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# Policymaker Discourse in Colorado Public Higher Education Appropriations

## Abstract

State funding for higher education is one of the most pressing issues facing both institutions and policymakers in 2022. Colorado has seen significant declines in the amount of state funding per student over the past two decades, resulting in increases in student burdens for tuition. Policy discourse analysis through a poststructural and neoliberal lens provided insight towards the legislative process and the discursive themes utilized by Colorado policymakers during the 2021-22 legislative budgeting cycle. Twelve artifacts were analyzed, including a mix of policy briefs, hearings, and budget and appropriations reports, for discursive data related to the state's appropriations for public institutions of higher education. Artifacts came from the Governor's Office, Colorado Department of Higher Education, Colorado Joint Budget Committee, and Colorado legislative staff offices.

Results showed a significant bias towards neoliberal discussion, reasoning, and motivations regardless of political party or state office. Courses of discussion fell primarily around three themes: student finances, institutional funding, and economy and workforce discourses. In addition to textual analysis, visual analysis was also undertaken. Overall, discourse themes remained consistent from office-to-office with small indicators of attempted independence between participants. Based on these results, policy influencers should be aware of neoliberal pervasiveness and find ways to either subvert the status quo or commit to overt reactionary stances.

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Policymaker Discourse in Colorado Public Higher Education Appropriations

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A Dissertation in Practice

Presented to

the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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by

Nathan Willers

August 2022

Advisor: Dra. Sarah Hurtado

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### **Abstract**

State funding for higher education is one of the most pressing issues facing both institutions and policymakers in 2022. Colorado has seen significant declines in the amount of state funding per student over the past two decades, resulting in increases in student burdens for tuition. Policy discourse analysis through a poststructural and neoliberal lens provided insight towards the legislative process and the discursive themes utilized by Colorado policymakers during the 2021-22 legislative budgeting cycle. Twelve artifacts were analyzed, including a mix of policy briefs, hearings, and budget and appropriations reports, for discursive data related to the state's appropriations for public institutions of higher education. Artifacts came from the Governor's Office, Colorado Department of Higher Education, Colorado Joint Budget Committee, and Colorado legislative staff offices.

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## **Chapter 1: Problem Statement and Preface**

Over the past 42 years, student share of overall tuition revenue at public institutions in the United States rose from 20.9 percent in 1980 to 44 percent in 2020 (SHEEO, 2021b). Though recent trends have indicated a willingness on the part of some states to increase funding after substantial cuts during the Great Recession, only 18 states recovered to pre-Great-Recession levels, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated low appropriation issues (SHEEO, 2021b). All these funding decisions contributed to “student share” (tuition plus fees), quantifying the financial burden that students shoulder (Alstete, 2014; USGAO, 2014).

The ultimate effects of increased student share of tuition are substantial for credential-earning students (and are particularly acute for students who do not persist to completion). Aside from increased up-front costs, students are taking on record levels of indebtedness to work towards their degrees, and student debt in the United States totaled \$1.58 trillion as of March, 2021 (Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 2021). Though decisions from the US Department of Education to reduce or pause student loan payments during the pandemic reduced the student loan delinquency rate, it still stood at 6.2 percent of student loans with a 90 day or more default or delinquency. It remains to be seen what the ultimate decisions and effects of pandemic-related student loan forgiveness or pauses will be going forward.



Despite these financing issues for higher education—and the way they squarely land on the shoulders of students—states and policymakers have consistently expressed a clear desire for higher education to prepare and educate students for “workforce readiness,” a term that has been adopted by politicians and institutions alike as a catch-all, defined as learning that legitimizes credentials granted to learners for a life of economic contribution to society (CDHE, 2020b). This disconnect between resistance to funding higher education through appropriations while simultaneously placing enormous economic and personal student importance on the results is difficult to reconcile.

There are few states where this disconnect is more acute than Colorado. The state has one of the highest student share rates in the US, averaging 67.4 percent in 2020 (SHEEO, 2021c), and general fund appropriations in Colorado have decreased 29.7% per full time equivalent student since 2001 (SHEEO, 2021c). Meanwhile, the emphasis on workforce readiness is readily apparent in publications from the Colorado Department of Higher Education (2020): “Earning a postsecondary certificate or degree will yield higher wages and more opportunities for our residents ... They’re equipped to enter the workforce qualified to contend in competitive industries.” This same report also emphasized the importance of containing or reducing higher education costs—but does not mention or suggest increasing appropriations for the state’s education system that is, as mentioned, already funded at rates that force students to pay more than they would elsewhere. Indeed, as of 2020, Colorado had the fourth-lowest appropriations per FTE student of any US state (SHEEO, 2021b).

Though the Colorado legislature has steadily increased appropriations per FTE student since the Great Recession, many of those gains are at risk of being undone by

pandemic-era cuts of over \$500 million—the second largest cuts to higher education of any state (SHEEO, 2021a). Most of that cut was backfilled by CARES Act stimulus funding from the federal government (Bickel & JBC Staff, 2021a), but it remains to be seen whether the Colorado legislature will fully restore funding levels for public institutions in the state going forward—particularly to early 2000s levels.

