentage ………………………………..72

16 Overall Issue-Specific Frames or Themes ………………………………………………75

17 Comparison of Dominant issue-specific frames or themes …………………...……...…77

18 Percentage of Dominant Theme Coverage by legacy news organization: *The New York Times* ……………………………………………………………………...……...…77

19 Percentage of Dominant Theme Coverage by legacy news organization: *The Wall Street Journal* ……………………………………………………………………..……..….78

20 Percentage of Dominant Theme Coverage by legacy news organization: *USA Today*.…78

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“Cheer up! In the midst of a calamity without parallel in the world’s history…rise again!”

Joseph Medill, Co-owner and Managing Editor of the Chicago Tribune, in response to the Great Chicago Fire

“It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it.”

Warren Buffett, Tycoon

COVID-19 and the Academy

COVID-19 descended upon mankind in the winter of 2020, leaving industries around the world in a state of shock and upheaval. Higher education was not immune. COVID-19 brought panic, trauma, isolation, and uncertainty to the ivory towers of academia and beyond. Can hope for the future, the defining public narrative of higher education (Hunsinger, 2020), survive the COVID-19 pandemic? News organizations act as gatekeepers and framers of information for public absorption, most especially in times of crisis (Graber, 1980; Shoemaker and Reese 2014; Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). As a result, news sources define what is important for the public to know and create a narrative tone that can act as a foundation for public perception, support, or condemnation (Fern-Banks, 2011; Coombs, 2015; Ulmer et al., 2019). The press has not been kind to institutions of higher education in the past, most especially in times of crisis (Daniel, 2009; Gasman, 2007; Gibbons, 2017; Troy, 2018). This study analyzed the prevailing narratives of news coverage of higher education during the initial crisis event of COVID-19, when colleges and universities around the world closed their doors to students and sent them home.

The press’s influence over the public is linked to how individuals take in new knowledge. Social constructionists maintain that knowledge is built upon past experiences, as well as shared language and cultural norms (Jonassen, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). Learning is also contextual. We

learn by building upon our own historical truths. This can occur through collateral means, such as our likes and dislikes, or prescribed means, such as a spelling lesson (Dewey, 1916). Over time, as we assimilate more knowledge, we become more and more likely to retain information that agrees with what we already know to be true (Ormrod, 2012; Jonassen, 1991). Language holds supreme power in how and what knowledge we choose to construct. Both language and word choice connect and color the experiences of a learner based on shared cultural norms (Shoemaker & Reese 2014; Racovia, 2013). Once formal schooling has ended, the press becomes the dominant producer of shared history and communal language, framing social reality for the public (Berger & Luckmann, 1979; Poerksen, 2011). Therefore, the ways in which journalists construct stories, build narratives, and share language create profound links to the social patters, norms, and narratives of our society (Poerksen, 2011; Shoemaker & Reese 2014; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

When creating and selecting stories for public consumption, journalists are bound by their Code of Ethics to seek truth and report it, minimize harm, act independently, and be accountable and transparent (2014). Choices of inclusion and exclusion made by journalists, as well as the language and manner, tone, sources, and frequency of reporting on a topic, form public opinion of events. Collectively, these themes become the public narrative on a subject, through social constructivism and the shared narrative of societies. By selecting certain stories, journalists also evoke framing mechanisms to impart stories to the public. The five most common framing mechanisms are conflict, human interest, economic consequence, attribution of responsibility, and morality (Daniel, 2009; Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Each frame has implications for how the public will receive information, who they will have empathy for, and the urgency of the event (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Pan &

Kosicki, 1993; Hallahan, 1999; Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992). When and how journalists bring a story, event, problem, event, or industry into the spotlight sets the agenda for both discourse and importance. Cohen (1963) acutely observed that while the media may not always be successful in telling the public what to think, they are skilled at telling them what to think about and, equally important, how to think about it. Framing research seeks to discover, beyond agenda setting research, *how* the public thinks about issues and events.

In times of crisis, the public demands more information from news outlets than they can immediately provide (Neal, 1998). The earliest days of a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have the utmost urgency. As the public becomes hooked on the news as a lifeline for information vital to their daily life and as a pipeline to public officials (Graber, 1980). During these times of crisis, the media becomes not only an outlet for interpretation and explanation but also one of consolation as vulnerable communities navigate tragedy (Li, 2007). Historically, higher education has not been well positioned by the media in times of crisis. This has, in turn, had a profound negative impact on the reputations of these institutions (Daniel, 2009; Gasman, 2007; Gibbons, 2017; Jones, 2004; Troy; 2018). The reputation of a college or university is arguably the most valuable currency they hold, as it has a direct correlation to the financial health of the institution, enrollments, rankings, funding, and selectivity of students. In times of crisis, the public will often take to task the reputation of an industry or organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2010a; Gardner et al., 2020). The framing of media narratives plays a direct role in how that dialogue plays out and whether or not the institution can emerge unscathed (Mahoney, 2013; Gibbons, 2017; Coombs and Holladay, 2010a).

Focus and Scope

A primary objective of this study was to determine the framing of news content in the initial stages of an industry in crisis. Scholars of education and communication have established that frames are present in the news and have strong influence over public opinion (An & Gower, 2009; Crigler, Just & Neuman 1992; Daniels, 2009; Hogan, 2013; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Frames are identified as the "presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgements" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Cappella and Jamieson (1997) further define journalistic frames as identifiable and clearly distinguishable from one another.

This study is a quantitative content analysis of the frames used by three American print news publications between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020—the period when their crisis coverage initially discussed institutions of higher education. The study analyzed news articles related to the COVID-19 pandemic and institutions of higher education covered by the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*. These three publications were chosen due to their elite status as news organizations, extensive circulation numbers, orientation, and the fact that the three have been used in content analysis studies in the past (Langheim et al., 2014; Chyi et al., 2012; Hogan, 2013). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education was viewed from the news media's perspective in the initial stage of Graber's (1980) stages of crisis. This dissertation sought to expand framing and crisis literature regarding news coverage of industries in crisis.

Research Questions

RQ1: Between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020, how frequent and how much coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic and higher education was conducted by the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*?

RQ2: Between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020, which sources were used most frequently in coverage of higher education and the COVID-19 pandemic by the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*?

RQ3: Between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020, did legacy publications; the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* use generic framing mechanisms (conflict, human interest, morality, attribution of responsibility, economic) in their coverage of higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ4: Will additional issue-specific frames or themes emerge in the analysis of coverage of higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic between March 5, 2020, and June 3, 2020 by legacy news publications; *The New York Times*, The *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*?

Significance and Implication

Although research has been conducted on news framing generally in crisis (An & Gower, 2009; Chavez et al., 2010; Gitlin, 1980; Feldman et al., 2017; DeVrees, 2010; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Kovar, 2020) and news framing in higher education (Daniel, 2009; Gasman, 2007; Gibbons, 2017; Jones, 2004; Troy; 2018), the caliber and scale of the COVID-19 pandemic and the unprecedented nature of its scope and impact have yet to be experienced in living memory and, therefore, trauma of this magnitude has yet to be explored. The COVID-19 pandemic swept the world in a cascade of crises, impacting every industry and individual. This study endeavors to close the gap in literature of a worldwide crisis and the news framing pertaining to a specific

industry and to serve as a guide to stakeholders in the wake of future crisis events. This research has the potential to be useful to university administrators, faculty, staff, and students in developing strategies to engage successfully with journalists and news organizations by taking back elements of their own narrative. Furthermore, this research has the potential to speak to news organizations and journalists about the power and privilege of their voice, especially in times of crisis, and the importance of wielding that power responsibly.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review is positioned to create context and understanding around the crisis event of COVID-19, impacts on higher education, the relationship between news media and the public, and constructivism. While no one was immune to the impact of COVID-19, it was experienced across a wide and nuanced spectrum of hardship (Ryan, 2020; Ellis et al., 2020). This chapter begins by revisiting the timeline of COVID-19, its discovery, spread, international guidance, and attention to the crisis. The speed with which the COVID-19 pandemic escalated, as well as the timeline of information available to both the public and university administrations, underscore the urgency of the crisis and the inability for pre-planning.

This review will also disclose the parallel timeline of responses from institutions of higher education, as twenty million students (Duffin, 2020) and millions of professors, staff members, and administrators transitioned to remote learning in a matter of weeks. The COVID-19 crisis exacerbated systemic inequities in many industries, and higher education was no exception (Kao & Woods, 2020; Cheng, 2020; Brown, 2019). The next section will detail the great obstacles many institutions faced and the glaring differences, privileges, and assumptions that left many students in the dark.

The literature review then defines and unpacks the perilous vulnerability of organizations in crisis as they experience urgent events that threaten their very existence (Fern-Banks, 2011; Coombs, 2015; Ulmer et al., 2019). It also discusses best practices in crisis communication and what is at stake specifically for higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. With keen attention to the literature surrounding both reputation in crisis and the unique relationship between institutions of higher education, the literature review will examine their constituencies and reputation.

This literature review will explore the relationship between media framing of COVID-19 and higher education; therefore it is essential to establish the role of news media in the United States. This requires an examination of the means through which media content connects and impacts society and the role and responsibilities of journalists as gatekeepers of public information (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Gee (2011) states that "When we use language, social goods and their distribution are always at stake. Language is always 'political' in a deep sense" (p. 7). To best define how news narratives summon public support or contempt for higher education, one must define the frames and language through which information is broadcast to the public (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Hallahan, 1999; Neuman et al., 1992). An examination of the literature of news framing and definition of the five most common media frames—conflict, human interest, economic consequence, attribution of responsibility, and morality—bring context to this study.

Finally, the review examines social constructivism as educational theory and practice through the relationship between journalists and their readers—paying special attention to the social, cultural, and contextual bonding power of language to connect a learner to knowledge (Brown et al., 1989; Thomas & Brown, 2011; Vygotsky, 1978). The review will also discuss the means through which journalists use constructivist methods to create profound links in social patterns, communal norms, and narratives (Poerksen, 2011).

COVID- 19 Pandemic Timeline

The following events have been curated to express the speed with which the COVID-19 pandemic spread, as well as the response, urgency, guidelines, and timetable available to campuses, prior to and immediately following, the first campus closure on March 5, 2020.

On December 31, 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) Country Office in the People's Republic of China heard a media statement from the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission China, reporting a cluster of 27 cases (PAHO, 2020) of acute respiratory syndrome with unknown cause in Wuhan, Hubei Province ("Timeline of WHO's response," 2020). By January 11, 2020, the first death from the novel coronavirus was reported in China ("Timeline of WHO's response," 2020).

The international spread of the novel coronavirus was documented on January 16, 2020, as the Japanese Ministry of Health reported a confirmed case of the novel coronavirus and the Pan American Health Organization released an Epidemiological Alert regarding the Novel coronavirus ("Epidemiological Alert," 2020). The WHO communicated evidence of human-to-human transmission of the novel coronavirus, just as the first case of the novel coronavirus was confirmed in the United States of America on January 21, 2020 ("Timeline of WHO's response," 2020).

The first cases of novel coronavirus in Europe were confirmed in France on January 24, 2020. Dr. Carissa Etienne, director of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), advised countries in the Americas to prepare for early detection, isolation, and care for those infected by the new coronavirus ("PAHO Director urges," 2020). The regional director for the World Health Organization's European branch, Dr. Hans Henri P. Luge, released a statement on January 25, 2020 advocating for readiness at local and national levels to identify infected individuals, manage the spread of the novel coronavirus, and maintain open communication with the public. Luge closed his statement by emphasizing that "We do not know at this point how the outbreak will evolve. While we cannot predict the virus' behavior, we can decide how good we are in

stopping it. Today we are offered a window of opportunity; today we must grab it to make the region and the world safer" (Statement – Novel coronavirus, 2020).

Dr. Poonam Khetrapal Singh, WHO regional director for the South-East Asia region, submitted a statement on January 27, 2020, demanding vigilance in the preparation, containment, and prevention of the novel coronavirus ("Readiness is the key", 2020). On January 30, 2020, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the WHO, declared the novel coronavirus a public health emergency of international concern. In his closing remarks, Dr. Ghebreyesus stated, "This is the time for facts, not fear. This is the time for science, not rumors. This is the time for solidarity, not stigma" (WHO Director-General's Statement, 2020). Dr. Matschidiso Moeti, the WHO regional director for Africa, offered a statement encouraging preparedness, surveillance, early detection, and proper management of the novel coronavirus ("WHO ramps up", 2020).

On February 3, 2020, the WHO disseminated the Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan aimed at distilling what was known of the novel coronavirus and creating a blueprint to establish international coordination, global preparedness, and accelerate enquiry and treatment ("2019 Novel Coronavirus," 2020). On February 14, 2020, they released planning recommendations and key considerations for holding mass gatherings, including respiratory etiquette, hand hygiene, symptom monitoring and the wearing of a face mask, based on takeaways from the H1N1 and Ebola outbreaks ("Key planning recommendations", 2020). Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the WHO, called for intensified preparedness from the international community and shared his concern around the international lack of urgency ("Munich Security Conference", 2020).

The WHO weekly COVID-19 briefings began on February 19, 2020, when Ghebreyesus cited “severe political, social, and economic upheaval” on account of COVID-19. Within 50 days of the first case of COVID-19, 74,279 cases and 2,006 deaths were reported in China and 918 cases were reported across 25 other countries (WHO Director-General Opening Remarks, 2020). At a press conference on February 24, 2020, WHO leaders stated, “To reduce COVID-19 illness and death, near-term readiness planning must embrace the large-scale implementation of high-quality, non-pharmaceutical public health measures” including detection, isolation, contact tracing, monitoring and quarantining, and community support. Fast and effective decision making by leadership, social engagement, and efficient public health systems were deemed essential to curbing the spread of an outbreak (Press Conference of WHO-China Joint Mission, 2020).

On March 10, 2020, the WHO released key actions for the prevention and control of COVID-19 within schools. In addition to prior guidance on hand washing, social distancing, cleaning, and isolating individuals with symptoms, the WHO expanded suggestions for operational changes within schools. This included staggering schedules, canceling events, spacing furniture to allow for social distancing, and planning for the continuity of learning through home study (Key messages and actions, 2020). The next day, March 11, 2020, COVID-19 was characterized as a pandemic (WHO Director-General’s Statement, 2020).

The WHO revealed evidence that COVID-19 may be transmitted by pre-symptomatic, asymptomatic, and symptomatic individuals on April 2, 2020 (Coronavirus Disease 2019 Situation Report #73, 2020). Two days later, over one million cases of COVID-19 were reported worldwide, increasing known infection by ten times in less than a month (Coronavirus Disease 2019 Situation Report #75, 2020).

On June 3, 2020, the WHO released guidance for international leadership, advising the use of face masks by all community members (Advice on the Use of Masks, 2020). However, the United States Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) would not call on Americans to wear masks until July 14, 2020 (CDC Calls, 2020). On June 3, 2020, there were 1,289, 380 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 70,590 coronavirus-related deaths worldwide (John Hopkins, COVID19 Dashboard).

The novel coronavirus was discovered and subsequently spread across the globe at such an astounding trajectory that, within 97 days, the world went into lockdown. A crisis of this magnitude and velocity has not been experienced in the collective memory of our global ethos.

United States Higher Education COVID-19 Pandemic Response

The COVID-19 pandemic brought sweeping and swift change to higher education in the United States and around the world (Daniel, 2020; Liguori & Winkler, 2020; Zraick & Garcia, 2020). Nearly 20 million students (Duffin, 2020) were enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States during the winter of 2020. As epicenters for the convergence of large groups, institutions of higher education began to establish and communicate precautionary measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 in early 2020. These measures included hand hygiene reminders and instructions to community members to stay home if they were ill (Liguori & Winkler, 2020). The situation quickly escalated to include the cancellation of large-scale and public facing events (Daniel, 2020; Liguori & Winkler, 2020; Zraick & Garcia, 2020).

On March 5, 2020, Northeastern University Seattle announced that the 709 students on its Seattle, Washington campus would move to remote course delivery, becoming the first institution to change their delivery methodology due to the pandemic (Northeastern Will, 2020). The following day, March 6, 2020, Brandman University moved to full remote course delivery

for their 7,812 students on campuses in both California and Washington (Robbins, 2020). The University of Washington also announced that their 50,000 students would move to remote course delivery on March 9, 2020 (Richards, 2020), becoming the first major American university to do so (Thomason, 2020).

On March 15, 2020, Harvard University instructed all undergraduate students to move out of their dormitories, becoming one of the first institutions to cancel in person learning for an extended period (Zraick & Garcia, 2020). Many institutions quickly followed suit by sending their students home for the remainder of the spring, thereby diving headfirst into purely remote learning delivery (Daniel, 2020; Liguori & Winkler, 2020; Zraick & Garcia, 2020). Between March 6, 2020, and March 12, 2020, nearly two thirds of four-year institutions in the United States announced plans to transition to remote delivery for the remainder of the spring (COVID-19 Dashboard, 2020). By March 12, 2020, 46 countries on five different continents closed schools or transitioned to remote delivery to curb the spread of COVID-19 infection (Crawford et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2020).

Transitioning Campuses to Remote Learning During COVID-19

The swift global transition to remote learning brought with it Herculean challenges, a plethora of implementation strategies, and exhaustive conjecture. Hage (2020) underscores that while the COVID-19 virus is asocial in nature, it is experienced socially. The spread of the virus is felt communally and, as a result, bias, and prejudice shaped society's response. Higher education was not insusceptible to bringing its spectacular inequities to light while grappling with COVID-19 (Kao & Woods, 2020; Cheng, 2020; Brown, 2019).

The speed with which faculty and administrators needed to pivot towards remote delivery resulted in the prioritization of preferred user students. Preferred user students are defined as

those who are studying in a full-time capacity, financially sound, able-bodied, and without any mental-emotional barriers to learning (Kao & Woods, 2020). This left many, if not the majority, of students struggling, especially those with disabilities, lower socioeconomic statuses, and unsafe home lives. COVID-19 revealed the vast inequities among students including financial inability to return home, food insecurity, lack of technological infrastructure, and housing insecurity (Fischer, 2020; Kafka, 2020, Brown & Kafka, 2020).

A preferred user student also has access to a computer and a reliable internet connection. The 2019 U.S. census data estimates that 17 percent of students did not have access to a computer at home and 18 percent did not have access to broadband internet (Brown, 2019). The National Center for Education Statistics found that six percent of students between the ages of three and 18 did not have any access to internet, and an additional six percent only had access through a smartphone (NCES, 2020). Internet access falls strictly across lines of economics, race, and privilege. Ninety eight percent of Asian American students have access to the internet compared to only 80 percent of American Indian/Alaskan Native students (NCES, 2020). Ninety nine percent of high-income families have access to internet compared to 87 percent of low-income families, and families whose parents had less than a high school education were most likely (17 percent) to only have access to the internet through their phones (NCES, 2020). Families who did not have access to the internet often cited a lack of need or interest in internet service (43 percent) or the price being too expensive (34 percent) (NCES, 2020). When remote learning began, these barriers forced vulnerable students to extremes, such as attending classes in parking lots outside of public institutions with internet signals (Brown, 2019).

A survey conducted by the American Council on Education (2020) found that 41 percent of university presidents cited the pandemic as a pressing concern on the mental health of their

students. With the sudden upheaval demanded by remote education, all stakeholders experienced significant strain as they struggled to navigate the new reality of campuses under COVID-19. Levels of stress and anxiety for faculty, staff, and students, especially for those who already battle mental illness, soared (Hegde et al., 2020). Of 195 students surveyed at the University of Texas A&M in April 2020, one month into remote instruction, 71 percent of students indicated increased levels of anxiety and stress, 89 percent cited difficulty concentrating, 89 percent experienced disrupted sleep, and 82 percent exhibited increased concerns about their academic performance (Son et al., 2020). Active Minds, a national health advocacy group, found that of 2,086 students surveyed, 80 percent stated that the COVID-19 pandemic had negatively impacted their mental health (Active Minds, 2020).

Students who relied on campus jobs through work study programs received varying levels of continued support, with the overwhelming majority of them being unable to rely on their work-study income (Kafka, 2020). In addition, low-income students lost access to medication, books, food, and shelter provided by their universities (Kafka, 2020). A 2018 Center for Education report found that seventy percent of college students were working while at school, with low-income students working longer hours than their peers from higher economic backgrounds. Low-income student workers were also more likely to be Black or Latinx, nontraditional, and female. The sudden loss of necessary income for these students emphasizes the mishandling of COVID-19 by universities (Amour, 2019; Center for Education Report, 2018; Kafka, 2020).

International students experienced microaggressions and blatant xenophobia on campus, most especially Asian students (Cheng, 2020). Many of these students were also unable to return to their home countries due to travel restrictions (Salcedo & Cherelus, 2020; Fisher, 2020) and

were abandoned to the ghost towns their campuses became. The initial March 2020 lockdown was a time of homecoming for many students, with families sheltering in place. International students suffered largely alone, however, with the added tension of worrying about their families abroad, navigating visa policies, and the very real possibility that if they did go home, they might not be able to return to campus in the fall (Cheng, 2020; Fisher, 2020).

Shifting classes from in-person to entirely virtual was not something that most institutions were poised to do. Successful implementation and delivery of an online education is a complex art form (Lee, 2019; Lee & Bligh, 2019; Lee et al., 2019; Lee, 2017). However, educators were expected to deliver remote coursework. The quality of this remote learning varied extensively (Lee, 2020; Bessette et al., 2020). Popular delivery models included posting slides to a course site with no faculty engagement, video recorded sessions, Zoom interactive sessions, and webinars (Lee, 2020; Bessette et al., 2020). In addition to disparities in preparedness, administrators also made directives to faculty under the assumption that they were equally equipped for immediate remote modality. This created significant hardships for contract faculty, differently abled faculty, and women, most especially women of color (Ryan, 2020; Lee, 2020). Simpson Scarborough (2020) found that 70 percent of the 2,258 students surveyed between March and April of 2020 described remote learning as "worse" than on campus delivery.

The shift to a remote learning environment sparked ambiguity and debate on the best ways to teach and create connections in the wake of significant inequalities between faculty, students, resources, and administrations (Zhang et al., 2020). Student engagement is an incredible challenge in the virtual classroom, with higher drop-out rates and attendance issues (Lee, 2020; Tauber, 2013). Simpson Scarborough (2020) found a dramatic increase between student's willingness to return to campus between March and April 2020. In March, 14 percent

of those surveyed did not plan on returning to campus in the fall and by April that number ballooned to 26 percent. Minority students were 10 percent less likely to return to campus in the fall compared to their white peers (Simpson Scarborough, 2020).

Prior to the pandemic, some scholars (Maguad, 2007; Brule, 2004; Saunders, 2011) argued that the identity of modern students had become increasingly customer centric. Once enrolled, students became increasingly disengaged from the work of earning an education—such as the honors students at the University of Illinois who admitted to completing less than half of their assigned coursework (Inside Higher Ed, 2005). A 2005 National Survey of Student Engagement reported that 43 percent of college students under the age of 30 agreed with the statement that they “do just enough to get by” and a shocking 77 percent of students over 30 agreed with the same statement (Wright, 2008). A study by Babcock and Marks (McCormick, 2011) found that in 1961, college students were studying on average 40 hours per week. By 2003, their average dropped to 27 hours per week, a nearly 39 percent decrease. Remote delivery exacerbated these concerns for faculty, administrators, and parents (Son et al., 2020; Kafka, 2020; Lee, 2020; Tauber, 2013).

Assessment and integrity were unchartered territory in a remote learning landscape. Stress and disconnection are among the strongest risk factors for cheating on campus (Supiano, 2020). During the pandemic, universities faced an abundance of both (Son et al., 2020; Kafka, 2020; Lee, 2020; Tauber, 2013). 63 percent of 2,086 college students surveyed in April 2020 found it nearly impossible to stay connected during the COVID-19 crisis (Active Minds, 2020).

Applying assessments designed to be made in person presents a significant challenge in a virtual classroom (Broadfoot et al., 2016). This pushed many institutions, beginning with Harvard University, to shift from letter grades to a pass/fail option for the spring (Stranger,

2020). Prior to COVID-19, scholars found that students had become increasingly focused on grades to the detriment of transformational scholarship, becoming less willing than ever to take educational risks and gravitating towards less demanding courses to maintain their GPA (Plant, et al., 2005). A Duke University study found that students would be 50 percent more likely to take science classes if they were guaranteed the same grade as they would achieve in a discipline with perceived lower difficulty such as the liberal arts or communication (Maguad, 2007). Students at the University of California, San Diego indicated that they would spend 50 percent less time studying for a class where they expect to receive an "A" grade versus an identical course by the same professor where they expect to receive a "C" grade (Babcock, 2010). Remote education further aggravated these tensions as faculty, students, and parents grew increasingly concerned with how much education students were receiving and at what cost (Stranger, 2020).

Questions of education today are answered in economic terms (Noddings, 2013). Since 1978, college tuition has increased by 375 percent. This is in comparison to a 127 percent increase in average family income, or medical costs which have increased at only half that rate, or the price of food which has gone up at a sixth of that rate (Brandon, 2010; Jamrisko, 2012). The unprecedented increase in tuition and a consumer-product model in higher education has led many students to believe that admission and payment is a contract with set expectations of outcomes (Svensson & Wood, 2007; Brandon, 2010; Wang et al., 2013). In the wake of COVID-19, 48 percent of surveyed college students named significant financial setbacks as a deciding factor in attending or staying in college (Active Minds, 2020). Institutions of higher education in the United States has been under fire for decades. As a result of COVID-19, Moody's Investor Service (2020) downgraded higher education from a stable to negative sector. The financial

implications of COVID-19 ravaged economies across the globe, and higher education was no exception (Gardner, 2020).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, waves of college closures had been predicted for years (Gardner, 2020; de Barros, 2015; Dorantes & Low, 2016). The financial decimation of higher education during the spring of 2020 made these doomsday predictions feel eminent (Gardner, 2020). 64 percent of university presidents cited the long-term financial viability of their institution as a dominant COVID-19 issue (American Council on Education, 2020). The pandemic brought acute financial strain in the form of lost revenue from cancelled events, athletics, and the television revenue they generate, housing and board refunds, lost research revenue, and the enormous expenses associated with pivoting to remote delivery on a dime (Gardner, 2020). For example, the University of Wisconsin System estimated 212 million dollars in losses related to the COVID-19 pandemic through the summer 2020 semester (Kremer, 2020) and George Washington University projected 38 million dollars in losses over the same period (Schonfeld, 2020).