In ways that are more substantial than most of the rest of the US, Colorado students are tasked with learning and earning their way to a credential for economic legitimacy, but they are not provided with the same resources to attain academic milestones. While troubling for all students, this situation exacerbates difficult situations for students in underserved populations, creating and perpetuating further inequities.

### **Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The goal of this study is to identify discursive language or artifacts that discussed appropriation funding effects by examining oral and written output of policy actors and stakeholders in Colorado public higher education. Output from elected or appointed government officials and offices were the only discourses considered for this project, and include the Governor’s Office, Colorado Department of Higher Education, Colorado Legislature (via the Joint Budget Committee), and legislative staff. Particular attention was paid to discourse (and financial outcomes) that affected student share. The Colorado legislative cycle for fiscal year 2021-2022 was analyzed for this project, which also incorporated basic financial analysis of appropriations budgets for context purposes.

In addition to the source parameters above, the discourses were only from published materials meant for public availability—speeches and written material that were available and meant to influence as wide an audience as possible. Private

communications between officials were not within the scope of this project as it sought analysis on *public* policy discourse materials.

Specifically, the project sought answers to the following research questions:

1. What policy discourses were used by public officials to discuss and/or influence higher education appropriations funding for public institutions in Colorado?

And, within the context of question one:

2. How were these discourses used and what do they make possible or impossible through their policy arguments?
3. What was inferred in these discourses about relationships, power structures, or other non-textual elements?

The first question was used to narrow the artifact field to useful discourses and identify relevant pieces and passages that formed the context and body of the study. For purposes of this study, “policy discourse” is defined as statements, speeches, policy briefs, press releases, or other written or spoken artifacts that describe policy efforts on the part of higher education policy officials. Inherent in policy discourse analysis, a poststructural approach (Allan, 2009) invites multiple narratives, making it possible to accommodate variations in perception for funding effects and analysis of discursive elements involving power, equity, and critical lenses. Policy discourse analysis brings these discussions into conversation with each other, as well as the people who have produced them (Allan, 2009). The use of policy discourse analysis is discussed further in chapter two.

The second and third questions delved into the identified materials to explore content and relationships in the text—both intrinsic and extrinsic—as well as considering style, design, and sub/textual components for meaning and symbols. Analysis of these elements allowed for deeper understanding and intentionality when considering their effects on legislation and financial outcomes that they were created to influence.

### **Significance**

Examining the discourse surrounding Colorado state funding will help higher education practitioners and advocates by allowing them to look at discursive models and devices that resonate with policymakers who decide higher education appropriations. Other fields, such as medical research grants, have a strong correlation between increased funding and increased advocacy, lobbying, and similar efforts (Best, 2012). Changing or increasing advocacy efforts for appropriations—and the resulting funding increases—offers the possibility of substantial improvements for students and their long-term financial health. In addition, from a purely economic perspective, attaining “workforce readiness” credentials typically has a consistent and healthy return on investment for all parties: states, individual students, and taxpayers (Blagg & Blom, 2018). Thoughtful application of increased appropriations also has the potential to improve education equity for students.

**Summary.** The past two decades have brought serious effects for students related to the costs they incur for higher education, particularly related to the pandemic. Colorado is no exception to this and went into the pandemic with existing structural shortcomings related to student vs. state share of cost. This project examines the policy discourses surrounding policymaker conversations on funding for public higher education

in Colorado and looks for what is possible or impossible in those discourses. Examining the discourse from neoliberal and poststructural frameworks allows for examination of a variety of viewpoints and narratives while seeking information in power structures and dynamics.

Chapter two, the literature review, discusses state appropriations, their current state of decline, and work that addresses various solutions that have been proposed. In addition, I examine the ways that fiscal policy has been analyzed through fiscal policy analysis, the governance structures present in higher education public funding, and the theoretical frameworks used for this study: neoliberalism and poststructural postmodernism, with its emphasis on multiple voices and narratives and skepticism of truths and binaries. Policy discourse analysis (as both framework and methodology) is discussed in chapter three, followed by an overview of the methods used.

Findings, in chapter four, reveal the discourse analysis and how relationships and governance structures from a variety of sources within the state interact and try to influence each other, how power flows from office to office, and what policy is eventually enacted. The four parties involved in the discourse: the Governor's Office, Colorado Department of Higher Education, Joint Budget Committee, and JBC staff, all contribute to the conversation and strive for influence and legitimacy. The implications for students and institutions, along with policy formation recommendations and suggestions for future research conclude in chapter five.

### **Definitions and Concepts**

**Access:** Unless noted, in this study, "access" primarily refers to economic accessibility, as this is the context in which it is used in the discourse materials that were

analyzed. Economic accessibility is defined as the ability of a student or family to pay the costs of higher education. The economic accessibility idea and emphases are in line with Colorado's performance funding model for higher education (Hillman, et al., 2014).

**Agency(ies):** Any of several departments that are part of the Colorado state government, such as the Colorado Department of Higher Education.

**Colorado Department of Higher Education and Colorado Commission on Higher Education:** The two primary entities that are responsible for governing the relationship between the Colorado legislature, governor, and the public higher education institutions in the state. CDHE is an agency department that works closely with the Governor's Office to execute policy and programs, while CCHE works directly with institutional governing boards (such as the University of Colorado Board of Regents, Colorado School of Mines Governing Board, the State Board for Community Colleges and Occupational Education, and others) to make recommendations on funding and funding formulae to the legislature (CDHE, 2022).

**Colorado Fiscal Year:** Colorado's fiscal (or budget) year runs July 1 through June 30 (Colorado General Assembly, 2022b). For this study, the fiscal year budget plan for analysis was July 1, 2021 through June 30, 2022.

**Colorado Joint Budget Committee:** Comprised of six legislators, the JBC sets detailed budget recommendations that are passed on to the Colorado house and senate for vote and enactment. There are three committee members each from the house and senate, and each party selects representatives for their membership. In fiscal year 2021-22, there were four Democrats and two Republicans on the JBC (CJBC, 2021a). The JBC works with a small contingent of non-partisan, bureaucratic, typically long-term staff who

develop budget documents, work with institutions and agencies to gather information, and present budget materials to the Committee throughout each fiscal year budgeting cycle. This staff group is also responsible for handling appropriations reporting and researching out-of-cycle budgetary adjustments when needed. The director of the JBC Staff is appointed by the JBC Executive Committee (Colorado General Assembly, 2022a).

**Colorado Legislature:** A bicameral body, the Colorado General Assembly (referred to generally as the “legislature”) has house and senate bodies. For fiscal year 2021-22, both houses were controlled by Democrats (Ballotpedia, 2021).

**Discourse:** At a basic level, discourse is the material or spoken artifact(s) that make up the communication between parties—political entities, in the context of this study. In addition, I recognize the nonverbal, visual, subtextual, and ignored elements of discourse. Discourse both reflects and creates reality when it is given. Because discourse produces reality, it is a form of power (Allan, 2009). Policy discourse analysis, as a methodology and method, is utilized in this study to analyze the communications of political actors for a specific topic, specifically examining power through the idea of discursive agency—who can speak and how socially-constructed groups are formed, reflected, and included or excluded in speech (Gándara & Jones, 2020). See also *neoliberalism* and *power*.

**Institutions and Institutional Governing Boards:** Unless noted, in this study, these refer to public institutions of higher education in the state of Colorado. The institutional governing boards in Colorado have a variety of formats, including system-level boards as well as individual institutions. Some boards are publicly elected (such as

the University of Colorado Board of Trustees) while others are appointed by the governor (Colorado School of Mines). The Colorado Commission on Higher Education is Colorado's coordinating higher education executive office, and the executive director is appointed by the governor. CCHE coordinates a variety of institutional governing boards, who directly govern their institutions or systems (SHEEO, 2020).

**Neoliberalism:** Closely related to power and discourse in the context of this study, my application of neoliberalism derives largely from the work of Allan (2009), Springer (2012), Smyth (2017), Harvey (2007), and Faber (2018). Neoliberalism, asserting the idea that markets and economic exchanges are the defining moral, ethical, and rational mediums for human interaction, forces discourse and power to be subsumed and translated into issues of monetary exchange. Most policy artifacts in this study were either directly or indirectly forms of neoliberal discourse, and neoliberal influence was used to leverage political power through to students and higher education institutions. Also see *discourse* and *power*.

**Policy:** Unless noted, refers to an enacted policy, set either by the legislature or through delegation to an agency such as CDHE, that governs the activities, budgets, or other elements of institutions of higher education. Though many forms of policy exist (such as proscribed regulatory rules or punitive measures), a poststructural approach suggests that legislative policy is recommended and potentially implemented towards improving outcomes and practices in higher education, primarily for students (Allan, 2009).

**Policy Brief:** A document, frequently short and pointed, that advocates for a specific policy, funding, or other legislative action. Policy briefs are utilized by agencies,



lobbyists, institutions (and their boards), private citizens, and others to attempt to influence the legislative process.

**Postmodernism:** Arising in the twentieth century, postmodern thought is “skeptical” about the ideas of truth, absolutes, and binaries. As a framework, it emerged in response to modernist ideas of concrete truth and empirical knowledge (Allan, 2009, p. 12; Baxter, 2003). In this study, it was utilized to recognize and incorporate multiple voices towards the overall narrative.

**Power:** Policy discourse analysis is highly focused on how power is demonstrated and wielded through speech. Power, in the context of this study, is the idea of having the ability to change reality and influence behavior through policy levers (Gándara & Jones, 2020). Closely related to power, the ideas of legitimacy and influence both describe and produce discourse and power, and my study views these ideas as flowing in and out of each other, given the power of discourse to influence reality and behaviors. See also *discourse* and *neoliberalism*.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The field of public higher education appropriations policy research is rich with study of many elements of the contexts, outcomes, and players in the space, and many projects have concentrated on quantifiable outcomes of policy decisions, linking attributes of policymakers and interest groups to appropriations (Tandberg, 2010a). In addition, a variety of policy discourse analysis studies have demonstrated the strength of the framework (further discussed below) as a tool for considering higher education policies and politics (Gándara & Jones, 2020; Saarinen, 2008). Likewise, related literature has also considered the higher education policy field from related postmodern theories or frameworks (Schneider & Sidney, 2009; Winkel & Leipold, 2016), but few have directly looked at funding through a poststructural lens—and even fewer have used a reaction to neoliberalism to form a basis for critique. As this review will show, there is a general lack of literature on higher education qualitative discourse analyses relative to funding, particularly in the poststructural theoretical space.