To further exacerbate these financial pressures, Simpson Scarborough (2020) estimated a 20 percent decline in enrollment in 4-year institutions. One in six high school seniors who were previously college bound were no longer planning to attend in the fall of 2020 (Hoover, 2020). 86 percent of university presidents cited fall and summer enrollment as the prevailing concern during the COVID-19 pandemic (American Council on Education, 2020). Issues cited were concerns about attending college in person and the inability to have the social, programmatic, athletic, and extracurricular experiences students had planned on (Hoover, 2020). First generation students and students of color are especially vulnerable to taking another path, with 40 percent of minority high-school seniors stating it is highly unlikely they will attend college in

the fall compared to 24 percent of white seniors (American Council on Education, 2020). Institutions of higher education are further handicapped by not getting to showcase their institutions through in-person admission events (Field, 2020).

With an unprecedented crisis, an uncertain future, a floodgate of insurance claims, triaging of unmitigated risk and billions of dollars at stake, COVID-19 brings extraordinary legal ramifications to institutions of higher education: “Small print is getting enormous attention as the novel-coronavirus crisis triggers what promises to be a tsunami of college litigation,” (Kafka & Gluckman, 2020). Class Action lawsuits began in spring of 2020, when students demanded tuition and mandatory refunds for the broken contracts. Students from Drexel University and the University of Miami, said they had been promised experiential learning, interaction with faculty and peers, access to libraries, art centers, labs, and gyms. When the universities went remote, the students felt the universities were in breach of contract and demanded a refund (Kafka & Gluckman, 2020). Other institutions, such as Liberty University, who opened their facilities to avoid having to refund students for room and board, are being sued for putting students at unnecessary risk (Kafka & Gluckman, 2020).

While the 97-day proliferation of COVID-19 was swift, the seven-day flip to complete remote instruction for twenty million university students was truly extraordinary. With the speed of this transition came many challenges for students, administrations, and families. These hardships were experienced most intensely by marginalized students—namely those who were not defined as preferred users. This led many students to push back against their administrations harder than ever, questioning the cost benefit of their college education investment in its current state.

Crisis Communication and Reputation

A crisis is "an event for which people seek cause and make attributions" (Coombs & Holladay, 2004, p. 97). Crises can also occur when an organization experiences urgent events of high consequence which may threaten the very existence of the organization (Fern-Banks, 2011; Coombs, 2015; Ulmer et al., 2019). A crisis of COVID-19's magnitude is unmatched in living memory. The lasting impacts of the pandemic are yet to be seen. However, the pandemic's unprecedented influence across borders and industries casts a frightening shadow. The likelihood that higher education will be shielded from the continued aftershocks of the COVID-19 pandemic is dubious at best. The following describes best practices in crisis communications and the high stakes of mismanagement.

Organizational crisis requires expedient communication with diverse audiences to mitigate negative impacts on the organization (Fern-Banks, 2011; Coombs, 2015; Zaremba, 2010). Crisis communication scholars Ulmer et al. (2015) define the five elements of an organizational crisis as unexpected, non-routine, producing uncertainty, creating learning opportunities and innovation, and a threat to the goals, image, and reputation of the organization. COVID-19 was undoubtedly unexpected and non-routine. The first known cases of COVID-19 emerged on December 31, 2019 (Timeline of WHO, 2020). Only 65 days later, the first American university campus transitioned to remote course delivery (Northeastern, 2020), which resulted in little time for proactive planning.

While the dramatic changes to the academic experience and course delivery brought uncertainty and threatened the fabric of higher education, it also brought an unprecedented opportunity for innovation (How will the pandemic, 2020). COVID-19 created financial shocks, college ghost towns with fractured economies, campus community disruption, doubts to the

rights of student athletes, faculty and staff, and loss of purpose to college communities around the world (How will the pandemic, 2020). COVID-19 was also the catalyst for a grand experiment in higher education in remote delivery of pedagogy and services, renewed commitment to innovation, creativity, and hope.

As an outside force, COVID-19 made university stakeholders compulsory communication agents for events out of their control. Communication behaviors in crisis are often more memorable than the details of the events themselves (Zaremba, 2010; Gibbons, 2017). These behaviors varied widely across universities, both damaging and entrenching their relationships with students and community members (Fischer, 2020; The Coronavirus is upending, 2020). Ideal communication in crisis should be rapid, correct, consistent, and transparent (Coombs, 2015; Rich, 2013; Gibbons 2017). Misinformation, silence, and perceived unnecessary delays create further reputational harm and, with time, force the public to draw their own conclusions from the rubble (Zaremba, 2010; Ulmer et al., 2019).

Openness and consistency of information are paramount to maintaining reputational standing with the public in times of crisis (Coombs, 2015; Zaremba, 2010; Ulmer et al., 2019). Corollary, sharing information throughout the organization as well as with the public and key stakeholders, is essential to maintaining confidence during a crisis (Coombs, 2015). This level of strategic organization requires managing the flow of information flawlessly to prevent ambiguity and further harm (Ulmer et al., 2019). Institutions of higher education are famously decentralized and accused of administrative bloat and inefficiencies (Pettit, 2020; Tugend, 2019). As active and vocal ambassadors of their institutions, faculty and students also carry the responsibility of consistency, openness, and validity, yet they are rarely given the tools to do that job well. This

dissertation will chronicle sources of information in news coverage to determine key proprietors of messaging (Gibbons, 2017).

Institutions of higher education are steadfastly protective of their reputations as the highest form of currency. In academia, reputation determines recruitment abilities, robustness of enrollment, selectivity, coveted rankings, and the ability to receive private and public funding. However, a university's reputation is not entirely under its own control. Rather, it is the manifestation of collective internal and external evaluations (Mahoney, 2013; Gibbons, 2017; Coombs & Holladay, 2010a). In times of crisis, the public will often call to task the reputation of an industry or organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2010a; Gardner et al., 2020). Furthermore, Parks & Reber (2011) found that positive relationships between a university and a constituent prior to a crisis increased the likelihood that the constituent would view the university favorably in a crisis and vice versa. Parks and Reber also found that "there may be something unique about the nature of higher education that leads internal and external publics to hold stricter standards for institutions of higher learning, especially in the wake of a negative event" (p. 254). This study seeks to evaluate the news messaging surrounding higher education from March 5, 2020, through June 3, 2020, to ascertain the depiction of higher education and its reputation during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The public internal and external evaluation points which collectively comprise an institution's reputation is classified by Coombs & Holladay (2010b) as the following: direct engagement with the organization, controlled and uncontrolled media reports, and second-hand information. Simpson Scarborough (2020) found that 40 percent of students have a "worse" opinion of their institution than they did prior to the pandemic.

COVID-19 certainly meets the parameters for crisis, both for the urgency of the event and the authentic threat it brings to the fabric of higher education. Crisis communication is an art form with best practices including timeliness, transparency, and consistency, all enacted with the hope of maintaining the crown jewel of every institution of higher education: reputation.

The Role of News in the United States

When social order is upended in times of crisis, the public often demands more information from news outlets than they can immediately provide (Neal, 1998). In moments of crisis, such as the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the public becomes desperately dependent on the news as a lifeline for information vital to the survival of their community and as a conduit to public officials (Graber, 1980). The public seeks out media outlets to interpret, explain, and inform. For example, during the hours following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, public vulnerability called for consolation as well as information (Li, 2007).

Graber (1980) found three distinct stages of media coverage in a crisis, which continue to be affirmed by subsequent studies forty years later (Daniel, 2009; Li, 2007). During the first stage, the media serves as the primary source for both public officials and the general public, acting predominately as a vessel for accurate news even if the news is unfavorable (Graber, 1980). The second stage is defined by the media attempting to make sense of the event, and the third stage is to repair damage (Graber, 1980). Li (2007) evaluated Graber's theory in an analysis of the coverage of the 9/11 crisis and found that the most important stage of the incident was the first stage. The first stage of the COVID-19 crisis, from March 5, 2020, through June 3, 2020, will be the timeframe utilized in this study, as the initial stage of crisis has been found in supporting literature to be the most telling (Daniel, 2009; Graber, 1980; Li, 2007).

Media content connects and impacts society with journalists acting as gatekeepers of public information (Shoemaker & Reese 2014; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). As gatekeepers, Shoemaker & Reese (2014) argue that the primary goal of a news organization is economic, creating narratives that will generate readership and profit. The secondary goal is a journalist's desire to create quality content, serve the public, and achieve professional success (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). This desire for excellence and integrity is personified in the four pillars of the Code of Ethics of the Society for Professional Journalists, which are to seek truth and report it, minimize harm, act independently, and be accountable and transparent (2014).

As gatekeepers (Shoemaker & Reese 2014; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), journalists decide what to hide and what to expose for public consumption. Given the magnitude of stories and limited space, journalists make decisions on how and what to funnel to the public. The amount of space available is largely determined by the media channel. Printed newspapers have somewhat limited space based on the physical nature of their medium and therefore must be more focused in their coverage. This differs from social media channels, which have nearly unlimited bandwidth and content creators and can therefore be nearly boundless in topics and saturation (Shoemaker & Reese 2014). The choices made to share media content with the public, the amount of coverage, and the framing of coverage has a direct impact on societal views of a topic (Racovia, 2013; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). The responsibility of journalists set forth by the Code of Ethics and the power they possess to move public opinion demand certain considerations of journalists. To focus reporting and create parameters around their coverage, journalists consider the following: the availability of stories, audience appeal, capabilities and resources needed to produce the story, and the mission of their organization (Gibbons, 2017).

With respect to technical issues including pandemic coverage, pedagogy, higher education administration, and industry culture, the news media also plays a critical role in connecting the technical valuation of experts to the more socially digestible assessments of the public (Chen et al. , 2014; Dunwoody & Neuwirth, 1991; Gregory, 1989; Murray et al., 2001; Endreny & Singer, 1987).

The primary vehicles for American news consumption have evolved considerably over the past decade (American Press Institute, 2014; Shearer, 2018; Geiger, 2019). In a 2014 survey of 1,492 adults by the American Press Institute, 75 percent of Americans accessed newspapers daily, both online and in print, making it their primary source of news. A follow up study in 2018 found that news consumption had begun to shift, with age being the determining factor of how news was consumed. Shearer (2018) found that Americans over fifty chiefly watched their news on TV, while those who were under fifty largely acquired news via news websites, print, or social media. In 2019, Pew Research Center found that 36 percent of Americans accessed news via print or news websites and 20 percent of Americans went to social media for news. Of the 20 percent of the population who use social media for news, 57 percent believed news from social media sites to be largely inaccurate and preferred legacy news sources for accurate coverage (Geiger, 2019). When seeking news about education or schools, print and online newspapers are the keystone of coverage (Gibbons, 2017) and will be the sample of analysis for this study.

This study will analyze news articles related to the COVID-19 pandemic and institutions of higher education covered by three major legacy American newspapers: the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*. These three publications have been chosen due to their elite status as news organizations, extensive circulation numbers, orientation, and the fact that they have been used in content analysis studies in the past (Langheim et al., 2014; Chyi et al., 2012;

Hogan, 2013). These papers are the highest circulated newspapers in the United States in 2020 (Infoplease, 2020).

Journalists provide an invaluable service to the republic, creating a common narrative and language, sharing our stories, and gatekeeping with integrity. As gatekeepers, they have immense impact on how the public perceives information (Shoemaker & Reese 2014). The means through which an individual receives stories from journalists is determined not only by their age but the topic of interest. In this study, educational news is sought through print and online legacy news organizations (Geiger, 2019; Gibbons, 2017). The means through which news organizations cover crisis in higher education, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, can have lasting impact on the relationship between the public and institutions of higher education.

Journalists and Institutions of Higher Education in the United States

Scholarship suggests that higher education has, until recently, been off the radar of journalists. Prior to the 1980s, institutions of higher education were rarely covered in dominant news media and only when scandals or issues of accountability arose (McLendon & Peterson, 1999; Jones, 2004; Stepp, 2003). A notable exception to this is historically Black colleges and universities that have been on the receiving end of negative press since their inception (Gasman, 2007; Jones, 2004; Troy, 2017; Willie, 1978). The media is an essential artery between public debate and democracy, similar to the transformational debates between students and their professors taking place in classrooms around the world. As a channel for what society holds as important and how the information is perceived, "the news is no ordinary commodity and is linked directly to the health and well-being of democratic practice" (Fenton, 2011, p. 63). Recently, the abundance of coverage and the public's fragmented levels of attention have created

both dependence and vulnerability for institutions of higher education (Kunelius & Reunanen, 2016).

Institutions of higher education have been particularly exposed in recent years. This coverage has focused primarily on evaluative tactics, particularly school rankings as universities are weighed, measured, and laid bare (Peters, 2018). The public, media, and university administrators place great value in these rankings, shifting substantial control away from traditional academic values such as collegial autonomy and academic freedom towards neoliberal marketization (Rider et al., 2013).

Acting as an "agent of legitimacy, generating mass belief (and acceptance of) dominant political economic institutions" (Marger, 1993, p. 238), the media's depiction of the nuanced and complexed research brought forth by universities is seen as tantamount to the actual research itself. The simplified version of packaged news for public consumption can delegitimize research, confuse readership, and convey a truly limited translation of the actual work of universities, how they are structured, and their missions (Altheide & Snow, 1979). In turn, universities are dependent on these same media outlets to accurately portray and sell their mediated version of a consumer product to attract both students and funding partners (Peters, 2018).

Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have had an especially strained relationship with the press (Gasman, 2007; Jones, 2004; Troy; 2018). Media coverage of HBCUs has been found to perpetuate racist stereotypes, focus on negative issues, and exploit missteps more emphatically than they do with predominately white institutions. This has caused sustained damage to the reputations of HBCUs and recruitment efforts (Gasman, 2007; Jones, 2004; Troy;

2018). This even impacts graduates of HBCUs, who have experienced 20 percent declines in wages upon graduation compared to their peers (Riley, 2010).

Content Analysis Studies of News Coverage of Higher Education

Quantitative content analysis of news coverage has been leveraged by researchers to better understand the public narratives surrounding industries, events, and institutions for decades (An & Gower, 2009; Crigler et al., 1992; Daniels, 2009; Hogan, 2013; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Quantitative content analysis allows researchers to conduct textual analysis effectively and systematically by identifying predetermined frames within a distinct field of interest. Frames are defined (Entman, 1993) as both the presence and absence of themes, language, and stereotypes, which define the narrative framework for the reader. Events and institutions of higher education have also been subject to quantitative content analysis to better understand the public narrative surrounding their institutions (Daniel, 2009; Gasman, 2007; Gibbons, 2017). The following three studies are explored in detail to illustrate the robust and telling opportunities quantitative content analysis can yield for institutions of higher education.

To investigate the news framing of fraternity hazing on college campuses between 2010 and 2015, Gibbons (2017) conducted a quantitative content analysis of coverage, chronicling the sources and frames used. Between 2010 and 2015, Gibbons found 192 unique articles published through a Factivia search of all articles with “hazing” and “fraternity” in the headline. Gibbons then coded each article, examining the story type (hard, soft, or opinion editorial), location, source attribution, presence of alcohol, story organization (episodic or thematic), and frames used in each paragraph of the article. Gibbons pulled frames from multiple studies, for a total of 15 possible outcomes. After conducting the analysis of the articles, Gibbons found that many of the frames were redundant and needed to be compressed. The conclusion of the analysis found

conflict, social impact and human interest, harm, and responsibility to be the most frequent frames in the chosen articles. Of the five most common frames used in U.S. news media—conflict, economic consequences, human impact, attribution of responsibility, and morality—the only frame Gibbons did not find to be prevalent in her analysis was morality. Gibbons concluded that the morality of university students was not of import to journalists or administrations, resulting in a lack of discussion. Gibbons found that negative stereotypes were being enforced within news coverage of fraternities with little emphasis on the many positive attributes and outcomes of fraternities. Gibbons encouraged stakeholders to change the narrative around fraternities by actively engaging with the news media, while also asking them to paint a more in-depth, nuanced, and accurate picture of fraternities in their coverage.

In a similar study, Daniels (2009) conducted a quantitative content analysis of news coverage regarding three lacrosse players charged with raping a woman at an off-campus party in 2006. Daniels employed the five generic news frames defined by Semetko & Valkenburg (2000) as conflict, economic consequences, human impact, attribution of responsibility, and morality. They focused their study on the initial crisis stage suggested by Graber (1980) to be the most influential across 108 articles. Daniels found four of the five dominant frames to be prevalent in his review, including conflict, human impact, attribution of responsibility, and morality. Economic consequence was the only missing frame. Daniel, like Gibbons (2017), also conducted a thorough analysis of the sources sited within his sample—examining those who were most often cited, the framing and tone employed by the individuals, and the influence they brought to the narrative.

Gasman's (2007) content analysis of media framing of Morris Brown College, a historically Black college, found that responsibility, conflict, morality, and attribution of

responsibility were the dominant frames. The implicit racism, bias, and negativity of the journalists covering Morris Brown College was the focus of the study. Gasman's content analysis further cast a spotlight on the power of language in news coverage, as well as the thoughtful and damaging information excluded from coverage that poisoned public opinion of Morris Brown College. A similarly devastating study by Troy (2018) conducted a riveting discourse and content analysis of media bias in their representation of historically Black colleges during two crisis events. Troy made particular note of the media's use of racist stereotypes and negative language around failure, decline, and incompetence when reporting on historically Black colleges in crisis.

When events and institutions of higher education have been subject to quantitative content analysis, a deeper understanding of the public perception of the academy reveals itself (Daniel, 2009; Gasman, 2007; Gibbons, 2017). Unfortunately, these studies have often found that news coverage has failed to conduct nuanced reporting on complex issues. Instead, they reinforce negative stereotypes and further influence public empathy for institutions of higher education. This dissertation aspires to further this research by unpacking how higher education was framed by journalists during the initial crisis of COVID-19.

Frames and Language

Public perception, interpretation, and action taken surrounding events are dependent on the saliency of information in relation to their environment (Heider, 1958). To understand how news narratives drive public support or contempt of higher education, one must begin by examining the frames through which information is delivered and the power of language chosen by journalists (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Hallahan, 1999; Neuman, et al., 1992).

The public's interpretation of a story is shaped by what the media chooses to include, the manner in which the information is presented, the tone of the story, and the frequency with which it is shared. Information is disseminated through "key words that emerge as powerful symbols" (Altheide, 2002, p. 3), guiding public discourse, meaning making and experiences. Framing theory suggests that journalists and the media create more than saliency with their selection and interpretation of data (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Pan and Kosicki, 1993; Hallahan, 1999; Neuman, Just, Crigler, 1992).

Framing assembles a narrative for an audience, highlighting connections to promote a particular interpretation (Entman, 2007). Riker (1986) asserts that the first aspect of framing is agenda setting. When a journalist brings a problem, event, industry, or person to the attention of the public, they are setting the agenda of discourse and import: ''The media may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*'' (Cohen, 1963, p. 13,). As gatekeepers, journalists exert significant influence over *what* the public thinks about, and the frames with which they share their stories influence in turn *how* the public thinks about events.

Framing analysis then "expands beyond agenda-setting research into *what* people talk or think about by examining *how* they think and talk about issues in the news," (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p. 70,). While there is no singular definition of framing, the collective grandparents of framing research paint a clear picture of the essentials. Entman (1993) describes framing as the selection of facets of an observed reality to increase their salience for the promotion of an evaluation and interpretation to define a problem or incite action. Frames, according to Tuchman (1978) set the parameters for citizens to experience events outside of their domain and help society discover, identify, and appreciate information (Goffman, 1974). Frames are conceptual

tools utilized by media to convey information to the public (Neuman et al., 1992) with persistence and emphasis through both exclusion and inclusion (Gitlin, 1980).

Frames can exert such considerable social power to language that once a term such as climate change become universally accepted by the public, they will discredit journalists who use other terminology (Gamson, 1992). The power of these frames bypass language in their ability to drive public opinion. Framing entreats the audience to conceptualize events, individuals, and industries in prescribed ways, both orienting and entrenching beliefs over time (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Strong frames are often linked to partisanship and can be built on exaggerations or to perpetuate elite agendas. Troy's 2018 content analysis of media bias during coverage of historically Black colleges in crisis illustrates that journalists used language to perpetuate racist stereotypes in their reporting of events. Sniderman & Theriault (2004) found that when confronted with frames of competing ideologies, the reader will invariably choose the one most consistent with their predetermined values.

Over the past 50 years, extensive study has been dedicated to the identification and import of news framing, specifically in examination of the *consequence* of framing and the relationship between framing and the public's understanding of subjects and events. Semetko & Valkenburg (2000) began syphoning this work into two categories of framing: deductive and inductive. By their definition, inductive approaches entail examining a news story with the view of capturing and identifying a multitude of frames through loosely defined preconceptions (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). This approach is labor intensive, often used for small samples, and can be challenging to replicate. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) instead champion the merits of a deductive approach. Deduction involves the establishment of predefined frames, clearly articulated on the outset of analysis. This approach boasts the merits of easy replication, the

ability to be applied to large sample sizes, and can also detect frames between mediums (e.g. print media and social media) and within media (e.g. newspapers of various political affiliations). This dissertation proposes to utilize deductive framing. Deductive framing will allow for the formulaic examination of the extensive materials available, is easy to replicate for further study, and can be used within media. A key element of this study is the examination of the frequency, similarities, and difference between how COVID-19 in higher education institutions is portrayed by different news outlets.

Neuman et al. (1992) identified the common reoccurring frames within American news media to include conflict, economic consequences, human impact, attribution of responsibility, and morality. This dissertation serves as an extension of their research and that of others (An & Gower, 2009; Daniels, 2009; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). A definition of each common frame follows.

Conflict Frame

The conflict frame captures the audience's attention by highlighting conflict between institutions, groups, or individuals. Neuman et al. (1992) found conflict to be the most dominant theme in American news media coverage. The reliance on the conflict frame has brought criticism to the news media for inciting mistrust, cynicism, and fear in the public (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). The conflict frame centers around strategy coverage where winning or losing is the dominant concern. The language chosen in a conflict frame features imagery around competition, war, and dominance, with stress given to the performance of key groups or individuals (Valkenburg et al., 2016). Semetko & Valkenburg (2006) found that the more prestigious the newspaper, the more prolific the conflict frame preceded over their coverage (An & Gower, 2009).

Human Interest Frame

The human interest frame is the second most commonly utilized frame in American news media coverage (Neuman et al., 1992). The human interest frame anthropomorphizes events, bringing emotional and personal context to issues, policies, or problems. Competition in the print news market has been further challenged with the advent of the internet and social media. Personalizing the narrative of news brings higher audience interest and engagement in all mediums (Valkenburg et al., 2016; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). During a crisis event, the human interest frame engages the psychological empathy of the reader, leading to negative attitudes towards the crisis, the institutions, and individuals involved (Padin, 2005, October 12). Cho and Gower (2006) illustrate how the emotional response induced by the human interest frame incites the reader toward blame responses and heightened demand for accountability for those responsible.

Economic Consequence Frame

Economic consequence frames leverage the considerable impact of economic outcomes on the population. These frames report events, problems, and issues in regard to the economic consequences they pose to the public (Neuman et al., 1992). The likelihood of reproductions of an event has direct correlation to its value as news. This frame, due to the scope of its influence on the public, gives it significant merit (An & Gower, 2009).

Morality Frame

Morality framing examines events, problems, or issues in relation to religious or moral implications. Due to the objective responsibility of journalists, morality framing is often found more in the minds of the readers than in the content of news (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). As gatekeepers, the sources, quotations, inferences, and choices made by journalists on what to

include or exclude can create moral or religious frames and are often implied or inferred through sources (Neuman et al., 1992).

Attribution of Responsibility Frame

The responsibility frame reports issues, events, or problems with the intention of attributing responsibility for either the causation or resolution to an institution or individual (Neuman et al., 1992). The American news media has been under fire for manipulating public opinion through use of the responsibility frame (Iyengar, 1987; Iyengar, 1991; Iyengar, 1993). Iyengar argues that the episodic coverage of the news as singular events urges the public to ignore larger systemic issues at play. Semetko & Valkenburg (2000) found that responsibility frames were most often employed by serious newspapers, including those in this study, despite concerns of manipulation of their readership.

Tankard, Hedrickson, Silberman, Bliss, and Ghanem (1991) defined a media frame as the "central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggest what the issue is using selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration" (p. 3). Operational to this study, this definition creates further context regarding for the need for an additional layer of issue-specific frames or themes. De Vrees (1991, 2001) expanded on the generic frames research to articulate the need for issue-specific frames or themes. In essence, De Vrees argued that some frames could not be broadly defined and were instead characteristic of specific stories. Issue-specific frames allow for a more nuanced view into stories on specific topics or events and create a richer understanding of the frames evoked by journalists to cover specific categories such as higher education in a pandemic.

Framing news begins with journalists making key decisions on what to include and exclude, the manner in which information is presented, tone, frequency of coverage, and *what*

and *how* information is experienced (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Language choices provide powerful social symbols, which guide public discourse and interpretation of a story (Altheide, 2002). Framing theory suggests that journalists create more than saliency with their interpretation of data. They create a collective dialogue and shared understanding of the world in which we all live (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Hallahan, 1999; Neuman et al., 1992).

Frames set the parameters for events outside of an individuals lived experience and help societies collectively discover, identify, and appreciate information (Goffman, 1974; Tuchman; 1978). The most persistent conceptual tools utilized by media to convey information to the public are frames involving conflict, morality, attribution of responsibility, economic consequence, and human interest (Neuman et al., 1992). Each frame captures and pulls on different elements of a reader's attention and is harnessed with clear objectives by the journalists who wield them—each with their own consequence to the narrative.

A Social Constructivist Approach: News as Knowledge

John Dewey (1916), a pioneer of educational theory, stated that "Education is a social process; education is growth; education is not preparation for life but is life itself." In the classroom, constructionists approach knowledge assimilation through teacher facilitators and guides. In the public sphere, journalists play a significant role in the facilitation of information, shared experience, and knowledge to the public through social constructivism (Poerksen, 2011; Racovia, 2013). A guiding principle of social constructivism is that knowledge is not acquired—rather, it is formed by building upon previous information, beliefs, and experiences.

The most influential epistemological theory of constructivism was conceived by Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (Jonassen, 1991). Piaget asserts that the knowledge people interact with is built upon schemas of prior knowledge, allowing learners to assemble knowledge over time.