In this literature review, the issues of declining state appropriations, effects of those declines on students and institutions, alternatives for funding, and justifications for the cost of higher education are explored. In many instances, the outcomes related to lobbying and distance education create self-replicating cycles (as will be shown below), thus making outcomes an important element in any discussion of legislative discourse, as the outcomes often become inputs during the next cycle. In addition, the relationships

between legislators who determine appropriations and those who try to influence them (such as higher education state executives, lobbyists, and advocates) were also mined from the literature. The literature gap that this study proposes to bridge is also considered, which explains and ties together the way that appropriations declines are problematic for students and institutions.

### **State Appropriations Environment in Colorado**

Though the earliest public institutions in the US date back to the early 1800s (Reed, 1948; UNC, 2020), significant expansion of state-supported public higher education institutions occurred because of land grants issued under the First Morrill Act, starting in 1862 (Gavazzi et al., 2018). While this study does not exclusively look at land-grant institution funding, the land-grant history is useful as an introduction to public appropriations. Not without problems—such as the theft of Native American lands and exclusion of women—this large-scale jumpstart of American public higher education built many of the systems and narratives surrounding higher education that persist today, including the idea of existing to serve the “public good” (Gavazzi et al., 2018). Today, land-grant institutions serve a vast array of purposes and communities, and there is at least one such institution in each US state, having been state-supported since their creation through the legislation of state budget appropriations (Sorber, 2018). State budget appropriations for land-grant institutions have formed a significant portion of the historical and current proportion of these funds, including in Colorado (Colorado Joint Budget Committee, 2020).

While receiving some federal funds, in fiscal year 2021-22, Colorado higher education institutions received more than \$1.2 billion in allocation from the state’s

general fund, representing approximately 9.7% of the state's overall general fund and the fourth-highest expenditure category (CJBC, 2021a). By contrast, in Colorado's fiscal year 2012-13, higher education expenses represented 8.2% of the general fund budget, or about \$620 million. In ten years, expenses for the state had nearly doubled in higher education (though most other categories—and the overall state budget—had also doubled; CJBC, 2021a). Most other US states had experienced similar changes relative to increasing costs for higher education, though Colorado's allocations had been and continued to be low as a percentage student vs. state share of expense (SHEEO, 2021b).

Colorado utilizes a performance funding model, the most recent version of which was enacted in 2020 to be implemented in the 2021-22 fiscal year budget. The performance funding model is administered by the Colorado Commission on Higher Education, alongside the Department of Higher Education and institutions in the state (Colorado General Assembly, 2022c). The model uses several metrics to determine funding share, including: resident student FTE enrollment, credential completion, resident Pell-eligible student population, resident underrepresented minority student population, retention rates, graduation rates, and resident first-generation student population. The administering agency, CCHE, is a coordinating board that works directly with institutional and system boards in Colorado to determine funding levels and set institutional policy, and is overseen by an executive director who is appointed by the governor and confirmed by the state senate (SHEEO, 2020).

One additional item that has significant effects on Colorado's budgetary process is TABOR, or the Taxpayer's Bill of Rights. TABOR is a constitutional amendment that Colorado voters passed in 1992 that restricts the amount of new revenue that Colorado

can retain, and amounts that exceed the TABOR limit must be refunded to taxpayers the following fiscal year unless a voter referendum passes that allows retention of the funds (CDR, 2022). This has significant follow-on effects for Colorado policymakers as they create each general fund budget, and largely prevents significant state surpluses from being used for almost all purposes, including P-12 education or health programs, in addition to higher education. It also precludes significant expansion of the state budget as TABOR further forces the state to put any tax increases into voter referendums—the legislature cannot unilaterally increase taxes (CDR, 2022). Though TABOR does present a non-trivial hurdle to increasing the revenue available to higher education, several tax increases have passed through TABOR referendums and have benefited categories such as pre-K education, infrastructure, and health. Several of the TABOR referendums that cleared voter passage increased so-called “sin taxes” by increasing or creating new taxes on tobacco or marijuana sales and gambling ventures (Ballotpedia, 2022).

### **State Appropriations Declines**

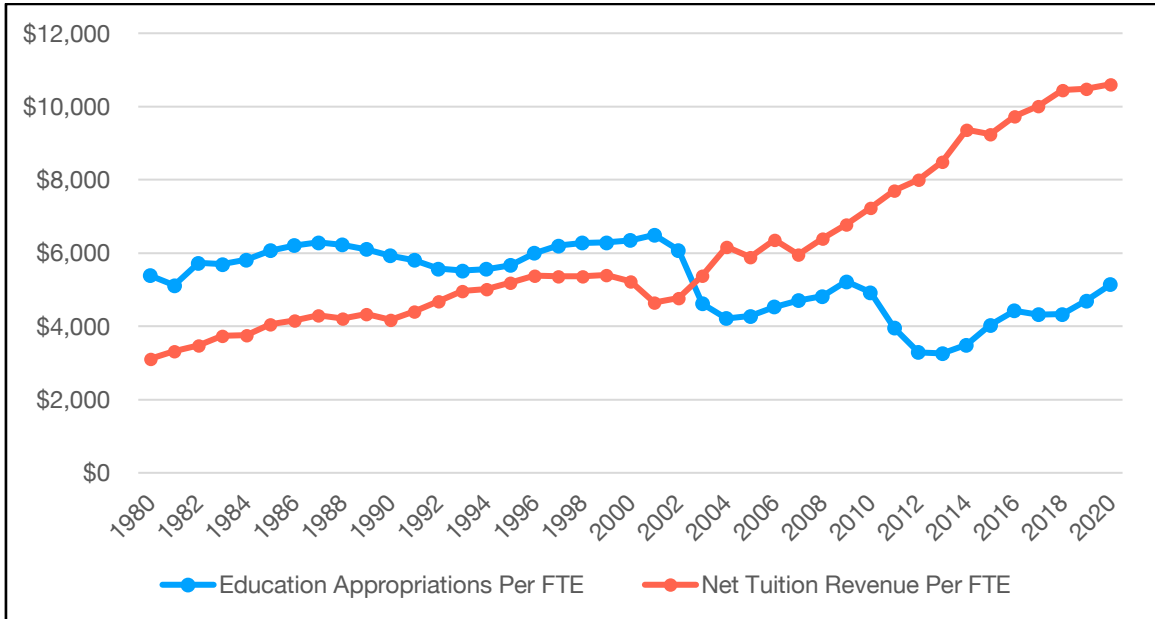
Weerts (2014) and many others, such as the State Higher Education Executive Officers’ Association (2020b), have looked at state appropriations to higher education in terms of funding per student in juxtaposition with student share. State appropriations research is important to the question of student share because the amount of state support received by public institutions influences the tuition rates that students must shoulder (Alstete, 2014; USGAO, 2014). “Student share” is made up of tuition and fees charged to students, net of state and institutional financial aid, and is sometimes called net tuition revenue (SHEEO, 2021b). During times of higher education budget cuts, tuition rates (and thus, student share) tend to increase as higher education is one of the few areas

where state governments have any ability to reduce expenditures (Lacy et al., 2017). Punctuated appropriations decreases, such as those that happened during the Great Recession and COVID-19 pandemic (Li, 2017; SHEEO, 2021a; 2021b), combined with steady erosion of per-student funding over the last several decades in most states (see above and SHEEO, 2021b), have left public institutions with substantial challenges and few alternatives for covering increasing costs beyond passing them to students. As will be seen in the next few sections, most of the studies directly examining appropriations have only looked at them through quantitative methods, resulting in little information on the “how” and “why” of the current funding environment.

Widely researched and reported, many graphs have been created that show student and state shares of tuition in an “X” shape over the past few decades, demonstrating the change in burden from public to private funding sources (Figure 1). For Colorado, the lines of the “X” crossed paths in 2003, the first year that public institutions received more revenue per student from net tuition (or student share) than they did from state appropriations (SHEEO, 2021c).

**Figure 1**

*Line Graph Showing Colorado Public Higher Education Appropriations Per Full Time Equivalent Student & Net Tuition Revenue Per Full Time Equivalent Student (SHEEO, 2021a)*



The State Higher Education Executive Officers' Association (2021a & 2021b), among others, has consistently highlighted this trend in appropriations funding, noting that students and their families have continued to be burdened with larger shares of higher education revenue over the past several decades. As of 2020, Colorado does not have the highest ratio of student share to appropriations per FTE (at 2.1:1); the state with the highest ratio was Vermont, at 4.5:1 (SHEEO, 2021b). Though Vermont was an outlier, Colorado had the fourth highest ratio of all states, with only New Hampshire, Delaware, and Vermont surpassing Colorado for the percent of total higher education costs placed on students (SHEEO, 2021b). While SHEEO's annual State Higher Education Finance reports are invaluable tools for identifying state and national trends, they do not examine the process leading to budgetary decisions.

Studies have pointed out these funding environments and their issues and sought ways to cover costs through other means or reduced expenses (CDHE, 2020b). The recognition of funding erosion as an issue is important and is an obvious contributor to many of the perceived problems with higher education today, such as excessive costs, student loan burdens, and (lack of) credential return on investment.

### **Increasing Non-appropriation Revenues as Alternative**

Faced with reduced state funding, institutions may turn towards other revenue sources to survive, with tuition increases and pursuit of higher-paying out-of-state students being two of the primary ways to generate additional income (Anderson, 2011; Jaquette & Curs, 2015). Additional non-academic sources of earned revenue have included auxiliary services, technology transfer, and partnerships with other organizations or corporations (Alstete, 2014). Though Anderson (2011) and Jaquette & Curs (2015) both make the case for increased revenue, they largely ignored the historical, legislative interest that states have had in higher education and were limited to internal institutional means for increasing funds.