Because knowledge is shaped by the unique cumulative experiences of the learner, the construction of knowledge and product varies widely among individuals (Jonassen, 1991; Mayer, 2004; Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007). Learning is an active and dynamic process. Learners need to engage in order to develop and build upon their foundational knowledge, and the act of learning about one area informs others. Constructivism implies that knowledge is constructed in relation and in addition to the existing knowledge of the learner and is therefore something that will be internalized differently based on the prior experiences of the learner (Jonassen, 1991; Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007).

Learning is social and personal. We learn from others by engaging with their ideas and beliefs as well as our own (Bandura, 1986; Dewey, 1916; Vygotsky, 1980). According to the constructionist approach, "We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future" (Dewey, 1986). This idea aligns with news media affiliations and 'slant.' Individuals will seek out ideas that resonate with their current ideologies and belief systems. The social aspect of constructivism prescribes more success in the readership of journalists when they can connect with what is personal and important to their readers.

Learning is contextual. We do not learn facts independent of our previous knowledge or experiences; we learn through connecting new information to what we already hold to be true (Brown et al., 1989; Dewey, 1916). This is referred to as collateral learning: "Collateral learning, in the way of formation of enduring attitudes, of likes and dislikes, may be, and often is, much more important than the spelling lesson or lesson in geography or history that is learned" (Dewey, 1986). Constructivism holds that knowledge exists in the mind and will not be sought

without a motivated learner (Ormrod, 2012; Jonassen, 1991). Individuals tend to retain information more deeply and have easier recall of new information when it connects to assertions they already hold as true and foundational. Facts that oppose previously held beliefs are more easily disregarded by the learner and not retained for significant amounts of time.

Constructivism prescribes significant power to language, specifically the cultural, social, and contextual implications of how language is used to connect a learner to knowledge (Brown et al., 1989; Thomas & Brown, 2011; Vygotsky, 1978). Language and word choice are invaluable tools for journalists as they construct frames around stories for presentation to the public (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Racovia, 2013). Constructivism, for journalists, ignites deep awareness of the importance of patterns, selections, and the presentation of information (Poerksen, 2011).

Constructivism as a journalistic framework creates awareness between the observer (journalist) and knowledge seeker (public). The transfer of knowledge from an educator or journalist to the constructed experiences of the learner is balanced by our society's collective cultural understanding of norms and beliefs (Berger & Luckmann, 1979). Karin Knorr-Cetina (Poerksen, 2011) defined this relationship to social constructivism as an attempt to clarify the nature of shared history and social realities through communal language, habits, and a typified narrative.

The journalist's code of ethics calls for objectivity in reporting, however constructionists argue objectivity in reporting is nearly impossible—especially as a means of clean transfer and acceptance of new information (Poerksen, 2011). All incoming communication innately holds the subjectivity and positionality of the journalist and of the recipient of information, coupled with their preexisting knowledge.

Other constructionists (Racovia, 2013) entreat the scientific community to follow the example of media by utilizing a constructivist approach to share and further scientific discovery. Stern (2019) brings a psychoanalytic lens to constructivism and the media. In examining news coverage of President Donald J. Trump during the first two years of his presidency, Stern questions whether or not constructivism, where knowledge is built upon what is already known and experienced, could be irrevocably damaged by lies and "fake news." Could repetitive false information damage the foundation of democracy and personal knowledge? Fortunately, Stern's study revealed the opposite, that the "crucial democratic influence of constructivism not only persists when despotic leaders lie in order to enforce their agendas, it is actually magnified under those circumstances" (Stern, 2019).

Constructivism depends on the active engagement of a learner to construct knowledge based on past experiences (Jonassen, 1991). It adds yet another layer to the scaffolding of information sharing and news—that of collective language, cultural norms, and collaboration created in community (Vygotsky, 1978). Journalists both create and share news. The imperfect nature of the journalists as a vessel for distributing neutral information and for the public's ability to receive information objectively is a necessary reality of constructivism and the media.

Gap in Literature

Research on elements of this proposed study is abundant, including news framing, constructivism, and preliminary assertions regarding the impact of COVID-19 on higher education (Goldstein & Beutel, 2008; Khalifeh, 2017; Gibbons, 2017; Porksen, 2011; Fenton, 2011; Ali, 2020; Mareck, 2005). However, no study has united all these questions into one analysis. This quantitative content analysis seeks to understand news media coverage of higher education during COVID-19 and the framing of coverage by three dominate print news

organizations: *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and *The New York Times*. Additionally, as noted by Matthes (2009), limited quantitative content analysis research exists, especially as a study testing hypotheses. This study will support future studies of quantitative content analysis of news coverage framing for issues within higher education.

This study addressed a specific crisis event—the COVID-19 pandemic—and the framing mechanisms used by three news publications, the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and the *New York Times*, to construct public perception, understanding, and knowledge of events. Therefore, this study will add to scholarly research by revealing the influence news organizations have on public perception of crisis events through the frames they deploy in creating narratives, which is foundational to the constructed relationship between the public and institutions of higher education.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The previous chapter synthesized the situational context of the COVID-19 pandemic, impacts on the institution of higher education and the relationship between journalists, framing of public opinion and constructivism. This study utilized a quantitative content analysis to examine framing and news coverage of higher education institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the context of prior literature surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education, crisis communication, news coverage and media framing the following research questions emerged.

Research Questions

RQ1: Between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020, how frequent and how much coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic and higher education was conducted by the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*?

RQ2: Between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020, which sources were used most frequently in coverage of higher education and the COVID-19 pandemic by the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*?

RQ3: Between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020, did legacy publications; the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* use generic framing mechanisms (conflict, human interest, morality, attribution of responsibility, economic) in their coverage of higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ4: Will additional issue-specific frames or themes emerge in the analysis of coverage of higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic between March 5, 2020, and June 3, 2020 by legacy news publications; *The New York Times*, The *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*?

Hypotheses

H1: The lengths and frequency of stories covering COVID-19 and institutions of higher education between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020 from most coverage to least will be as follows: *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal.*

H2: The *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and the *Wall Street Journal* will use sources from outside of higher education personnel most frequently in stories covering higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020.

H3: The *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and the *Wall Street Journal* will utilize generic frames, including conflict, attribution of responsibility, morality, economic consequences, and human interest, during their coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in regard to institutions of higher education between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020.

H4: Additional issue-specific frames or themes will emerge in the analysis of coverage of higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic between March 5, 2020, and June 3, 2020 by legacy news publications; *The New York Times*, The *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*.

Quantitative Content Analysis

The hypothesis and research questions presented from the literature will be studied through a quantitative content analysis of the news coverage of higher education. This study proposes to explore news frames of higher education in the United States during the initial phase of the COVID-19 crisis. A quantitative content analysis is the ideal method for this study, as it has been proven to be an effective means of systematically reviewing text through the analysis of predetermined frames in a topical area (An & Gower, 2009; Daniels, 2009; Hogan, 2013; Neuman et al., 1992; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Entman (1993) describes frames as collective presence and absence of themes, language, stereotypes, reinforcement or dismissal of

facts, and judgements which define the narrative framework for the reader. Quantitative content analysis as a methodology provides for a systematic review of the themes, conclusions, and language of the data sample.

Sample and Unit of Analysis

The public is most dependent on the news as a lifeline for information vital to the survival of their community and as a conduit to public officials during the first stage of crisis (Graber, 1980; Li, 2007). The timeframe of the investigation is based on Graber's theory of media framing in stages of crisis, beginning on March 5, 2020 when Northeastern University became the first institution of higher education to change their delivery methodology due to concerns surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic (Northeastern Will, 2020). The analysis covered the next 90 days, ending on June 3, 2020. During this 90-day period, most institutions of higher education across the United States pivoted to remote instruction. Students were sent home; commencements became virtual affairs, and the country went on lockdown.

This study was a quantitative content analysis of the crisis coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in regard to institutions of higher education and the frames used by three major American print news publications between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020. The study analyzed news articles related to the COVID-19 pandemic and institutions of higher education covered by the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*. These three publications have been chosen due to their elite status as news organizations, extensive circulation numbers, orientation, and the fact that the three have been used in content analysis studies in the past (Langheim et al., 2014; Chyi et al., 2012; Hogan, 2013). These papers were the highest circulated newspapers in the United States in 2020 (Infoplease, October 2020). The October 2020 circulation numbers for each paper were as follows: *USA Today* circulated 2,278,022 copies, the *Wall Street Journal*

circulated 2,062,312 copies, and the *New York Times* circulated 1,120,420 copies. These papers cover both national and international issues and have significant policy influence and sway over public opinion. All three act as news resources for local, regional, television, and internet news (Gans, 2003; Schudson, 2002; McCombs, 2001). These three papers comprise a national perspective, while also creating an opportunity to examine the differences between their coverage of events (Chyi et al., 2011). Newspapers are best positioned for educational studies. According to an analysis by Edmonds et al. (2012), education comprised four and a half percent of newspaper coverage and only one point six percent of broadcast media coverage. Educational news is most often sought through print and online newspapers (Gibbons, 2017), making legacy newspapers the primary and most influential source of information.

The databases utilized for compiling articles for this study were Nexis Uni and Factvia. Nexis Uni was chosen as it holds a complete database of news articles for both the *New York Times* and *USA Today*. The Factvia database was chosen due to its complete collection of articles from the *Wall Street Journal*. The sample of articles was created by searching the terms 'higher education' or 'college' or 'university' or 'universities' or 'colleges' and 'COVID-19' or 'coronavirus' or 'COVID' in the story headline and/or opening paragraph. All articles were collected, downloaded and stored on a personal computer for review, coding and analysis.

Each news article was the unit of analysis. The researcher read each article through once in its entirety to assess tone, source attribution and article type. The article was then read a second time by the researcher to identify and code the frames present in each paragraph of the article, dominant frames, and issue-specific frames or themes. The coding for all variables was entered into an excel file.

Variables

The content analysis identified which if any, of the five dominant news frames each story deployed: conflict frame, morality frame, human interest frame, economic consequence frame, or the attribution of responsibility frame. Based on the literature review, other variables such as story type, sources, and dominant and issue-specific frames were also examined.

Story Type

Each story was identified as hard news, soft news, or editorial. Hard news is defined as a story written in inverted pyramid style, where information is presented with the most important coming first and descending in importance. For example, hard news includes the coverage of basic facts, first person accounts of events, and timely and immediate portrayals of events (Gibbons, 2017). Soft news is defined as news that both entertains and informs, it is less timely than hard news. This may include a human-interest story, entertainment, lifestyle, a feature story, or a background piece. Editorial pieces are most often written with the author's bias or positionality driving the narrative, such as a letter to the editor (Gibbons, 2017).

Sources

Sources are the organizations or individuals selected by journalists to provide both factual evidence and opinion to color and legitimize the narrative of a story. Sources are identified through quotations in articles, through the citing of data, or through indirect quotes. The selection of sources is a window into what the journalist finds salient to the story, as well as who they attribute credibility and import to (Chyi et al., 2011). Prior research has examined that marginalized populations are often left voiceless or misrepresented as sources (Gasman, 2007; Troy, 2018). Examples of sources likely to occur in this study are faculty members and university administrators, or public health and government officials commenting on the COVID-

19 pandemic and how it is impact higher education. Sources are often identified as a quote attributed to an individual or organization, data cited from an outside group, or a publication.

The following list is a collection of the anticipated sources for this study. Additional sources and redactions may take place in the exercise of the analysis.

(1) **Government official**: Individuals who have a specified title or affiliation designating them as speaking on behalf of the United States federal or state government

(2) **Scientist or Doctor**: Individuals who, due to their professional status as scientists or doctors, speak on behalf of the medical or scientific community

(3) **University leadership**: Individuals identified to speak on behalf of the university (e.g., University President, Dean, communications specialist, ‘the school,’ etc.)

(4) **University faculty members**: Those who hold a teaching or research position at a university or college

(5) **University personnel**: Staff and administration members of a university without leadership or faculty appointments

(6) **Current students**: Current college or university students

(7) **Prospective students**: Prospective college or university students who are not currently enrolled but are or were planning to enroll (e.g., high school seniors)

(8) **Family members of current students**: Individuals related to a current student and an indirect stakeholder in the events (e.g., parent, grandparent, sibling, etc.)

(9) **Family members of prospective students**: Individuals related to a prospective student and an indirect stakeholder to the events (e.g., parent, grandparent, sibling, etc.)

(10) **Alumni**: Former college or university students who are not currently enrolled but have graduated from an institution of higher education.

(11) **Records**: Miscellaneous reports and or documents (e.g., complaints, motions, case affidavits, financial documents, etc.)

(12) **Digital media**: Technology used as reference or resource (e.g., websites, Twitter)

(13) **Other media outlets**: References to other news reports or stories

(14) **Anonymous or unidentified**: Statements made by unidentified individuals who are close to the events but prefer to remain anonymous

(15) **Other**: Sources outside of those listed above

Generic Frames

To understand how news narratives drive public support or contempt of higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher examined the frames through which the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* position their coverage (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Hallahan, 1999; Neuman, et al., 1992).

Public interpretation of a story is influenced by the way information is presented, the tone of the story, the frequency of updates and which voices the media chooses to include or exclude. Key words and themes become “powerful symbols” (Altheide, 2002, p. 3), guiding public discourse, experiences, perception, and their ability to make meaning of an event. Framing theory suggests that journalists and the media create more than saliency with their selection and interpretation of data by creating a shared narrative for public consumption (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Pan and Kosicki, 1993; Hallahan, 1999; Neuman, Just, Crigler, 1992). As gatekeepers, journalists exert significant influence over *what* the public thinks about, by setting the agenda for public discourse (Riker, 1986). The frames with which they share their stories influence in turn *how* the public thinks about events (Cohen, 1963).

This study utilizes the deductive framing approach of Semetko & Valkenburg (2000) using predefined frames, clearly articulated on the outset of analysis. Each article will be identified as having one or more of the following frames identified by Neuman et al. (1992) as those most commonly occurring in American news media: conflict, human interest, economic consequence, morality, or attribution of responsibility. This study serves as an extension of their research and that of others (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; An & Gower, 2009). Each frame is defined below.

(1) **Conflict Frame**: The conflict frame feeds on tension between institutions or individuals and is consumed by winning and losing. The conflict frame is most often used to reflect disagreement among individuals or organizations. The language chosen in a conflict frame features imagery around conflict, competition, war, and dominance, with stress given to the performance of key groups or individuals (Valkenburg et al., 2016; Neuman et al., 1992). Examples of conflict framing pertaining to this study could include an adversarial relationship between administration/faculty/students/parents/government officials, 'winning' i.e. admissions numbers, tension, legal action, challenge, emergency, or separation.

(2) **Human Interest Frame**: The human interest frame brings personal and emotional shine to issues, policies, or problems. In crisis event reporting, the human interest frame triggers empathy in the reader, and brings to life the psychological pulse of an event, often creating negative attitudes towards the crisis and those involved (Padin, 2005, October 12; Cho & Gower, 2006).

Examples of human interest framing pertaining to this study could include student experiences.

(3) **Economic Consequence Frame**: Economic consequence frames report events, problems, and issues in regard to the economic consequences they expose the public to (Neuman et al., 1992). Examples of economic consequence framing pertaining to this study could include admissions, enrollment, job prospects post-graduation, job loss and student loans.

(4) **Morality Frame**: Morality framing portrays events, problems, or issues through social prescriptions, religious or moral implications. Morality framing is often implied through the strategic use of sources, inferences, and implication (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Neuman et al., 1992). Examples of morality framing pertaining to this study could include admissions of what is 'right' for community members, discrimination, and fairness.

(5) **Attribution of Responsibility Frame**: The responsibility frame reports with the intention of attributing responsibility for either the causation or resolution to an institution or individual in response to issues, events, or problems (Neuman et al., 1992). Examples of attribution of responsibility framing pertaining to this study could include en loco parentis decision making.

Issue Specific-Frames or Themes

In addition to an analysis of the presence of generic frames within each article, De Vreese (1991) conveyed the importance and richness of issue-specific frames or themes. This study will also code for the presence of the following eight issue-specific frames based on the literature review. Issue-specific frames or themes will be coded one per article as general topics of inquiry.

(1) **School Closure**: This issue-specific frame includes coverage around the closure of colleges and universities and the impact on students, faculty, staff, and surrounding community members.

(2) **Student Experience**: This issue-specific frame includes coverage that examines the impact of COVID-19 on the lived experiences of college and university students.

(3) **College Sports**: This issue-specific frame includes coverage which examines the impact of COVID-19, higher education, and sports. Such as the NCAA, sport-based eligibility or recruitment, tournaments and both real and perceived consequences of truncated sports seasons for higher education.

(4) **Financial Pressure**: This issue-specific frame includes coverage that examines the impact of COVID-19 on the financial health of institutions of higher education and as an industry.

(5) **The transition to Online Modality**: This issue-specific frame includes coverage that examines the experiences and resources available to faculty, staff, and students during the transition to online modality due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

(6) **Standardized testing**: This issue-specific frame includes themes regarding standardized testing as a means to examine the abilities of entering students, changes to the system due to COVID-19 and merits and issues with the system.

(7) **Corruption**: This issue-specific frame includes coverage that emphasizes the public's reaction to the higher education and issues of corruption, such as admission scandals, questionable relationship with corporate or international partners, or misuse of government funds.

(8) **Virtual Graduation**: This issue-specific frame includes coverage that examines the lived experiences of college and university students regarding the transition to a virtual graduation format due to COVID-19.

Coding

The unit of analysis for this study will be each news article with "university" or "college" or "higher education" and "COVID-19" or "coronavirus" in the headline between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020. The code sheet used for the analysis of each article (see Appendix A) was developed with an a priori coding system – one that was developed before the research based on the literature of news framing and the definitions of frames examined. A codebook (see Appendix B) accompanied the code sheet, including explanations, definitions, and examples of the frames for clarity during analysis.

Data Analysis

After completing the coding of the articles, the code sheet data was transferred to an excel spreadsheet prior to conducting statistical analysis through SPSS software. The data analysis includes inferential statistics and descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics, illustrate basic information such as frequency and percentages to the study. Whereas inferential statistics help provide measurable statistics needed to test some of the hypotheses and generalize the study result to larger populations (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). The measures deployed in this study were largely frequency analysis, ordinal or nominal, cross-tabulation, chi-square and a one-sample t-test analysis of the data. These test help to support the validity of the hypotheses and the statistical significance of the researcher's findings.

By conducting a content analysis, this research study provides support to the literature of quantitative data analysis of news framing of higher education and of framing generally. Scholars Matthes (2009) and Hogan (2013) specifically call out the need for additional

quantitative content analysis of framing where hypotheses are tested. This dissertation proposes to provide additional support to that end.

Chapter 4: Results

This research study content analyzed the frames used by legacy news organizations in their coverage of higher education during the COVID-19 crisis. The population sample consisted of all articles with "higher education, college, university, or universities" and "COVID-19, COVID, or coronavirus" in the heading and/or lead paragraphs. The timeframe of analysis was based on Graber's theory of media framing in stages of crisis, utilizing a 90-day period between March 5, 2020, and June 3, 2020, when campuses closed and transitioned to a purely online modality due to COVID-19. The search bore a total sample size of 169 articles, 75 articles from *The New York Times*, 50 articles from *The Wall Street Journal,* and 44 articles from *USA Today*. All articles were coded for the presence of generic frames (conflict, attribution of responsibility, morality, economic consequences, and human interest), generic frame saturation (frequency by paragraph), issue-specific frames or themes, source attribution. Several additional aspects discussed below were also analyzed. The research questions asked were as follows:

RQ1: Between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020, how frequent and how much coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic and higher education was conducted by *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*?

RQ2: Between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020, which sources were used most frequently in coverage of higher education and the COVID-19 pandemic by *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*?

RQ3: Between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020, did legacy publications *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* use generic framing mechanisms (conflict, human interest, morality, attribution of responsibility, economic consequences) in their coverage of higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ4: Will additional issue-specific frames or themes emerge in the analysis of coverage of higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020 by legacy news publications, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*?

The research questions above and supporting hypotheses will be addressed after a general overview of data is explored.

News Story Type

Each article was identified by story type (hard news, soft news, and editorial). Of the articles examined, 63.91% (n=108) of articles were identified as hard news, 18.93% (n=32) were identified as soft news, and 17.16% were identified as editorial. *The New York Times* coverage was 66.67% hard news (n=75), 14.67% soft news (n=11) and 18.66% editorial (n=14). *The Wall Street Journal* coverage was 72% hard news (n=36), 20% soft news (n=10), and 8% editorial (n=4). *USA Today* coverage was 50% hard news (n=22), 25% soft news (n=11), and 25% editorial (n=11). Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of news types in the total sample. Figure 2 compares the distribution of news types in the total sample and per news organization.

Figure 1: News Story Type

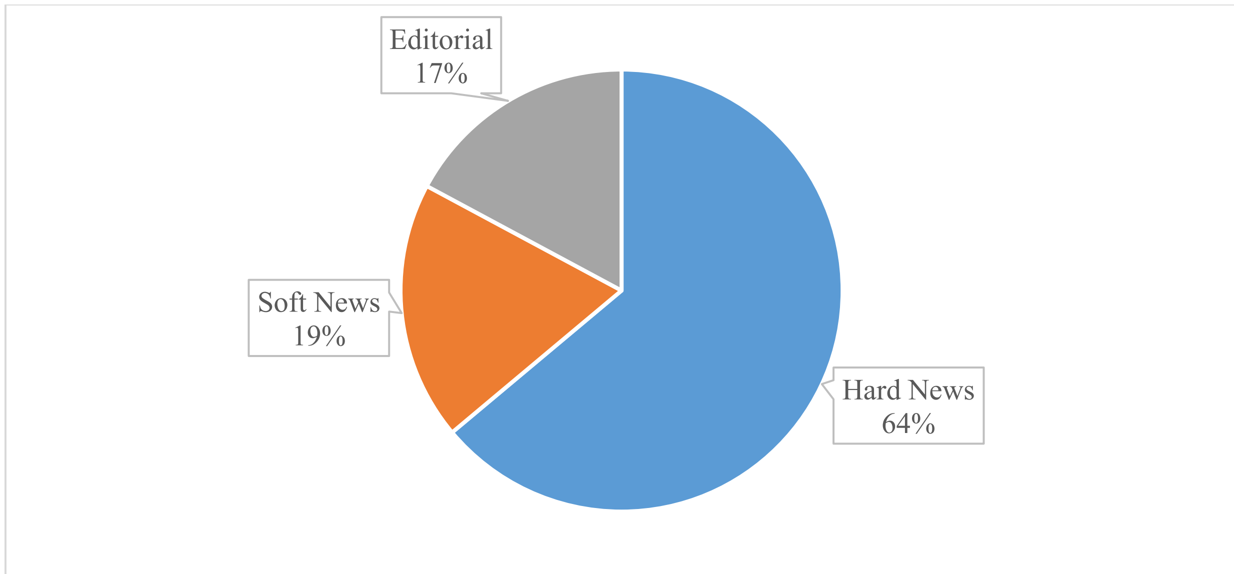
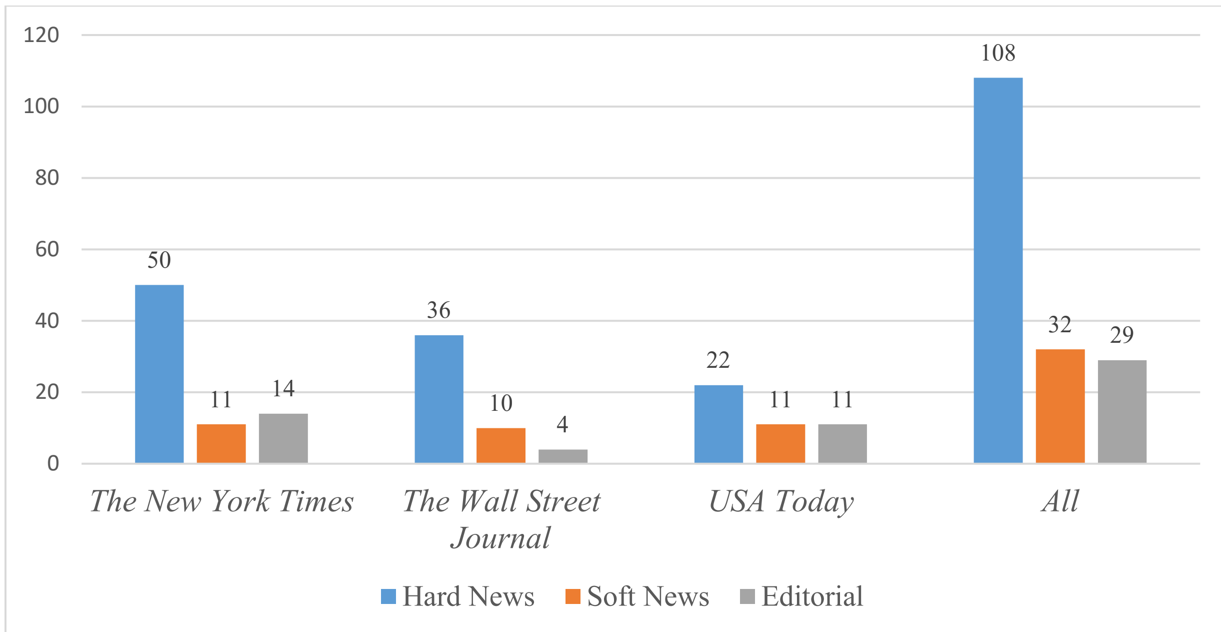


Figure 2: Comparison of News Story Type by publication and the total sample

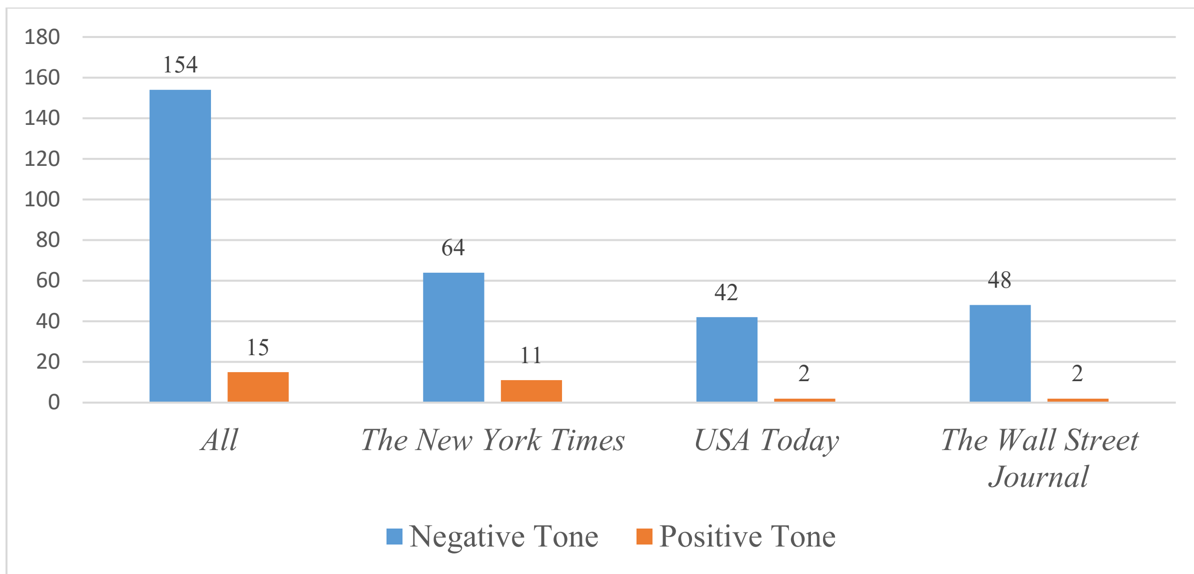


Tone or Valence

The tone or valence of each article was identified based on the overall impression of the article and recorded as either neutral, positive, or negative. The largest percentage of articles, 91% were identified as negative (n=154). Next in frequency were positive articles at 9% (n=15),

and no (n=0) articles were identified as neutral. *The New York Times* coverage was 85% (n=64) negative and 15% (n=11) positive. Coverage from *USA Today* was 95% (n=42) negative and 5% (n=2) positive. *The Wall Street Journal* coverage was 96% (n=48) negative and 4% (n=2) positive. A one sample t-test was conducted to determine the extent to which these results differed from the expected mean of 1.0, or neutral. The results indicated an extremely statistically significant difference favoring a negative tone, one-sample t(168)=20.5791, p=0.00025. The negative news coverage outweighed positive and neutral coverage to a significant degree and contributed to an impression of pessimism and negativity surrounding higher education. Figure 3 compares the frequency of negative and positive tone at each legacy news organization and, as a total, neutral instances were zero were omitted from the table.

Figure 3: Comparison of the overall tone between legacy news organizations and as a total

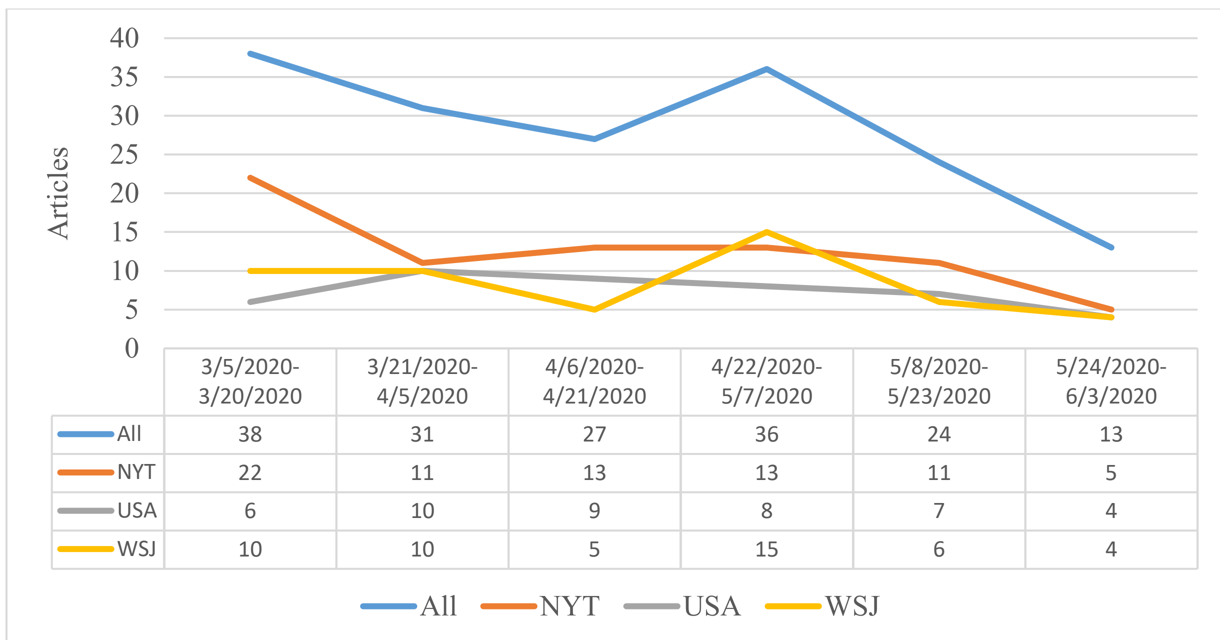


Timing

The period of analysis was a 90-day window, between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020. The publication date of each article was recorded and grouped into 15-day segments to analyze trends in coverage between publications. *The New York Times* published the highest number of

articles (n=22) in the first period of analysis from March 5, 2020 through March 20, 2020. *The Wall Street Journal* published the highest number of articles (n=15) during the fourth period of analysis from April 22, 2020 to May 7, 2020. *USA Today* published the highest number of articles (n=10) during the second period of analysis from March 21, 2020 to April 5, 2020. Cumulatively all publications had the most coverage (n= 38) during the first period of analysis from March 5, 2020 through March 20, 2020. Figure 4 compares the number of articles published by three legacy news organizations under review and in total during each 15-day window.

Figure 4: Timing of articles published by each legacy news organization during the 90-day review period



	3/5/2020-3/20/2020	3/21/2020-4/5/2020	4/6/2020-4/21/2020	4/22/2020-5/7/2020	5/8/2020-5/23/2020	5/24/2020-6/3/2020
All	38	31	27	36	24	13
NYT	22	11	13	13	11	5
USA	6	10	9	8	7	4
WSJ	10	10	5	15	6	4

Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis predicted that the lengths and frequency of stories covering COVID-19 and institutions of higher education, between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020, from most coverage to least would be as follows: *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *The Wall Street Journal.* Given the magnitude of available stories and limited space, the choices made by journalist of how much, and how often, to cover a story, has direct impact on societal views of the importance of the topic (Racovia, 2013; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

Word Count

The word count for each article was coded and analyzed. The word count range for all articles (n=169) was between 304-6,250 words per article with an average of 1,201.02 words per article. The word count per article was grouped in SPSS to illustrate the frequency and percentage of word counts. The analysis found that the highest distribution of word count (21.89%) was between 1001-1500 words per article (n=37), the next highest percentage (20.12%) was between 751-1000 words per article (n=34). Figure 5 compares the word count frequency and percentage.

Figure 5: Word Count of All Articles

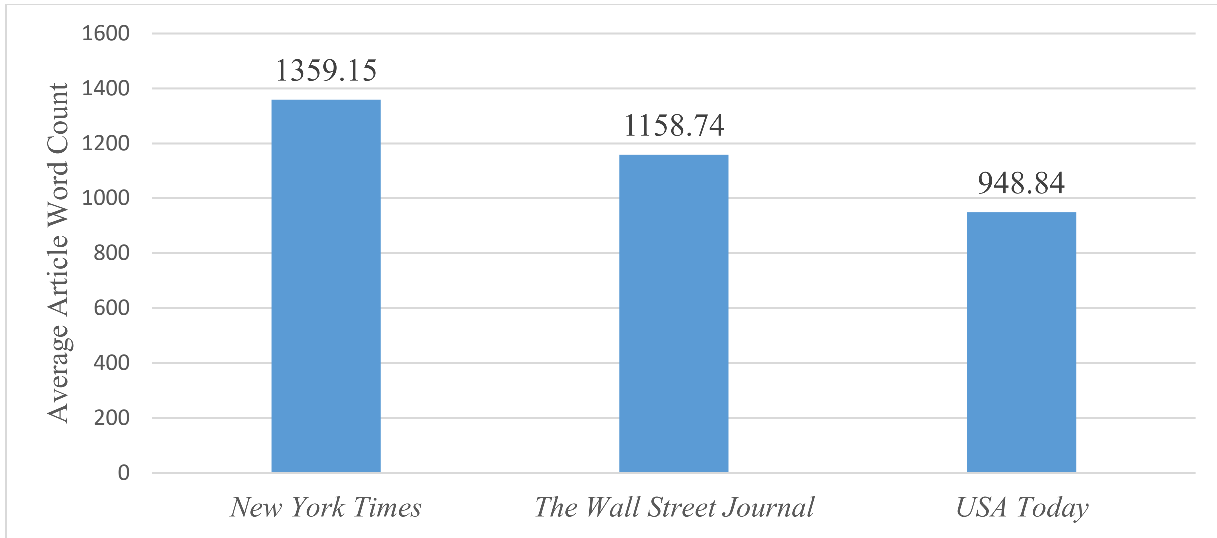
	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1-250	0	0%	0%t
251-200	7	4.14%	4.14%
501-750	23	13.61%	17.75%
751-1000	34	20.12%	37.87%
1001-1250	37	21.89%	59.76%
1251-1500	32	18.93%	78.69%
1501-1750	21	12.43%	91.12%
1751-2000	6	3.55%	94.67%
2001 +	9	5.33%	100%
Total	169	100.00%	

The New York Times had an average of 1,359.15 words per article with a word count range of 448-6,250 (n=75); *The Wall Street Journal* had an average of 1,185.74 words per article with a word count range of 365-3410 (n=50); and *USA Today* had an average of 948.84 words per article with a word count range of 304-1675 (n=44).

The New York Times articles were 17.3% (n=1359.15) longer than *The Wall Street Journal,* (n=1158.74) articles and 43.24% longer than *USA Today* (n=948.84) articles. *The Wall Street Journal* articles were 22.12% (n=1158.74) longer than *USA Today* (n=948.84) articles.

Figure 6 compares the word count frequency average between the three legacy news organizations.

Figure 6: Word Count Averages



Number of Paragraphs per Article

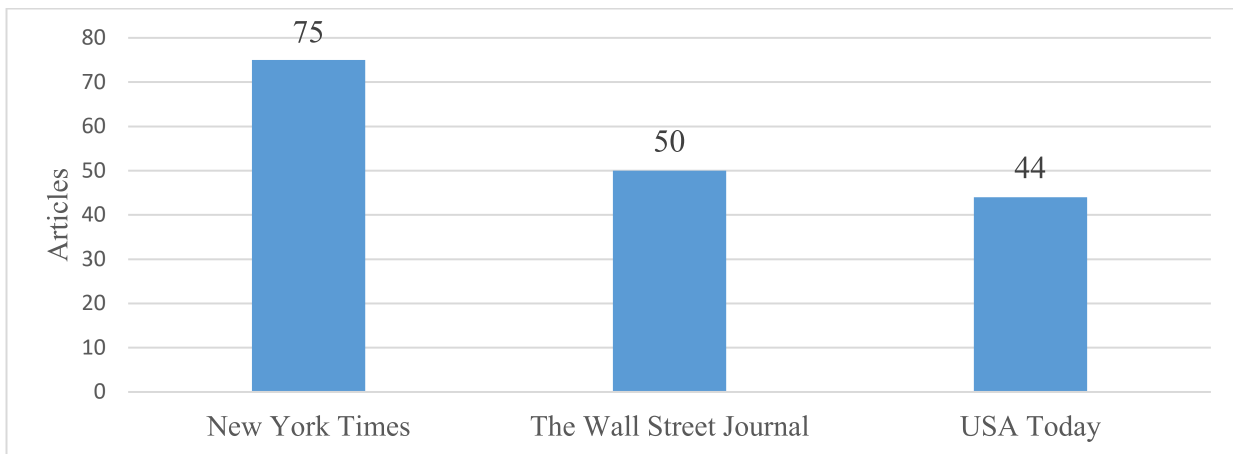
The number of paragraphs per article was recorded and used as a unit of analysis for each generic frame code. The total number of paragraphs analyzed were 4,026, with an average of 23.82 paragraphs per article and a range of 7-89 paragraphs per article. *The New York Times* had an average of 28.84 paragraphs per article (n=2163), *USA Today* had an average of 20.57 paragraphs per article (n=905), and *The Wall Street Journal* had an average of 19.16 paragraphs per article (n=958).

The New York Times had an average of 40.2% more paragraphs (n=2163, or an average of 28.84 paragraphs) per article than *USA Today* (n=905, or an average of 20.57 paragraphs per article) and 50.53% more than *The Wall Street Journal* (n=958 or an average of 19.16 paragraphs per article). *USA Today* had an average of 7.36% more paragraphs (n=905, or an average of 20.57 paragraphs) per article than *The Wall Street Journal* (n=958 or an average of 19.16 paragraphs per article).

Frequency

Between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020, 169 articles were published by *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal,* and *USA Today* that addressed COVID-19 and higher education. *The New York Times* had the most coverage with 75 articles (n=75); the second most coverage was by *The Wall Street Journal* with 50 articles (n=50), and *USA Today* had the least coverage with 44 articles (n=44) during the period of analysis. Figure 7 compares the number of articles published by the three legacy news organizations.

Figure 7: Number of articles published by each organization



The New York Times published 50% (n=75) more articles than *The Wall Street Journal,* (n=50) and 70% more articles than *USA Today* (n=44). *The Wall Street Journal* published 13.64% (n=50) more articles than *USA Today* (n=44).

In summation, the data partially supports the first hypothesis that predicted the lengths and frequency of stories covering COVID-19 and institutions of higher education between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020, from most coverage to least, would be: *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal.* The hypothesis was correct that *The New York Times* would have the most coverage in article length and frequency of the three publications, however the

hypothesis was incorrect that *USA Today* would have more coverage in length and frequency than *The Wall Street Journal.* While *USA Today* had longer average paragraph lengths than *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Wall Street Journal* had both more words per article and more articles published during the period of review than *USA Today.* As the most widely circulated legacy news organization in the United States, the lack of coverage by *USA Today* illustrates a clear void. By failing to give higher education time or space on the page during the COVID-19 crisis, they are denying an essential industry and the students, research, and initiatives they serve a voice.

Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis predicted that *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *The Wall Street Journal* would use sources from outside of higher education personnel most frequently in their coverage of higher education and the COVID-19 pandemic between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020. The sources selected by journalists provide both factual evidence, opinion, and color to legitimize the narrative of a story. The selection of sources is a window into what the journalist finds salient to the story, as well as who they attribute credibility and import to (Chyi et al., 2011). As gatekeepers, the credibility journalists give to sources heavily influences public opinion regarding trustworthiness and authority on an issue.

The analysis identified 679 sources within the 169 articles for an average of four sources per article. If the same source was used in more than one article it was counted for each article they were cited in; for example, Lawrence S. Bacow, President of Harvard, was a source in four (n=4) different articles.

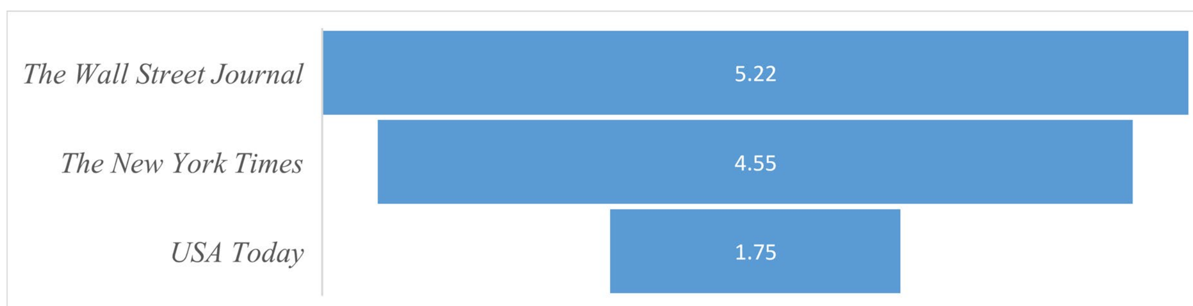
The Wall Street Journal had the highest source (n=261) per article rate in their coverage, with an average of 5.22 sources per article. *The New York Times* enlisted the second most

sources (n=341) per article with an average of 4.55 sources per article. *USA Today* had the fewest sources (n=77), with an average of 1.75 sources per article.

The Wall Street Journal averaged 14.73% more sources (n=5.22) per article than *The New York times* which, on average, had 4.55 sources per article and 198.29% more average sources per article than *USA Today*. *The New York Times* had an average (n=4.55) of 160% more sources per article than *USA Today* (n=1.75).

Figure 8 compares the average number of sources used in articles by each legacy news organization.

Figure 8: Average number of sources per article



The sources identified in order of most to least were current students (n=213, 31%), other (n=129, 19%), university leadership (n=113, 17%), government official (n=73, 11%), university faculty (n=40, 6%), athletic director or coach (n=30, 4%), family member of current student (n=24, 4%), alumni (n=18, 2%), university staff (n=13, 2%), prospective student (n=10, 2%), scientist or medical doctor (9, 1%), and finally, family member of prospective student (n=7, 1%).

Other sources were the second most cited group in the analysis (n=129, 19%) Other sources included commissioners, educational consultants, small business owners, financial aid consultants, testing board members, NCAA members, high school counselors, corporate

executives, union leaders, sport fans, and religious leaders. Early in the source analysis the researcher identified the need to add an additional source group of athletic director or coach to the source analysis. Athletic directors and coaches were the sixth most frequently cited sources in the analysis (n=30, 4%) and were quoted more frequently than family members of current students, alumni, university staff, prospective students, scientists/medical doctors, or family members of prospective students. The literature review suggested that digital media, records, other media, and anonymous sources could be found in the analysis, however there were no instances of these sources found in the analysis and they were therefore removed from the figures below. Figure 9 compares the frequency of sources identified. Figure 10 compares the sources used by each legacy news organization.

Figure 9: Frequency of Identified Sources

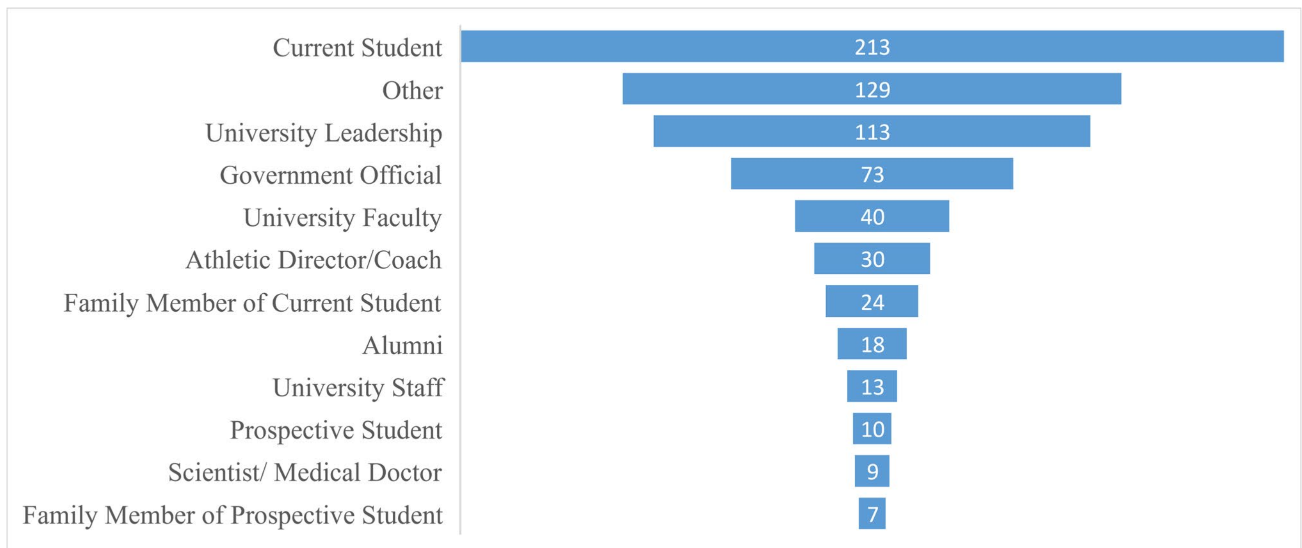
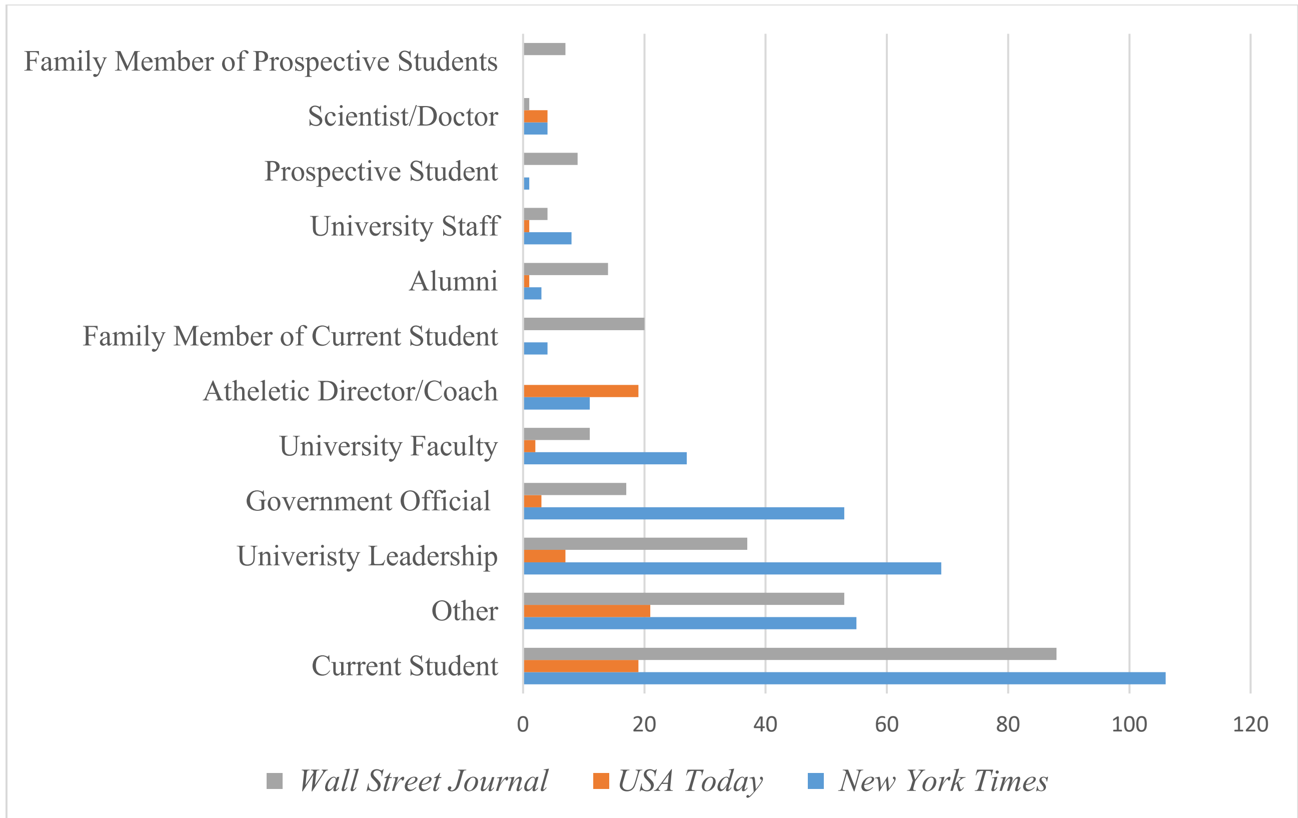


Figure 10: Comparison of Sources by each legacy news organization



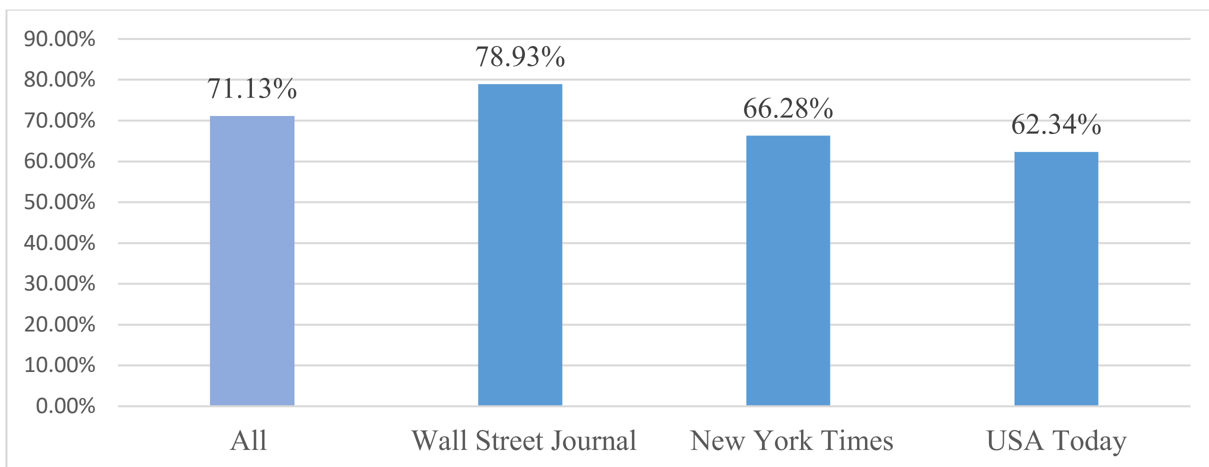
Sources considered outside of higher education personnel include current students, family members of current students, prospective students, family members of prospective students, alumni, government officials, scientists/medical doctors, and other. Of the 679 sources identified within the 169 articles, 483 or 71.13% were from outside of higher education personnel.

Higher education personnel sources included university leadership, athletic directors or coaches, faculty, and university staff. Of the 679 sources within the 169 articles, 196 or 28.87% of the sources were higher education personnel.

The Wall Street Journal utilized sources from outside of higher education personnel most frequently (n=261), with 209 or 78.93% of their sources coming from outside of higher education personnel. Of the 341 sources identified in *The New York Times* coverage, 226 or

66.28% were from outside of higher education personnel. Of the 77 sources identified in the *USA Today* coverage, 48 or 62.34% were from outside of higher education personnel. Figure 11 illustrates the percentage of sources coming from outside of higher education personnel from each legacy news organization.

Figure 11: Percentage of sources coming from outside of higher education personnel



Analysis supports the hypothesis that *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *The Wall Street Journal* would use sources from outside of higher education personnel most frequently in stories covering higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020.

Hypothesis 3

The third hypothesis predicted that generic frames identified in previous research studies, including conflict, attribution of responsibility, morality, economic consequences, and human interest, would also be found in the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic and institutions of higher education between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020. In the content analysis, the researcher identified whether the five dominant themes—attribution of responsibility, conflict, economic consequences, human interest, and morality—were present in each article.