Tuition and student fee increases—or increases in student share—have been the most common methods for finding revenue to replace appropriations declines, and these two data points, student share and appropriations, tend to have an inverse relationship (SHEEO, 2021b). Because of the punctuated decreases in appropriations during the last two recessions, in 2020, state appropriations per student in the US remained below inflation-adjusted 2001 levels (SHEEO, 2021b). COVID was unlikely to improve the situation for 2021 and following. Because of these historically low levels and volatility in



funding, institutions have sought out other ways to replace income and ensure student services survive.

Though there are a variety of non-academic sources of income available to institutions, such as auxiliary services and technology transfer, Alstete (2014) pointed out that these may represent, at most, 7-10% of most higher education budgets. In addition to their relatively low percentage of budget, some supplemental sources of income are also contingent on tuition through their relationship with enrollment head count, such as housing, parking, and food services. Still others are somewhat unpredictable as regular sources as income, such as technology transfer and its relationship with faculty research viability in the market. Technology transfer is also not a core mission of most regional and community institutions and their ability to raise any significant funding from this activity is limited—along with the vast majority of institutions outside of a few “unicorns” who have been fortunate enough to develop a major drug or scientific breakthrough (Andes, 2016).

Attracting out-of-state students ties into the varying rates that public institutions charge to in-state vs. out-of-state students. One of Colorado’s two flagship institutions, University of Colorado Boulder, for example, charged more than twice the rate to out-of-state students than in-state (CU Boulder, 2021a & 2021b). Ft. Lewis College—a very different institution from CU Boulder located in a small community in rural southwest Colorado—also charged more than twice as much for out-of-state students (Ft. Lewis College, 2021). Though institutions justify the additional charge for out-of-state students with an assumption that in-state families (or the students themselves) have paid or will pay taxes to the state that helped fund their education, the additional burden on out-of-

state students—and subsequent debt load—are still problematic for students and the field. When an institutional marketing emphasis on enrolling out-of-state students has been taken into consideration (Alstete, 2014), the situation becomes quite troubling as students are commoditized by how much they will pay for tuition. Though higher out-of-state rates are not unique to larger, research-oriented institutions (such as CU Boulder), the role of these institutions in emphasizing the attraction of out-of-state students was brought to light by a 2012 study showing that 73.6% of public doctoral institutions considered attraction of higher-paying students as an important revenue increasing strategy (Green et al.). None of these studies have considered the effects on students relative to tuition differentials or equity.

Finally, most public higher education institutions (such as the land-grants mentioned above) have maintained missions or mindsets that include public good and community engagement. These principles are challenging to maintain with straggling public support (Fretz et al., 2009). As Fretz et al. (2009) pointed out, public good and community engagement are closely tied to ideas of access, equity, and inclusion and are more challenging without funding supports that keep student share rates low.

### **Justification of Increases in Costs to Students**

In a 2020 “Return on Investment Report,” the Colorado Department of Higher Education and Governor Jared Polis argued that “despite tuition increases, a credential’s worth can be directly correlated to student decisions and the options available to them—it depends on where a student goes to school, how long they attend, what they major in and, most importantly, if they graduate” (p. 3). The Report went on to argue that degree attainment is highly worthwhile even as costs continue to increase, focusing almost

entirely on return-on-investment for students and cost reduction or control for institutions. It also maintained that student choice of major, living circumstances, and time-to-credential are all important elements in determining whether return-on-investment is worthwhile, discussing wage premiums for different areas of study and different credential types. Though the Report never explicitly suggested that students should pursue, for example, a business degree over a humanities degree, it mentioned repeatedly that if students want to “ensure affordability and maximize the ROI of a credential” (p. 17), they should carefully choose their major or area of study. It further went on to recommend that institutions:

- Act to reduce the time it takes to complete to ensure students realize the increased wage earnings they receive from a degree sooner (p. 17).
- Minimize the number of credits students take beyond what is required to complete a credential to ensure they are not paying more tuition or taking longer than they need to (p. 17).

Showing an emphasis on increased wages (and the income tax benefits they accrue to the state), this extraordinarily neoliberal perspective on higher education purposes and outcomes completely ignored Colorado’s position as the fourth-lowest state for higher education funding per FTE student in the United States (SHEEO, 2021b), and attempted to justify net tuition cost to students regardless of amount. Though affordability was mentioned throughout the Report, the onus is only on institutions to reduce or limit costs—never on the State to increase allocations (this will be discussed further in the next section).

Furthermore, Colorado leadership’s comments through the 2020 Report were not unique to the state or the Governor’s Office. Orphan et al. (2020) found that neoliberal discourses permeate the public comments of governors and state leaders—emphasizing return-on-investment, economic, and workforce development as “good” and primary outcomes of higher education activities, largely ignoring the socially-valuable public purposes of education (Berman, 2012; Brown, 2003; Smyth, 2017). In illustration, the Colorado legislature also agreed with the Governor’s Office, stating,

Colorado has always expected that individuals and families who benefit from higher education will bear at least some portion of the cost ... because state funds are limited and tuition increases are feasible, Colorado and other states have historically addressed state budget constraints by increasing the share of higher education costs borne by individuals and families (CJBC, 2020, p. II-59).