Examples of quotes from articles related to the attribution of responsibility frame include:

> "It was us looking at this and saying we have a responsibility first and foremost to our students and to the coaches and staffs and to the public at large that is the promoting of the public health as we can," Mark Emmert, the N.C.A.A. president, said in an interview on Wednesday. "We're trying to find the right balance between our responsibilities in public health and providing young men and women the opportunity to play in the tournament of their life." *The New York Times*, March 11, 2020

> Is it irresponsible to play the NCAA men's and women's tournaments this year? *USA Today,* March 11, 2020

> "The Governor is concerned by these reports, and members of the administration have already spoken directly with Jerry Falwell Jr.," Alena Yarmosky, press secretary to Mr. Northam, said. "All Virginia colleges and universities have a responsibility to comply with public health directions and protect the safety of their students, faculty, and larger communities. Liberty University is no exception." *The New York Times,* March 24, 2020

> Reopening responsibly is the best way to balance a full university experience and public health. *The Wall Street Journal,* May 5, 2020

Examples of quotes from articles related to the conflict frame include:

> Spring games have been canceled. Practices are tabled for the spring, with the possibility of rolling them back into team schedules during this summer. Recruiting issues that have already arisen will trickle through the next four months, if not longer. *USA Today*, March 20, 2020

> Gov. Ralph Northam of Virginia, Lynchburg city officials and a growing number of Liberty students, parents and employees have urged Mr. Falwell to reverse course, but such pleas have only prompted a stream of often conflicting statements. *The New York Times*, March 29, 2020

> Roy Willey, a lawyer at the Anastopoulo Law Firm in South Carolina, the firm that filed the cases against the University of Miami and Drexel, said the schools weren't providing students with the experience they were promised. *The Wall Street Journal*, April 10, 2020

Examples of quotes from articles related to the economic consequence frame include:

> But the hard fact is that this delivery format is an extraordinarily expensive way of purveying college degrees. Americans' obsession with residential education as the sine qua non of academic excellence is a big part of what makes higher education roughly twice as costly per student here than it is in European countries. It also categorically excludes those whose life circumstances make them unable to leave their family homes and forgo paid work to attend college. *The New York Times*, March 18, 2020

At this particular school, which already relies on millions of dollars in university subsidies to operate its athletic department, the loss of revenue due to COVID-19 cancellations is projected to be about $1.5 million - and that doesn't include any potential fallout from an altered football season. *USA Today*, March 30, 2020

Oberlin, like many other schools, was already struggling financially before the pandemic. It was considering laying off 108 staff members before the shutdown due to budget constraints. Now it's missing substantial revenue from housing and dining. Another semester of this could do irreparable damage. Layoffs could affect campus program coordinators and residential education staff, and even extend to faculty, as fewer students are willing to pay tuition for a semester online, and virtual class sizes increase. *The Wall Street Journal*, May 5, 2020

Examples of quotes from articles related to the human-interest frame include:

She thinks about how this whole episode will seem when she looks back on it some day. “I feel sometimes sad, sometimes angry, sometimes laughing,” she said. “But it also feels monumental as well.” *The New York Times,* March 6, 2020

"For all college basketball seniors who were ready to play in the NCAA tournament, this one hits hard," said Yale senior guard Eric Monroe, another to never play in March Madness. Yale was granted an automatic bid to the NCAA tournament when the Ivy League became the first conference to cancel its tournament because of concerns about coronavirus. "It's just sad. I'm definitely a nostalgic person. My childhood was obsessed with the NCAA tournament, filling out brackets and watching all the games. It was my favorite time of year. I felt so close to living out that dream by playing in a March Madness game. At the end of the day though, basketball is just a game. People are dying. It's easy to get wrapped up in emotion but knowing there's a bigger picture out there has helped me cope." *USA Today*, March 16, 2020

This is certainly not how I pictured graduating from college. . . and it's true, we've lost our final moments on campus. We've lost our senior weeks. We've lost the streamers and the confetti and Hilton. *The Wall Street Journal*, May 30, 2020

Examples of quotes from articles related to the morality frame include:

"We felt it would be unfair and not equitable," he said, "to try to proceed under the conditions of this global crisis with business as usual." *The New York Times*, March 30, 2020

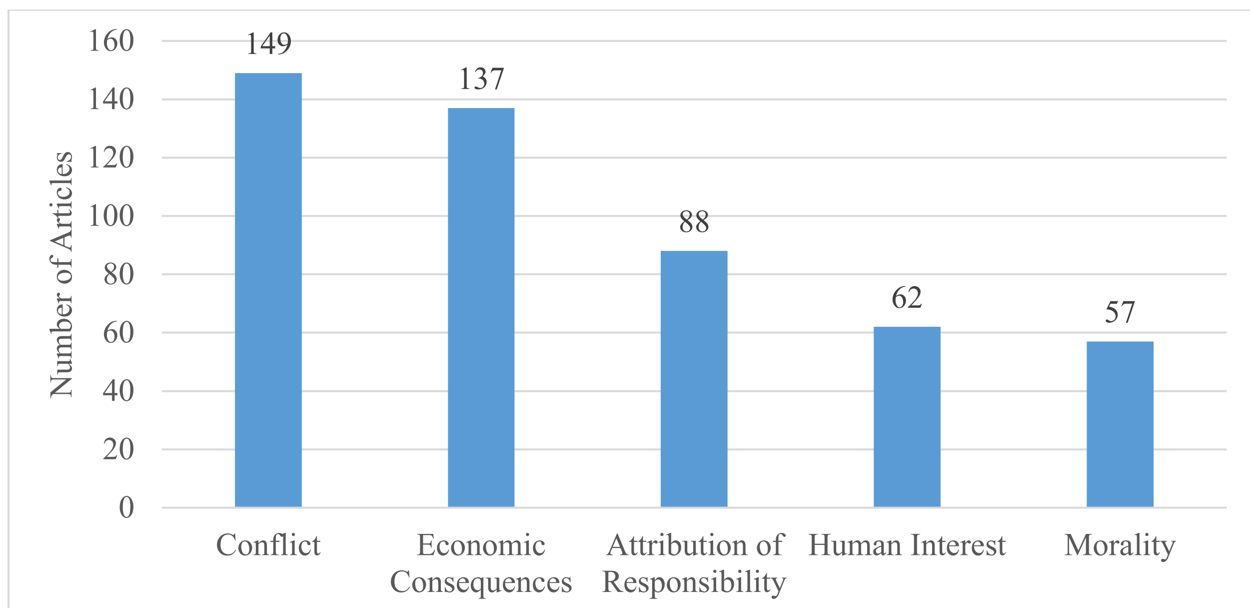
Pollard was careful to note that he didn't want to sound preachy or judge what other programs are doing, but he knows his colleagues across the country are worried about what the future looks like and what unknown factors might complicate things even further. *USA Today*, April 6, 2020

Since studying will be harder for students who have unstable home lives or have to worry about health, money and internet access than for those who don't, proponents of the

policy argue that it would be unfair to the disadvantaged to grade everyone the standard way. These universities are coming from the right place, but there are disparities between students even in normal times, and the response isn't to insist that all distinction between an A-plus and a C-minus must be erased in the name of equity. *The Wall Street Journal*, April 28, 2020

The results of the analysis revealed that at least one of the frames were found in 100 percent of the articles (n=169). In order of highest to lowest frequency, conflict was found in 88.12% (n=149) of the articles, economic consequences frame was found in 81.06% (n=137) of the articles, attribution of responsibility was found in 52.07% (n=88) of the articles, human interest was found in 36.68% (n=62) of the articles, and morality was found in 33.77% (n=57) of the articles. Human interest and morality were not found in the majority of the articles. Figure 12 compares the frequency of each of these frames across all articles (n=169).

Figure 12: Frequency of Generic Frames



The researcher also coded the saturation of frames by coding each paragraph within each article to determine the frequency and salience of frames throughout articles, for a total of 4,026

instances (n=4,026). The results of analysis show that economic consequences frames were found in 38.35% (n=1,544) of the coded paragraphs, conflict frames were found in 38.15% (n=1,536) of the coded paragraphs, attribution of responsibility frames were found in 9.24% (n=372) of the coded paragraphs, human interest frames were found in 8.12% (n=327) of the coded paragraphs, and morality frames were found in 6.14% (n=247) of the coded paragraphs. Figure 13 compares the frequency of each of these frames. Figure 14 shows the percentage of saturation of each frame in relation to the whole (n=4,026).

Figure 13: Frequency of Generic Frame Saturation

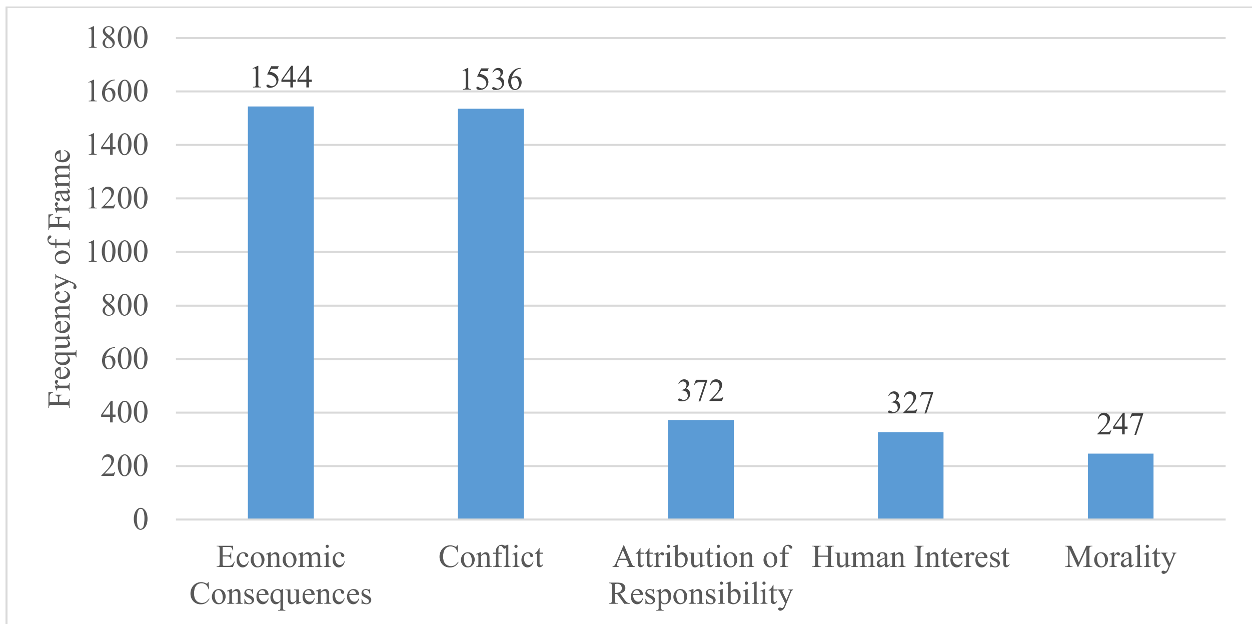


Figure 14: Comparison of frame saturation by Legacy News Organization

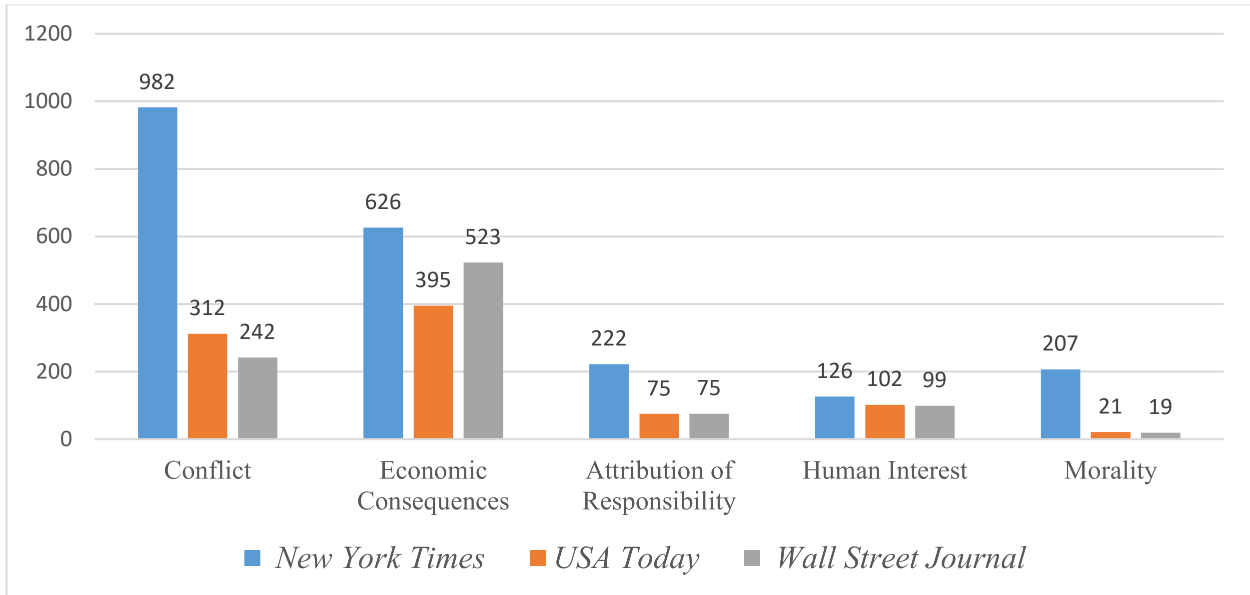
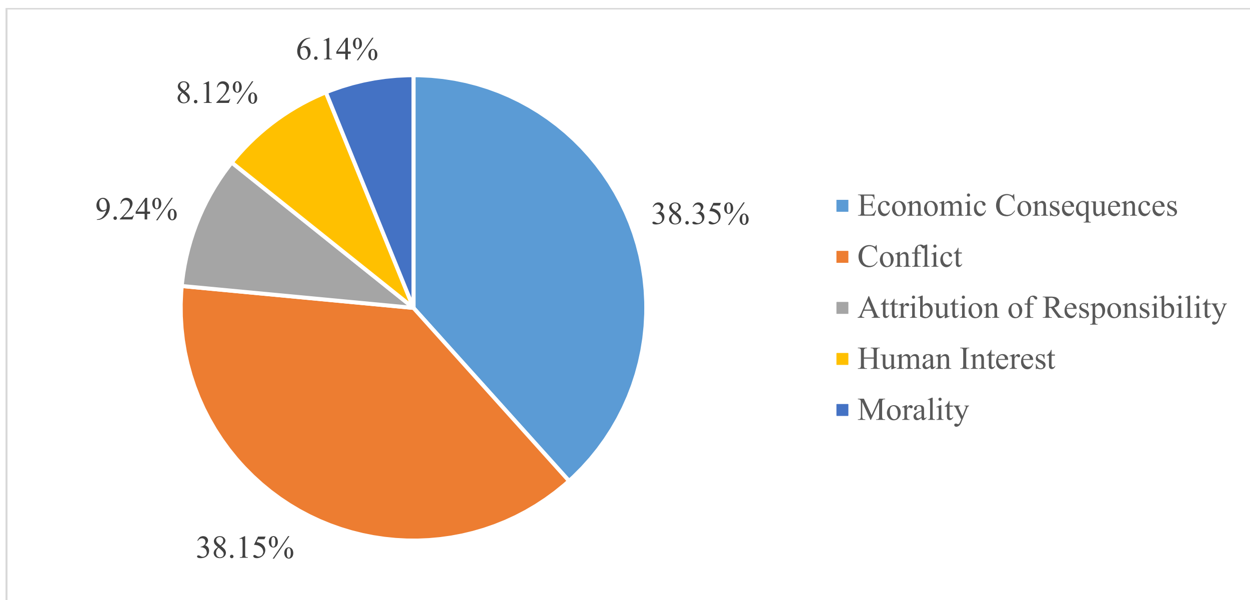


Figure 15: Frame saturation in relation to the whole by percentage



In summation, of the frames analyzed, the findings support the hypothesis that generic frames identified in previous research studies, including conflict, attribution of responsibility, morality, economic consequences, and human interest, would also be found in the coverage of

the COVID-19 pandemic and institutions of higher education between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020. Conflict and economic consequences were the most dominant frames in both frequency and saturation. Through frequency analysis, conflict frame was the most dominant among articles and was found in 88.12% (n=149) of the articles while economic consequences frame was the second most dominant in frequency and was found in 81.06% (n=137) of the articles. The remaining frames were found in descending order of frequency: attribution of responsibility (52.07%, n=88), human interest (36.68%, n=62), and morality (33.77%, n= 57).

Regarding saturation of frames, the economic consequence frame was found to be more dominant and was present in 38.35% (n=1,544) of the coded paragraphs, while conflict frames were found in 38.15% (n=1,536) of the coded paragraphs. The remaining frames were found in descending order of saturation: attribution of responsibility (9.24%, n=372), human interest (8.12%, n=327), and morality (6.14%, n= 247).

A chi-square test of significance was performed to examine the relationship between frame saturation and legacy news organization (*The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and USA Today*). The relationship between these variables was significant: X^2 (8, N=4026) = 323.4219, p=.00001. The result is significant at $p < .05$. The results suggest a strong difference among the frame usage depending on the legacy news organization (*The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and USA Today*).

Hypothesis 4

The fourth hypothesis envisaged the emergence of clear issue-specific frames or themes during the analysis. De Vrees (1991, 2001) expanded on the study of generic frames to include analysis of frames specific to categories of stories. The themes or issue-specific frames employed by journalists set the agenda for both discourse and import for the general public and are key to

our analysis of higher education coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic by *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *The Wall Street Journal.*

During the framing analysis the researcher noted dominant themes emerging within the sample of articles (n=169), with each article having one clearly articulated point of view of issue-specific frame. Eight themes surfaced and were supported by the literature review, including school closure, student experience, college sports, financial pressure, the transition to online modality, standardized testing, corruption, and virtual graduation.

The following list is a sampling of article titles under each issue-specific frame.

School Closure: Coronavirus Prompts Colleges to Send Students Home; Harvard, Berkeley, Ohio State and others rush to move classes online; some tell students not to return after spring break (*The Wall Street Journal*, March 10, 2020)

Student Experience: My World Is Shattering': Foreign Students Stranded by Coronavirus (*The New York Times*, April 26, 2020)

College Sports: College football's coronavirus game plan (*USA Today*, March 20, 2020)

Financial Pressure: Public Colleges Lose State Funding, Effective Immediately; Coronavirus prompts states to cut budgets of their universities; Montclair State University loses about 25% of its annual appropriation (*The Wall Street Journal*, April 23, 2020)

The transition to Online Modality; Online Learning Should Return to a Supporting Role (*The New York Times*, April 10, 2020)

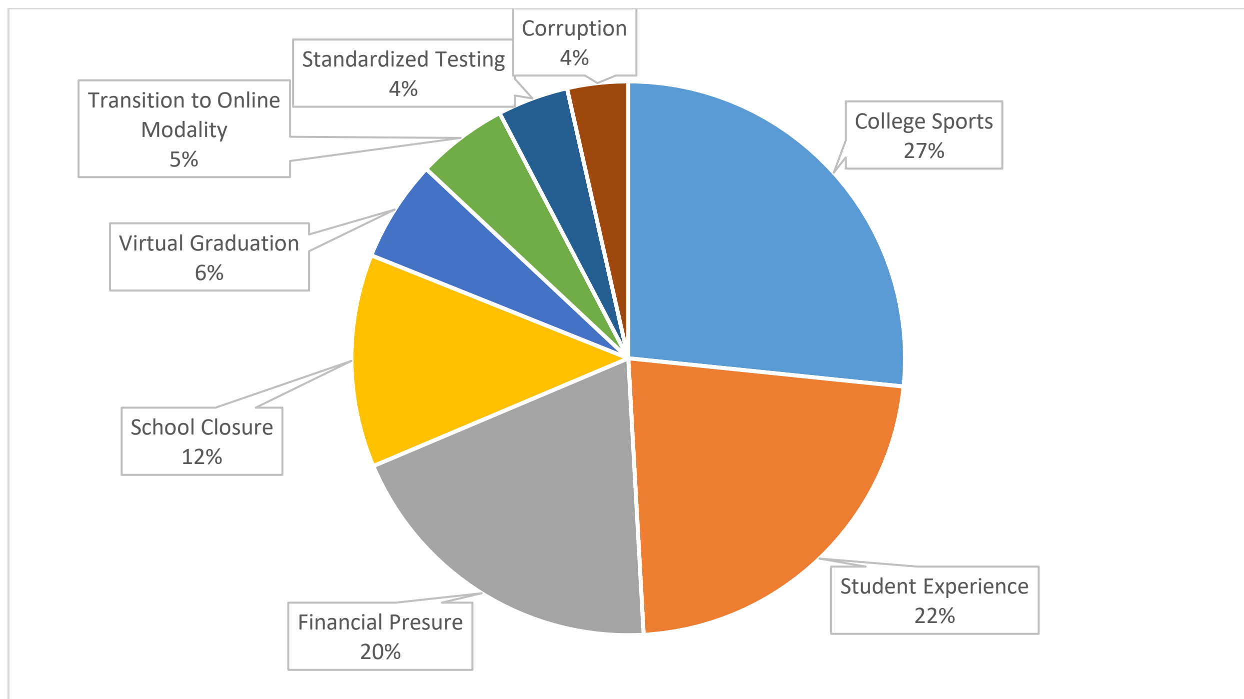
Standardized testing: Cornell to Drop SAT and ACT for Admissions Next Year Due to Coronavirus; First Ivy League school to suspend standardized-test requirement says move is temporary (*The Wall Street Journal*, April 20, 2020)

Corruption: After Criticism, Harvard Won't Take Federal Aid (*The New York Times*, April 23, 2020)

Virtual Graduation: What it's like to graduate online (*USA Today*, May 27, 2020)

A frequency analysis of the dominant issue-specific frames or themes, in order of most to least prevalent among articles reviewed (n=169), were 27% college sports (n=45), 22% student experience (n=38), 20% financial pressure (n=33), 12% school closure (n=21), 6% virtual graduation (n=10), 5% the transition to online modality (n=9), 4% standardized testing (n=7), and 4% corruption (n=6). Figure 16 illustrates the dominant themes by percentage.

Figure 16: Overall Issue-Specific Frames or Themes



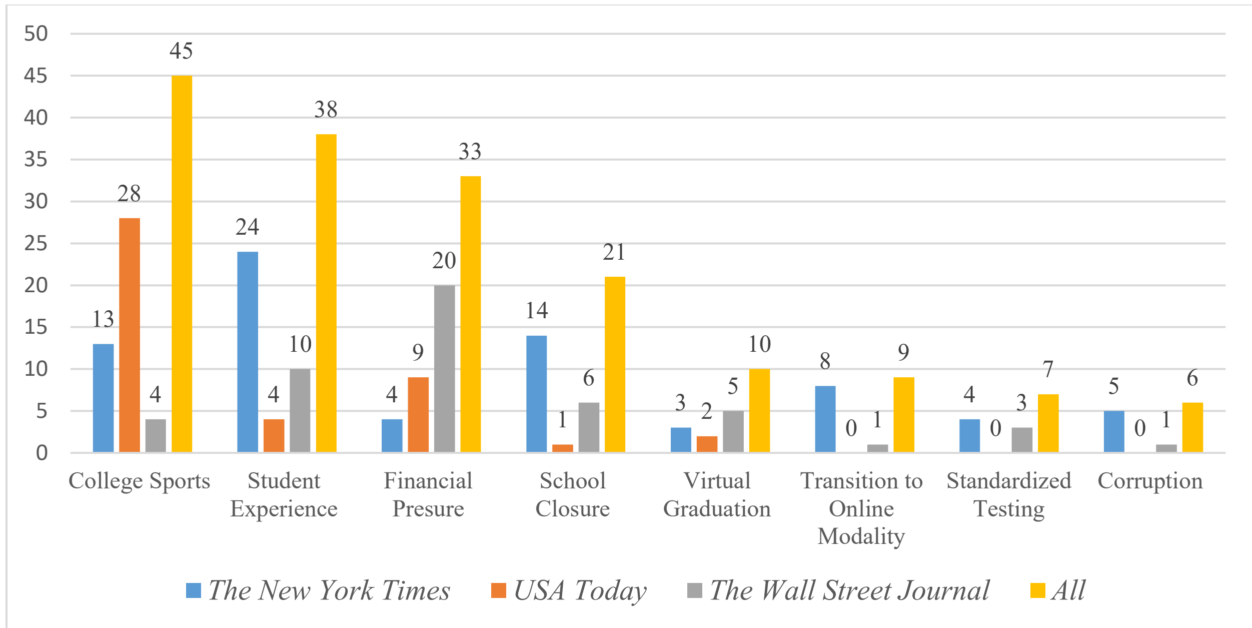
Dominant issue-specific frames or themes varied between news organizations. Dominant themes, in order of most to least prevalent in *The New York Times* articles (n=75), were 32% student experience (n=24), 19% school closure (n=14), 17% college sports (n=13), 11% percent the transition to online modality (n=8), 7% corruption (n=5), 5% standardized testing (n=4), 5% financial pressure (n=4), and 4% virtual graduation (n=3).

Dominant issue-specific frames or themes, in order of most to least prevalent in *The Wall Street Journal* articles (n=50), were 40% financial pressure (n=20), 20% student experience (n=10), 12% school closure (n=6), 10% virtual graduation (n=5), 8% college sports (n=4), 6% standardized testing (n=3), 2% transition to online modality (n=1), and 2% corruption (n=2).

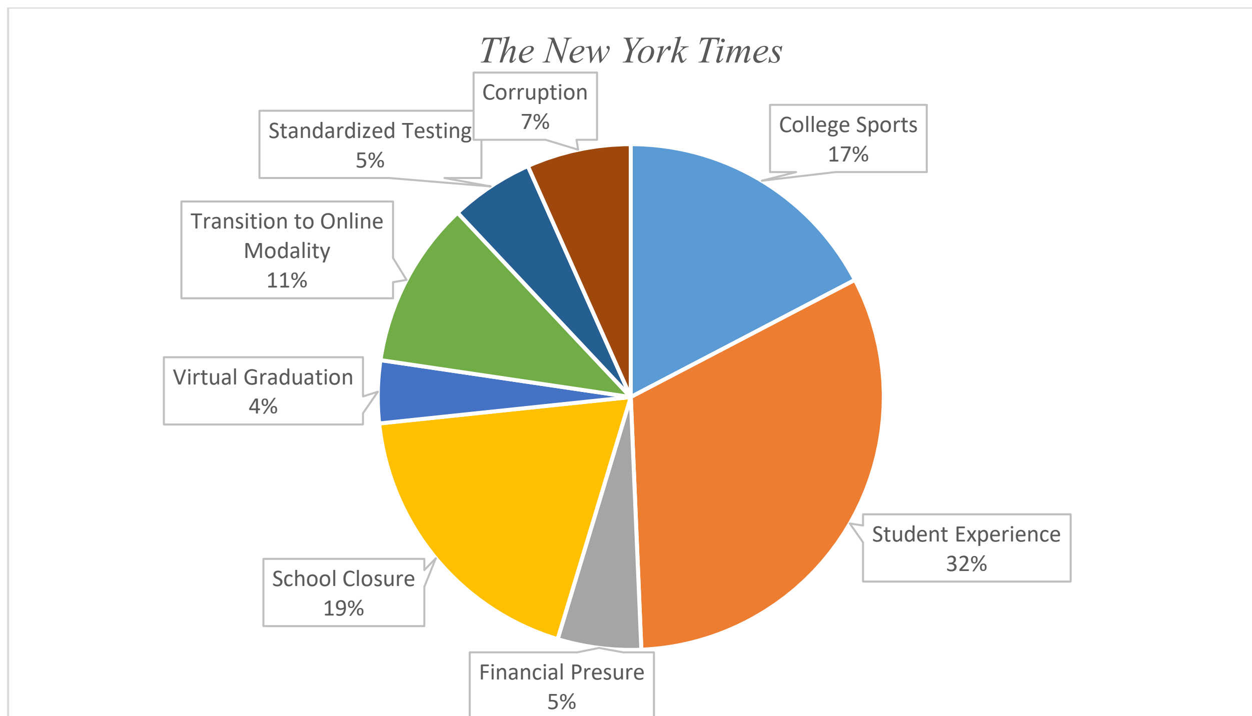
Dominant issue-specific frames or themes in order of most to least prevalent in *USA Today* articles (n=44) were 64% college sports (n=28), 20% financial pressure (n=9), 9% student experience (n=4), 5% virtual graduation (n=2), and 2% school closures (n=1). Transition to online modality, standardized testing, and corruption themes were not found within the *USA Today* articles.

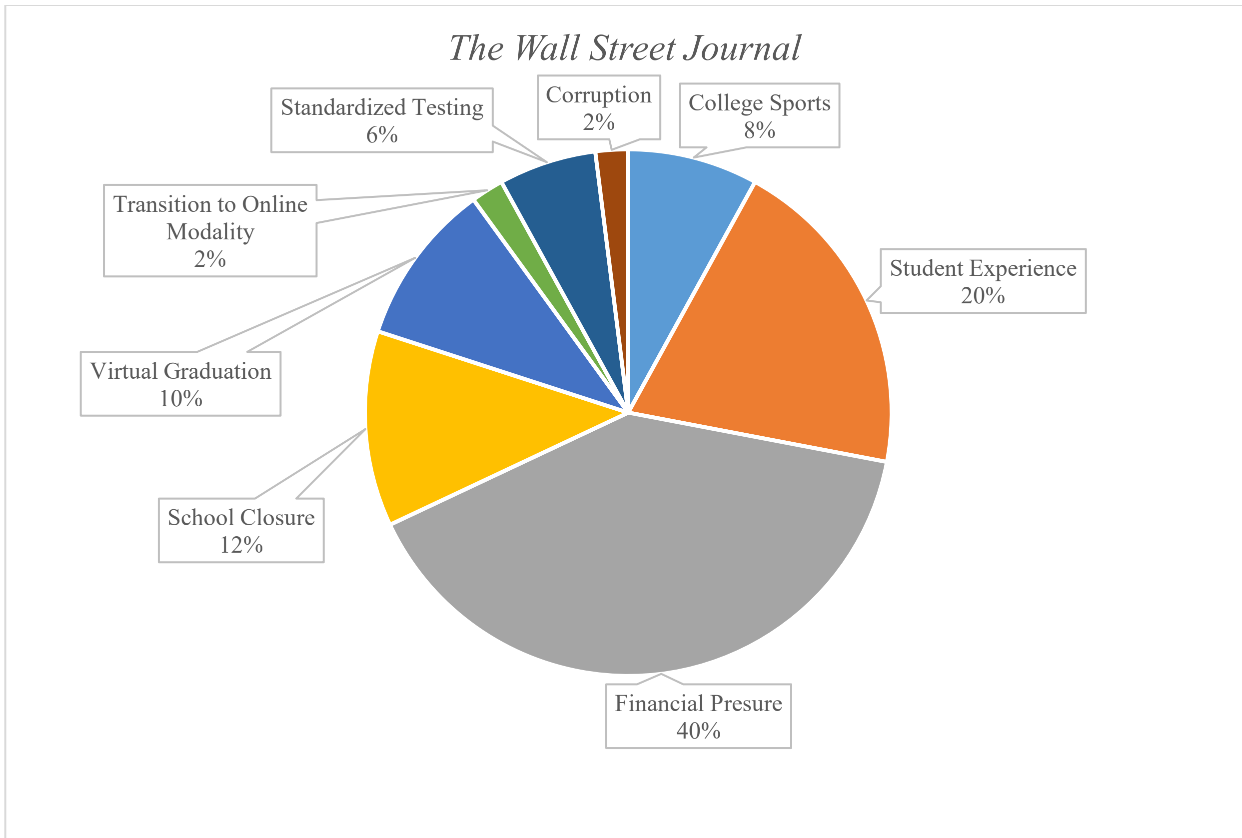
Figure 17 compares the dominant issue-specific frames or themes in *The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, USA Today* and overall. Figures 18, 19, and 20 show the percentages of coverage related to each dominant issue-specific frames or themes by legacy news organizations.

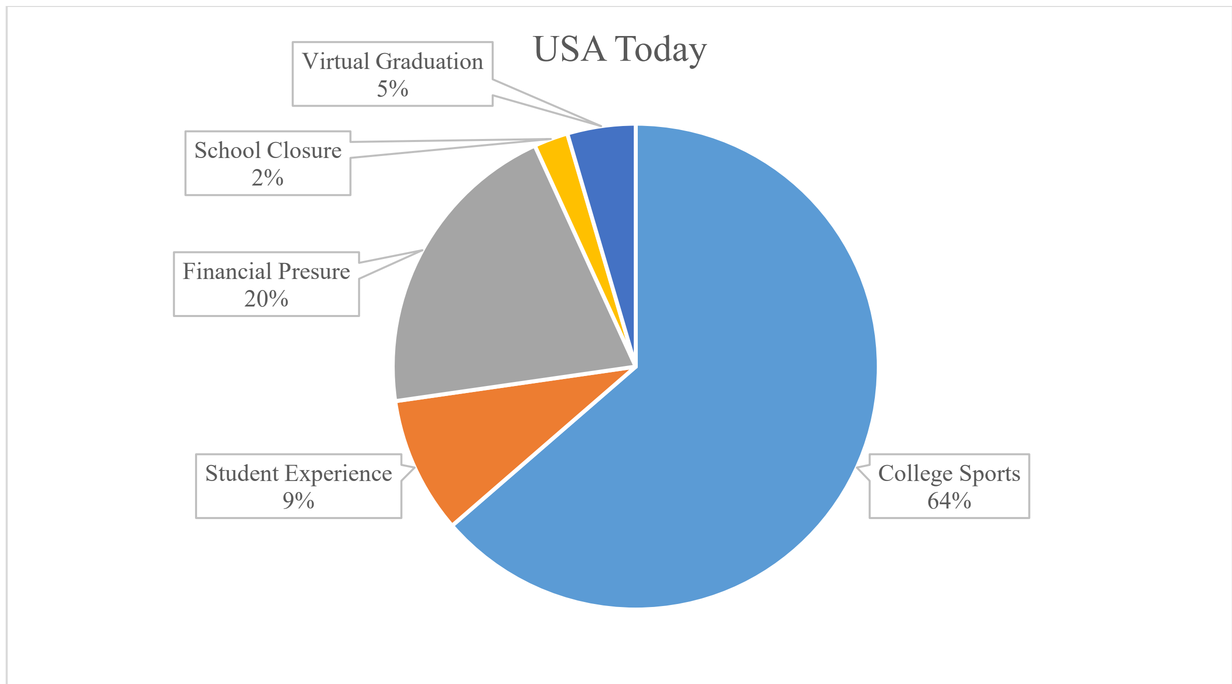
Figure 17: Comparison of Dominant issue-specific frames or themes



Figures 18, 19 and 20: Percentage of Dominant Theme Coverage by legacy news organization.




The Wall Street Journal
Standardized Testing 6%
Corruption 2%
College Sports 8%
Transition to Online Modality 2%
Student Experience 20%
Virtual Graduation 10%
School Closure 12%
Financial Presure 40%


USA Today
Virtual Graduation 5%
School Closure 2%
Financial Presure 20%
Student Experience 9%
College Sports 64%

In summation, the findings support the fourth hypothesis that issue-specific frames identified in the literature review, including school closure, student experience, college sports, financial pressure, the transition to online modality, standardized testing, corruption, and virtual graduation would also be found in the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic and institutions of higher education between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020. Articles aligned with issue-specific frames or themes, in 100% (n=169) of the instances under review. Issue-specific frames in order of most to least prevalent among articles reviewed (n=169) were 27% college sports (n=45), 22% student experience (n=38), 20% financial pressure (n=33), 12% school closure (n=21), 6% virtual graduation (n=10), 5% the transition to online modality (n=9), 4% standardized testing (n=7), and 4% corruption (n=6).

Summary of Findings

Based on Graber's theory of media framing (Graber, 1980), the analysis covered a 90-day period when the public would be most tied to legacy news coverage to draw conclusions about the handling of COVID-19 by institutions of higher education. The findings partially supported the first hypothesis that the lengths and frequency of stories from most coverage to least would be *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and lastly, *The Wall Street Journal.* While *The New York Times* had the most coverage in both frequency and length, *The Wall Street Journal* had more coverage than *USA Today,* making the hypothesis only partially true. The findings strongly supported the second hypothesis that *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *The Wall Street Journal* would predominately use sources from outside of higher education personnel most frequently. This analysis identified 679 sources within the 169 articles and 483, or 71.13%, from outside of higher education personnel. By principally citing sources from outside of higher education, journalists essentially deny institutions a voice in their own story.

The third hypothesis that *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *The Wall Street Journal* would utilize generic frames, including conflict, attribution of responsibility, morality, economic consequences, and human interest, during their coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic regarding institutions of higher education was also supported by the analysis. All five generic frames were found in the sample (n=169) with conflict and economic consequences used most frequently. Conflict was found in 88.12% (n=149) of the articles, and economic consequences frame was found in 81.06% (n=137) of the articles. Economic consequences and conflict also had the highest levels of saturation within the articles, with economic consequences frames in 38.35% (n=1,544) of the coded paragraphs and conflict frames in 38.15% (n=1,536) of the coded paragraphs. The coverage by all three legacy news organizations was found to be overwhelmingly negative contributing to an impression of pessimism and negativity surrounding higher education.

Finally, the fourth hypothesis was also supported by the research with additional issue-specific frames or themes found throughout the sample (n=169). The issue-specific frames focused on the following from most to least prevalent: 27% college sports (n=45), 22% student experience (n=38), 20% financial pressure (n=33), 12% school closure (n=21), 6% virtual graduation (n=10), 5% the transition to online modality (n=9), 4% standardized testing (n=7), and 4% corruption (n=6). The issue-specific frames or themes found in the sample closely aligned with the themes foreshadowed in the literature review. This study's analysis of the frequency of coverage, sources, generic, and issue-specific frames used by legacy news organizations during their reportage of higher education during the COVID-19 crisis produced disheartening results to be explored in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This chapter serves to unpack the findings of the analysis, creating context and understanding around the narrative surrounding the crisis event of COVID-19 and higher education and the relationship between news media, the public, and constructivism. This chapter begins with a detailed discussion and review of the research questions, hypotheses, and discoveries made through the analysis. The limitations of the study, opportunities for further research, and examination of the implications of the findings are also revealed. Finally, the conclusion brings clarity to the analysis, findings, and the unique relationship between institutions of higher education, legacy news organizations and their constituencies.

Discussion

Piaget asserts that the truths people interact with are built upon schemas of prior knowledge, allowing learners to assemble wisdom over time (Jonassen, 1991; Mayer, 2004; Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007). Once we graduate from traditional institutions of education, the press become the framers of our public schema. As gatekeepers and producers of our shared history and communal language, which systematically frame reality, the press has an incredible social responsibility (Berger & Luckmann, 1979; Poerksen, 2011). In a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the public seek out legacy news organizations to define what is important, to name heroes and villains, and to create a narrative tone that, in turn, acts as a foundation for public perception, backing, or censure (Graber, 1980; Fern-Banks, 2011; Coombs, 2015; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Ulmer et al., 2019). The press has a history of either neglecting or disparaging institutions of higher education, especially in times of crisis (Daniel, 2009; Gasman, 2007; Gibbons, 2017; Troy, 2018). This study sought to analyze whether legacy news organizations were friends or foes of academia after the COVID-19 pandemic brought an epic disturbance to the very fabric of higher education, and the world.

The purpose of this study was to answer the following four research questions and determine the validity of the subsequent hypotheses:

RQ1: Between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020, how frequent and how much coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic and higher education was conducted by *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*?

H1: The lengths and frequency of stories covering COVID-19 and institutions of higher education between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020, from most coverage to least will be as follows: *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal.*

RQ2: Between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020, which sources were used most frequently in coverage of higher education and the COVID-19 pandemic by *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*?

H2: *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *The Wall Street Journal* will use sources from outside of higher education personnel most frequently in stories covering higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020.

RQ3: Between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020, did legacy publications *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* use generic framing mechanisms (conflict, human interest, morality, attribution of responsibility, economic) in their coverage of higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic?

H3: *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *The Wall Street Journal* will utilize generic frames, including conflict, attribution of responsibility, morality, economic consequences, and human interest, during their coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic regarding institutions of higher education between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020.

RQ4: Will additional issue-specific frames or themes emerge in the analysis of coverage of higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020, by legacy news publications *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*?

H4: Additional issue-specific frames or themes will emerge in the analysis of coverage of higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic between March 5, 2020 and June 3, 2020 by legacy news publications *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*.

In the following sections, each research question is considered and discussed independently prior to an analysis of broader inferences and deductions. The analysis unpacks framing, agenda-setting, social-constructivism, and the relationship between the print media and institutions of higher education in crisis. This section also includes a petition to higher education professionals, journalists, and communication researchers to garner a richer understanding of the shared responsibility for accurately and responsibly telling the stories that become entrenched in our public narrative through additional research.

Research Question One: The implicit value statement of Character Count

The stories chosen by journalists to be shared and the amount of coverage offered is a value statement with direct influence on public views of a topic, especially for those topics of significance (Racovia, 2013; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). The first research question and hypothesis explored the frequency of coverage by legacy news organizations *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* during the first 90 days of the COVID-19-pandemic-induced closures of institutions of higher education. The public voraciously consumes news coverage in crisis, often demanding more information than news outlets can provide (Graber, 1980; Neal, 1998; Daniel, 2009; Li, 2007). At such a time, when the hunger for information was at its apex, the absence of coverage by all publications tells us

volumes about the lack of value placed on higher education by legacy news organizations. *The New York Times* published approximately 14,000 articles during the period of review (Meyers, 2016), making higher education only 0.54% of their dedicated coverage (n=75). *The Wall Street Journal* published approximately 21,600 articles during the period of review, (Meyers, 2016) making higher education only 0.23% of their dedicated coverage (n=50). Finally, *USA Today* has the highest circulation numbers of the three legacy news organizations and the least coverage (n=44) or 26%.

Higher education largely has been absent from legacy news coverage until recently, and current coverage has only arisen surrounding scandals or issues of accountability, or to exacerbate racist stigmas condemning HBCU's (McLendon & Peterson, 1999; Jones, 2004; Stepp, 2003; Gibbons, 2017). The lack of coverage by all three publications during the period of review points to this trend continuing. Higher education accounts for 2.9% of the gross domestic product (GDP) of the United States (Snyder, 2019; Statista, 2021), yet only garners fractions of a percentage point of journalists' published attention. The minimal coverage creates a void for the public and establishes that higher education is not worthy of their time.

When seeking news about education or schools, print and online newspapers remain the bedrocks of coverage for the public (Gibbons, 2017). The physical nature of print media and limited space provided force strategic decisions about coverage; therefore, the choices of inclusion and exclusion become value statements of merit and importance for the public (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). The differences in word count and paragraph distribution between the three publications illustrates how much of their physical space and intellectual weight they grant to higher education. *The New York Times* articles were 17.3% (n=1359.15) longer than *The Wall Street Journal* (n=1158.74) articles and 43.24% longer

than *USA Today* (n=948.84) articles. *The Wall Street Journal* articles were 22.12% (n=1158.74) longer than *USA Today* (n=948.84) articles. Due to the liberal slant of *The New York Times*, the supported hypothesis that they would dedicate the most space to higher education in crisis is not a surprise. However, *USA Today*, the most widely circulated print newspaper in the United States and a publication considered to have a neutral slant, dedicated 43.24% less space than *The New York Times.* The depth of this difference in coverage should be concerning for higher education administrators.

The United States gives 2.9% of its GDP to higher education (Statista, 2021), and according to a reader's poll, 44% of those surveyed are interested in reading coverage about education (Schroder, 2019). This desire by the public is not translating to the page as revealed in this study's analysis. Public relations professionals and higher education administrators should be advocating to have their stories shared with the public, driving attention, and enriching the depth and breadth of reportage to fuel public demand and establish their voices.

Research Question Two: The Problem of Voice, when outsiders tell your story.

Openness and consistency of information are paramount to maintaining reputational standing with the public in times of crisis (Coombs, 2015; Zaremba, 2010; Ulmer et al., 2019). University leadership and public relations teams should proactively engage with news organizations to respond to concerns and advocate for the reputation of their institutions (Coombs & Holladay, 2010a). Unfortunately, institutions of higher education are famously decentralized, unorganized, and opaque (Pettit, 2020; Tugend, 2019). Institutional ambassadors, such as chancellors, coaches, vice presidents, faculty, and staff carry the enormous responsibility of consistency, openness, and validity, yet are rarely given the tools to do that job well. A key desire of this study was to engender a deeper understanding of who speaks on behalf of

institutions of higher education in crisis. The analysis found that of the 679 sources identified within the 169 articles, 483 or 71.13% were from outside of higher education personnel, supporting the hypothesis. With nearly three out of four sources coming from outside of higher education personnel, higher education had little to no strategic voice in their own story.

The commodification of universities, entrenched in neoliberal pressure to abdicate to the student as consumer discourse (Hager & Peyrefitte, 2018), has fractured the relationship between the academy and its students over the past several decades (Giroux, 2010), with university students transitioning to a more customer centric identity (Maguad, 2007; Brule, 2004; Hager & Peyrefitte, 2018; Saunders, 2011). Students are solicited with the fringe benefits of a bachelor's degree, i.e., multitudes of dining options, luxurious accommodations, social engagements, travel, experiential learning opportunities, and even campus waterparks (Effron & Yu, 2014). Upon enrollment, students become increasingly disengaged from the work of earning an education, and do just enough to get by (Wright, 2008). Once considered a responsibility of citizenship, education has become a commodity, where students have become demanding and autonomous clients (Hager & Peyrefitte, 2018). These same customer-students or current students (n=213, 31%) were the largest source group cited within the analysis. Overwhelmingly, these student-customers, whom journalists called upon to tell the story of higher education, were dissatisfied:

> "Working from home doesn't feel very motivating." (*The Wall Street Journal*, March 14, 2020).

> ''The reality is, there are people who will not pass their classes, there are people who will not finish the semester, who will not graduate on time… the most vulnerable will be drastically harmed.'' (*The New York Times*, March 30, 2020).

> "We've been told we're essential employees, that's why we can't go home early for winter break. For all these different things, (the message is:) 'We want you to work more,' Kellogg said. And suddenly it was like, 'Nope, you're laid off. Sorry. Goodbye. Good luck.'" (*USA Today*, April 9, 2020)

> "It was really hard because we've all been envisioning our graduation since we started college and all of a sudden it was taken away." (*The New York Times*, May 15, 2020).

> "I feel like a lot of experiences have been stolen from me." (*The New York Times*, April 15, 2020).

When given the floor to speak on behalf of their institutions, the powerful transactional relationship further cages academics and their institutions to bend under the sovereignty of their student-customers' demands.

The second largest source group cited in the analysis was *other* (n=129, 19%). Other sources included commissioners, educational consultants, small business owners, financial aid consultants, testing board members, NCAA members, high school counselors, corporate executives, union leaders, sport fans, and religious leaders. This motley crew of opinions carried 19% of the voices within the analysis, many of whom were financially dependent upon institutions of higher education (i.e commissioners, educational consultants, small business owners, financial aid consultants, testing board members, NCAA members) and were panicked by the looming loss of livelihood should the industry collapse. For example,

> “We employ several hundred people, we can’t stay closed forever… We can handle three months. Six months would be a challenge. Nine months would be devastating.” Pastor. (*The New York Times*, March 24, 2020)

> "We couldn't have imagined an economic crisis that took the university out." Small Business Owner. (*The Wall Street Journal*, May 17, 2020)

> "It's a whole new ballgame if we find ourselves not playing football." Commissioner. (*USA Today*, March 27, 2020)

> Sun Belt commissioner Keith Gill stated that "the most pressing issue is to get our schools back open. Plain and simple…the decision to get our campuses to some point of what seems like normal operations is key to whether or not we'll be able to find a path to have our sports as we know them. At the end of the day we are inextricably linked." (*The Wall Street Journal*, April 24, 2020).

This link is an imperative feature of this source group. The second most cited group when higher education was engulfed in crisis were those who desperately needed something from them. Overwhelmingly, that need was to stop being remote and get back on campus, which colored their commentary with pessimistic reflections on the decisions, processes, and motivations of institutions of higher education.

Between current students (n=213, 31%) and other (n=129, 19%), exactly 50% of the total sources have already had a voice. The first dominant source group leveraged by journalists in this analysis were those with whom institutions of higher education are dependent: their students. The second most dominant source group were those who are dependent upon institutions of

higher education. Finally, higher education personnel are invited to the table as the third most cited source group, university leadership (n=113, 17%). The two most often cited members of university leadership were Lawrence S. Bacow, the president of Harvard University and Jerry Falwell Jr., the president of Liberty College. The two leaders came from diametrically opposed positions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bacow is the leader of the oldest and most prestigious university in the United States, Harvard, an institution that paves the way for others within higher education. The citations from Harvard's president began as they became one of the largest dominos to fall toward school closure. Harvard announced that it would be transitioning to virtual instruction on March 10, 2020:

> The decision to move to virtual instruction was not made lightly…Despite our best efforts to bring the university's resources to bear on this virus, we are still faced with uncertainty — and the considerable unease brought on by uncertainty…It will take time for researchers, a good many of them who are our colleagues, to understand enough about this disease to mount a reliable defense against it. (*The New York Times*, March 10, 2020)

A few days later, Harvard University took things a step further by instructing all undergraduate students to move out of their dormitories, becoming one of the first institutions to cancel in person learning for an extended period (Zraick & Garcia, 2020). As the north star for many in the industry, the decision by Harvard to transition to virtual instruction was a call to action for other institutions. Once Harvard announced virtual instruction for the spring quarter, others quickly followed suit (Daniel, 2020; Liguori & Winkler, 2020; Zraick & Garcia, 2020). Between March 6, 2020, and March 12, 2020, nearly two-thirds of four-year institutions in the

United States had announced plans to transition to remote delivery for the remainder of the spring (COVID-19 Dashboard, 2020).

Ironically, Bacow was frequently quoted also because he and his wife contracted COVID-19 in early March. “This virus can lay anyone low, the world needs your courage, creativity and intelligence to beat this virus” (*New York Times*, March 24, 2020). After Bacow announced that he and his wife had COVID-19, that footnote would be added to all future mentions of him over the 90-day period under review. Finally, Bacow became entrenched in a politically fueled corruption claim by former President Trump after the university was allocated $8.6 million in relief funds from a Congress-developed coronavirus stimulus package. Although Harvard did not request or accept the aid, they came under a firestorm of criticism. Bacow admitted that Harvard, the richest university in the country had dark days ahead: "although we entered this crisis in a position of relative financial strength, our resources are already stretched…If we are to preserve our core mission of teaching and scholarship, we face difficult, even painful, decisions in the days ahead" (*The New York Times*, April, 22, 2020).

The second most quoted university leader during the 90-day period of review was Liberty University President, Jerry Falwell Jr. Liberty University, one of the largest schools in Virginia, announced on March 24, 2020 that their campus would be reopening: “We think it’s irresponsible for so many universities to just say ‘closed, you can’t come back,’ push the problem off on other communities and sit there in their ivory towers” (*The New York Times*, March 29, 2020). His decision was at odds with Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam, public health mandates, the desires of many Liberty students, and the town. Treney Tweedy, the mayor, said “The city of Lynchburg is furious. We had a firestorm of our own citizens who said, ‘What’s

going on?'" (*The New York Times*, March 29, 2020). "I'm not allowed to talk to you because I'm an employee here," one student on campus wrote in an email. But, he pleaded, "we need help to go home" (*The New York Times*, March 29, 2020).

The framing of these university leadership voices brought diametrically opposed views on whether to keep schools closed or to reopen them. They establish tensions between government officials and university administrators; they paint dependent communities as desperate and in ruin, with students' health at serious risk, all while insinuating financial hardship and corruption. Communication behaviors in crisis are often more memorable than the details of the events themselves (Zaremba, 2010; Gibbons, 2017). Conflicting information and ambiguity create reputational harm, damaging the relationships with students and community members (Fischer, 2020; The Coronavirus Is Upending, 2020; Ulmer et al., 2019).