These statements were made during a period in which Colorado’s entire state government was controlled by Democrats—the Governor’s Office and both branches of the legislature (Ballotpedia, 2021). No commentary or analysis on the effects of increased higher education costs to students and families is presented with this note, and it seems to be accepted by both parties as a default answer to issues of funding.

### **Reducing Costs as Alternative**

Alongside appropriations and revenue increases, studies and public figures (including those in Colorado) have advocated for expense containment or reduction at public higher education institutions (Alstete, 2014; CDHE, 2020b; Maloy, 2018) as a means to limit net tuition costs to students. While higher education (and indeed, any public trust organization) has a reasonable responsibility to be a good steward of public funds, arguing for cost reductions in light of Colorado’s fourth-from-last higher education funding stance seems to willfully ignore a long history of recorded higher education

budgeting and finance that has not shown signs of systemic, abusive mismanagement. Given Colorado's higher education leadership and the Governor's Office embrace of austerity as the best option for institutions to lower student costs, their recommendations have included (CDHE, 2019, p. 4-5):

- Convening institutions to define clear targets and accountability measures, increase institutional reporting, and find efficiencies
- Lowering textbook costs through use of open educational resources
- Reducing time to degree through concurrent enrollment, transfer programs, and accelerated degrees
- Providing students with information about federal nutrition and housing programs
- Providing students with information about federal grants, work study, and scholarships
- Reduce healthcare costs through regional purchasing alliances
- Expand use of renewable energy

These were laudable and worthwhile goals to ensure good stewardship of public funds and institutions, though the state offered no analysis or suggestion as to *how much* they would have alleviated student share of costs (CDHE, 2019; 2020). The 2020 Report, however, did suggest that increases in higher education appropriations funding were unlikely in the short term given the budgetary challenges presented by COVID. At the time, however, other areas of Colorado education, such as early childhood education, had success in approving new tax revenue lines and increasing programming resources at the state level (Breunlin & Paul, 2021).

## **Fiscal Policy Framework Studies**

Tandberg's fiscal policy framework (FPF) has tied policy actors, such as interest groups, agency heads, college and university lobbyists, and politicians to the budgetary implications and limitations that result from appropriations decisions (Tandberg, 2010a). FPF has primarily looked at the *attributes* of actors to find links with financial outcomes. Those attributes might include group size, activity, visibility, political power, ideology, structure, or culture (Tandberg, 2010a).

Fiscal policy framework studies have tended towards quantitative evaluation, and they have shown that interest groups have influence on financial outcomes (Tandberg, 2010a; 2010b) and that, in particular, state higher education executive officers (SHEEOs) have a strong influence on appropriations decisions (Tandberg et al., 2017). These links demonstrate the importance of finding influential parties when identifying source material for policy discourse analysis. While enormously useful and relevant to the context of this study, attribute trends do not get at the "why" or "how" of the policy process.

## **Governance Structures and Centralization**

Mentioned above, Colorado has a single coordinating board (the Colorado Commission on Higher Education) that oversees the budget process and advises on policy to institutional and system boards that govern the various public colleges and universities in the state. Coordinating boards, in contrast with state-wide governing boards, tend to have lower amounts of centralized power and influence on the institutions in their states (ECS, 2019). Though there are nuances and complexities in how states govern higher

education that extend beyond the type of board they utilize, the ECS (2019) report demonstrates clear differences in how these various structures operate.

Where centralized state-level governance is stronger, educational funding has also seemed to be higher (Lacy et al., 2017; Manna, 2013; Tandberg et al., 2017), and state SHEEOs have played into this level of centralization—having influence on both the education governing structures of their state as well as on the way appropriations are utilized. As recipients, actors, and influencers in policy, SHEEOs (particularly those in governors’ cabinet level roles) have been uniquely positioned to both distill the goals of their constituencies as well as find power in political influence (Lacy et al., 2017). Unsurprisingly, Colorado ranked relatively low (ninth from lowest) in higher education policy actor centralization—as did several other low-appropriations per student states, such as Vermont and Delaware (Lacy et al., 2017).

In addition to the benefits for SHEEOs themselves, the centralization of higher education governance in states has also provided a concentrated resource for institutional lobbyists and advocates. Concentration of power and influence in politics has consistently been shown to increase overall financial outcomes for higher education in these circumstances (Manna, 2013). That said, better overall outcomes have not necessarily equated to more equitable outcomes for either students or institutions; these two concepts are decoupled and while greater financial resources are positive, they have not necessarily reduced equity gaps without intentional planning and policy (Manna, 2013). These studies again provide important context but are all quantitative.

Finally, though there has been some similar methodological work in education, such as Goldstein’s and Beutel’s (2009) analysis of the Bush administration’s discourse

related to the *No Child Left Behind* effort and localized efforts like Winton's (2009) study of rhetoric in public policy for Ontario primary schools, these studies have rarely explored higher education appropriations and the language used to influence policymaker decisions.