Recalling that Parks and Reber (2011) found that "there may be something unique about the nature of higher education that leads internal and external publics to hold stricter standards for institutions of higher learning, especially in the wake of a negative event" (p. 254), yet overwhelmingly the voices in this crisis came from outside of higher education personnel (n=483 or 71.13%). The sources leveraged by journalists set the framing and tone and strongly influence the narrative of the story. In the analysis of higher education and COVID-19, with an examination of the coverage from March 5, 2020, through June 3, 2020, by legacy news organizations *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*, the bulk of the sources came from outside of higher education personnel (n=483 or 71.13%). This supports the hypothesis and serves as a warning to university public relations and communications leadership that the story of higher education is being told predominately by our student-customers and those who are financially dependent upon us. In academia, reputation impacts one's ability to recruit

students, with direct implications for the financial health of the organization including the ability to receive private and public funding. The findings in this section point to the limited control a university has regarding its reputation and voice, leaving universities at the mercy of a feuding collective of external evaluations (Mahoney, 2013; Gibbons, 2017; Coombs & Holladay, 2010a).

Research Question Three: What's in a Frame?

A driving motivation of this study was to determine if the five generic news frames defined by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), conflict, economic consequences, human interest, attribution of responsibility, and morality, would be present in the coverage of higher education during the first 90-days of COVID-19 induced campus closures. Frames are conceptual tools utilized by journalists to convey information to the public (Neuman et al., 1992), creating persistence and emphasis through both exclusion and inclusion and solidifying public interpretation of data overtime (Gitlin, 1980; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Hallahan, 1999; Neuman et al., 1992). As gatekeepers (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014), journalists exert significant influence over *what* the public thinks about, and the frames with which they share their stories influence in turn *how* the public thinks about events. The analysis supported the hypothesis with at least one of the frames found in 100% of the articles (n=169).

The discovery of generic framing in this analysis demonstrates further support of previous research (Daniel, 2009; Gasman, 2007; Gibbons, 2017; Troy, 2018) and illustrates that coverage of higher education follows the same framing conventions as other topic areas. Additional analysis below further enriches our understanding of how these frames were deployed.

Conflict Frame

The conflict frame is the most utilized frame in American news coverage (Neuman et al., 1992), as it captures the attention of readership by highlighting drama and conflict. The findings of this analysis align with previous research and the conflict frame was the most exploited. Given that the world was in a state of crisis at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is concordant that conflict would be the most frequently found frame. Key characteristics of the conflict frame are language centered around tension, loss, performance, judgement, winning, and losing (Valkenburg et al., 2016).

Tension between groups was a reoccurring theme in the conflict coverage of higher education during the COVID-19-induced campus closures. This analysis highlighted tensions between administrators, faculty, and staff. Tensions between students/parents and universities emerged, as described here: "the decision on what is safe and how to proceed has been left to the institutions. Each family must then make its own decision on how to proceed. All this has left parents feeling confused, frustrated and sharply divided" (*The Wall Street Journal*, May 24, 2020). Tensions between preferred-user students and everyone else also emerged: "many critics of standardized tests continue to view them as racially and economically discriminatory in effect" (*The New York Times*, June 3, 2020). Tensions between higher education officials and government organizations, as "the incident highlighted longstanding tensions between Republicans and elite institutions of higher education" (*The Wall Street Journal,* April 30, 2020). Finally, tensions arose between student expectations, what universities were able to produce virtually, and tensions around the seemingly impossible challenges for students on the margins and the inability for educators to support them as they should:

> Undergraduates at places like Harvard, Stanford and M.I.T. will largely have no problem getting online to complete their work. But one recent study found that roughly 20 percent of students have trouble with basic technology needs. Their data plans are capped, their computers break, or their connections fail. Those with technology challenges are disproportionately low-income and students of color, who are also more vulnerable to dropping out. (*The New York Times,* March 13, 2020)

The tension theme was an integral element of the coverage under analysis to the extent that higher education seemed to be at war with all its constituencies and with itself. In discussing the realities and conflicting desires regarding return to campus between stakeholders, one *New York Times* article decreed "The tension is real. Can one of you explain the existential threat?" (June 3, 2020)

Litigious themes are also commonly found in the conflict frame. This played out throughout the analysis as universities transitioned to virtual instruction, leaving some students feeling that they were in breach of contract (Kafka & Gluckman, 2020). "Students at about 200 schools have started petitions demanding the return of money. Attorneys who represent universities say schools refusing to reimburse tuition is rooted in firm legal ground: By continuing to hold classes for credit remotely, they are fulfilling the terms of their contract" (*Wall Street Journal*, April 10, 2020). Or on the other side of the coin, universities that stayed open, such as Liberty University, were being sued for putting students at unnecessary risk (Kafka & Gluckman, 2020).

Language around winning and losing was also a common thread, especially around loss. Students lamented the experiences, financial damage, unfulfilled opportunities, plunging

educational standards, and job prospects they lost due to the actions of their institutions. Universities bemoaned the loss of traditions, "college graduation in the time of Covid-19 is missing the usual inspirational speeches that come with commencement" (*Wall Street Journal*, May 3, 2020). Additional losses include the broken relationships between students, parents, and community members, not to mention the loss of revenue from room and board and lucrative sport deals; "the losses are especially painful in places that have leaned on universities to lure well-paying jobs and industry to communities that might otherwise lack both" (*The Wall Street Journal,* May 17, 2020). The reliance on the conflict frame has brought criticism to the news media for inciting mistrust, cynicism, and fear in the public (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). In the spring of 2020, legacy news organizations could not find any winners in higher education. Rather, the prevailing narrative was one of loss and hopelessness.

As the most dominant theme in American news coverage and corroborated by this analysis where conflict frame was found in 88.12% (n=149) of the articles, higher education leadership needs to appreciate the implications that this dangerous frame could have on its reputation. If the media narrative surrounding higher education continues to be one of conflict, loss, legal action, and tension, it could irreparably damage the image of universities over time and threaten their very existence.

Economic Consequence Frame

Noddings (2013) declared that questions of education are often answered in economic terms. This proclamation is further supported by the positioning of economic consequence as the second most prevalent frame in this analysis. Economic consequence frame casts events, problems, and issues through the scope of financial repercussions (Neuman et al., 1992). Due to the scope of its influence on the public and the argument that the primary goal of a news

organization is economic (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014), this frame boasts formidable weight (An & Gower, 2009). Economic consequence frames were found in 81.06% (n=137) of the articles and had the highest level of saturation within the sample, being found in 38.35% (n=1,544) of the coded paragraphs. Articles that included the economic consequence frame spoke of tuition, room and board, reimbursements, lost revenue, lost income streams (i.e. college sports), recruitment issues, diminished job prospects or job loss, and college towns in ruin without students on campus to drive revenue streams.

Catapulting tuition rates, including a 375% increase since 1978 (Brandon, 2010; Jamrisko, 2012) have exacerbated a consumer-product model in higher education, emboldening many students to believe that by paying tuition they have been promised certain outcomes and opportunities, with or without their own labors (Svensson & Wood, 2007; Brandon, 2010; Wang et al., 2013). A primary recurring economic consequence theme involved tuition, room and board, and the execution of *service agreement elements* by students and their parents. According to *The New York Times*, "Many students feel that going to school online does not give them the rich college experience they were expecting, and there are a growing number of class-action lawsuits demanding tuition refunds" (May 18, 2020). Additionally, *USA Today* states that "Mittleman said she was fine finishing the current quarter without in-person classes, but she hopes the university will reduce tuition if it still offers only online courses in the spring. It just doesn't seem as valuable to me," (March 12, 2020). From the *Wall Street Journal*,

> Virtual classes make me question the value of this steeply priced but watered-down offer. There will be no coffee chats with professors, peers or employers. I signed up for Stanford, not Coursera, but the university refuses to provide a discount. I can't justify paying almost $50,000 this quarter for virtual classes with sound lags, frozen video and

> no guest speakers. The campus is still sunny and the palm trees look Photoshop-perfect, but we question the whole point of sticking around. (March 17, 2020).

The transition to remote modality forced neoliberal tensions between institutions of higher education and student customers to loudly crash to the forefront.

The COVID-19 pandemic seemed positioned to make the decades-long doomsday predictions of school closures a reality (Gardner, 2020; de Barros, 2015; Dorantes & Low, 2016) as Moody's Investor Service (2020) downgraded higher education to a negative status sector. Students were demanding refunds for breach of service contracts, and institutions of higher education wrestled with the very real prospect of having to completely shut down. According to *USA Today*, "More than 55% of respondents said their programs do not have a financial reserve to help them through this situation" (April 3, 2020). Further, *The New York Times* states "Tuition-dependent colleges that are facing diminished fall enrollment, running operating deficits, and have dwindling endowments are at the greatest risk" (April 24, 2020). Sixty-four percent of university presidents indicated that the long-term financial viability of their institution was of utmost concern (American Council on Education, 2020).

When interviewed, students were highly transactional regarding their expectations of their institutions, further establishing that the neoliberal university is the current reality. "It doesn't seem fair to me to pay for an education that I'm not receiving… it seems very opaque right now, what my money is going towards," (*The Wall Street Journal*, March 19, 2020). Or, the student who

> expects to graduate with about $50,000 in debt, and the idea that some of that will be for services he couldn't use was hard to accept. They have it in small print in the contract, so

> I guess there's not much you can do. But it just feels like a kick in the face to the students (*The Wall Street Journal*, March 19, 2020).

The “empowered autonomous student client” (Hager et al., 2018) demands universities and their faculty to bend to their demands. Years of customer satisfaction surveys (such as student evaluations of teaching), inflated grades, and kowtowing to student wishes has created a monster that is haunting universities as they seek grace and empathy from their student-customers in this time of crisis.

As current students petitioned for tuition refunds their institutions could not afford, trepidation about prospective students’ plans further stressed university finances. One in six high school seniors began to change their plans for fall 2020, deciding to take a gap year or attend a community college (Hoover, 2020). “School officials are bracing for high levels of so-called summer melt, with students who had seemed a sure thing just not showing up once classes begin (*The Wall Street Journal*, May 6, 2020). Scarborough (2020) estimated a 20% decline in enrollment in four-year institutions, and 86% of university presidents cited fall and summer enrollment as their top concern (American Council on Education, 2020).

While colleges and universities grappled with their own financial futures, they were also acutely aware of their important place in the marketplace and the impacts—both social and economic—of long-term closures.

> Higher education is also important to the U.S. economy. The sector employs about three million people and as recently as the 2017-18 school year pumped more than $600 billion of spending into the national gross domestic product. Colleges and universities are some of the most stable employers in municipalities and states. Our missions of education and

> research drive innovation, advance technology and support economic development. The spread of education, including college and graduate education, enables upward mobility and is an essential contributor to the upward march of living standards in the United States and around the world. (*The New York Times*, April 27, 2020)

In the wake of COVID-19, 48% of surveyed college students named significant financial setbacks as a deciding factor in attending or staying in college (Active Minds, 2020). Meanwhile the institutions themselves faced significant financial duress and grappled with the financial responsibilities to surrounding communities, student expectations, and the health of all those involved. The economic consequence frame was vital to this coverage and unpacking the evolution of the relationship between students and their institutions from a requirement of active citizenship to demanding customers.

Attribution of Responsibility

The third most dominant frame in the analysis, the attribution of responsibility frame, seeks to hold those responsible for either the causation or resolution of a crisis. Institutions of higher education are often held to a standard of in loco parentis of their student charges, expected to shepherd their educations as well as their mental, social, and physical health. The media have been known to use this frame to manipulate public opinion (Iyengar, 1987; Iyengar, 1991; Iyengar, 1993), making the stakes especially high as institutions are essentially held to a standard of parental responsibility. Attribution of responsibility was found in 52.07% (n=88) of the articles and 9.24% (n=372) of the coded paragraphs. The weight of responsibility was most commonly manifested during the decision-making processes of academic leadership as they balanced the health and safety of their communities with the need to return to campus; according to Virginia Tech's president, Tim Sands, "fall is an opportunity for us to bring the campus back

to life to some degree…We're really hoping and planning that will be an in-person fall, but with caveats—and there are still some major decisions to be made" (*The Wall Street Journal*, May 17, 2020). Or, "packing stadiums during the coronavirus pandemic potentially carries massive risk and runs counter to guidelines from public health officials to socially distance. Even with appropriate distance, there's no way to enforce that attendees stay 6 feet apart" (*The Wall Street Journal*, May 18, 2020). *The New York Times* used the attribution of responsibility frame 196% more frequently (n=222) than *USA Today* (n=75) or the *Wall Street Journal* (n=75), calling to task university leadership for their decision-making and demanding courses of action.

Human Interest and Morality Frames

Human interest (8.12% of the coverage) and morality frames (6.14% of the coverage) were found least frequently in the analysis, which supports findings from prior higher education framing research (Daniel, 2009; Gasman, 2007; Gibbons, 2017; Troy, 2018). Human interest frames attempt to personalize the narrative and create empathy connections between the narrator and reader (Padin, 2005). Emotional responses were most often solicited through the experiences of students; "I feel sometimes sad, sometimes angry, sometimes laughing…But it also feels monumental as well" (*The New York Times,* March 6, 2020). Or, "It's just a sad thing to hear…I had two more months left to really advocate for myself and that is gone now" (*The New York Times*, March 27, 2020). The second group most frequently given the opportunity to garner an emotional connection from the reader were community members whose businesses were dependent on universities that had shutdown:

> I was a bawling, blubbering mess at work, because it made me feel like I didn't even know what's gonna be in two weeks, three weeks. Was I having my last day at my shop?

> I don't think people like to even talk about how poor and stressed out they are half the time in really small businesses like mine. (*The Wall Street Journal*, March 24, 2020)

This aligns with the findings from the second research question, wherein students and those who are dependent on colleges and universities for their livelihood were most frequently quoted: current students (n=213, 31%) and other (n=129, 19%). Journalists not only gave 71.13% of the voice to those outside of higher education personnel; they also leveraged the human interest frame to create compassion for those outside of higher education and to paint institutions of higher education with a disparaging sheen.

Morality framing often manifests in the mind of the reader as right or wrong action taken by an institution or individual. The morality of leadership in higher education, through incompetent decision-making was described as followed: "it's sad, but unsurprising, that some would put their own financial interests ahead of the needs of all students and teachers" (*The New York Times* May 15, 2020). Additionally, the following quote illustrates the perception of practices seen as unfair, and those that impact students in particular: "in my opinion, every senior should have the right to come back. I know it's not going to happen. But you know what it's how I feel. They had this experience taken away from them and they've got nothing to do with it" (*USA Today*, March 16, 2020). Higher education leadership have been cast as those who put students at risk for financial gain, are seen as unfair or wrong, and are once again largely excluded from the opportunity to speak on their own behalf.

At least one generic frame—conflict, economic consequence, attribution of responsibility, human interest, or morality—was found in 100% (n=169) of the articles analyzed. Journalists made clear choices to frame institutions (Racovia, 2013; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996)

of higher education as those in conflict with members of their communities, both students and the business communities they support, and as neoliberal machines. In loco parentis (attribution of responsibility frame) placed additional moral weight on the decision-making of institutions of higher education and the empathy connections forged through the human interest frame drove home a narrative of negativity and irresponsible, destructive decision-making.

Research Question Four: Gametime for the Win

De Vrees (1991, 2001) expanded upon generic framing research by discerning that issue-specific frames or themes were characteristic of specific stories. Operational to this study was an exploration of the emergence of issue-specific frames or themes and the further context they bring to the analysis. The literature review of this study foreshadowed the issue-specific frames and themes which would surface: school closure, student experience, college sports, financial pressure, the transition to online modality, standardized testing, corruption, and virtual graduation. Most of these themes are either deleterious portrayals of the current state of higher education or reflect negatively on the choices and consequences of their actions.

College Sports

College sports was the most dominant issue-specific frame to surface in this analysis, comprising 27% of the overall coverage (n=45). *USA Today* focused an astonishing 64% (n=28) of their coverage on college sports, and while *The New York Times* (1%7, n=13) and *The Wall Street Journal* (8%, n=4) had less dedicated coverage, it was nonetheless substantial. The anxiety surrounding the return of college sports created three clear sub-themes: the financial impact of delayed or cancelled seasons, the lost opportunities for student athletes, and the desperate and potentially harmful risks athletic associations and leadership were willing to take to bring sports back to campus by any means necessary.

In 2019, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) reported a total athletics revenue of $18.9 billion (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2019). Texas A&M tops the list with an average of $192.6 million in revenue generated each year from their athletics programs (Gaines, 2016). Of the 231 schools who participate in NCAA Division 1 programs, 24% make over $50 million per year in revenue (Gaines, 2016). When March Madness and college sports screeched to a halt in the spring of 2020, programs across the country lamented the dire state of higher education with sports on hold. “A sign of the financial squeeze on athletic departments surfaced last week when the NCAA announced that men's basketball tournament revenues that are distributed to conferences would be reduced by nearly two-thirds, to $225 million” (*The New York Times*, March 31, 2020). A two-thirds reduction in revenue led to a seismic shift in the tradition of college sports and the universities they support: “if there's no football season, the entire landscape of college athletics changes forever. If the season is shortened or altered, the financial hit is going to be big even for the rich schools” (*USA Today*, April 9, 2020).

College athletes were blindsided by the loss of opportunity as COVID-19 shut down their programs. Journalists and readers shared their great sense of bewilderment and loss: according to Utah State guard Sam Merrill “once the tournament was canceled, it took me a while to realize my career was over just out of nowhere” (*USA Today*, March 16, 2020). The players shared both their sense of personal loss and the lost opportunity to bring joy to their fans: "I think the thing that everybody loves about March Madness is the Cinderellas and the underdogs - when the No. 12 seeds make a run. That's what America will miss the most and we're sad we can't be the ones to bring it to them” (*USA Today*, March 16, 2020). "I'm a senior, so obviously I have a lot of different emotions. In a way, it is heartbreaking because it feels like unfinished business… You

try to rest knowing you left something behind" (*USA Today*, March 16, 2020). For college athletes, especially the seniors who will never be able to get this time back, we can feel their disappointment coming off on the page and how heartbreaking this moment was for them.

The final and perhaps most unsettling theme in college sports was the fever with which adults responsible for the wellbeing of their athletes seemed to stop at nothing to have them on campus, even if it was not healthy for them to be there. “The sports bodies largely waited to act until they had no other choice. The NCAA, for example…only took action after Duke and Kansas, two of college basketball's blue-chip brands, forced the NCAA's hand by suspending all athletic operations” (*The Wall Street Journal*, March 12, 2020).

> Alarmingly, “some doctors suggested that universities could use athletes as guinea pigs, bringing them back to campus in small numbers before the entire student body is cleared to return. ‘It would almost be a dry run for bringing students back to campus,’ said Dr. Jeffrey Dugas, an orthopedic surgeon in Birmingham, Ala., and member of the NCAA Committee on Competitive Safeguards and Medical Aspects of Sports. ‘[Athletes] are a much smaller number and would give the university a chance to test their resources and test their processes before they have an influx of thousands upon thousands of students." (*Wall Street Journal*, March 12, 2020).

Revenue-generating powerhouses such as college football and basketball are often predominately played by students of color. For example, students who participate in NCAA Division 1 basketball are 76% Black, Indigenous, or people of color (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2021). Meanwhile, their predominately White university leadership and coaches (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2021) not only publicly ruminate about using

them as test cases, but they also dismiss their health all together for the sake of entertainment: "we can only wait so long for the death and sickness to subside because, well, we have a college football season to get ready for," said Oklahoma State Head Coach Mike Gundy (*USA Today*, April 9, 2020). Elijah Wade, former UCLA football player, spoke on behalf of players across college programs, calling attention to the history of neglect, dishonesty, and greed in college sports:

> As of today, none of the task forces created for the return to practice or competition of student-athletes has included the voices of those same students…This has created fear and confusion among some within the athletic community. They have concerns that their health and well-being is being weighed against money for the university, its coaches, and administration. As we look at the rampant negligence and mistreatment of student-athletes in NCAA sports, it's clear that colleges cannot be trusted with policing themselves on any health recommendations passed down by state or local officials. (*USA Today*, May 28, 2020).

As the most dominant issue-specific frame or theme, college sports positions higher education in a dismal light. Leadership is portrayed as making self-serving, financially motivated decisions on the backs of students, many of whom are students of color, for material gain. The completely dismissive tone towards student health and the arrogance of leadership to be publicly flippant about the health and welfare of their students should be a wake-up call to higher education leadership, students, and parents. Student athletes are treated as chattel for the almighty dollar. We should be ashamed.

Student Experience

Student experience was the second most dominant issue-specific frame to surface in the analysis, comprising 22% of the overall coverage (n=38). *The New York Times* dedicated 32% (n=24) of their coverage to the student experience, *The Wall Street Journal* dedicated 20% (n=10), and *USA Today* dedicated 9% (n=4). Overwhelmingly the student experience articles were all shadowed with expressions of los: t he loss of traditions and coveted daily rituals, the lost time fostering relationships with peers and professors, the loss of opportunities such as study abroad and internships, and the frustration with the opaqueness of it all. Student experience pieces also highlighted the inequity between the kind of disruption experienced by preferred-user students versus their peers. Finally, students questioned the decisions to keep campuses closed and expressed urgency to return to the life they left behind.

University students were crushed when campuses closed. The weight of their loss felt tangible in the many articles highlighting their devastation. "To be two weeks from the experience of a lifetime and have it canceled was one of the most heartbreaking experiences of my life, as studying abroad was the one thing I knew for sure I wanted to do in college" (*USA Today*, March 5, 2020). It “wasn't supposed to end like this. If not for the coronavirus outbreak effectively cutting her semester short, she would have conducted a 60-piece orchestra playing an hour of music she wrote herself, a perfect end to her studies as a music composition major…Rassler can't help but think about what she has lost” (*USA Today*, April 6, 2020). The multitudinal nature of student loss, athletic events, research projects, study abroad, time with professors, lab time, or performances speak to the astounding depth and breadth of experiences available to college students, most of which are irreplaceable outside of their ivory towers.

During the hurried transition from brick-and-mortar modality to online learning, universities knew, due to lack of time and resources, that they would be leaving some students behind. Unfortunately, there may have been fewer preferred-user students, those who are studying in a full-time capacity and who are financially sound, able-bodied, and without any mental-emotional barriers to learning (Kao & Woods, 2020), than they had assumed. "Low-income students wondered whether they could afford to go home. International students had questions about their visas, which usually did not permit online learning. Graduate students worried about the effects on research projects years in the making" (*The New York Times*, March 11, 2020). "The pandemic has made studying from home much more difficult. Spotty internet makes connecting to class content frustrating. Anxieties arise about how my family will continue to pay the bills when income from my father's small business has fallen almost to zero" (*The Wall Street Journal*, April 28, 2020). The mounting anxiety of legions of students across the country aligns with the survey conducted by the American Council on Education (2020) wherein 41% of university presidents cited the mental health of their students as a prevailing concern. While students lost the support networks of friends and intellectual coconspirators, "As we prepare to start taking classes online, my classmates and I face an unusual challenge: working alone" (*The Wall Street Journal*, March 17, 2020).

Due to their stress, feelings of upheaval, and frustration, students began to push back, questioning their institutions. "An acute state of vigilance during the early days of the pandemic befit our lack of understanding… Reopening schools means putting more people at risk, but staying closed threatens the livelihoods of many" (*The Wall Street Journal*, May 5, 2020). Students also quickly articulated many of things virtual learning could not replace:

> Students are more than passive recipients of information. Learning from far away, we will miss out on two advantages of the campus: interacting with peers from different walks of life and forming relationships with scholars who have lifetimes of academic learning and wisdom to impart. (*The Wall Street Journal*, March 17, 2020).

One student put it particularly well when describing the sense of abandonment and hopelessness of their cohort: “Generation Z is nihilistic: Teenagers feel that their predecessors have let them down, and they believe that the world is so beyond fixing that what happens happens” (*The New York Times*, March 28, 2020).

Current students were the most often cited sources (n=213, 31%) in this study, essentially telling the story of higher education during the COVID-19-induced campus closures. They are also the arduous consumers of higher education; their tuition dollars pay the salaries of those who they learn from, which over time has twisted the relationship between educator and student to product and customer. During the issue-specific theme analysis it becomes clear that the disruption of COVID-19 has created unhappy customers, the needs of which are not being met. How long will it take for higher education to repair the damaged relationship and at what cost?

Financial Pressure

The extreme financial pressure during the first 90 days of campus closures was the third most dominant issue-specific frame, comprising 20% of the overall coverage (n=33). *The Wall Street Journal* dedicated a hefty 40% (n=20) of their coverage to the financial pressures experienced by colleges and universities; *USA Today* dedicated 20% of coverage (n=9), and *The New York Times* dedicated 5% (n=4). The financial pressures of colleges and universities explored by journalists were either student centric or from external community stakeholders.

The titanic increase in tuition and a consumer-product model in higher education has led many students to believe that admission and payment is a contract with set expectations of outcomes (Svensson & Wood, 2007; Brandon, 2010; Wang et al., 2013). Students have become more demanding of their institutions of higher learning in recent decades. COVID-19 and the drastic change in modality brought those demands to a head. “For Ryan Sessoms, a marketing student at the University of North Florida, the transition to online classes has been rocky. The thought of paying the same amount of tuition for another semester of lackluster classes is a nonstarter” (*USA Today*, April 20, 2020). Especially as students continued to take on exorbitant debt with diminished prospects upon graduation, “when the pandemic passes and the rest of the world can breathe a sigh of relief, he'll be thrown back out into what might be the worst job market since the Great Depression” (*USA Today*, May 29, 2020).

As current students questioned the merits of the education they were paying for, prospective students took note, creating perilously low enrollment predictions for the fall. “If enrollment falls by a quarter, that’s a huge amount of money and, for some universities, the difference between bankruptcy and staying afloat” (*The New York Times*, April 16, 2020).

> A higher education trade group has predicted a 15 percent drop in enrollment nationwide, amounting to a $23 billion revenue loss. “The combination of fear for health and safety and the economic impact at the same time is one that I haven’t experienced, and I don’t think most university leaders have,” said Kent D. Syverud, the chancellor of Syracuse University. (*The New York Times*, April 15, 2020).

Universities also faced extreme external financial pressures. Those who rely on state funding were left hanging dry,

> Montclair State University, in New Jersey, said it has been told not to expect $12.3 million of state funding it had been counting on for the rest of the current fiscal year, after Gov. Phil Murphy slashed funding in light of the coronavirus's toll on the local economy. That's about 25% of the university's annual state appropriations for the fiscal year that ends in June. (*The Wall Street Journal*, April 23, 2020).

Meanwhile universities are acutely aware of the dependence their surrounding community members have on them, resting the fate of college towns at the mercy of their collegiate keystones, "[a]nd with the uncertainty of the fall, it's made things difficult to project…Large colleges and universities employ thousands, buy local goods and services and draw tens of thousands of students and visitors to their stores, restaurants and hotels" (*The Wall Street Journal*, May 17, 2020). The global economy was under significant financial pressure during the spring of 2020. As COVID-19 turned the world upside down, higher education was no exception. Institutions of higher education were perhaps only unique in the tenuous relationship they hold with students as both educational charges, benefactors, and the essential lifeline they bring to their communities.

School Closure

School closures, opinions thereof, and impacts of, was the fourth most dominant issue-specific frame in the analysis, comprising 12% of the overall coverage (n=21). *The New York Times* dedicated 19% (n=14) of their coverage to school closures, *The Wall Street Journal* 12% (n=6), and *USA Today* 2% (n=1). Narratives around school closures began with play-by-plays of institutions shutting down, then expressions of uncertainty on next steps and the looming autumn decision of whether or not to be in person.

University leadership quickly acknowledged their position as catalysts for infection:

> College campuses are distinctly positioned in the crosshairs of the fast-spreading virus: People live in close quarters, gather frequently in large groups and travel internationally. Spring break also hits at a bad time, as it scatters students and raises concerns they might return having been exposed to the virus. (*The Wall Street Journal*, March 10, 2020)

On March 5, 2020, Northeastern University Seattle announced that the 709 students on its Seattle, Washington campus would move to remote course delivery, becoming the first institution to change their delivery methodology due to the pandemic (Northeastern Will, 2020). Other campuses quickly followed course; over a matter of days, nearly two-thirds of four-year institutions in the United States announced plans to transition to remote delivery for the remainder of the spring (COVID-19 Dashboard, 2020). This disruption continued on a global scale, and by March 12, 2020, 46 countries on five different continents either closed schools completely or moved to virtual modality to curb the spread of COVID-19 infection (Crawford et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2020). "In-person classes were canceled or postponed at more than 100 universities by late afternoon Wednesday…Across the country, dorms were emptying. Fans were banned from sporting events. Graduation plans were up in the air" (*USA Today*, March 12, 2020).

The expediency with which campuses shut down created nearly as many problems as it solved. Meanwhile, political pressure and issues with online learning forced many to question whether colleges and universities were making the right call. Bending to political demands, Liberty University President Jerry Falwell Jr. brought students back to campus only to be bombarded with COVID-19 cases and outrage from family and community members: "an angry counteroffensive against critics of his decision to invite Liberty University students back…has

played out in the media, the courts, even with the campus police. But his campaign has been undermined by the spread of a virus he cannot control" (*The New York Times*, April 16, 2020). Other parents, university leaders and community members grappled with unprecedented anxiety: "You want them to get back as soon as possible, but you also want everyone to be safe" (*The Wall Street Journal*, May 24, 2020).

As the spring quarter came to a close, the world's attention turned to fall.

> Universities face strong social, academic and financial incentives to return. Closing down as they tried to protect students, staff and faculty from the coronavirus has cost them billions of dollars. Many students feel that going to school online does not give them the rich college experience they were expecting, and there are a growing number of class-action lawsuits demanding tuition refunds. (*The New York Times*, May 18, 2020).

"The toll of this pandemic is high and will continue to rise. But another crisis looms for students, higher education and the economy if colleges and universities cannot reopen their campuses in the fall" (*The New York Times*, April 27, 2020). The school closure theme did a masterful job of expressing the conflicting demands on university leadership. They are balancing the need to be open for the financial solvency of their institutions and communities, recognizing that they cannot deliver all that was promised to their students with the full knowledge that bringing students back could be a literal death wish.

Virtual Graduation

Virtual Graduation was the fifth most dominant issue-specific frame to surface in the analysis, comprising 6% of the overall coverage (n=11); *The Wall Street Journal* dedicated 10% of their coverage (n=5) to the experience of virtual graduation, *The New York Times* dedicated

4% percent (n=3) and *USA Today* dedicated 5% (n=2). The virtual graduation theme echoed the student experience issue-specific frame and was dominated by a deafening sense of loss and despair. For example,

> "We've all been envisioning our graduation since we started college and all of a sudden it was taken away" (*The New York Times*, May 15, 2020).
>
> "I feel like a lot of experiences have been stolen from me" (*The New York Times*, April 15, 2020).
>
> "During quarantine, without much human interaction for an extended period of time, I grew sad. Besides the accomplishment in itself - which I struggle acknowledging as a 'big deal,' but that's another story for my therapist - I craved being among fellow graduates and searching for families and friends in the stands. Feeling a part of something" (*USA Today*, May 27, 2020).
>
> "There is no way to hide from the stark fact that you have been deprived of that preparation. You have missed out on some things that I'm sure most of you were looking forward to greatly: having your parents—for the first time for some of you—get to see the place where you lived and learned, meet your friends and their families in person, and share the pomp and circumstance as you were sent on your way" (*The Wall Street Journal*, May 3, 2020).

Universities promised to make it up to their students in futures that they were unable to predict, but the narrative was clear: graduation could not be made up. It was gone, stolen, and irreplaceable.

Transition to Online Modality

The herculean task of transitioning learning to an online modality garnered little attention as the sixth issue-specific frame to surface in the analysis, comprising five percent of the overall coverage (n=9). The *New York Times* dedicated 11 percent (n=8) of their coverage to the transition to online modality, the *Wall Street Journal* two percent (n=1) and *USA Today* zero (n=0). The transition to online modality seemed to be positioned as a failure from the outset. Universities were disparaged at every turn, often being blamed for obstacles out of their control.

Examples of ludicrous execution, including the "professor at Loyola University New Orleans [who] taught his first virtual class from his courtyard, wearing a bathrobe and sipping from a glass of wine" (*New York Times*, April 24, 2020) were positioned to make a mockery of faculty. Meanwhile, student performance issues outside of university control were still placed at their feet. "The reality is that the performance of students this semester is not only going to reflect the mastery of a subject," Prof. Danheiser said, "but also could be impacted by differences between students due to their different health situations, the health of their loved ones, different access to technology, different home situations" (*The New York Times*, March 30, 2020).

Unfortunately, this was a missed opportunity for university leadership. Despite the admittedly imperfect transition to remote modality in a mere seven days, the fact is that many things went sensationally well. The innovations, fortitude, and splendid work of university colleagues across the country created a space where 20 million students could continue to learn and grow intellectually during a global pandemic. Instead of focusing on successes, however, gatekeeper journalists drew attention to imperfections in the implementation, including

haphazard execution of content and poor student outcomes which were not always a reflection of the pedagogy.

Standardized testing

Standardized testing, and an examination of the systemic problems of the practice, was the seventh issue-specific frame to emerge in the analysis, comprising four percent of the overall coverage (n=38). *The Wall Street Journal* committed 6% (n= 4) of their coverage to standardized testing, *The New York Times* committed 5% (n=3), and *USA Today* committed zero (n=0). Thematically, standardized testing articles portrayed the system as largely flawed but also shared concerns with the industry of higher education having fractured approaches to incorporating standardized test results into their admission processes.

Standardized tests have been under fire for years due to the "gaming of the exams by the wealthy… endlessly prepped and tutored upper-middle-class students can engineer better scores. Researchers have found that SAT scores correlate positively to higher parental income levels," (*The New York Times*, May 1, 2020). A silver lining of COVID-19 in the spring of 2020 was that the "standardized admissions tests, which many aspiring low-income students see as the greatest barrier to their college goals, are being eliminated this spring as entrance requirements by one institution after another" (*The New York Times*, May 21, 2020). Not only could this change remove a significant barrier to marginalized students, but it also provides a testing ground for colleges and universities to enroll a freshman class without standardized test scores and see how they do. When monster systems such as the University of California remove the barrier of standardized testing from their campuses, we might finally "put to rest a contentious debate

roiling campuses across the country over the fairness of standardized tests. [Where] wealthy, white students consistently outperform others" (*The Wall Street Journal*, April 1, 2020).

Unfortunately, as with all things higher education, the application of standardized testing removal was rolled out in a slapdash fashion, confusing students, and their families.

> The big question is, with all the hard work we've put in, will that go to waste…and will she be at a disadvantage applying to colleges that haven't yet made submission of SAT or ACT scores optional, including an Ivy League school where she plans on applying. (*The Wall Street Journal*, April 28, 2020)

The opportunity for a united front was once again lost due to a lack of industry cohesion and communication.

Corruption

The final issue-specific frame found in the analysis, corruption, comprised 4% of the overall coverage (n=6). *The New York Times* dedicated 7% percent (n=5) of their coverage to corruption within higher education, *The Wall Street Journal* dedicated 2% (n=1), and *USA Today* dedicated zero (n=0). The corruption articles were largely in response to a public relations kerfuffle wherein Congress passed a bill awarding stimulus money to all colleges and universities without taking their financial health into account. After realizing the error, government officials lashed out at institutions of higher education, painting a false narrative that they had requested the funds. "Ms. DeVos had criticized elite colleges that received stimulus funding they did not apply for and had urged schools to reject money they did not need" (*The New York Times*, May 15, 2020). "President Trump joined mounting criticism of Harvard on Tuesday, saying the richest university in the country would pay back $8.6 million in relief

money from a coronavirus stimulus package that the president himself signed last month" (*The New York Times*, April 22, 2020). While most universities did not accept these funds, the accusatory and misleading narrative have the potential to cause reputational damage.

The themes from the literature review generated a preview of the issue-specific frames and themes (De Vrees, 1991; De Vrees, 2001) that would surface in this study: school closure, student experience, college sports, financial pressure, the transition to online modality, standardized testing, corruption and virtual graduation. These frames bring nuance and depth to the analysis, creating a framework for the stories journalists use, as they guide the public narrative surrounding higher education. The import of the college sports theme was admittedly a surprise to the researcher (27% of the overall coverage, n=45). The importance of this theme as well as the student experience theme (comprising 22% of the overall coverage, n=38) are an opportunity for institutions of higher education moving forward. Both themes are perennial and will continue to be covered by journalists as we move past the COVID-19 campus closures. How can public relations and higher education leadership coach students and student athletes to advocate on behalf of their institutions in the future? Furthermore, how can we better collaborate with journalists to advocate for more holistic coverage including narratives outside of sports and student experiences to more accurately reflect the contributions of higher education to society at large?

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is scope. Guided by the literature review and previous content analysis studies, only three publications were chosen to be analyzed: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA Today*. By narrowing the scope to three publications, some nuance and depth as well as localized community reactions were lost. The

anticipated volume of sampling from all available local and regional newspapers, however, was prohibitive. These three publications were selected due to their elite status as news organizations, extensive circulation numbers, orientation, and history of utilization in previous content analysis studies (Langheim et al., 2014; Chyi et al., 2012; Hogan, 2013). Additionally, this study chose to focus the analysis on print media only and did not include blog posts, broadcast news, or online media. While data demonstrates significant increases in online and broadcast news utilization by the public, educational news is still primarily sought through print publications (Gibbons, 2017).

This study is further limited due to examining only a single element of the framing process described by Scheufele (1999). Scheufele defined the framing journey to include three stages: frame building, frame setting, and the effects of frames for individuals and journalists. By examining the frame setting stage only, this study highlights the framing mechanisms used by journalists when covering the COVID-19 campus closures, however it does not examine the societal norms that exist to create these frames in the first place or the impact of the frames used on higher education, the public, or journalists.

Finally, while this study drew from both qualitative and quantitative analysis, there remains opportunity for further robustness. The coding analysis could be enhanced through Krippendorff's alpha and the use of multiple researchers to determine inter-coder reliability, which would yield additional confidence in the data. This was mitigated with additional quantitative data such as frequency analysis and qualitative data such as direct excerpts and quotes from the articles.

Future Research

The hypothesis and findings offer several suggestions for future research on news framing of higher education during a crisis event. Quantitative content analysis of news framing

of higher education is extremely limited. While this study brings additional insight to this arena, more research is needed to further awareness of the frames deployed by journalists, tone, and agenda-setting regarding higher education.

Longitudinal studies bring nuance to the interpretation of a phenomenon. Therefore, continuing this study over multiple crisis events in higher education such as the Great Recession would bring additional clarity. The timeframe of this study was determined by Graber's (1980) stages of crisis and focused on the initial stage of the crisis event by focusing on the first 90 days of campus closures. Future research on the proceeding months and Graber's (1980) second and third stages of crisis could yield fascinating results, especially as colleges and universities began to navigate highly varied return to campus plans.

Several of the hypotheses regarding framing were supported in the analysis, providing the opportunity for complementary research in this area. This analysis, however, is only a starting point for additional research regarding the effects of framing higher education as a disastrous calamity with many undesirables, including contradictory and incompetent rulers. To determine solid conclusions regarding the effects of this narrative, subsequent studies are needed to gain a deeper understanding of audience impact and consequences of the damaging coverage. Furthermore, the impact of these frames on journalists and the cultural and monetary pressures to support the use of negative frames in coverage of higher education should also be explored.

Framing and agenda-setting were the primary analytical tools of this study; however, a supplementary review of language and word choice would further enhance the investigation. Coupled with an understanding of the generic and issue-specific frames, a deeper appreciation of the cultural weight and allocation of language when discussing higher education in crisis could yield extraordinary results. Constructivism ignites deep awareness of the importance of patterns,

selections, and the presentation of information by journalists (Poerksen, 2011). The use of language attributed to or aligned with key sources is an especially interesting opportunity. For instance, after Harvard's President Lawrence Bacow was diagnosed with COVID-19, his diagnosis was consistently mentioned in future references to him. Further trends in source provenance, as well as the language supporting or condemning sources could advance our understanding of the positionality of higher education by legacy news organizations. Word choice and language are precious and powerful tools for journalists as they construct frames around stories for public consumption (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Racovia, 2013).

A final area of inquiry should be an analysis of what was being covered by the press in lieu of higher education and the campus closures due to COVID-19. Public construction of a story is influenced by the way information is presented, the tone of the story, and the sources, but the frequency of updates also serve as a powerful factor in determining importance of an event (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Hallahan, 1999; Neuman et al., 1992; Altheide, 2002). By dedicating an insignificant fraction of their overall coverage to higher education in the spring of 2020, journalists were making a value statement. Where did they place their resources instead?

Implications

The discoveries made by this study bring awareness to how journalists position higher education in crisis. As stewards of the reputation of their institutions, leaders in higher education have a responsibility to understand and proactively manage the public narratives of their organization. Reputational value determines recruitment abilities, robustness of enrollment, selectivity, rankings, and the ability to receive private and public funding. In times of crisis, the public perception of an institution's reputation is particularly jeopardized, and the collective

external evaluations of stakeholders and journalists often dictate public perception (Mahoney, 2013; Gibbons, 2017; Coombs & Holladay, 2010a; Gardner et al., 2020). To that end, actively managing the reputation of their institutions through thoughtful and cultivated relationships with members of the press is an essential function of leadership portfolios.

Tandem to this, the public has a right to comprehensive and objective knowledge of higher education. Colleges and universities regularly receive grants and funding from federal and state governments. Citizens, therefore, should have reliable and accurate information about the performance of the schools they fund. Nearly 94 million Americans, ages 25 or over, have some type of college degree (Bryant, 2021), and 20 million students are currently enrolled in a college or university (Duffin, 2020). Consequently, higher education is part of the lived experience and is personally important to one-third of the United States population. As a dominant part of our collective shared history, the veracity of reporting by journalists when covering higher education, and the care taken to report with honesty and a holistic lens is vital. Armed with a richer understanding of framing research and the currently one-sided nature of reporting by journalists, an informed citizenry can demand that coverage change through their readership.

Furthermore, this research has the potential to speak to news organizations and journalists about the power and privilege of their voices—especially in times of crisis—and the importance of responsibly wielding that power. The findings of this study suggest that journalists are framing higher education as unorganized and struggling, leveraging the conflict and economic consequence frames to paint institutions in a marring fashion and not giving them voices in their own stories. Social constructivism (Jonassen, 1991; Poerksen, 2011; Racovia, 2013) has taught us that the framing of stories deployed by journalists creates shared narratives for the public. The narratives revealed in this study fail to give a holistic perspective of higher education, focusing

instead on the experiences of our student-customers, sports programs, and shortcomings. Most of the articles are negative in tone and disparaging of the choices of leadership and outcomes of the industry. Journalists have an opportunity to examine the frames they use, sources deployed, stories chosen, and language utilized to better describe higher education in crisis with balance and integrity in alignment with their code of ethics (2014).

For scholars, this research establishes the need for persistence in the examination of legacy news media framing of higher education. Framing studies have been conducted across a varied landscape of topic areas but less so in education, with higher education largely unobserved. Higher education as an industry merits this type of review, as both the home to many of the scholars in this arena and the perennial surest path to the American dream (Golston, 2016). Research of this type can counsel journalists on the manners with which topics are covered and the implications of deleterious and deficient coverage.

Finally, this study strove to contribute to framing research overall by advancing the literature on generic frame use and analysis. By utilizing the approaches documented in previous framing research (Daniel, 2009; Gasman, 2007; Gibbons, 2017; Jones, 2004; Troy; 2018) this study contributes to the larger scope of systematic, quantitative framing research. This study broadens the aperture of current framing research with additional analysis on the topic of higher education which is currently limited.

Conclusion

This study aimed to create further insight into the framing mechanisms used by legacy news organizations during their coverage of higher education in crisis. Specifically, the coverage of higher education during the initial crisis event of COVID-19, from March 5, 2020, to June 3, 2020, when colleges and universities around the world closed their doors to students and sent

them home. The results of the analysis illustrate that the limited coverage by journalists depicts higher education as largely floundering and in crisis. Journalists have an obligation to report objectively, especially as the constructed experience they create for their reader enforces shared history and social realities (Berger & Luckmann, 1979; Poerksen, 2011; Racovia, 2013).

The primary external evaluation point that comprises an institution's reputation is classified as controlled and uncontrolled media reports (Coombs & Holladay, 2010b). A gap currently exists between the perceived state of higher education and reality. Scarborough (2020) found that 40% of students have a worse opinion of their institutions than they did prior to the pandemic even after they shifted hundreds of years of brick-and-mortar pedagogy to virtual instruction within a manner of days. A truly remarkable endeavor.

As storytellers and gatekeepers, journalists determine which stories to tell and the perspectives made available to the public. The troubling findings of this analysis begin in the sourcing of articles, where overwhelmingly, 71.13% (n=483) of their sources came from outside of higher education personnel. This finding illustrates the limited control a university has regarding its reputation, especially as student-customers and dependent stakeholders are most often cited (current students, n=213, 31%; other, n=129, 19%) instead of those in university leadership (n=113, 17%).

While journalists leveraged all the generic frames in their coverage, they depended most heavily on conflict and economic consequence frames to portray higher education as a failing industry, and one with deteriorating relationships with stakeholders, unreliable messaging, and irresponsible, negligent, and harmful decision-making practices. A deeper review into the issue-specific frames clearly articulates the injuriously limited scope of coverage. While the primary mission of every institution of higher education is, after all, to educate, only 5% (n=9) of the

thematic coverage focused on the education of students through the transition to online modality frame. The other 160 articles in the analysis (95%) focused on issues tangential to higher education but were not pertinent to the nucleus of what institutions of higher education set out to do in the spring of 2020: educate 20 million students to the best of their abilities during a global pandemic.

If the defining calling of higher education is hope for the future (Hunsinger, 2020), the question of survival for higher education has less to do with the COVID-19 pandemic and everything to do with controlling our own narrative. If institutions of higher education remain passive, mired in damage control, allowing others to speak on our behalf and for journalists to ignore or slander our names, our reputation—and with it, our hope for the future—we are in grave peril. If, however, we take this study as a warning and seize our own narrative, our possibilities become limitless, and hope for the future abounds.

This study should serve as a mirror to anyone who values education. The many merits of a college degree, including the doors of opportunity it can open, as the surest path out of poverty and as a transformative experience which challenges and encourages the next generation to become the best version of themselves is not the narrative playing out in the media. All of us who value this work, have a responsibility to change that.

APPENDIX A: CODE SHEET

1. Article Number
2. Headline
3. Byline
4. Date Published
5. Word Count

6. Newspaper

    a. The New York Times
    b. USA Today
    c. The Wall Street Journal

7. Article Type
    a. Hard News
    b. Soft News
    c. Opinion/Editorial

8. Frames

Conflict	
Human Interest	
Economic Consequence	
Morality	
Attribution of Responsibility	

9. Dominant Frame

Conflict	
Human Interest	
Economic Consequence	
Morality	
Attribution of Responsibility	

10. Issue-Specific Frame

School Closure	
Student Experience	
College Sports	
Financial Pressure	
The transition to Online Modality	
Standardized Testing	
Corruption	
Virtual Graduation	

11. Sources

Government official	
Scientist or doctor	
University leadership	
University faculty members	
University personnel	
Current students	
Prospective students	
Family members of current students	
Family members of prospective students	
Alumni	
Records or digital media	
Other media outlets	

Anonymous or unidentified	
Athletic Director or Coach	
Other	

12. What is the overall impression of the article in regard to higher education during the COVID-19 crisis?
    a. Positive
    b. Neutral
    c. Negative

APPENDIX B: CODE BOOK

1. **Article Number**: Coder will assign a code number to each article for future identification.

2. **Headline**: Full text title of the article.

3. **Byline**: Name of the author.

4. **Date Published**: Written in six digits; for example, May 21, 2020 would be written 05/21/20.

5. **Word Count**: Number of words in article.

6. **Newspaper:** Mark one of the three options to indicate where the article was published: *The New York Times, USA Today*, *or The Wall Street Journal.*

7. **Article Type**:
    a. Hard News: A story written in inverted pyramid style, where information is presented with the most important item first and descending in importance. For example, hard news includes the coverage of basic facts, first person accounts of events, and timely and immediate portrayals of events.
    b. Soft News: News that both entertains and informs and is less timely than hard news. This may include a human interest, entertainment, lifestyle, feature, or background/historical story.
    c. Opinion/Editorial: Most often written with the author's bias or positionality driving the narrative, such as a letter to the editor.

8. Frames

Each paragraph within each article will be assigned one of the following frames: conflict, human interest, economic consequence, morality, or, attribution of responsibility. Tally marks will be entered to account for frames within the article.

Conflict	
Human Interest	
Economic Consequence	
Morality	
Attribution of Responsibility	

Conflict Frame Definition/Guide

The conflict frame feeds on tension between institutions or individuals and is consumed by winning and losing. The language chosen in a conflict frame features imagery around competition, war, and dominance, with stress given to the performance of key groups or individuals (Valkenburg et al., 2016; Neuman et al., 1992).

Human Interest Frame Definition/Guide

The human-interest frame brings personal and emotional shine to issues, policies, or problems. In crisis event reporting, the human-interest frame triggers empathy in the reader, often creating negative attitudes towards the crisis and those involved (Padin, 2005, October 12; Cho & Gower, 2006).

Economic Consequence Frame Definition/Guide

Economic consequence frames report events, problems, and issues in regard to the economic consequences they expose the public to (Neuman et al., 1992).

Morality Frame Definition/Guide

Morality framing portrays events, problems, or issues through religious or moral implications. Morality framing is often implied through the strategic use of sources, inferences, and implication (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Neuman et al., 1992).

Attribution of Responsibility Frame Definition/Guide

The responsibility frame reports with the intention of attributing responsibility for either the causation or resolution to an institution or individual in response to issues, events, or problems (Neuman et al., 1992).

9. **Dominant Frame**

The dominant frame will be determined by the frame most present within the article as tabulated in section 8.

Conflict	
Human Interest	
Economic Consequence	
Morality	
Attribution of Responsibility	

10. **Issue-Specific Frame**

An issue-specific frame will be determined based on the overall theme and impression most likely to be given to the average reader from the following list.

School Closure

This issue-specific frame includes coverage around the closure of colleges and universities and the impact on students, faculty, staff, and surrounding community members.

Student Experience

This issue-specific frame includes coverage that examines the impact of COVID-19 on the lived experiences of college and university students.

College Sports

This issue-specific frame includes coverage which examines the impact of COVID-19, higher education, and sports. Such as the NCAA, sport-based eligibility or recruitment, tournaments and both real and perceived consequences of truncated sports seasons for higher education.

Financial Pressure

This issue-specific frame includes coverage that examines the impact of COVID-19 on the financial health of institutions of higher education and as an industry.

The transition to Online Modality

This issue-specific frame includes coverage that examines the experiences and resources available to faculty, staff, and students during the transition to online modality due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Standardized testing

This issue-specific frame includes themes regarding standardized testing as a means to examine the abilities of entering students, changes to the system due to COVID-19 and merits and issues with the system.

Corruption

This issue-specific frame includes coverage that emphasizes the public's reaction to the higher education and issues of corruption, such as admission scandals, questionable relationship with corporate or international partners, or misuse of government funds.

Virtual Graduation

This issue-specific frame includes coverage that examines the lived experiences of college and university students regarding the transition to a virtual graduation format due to COVID-19.

11. **Sources**: Coder will identify all the unique sources cited in each article.

(1) **Government official**: Individuals who have a specified title or affiliation designating them as speaking on behalf of the United States federal or state government.

(2) **Scientist or doctor**: Individuals who, due to their professional status as scientists or doctors speak on behalf of the medical or scientific community

(3) **University leadership**: Individuals identified to speak on behalf of the university (e.g., University President, Dean, communications specialist, 'the school,' etc.)

(4) **University faculty members**: Those who hold a teaching or research position at a university or college

(5) **University personnel**: Staff and administration members of a university without leadership or faculty appointments

(6) **Current students**: Current college or university students

(7) **Prospective students**: Prospective college or university students who are not currently enrolled but are or were planning to enroll (e.g., high school seniors)

(8) **Family members of current students**: Individuals related to a current student and an indirect stakeholder to the events (e.g., parent, grandparent, sibling, etc.)

(9) **Family members of prospective students**: Individuals related to a prospective student and an indirect stakeholder to the events (e.g., parent, grandparent, sibling, etc.)

(10) **Alumni**: Former college or university students who are not currently enrolled but have graduated from an institution of higher education.

(11) **Records**: Miscellaneous reports and documents (e.g., complaints, motions, case affidavits, financial documents, etc.)

(12) **Digital media**: Technology used as reference or resource (e.g. websites, Twitter)

(13) **Other media outlets**: References to other news reports or stories

(14) **Anonymous or unidentified**: Statements made by unidentified individuals who are close to the events but prefer to remain anonymous

(15) **Athletic Director or Coach**: University Athletic Program Director or member of the University Coaching Staff.

(16) **Other**: Sources outside of those listed above

12. **Overall impression of the article in regard to higher education during the COVID-19 crisis**: Determine, based on the overall tone and impression most likely to be given to the average reader, whether the portrayal of higher education is positive, negative, or neutral.

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