### **Methodological Gap and Policy Discourse Analysis**

As noted above, much of the research surrounding higher education financial policy has been quantitative. Though there is a lack of qualitative work, Maxwell (2020) points out that this format has significant value for the field, as “meaning matters, context matters, and process matters” (p. 181). To those three, I would add that message matters. Though Maxwell's “meaning” incorporates perceptions, it does not specifically look at the discourse content that policy advocates use. This invites a challenge from the angle of transferability of results—qualitative studies are often (self-admittedly) limited in their broad application. However, the contexts of quantitative studies also limit transferability to a certain extent, particularly when considering the data of a single state context. In any case, qualitative research has direct value and helps to uncover contexts and perceptions that, while unique to certain circumstances, are nevertheless important and consequential (Cheek, 2004). Qualitative analysis directly fills a methodological gap in the literature for this topic.

Taken together, the literature surrounding the topic of state higher education appropriations reveals a field that has seen decades of decreasing public support and increasing political blame on institutions for higher student costs (CDHE, 2019 & 2020; SHEEO, 2020a). Public institutions have not been consistently effective at communicating and advocating on their own behalf, allowing narratives from other



sources to promote a dominant discourse of excess, overspending, and questionable financial management (Alstete, 2014; CDHE, 2020b). To date, students and their families experience most of the downsides of the situation due to higher student share costs and higher debt burdens—having the most significant effect on students most in need of financial assistance (Blagg & Blom, 2018).

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

### ***Postmodernism and Poststructural Discourse***

Accepting a wide variety of possible paths, this study is firmly rooted in postmodernism. Rejecting the idea of universals, absolutes, and binaries, postmodern thought emerged in the twentieth century in response to modernism, which sought to find essential, concrete ideas about subjects (Allan, 2009; Baxter, 2003). Many approaches to understanding political discourse are viable, and postmodern thought allows for acknowledgement of the conversation between discourse, power, and influence present in current cultural systems.

Relying heavily on Allan (2009) and her introductory writing on feminist poststructuralism (and by extension, Foucault and Derrida), poststructuralism is associated with the idea that “language and discourse produce sociopolitical realities” (Allan, 2009, p. 12). Further, the meanings of language and discourse are not essential and change according to speaker, listener, time, or medium—in contrast with modern, structuralist views that seek intrinsic, universal, or truth values in discourse (Baxter, 2003). Poststructural analysis seeks to deconstruct language and evaluate the symbolism within that reflects political power relationships, working to “recognize the plurality, multivocality, and non-fixity of all meaning” (Baxter, 2003, p. 6).

An effect of higher education's attachment to empiricism (Yan, 2018), many higher education advocates (who are also, or have been, practitioners) also argue for increased funding and attention to the field based on traditional, modernist assertions of higher education's benefits to societies and economies (Ball, 1994; Carlson, 1993). Deconstruction of this language invites the question: has politics as a larger practice moved to a poststructuralist discourse frame, while higher education continues to try to prove its points from a modern, essentialist point of view?

Embracing the pluralism of poststructural discourse theory (Allan, 2009), this study seeks information in the discourse itself, embracing that there may be multiple paths to resources for higher education and that speaker-receiver perceptions of the "same" message may differ significantly (Cheek, 2004). This combination of theory and frameworks also ensures that actors, discourse, and financial outcomes are all acknowledged for their contributions.

Regardless of the answer to the rhetorical question posed above, employment of poststructural frameworks in political discourse contexts is a fitting analysis because of the emphasis on multiple narratives, voices, disciplines, and cooperative outcomes. My embrace of poststructuralism for this study maintains that many voices are not just important, but also essential to achieving equitable and positive outcomes for both students and practitioners in higher education. Ultimately, these outcomes would re-embrace the idea of higher education's positive effects on society, not merely economic growth, but also contributing to justice, equity, and ethical policy.

### ***Reaction to Neoliberalism***

Examining the discourse used to argue for higher education resources is only part of the equation, and policy discourse analysis must be brought into conversation with other dominant narratives (Allan, 2009). In this case: neoliberalism. Because one higher education goal of political discourse is increased funding, and the US economic, societal, and higher education paradigm is neoliberal and hyper-capitalist—emphasizing the private and financial benefits of higher education to the state (Gildersleeve, 2016; Smyth, 2017), my reactionist stance asserts that we must learn to build resources by operating from within the machine (la paperson, 2017)—specifically the neoliberal machine that has currently captured government and societal policymaking.

Over the past fifty years, neoliberal thought and practice has become firmly entrenched in the US (and throughout much of the world) (Faber, 2018; Harvey, 2007). Neoliberalism asserts the idea that markets and economic exchanges are the defining moral, ethical, and rational mediums for human interaction, and that political divisions and discourse are both subsumed and translated into issues of monetary exchange (Harvey, 2007; Faber, 2018; Smyth, 2017). US public higher education is also subservient to neoliberal ideas (Gildersleeve, 2016; Orphan et al., 2020), relying on the legislative decisions made by heavily lobbied representatives.

When considering this study, I have maintained that the overwhelming role of neoliberal thought in society need not lead only to the acquisition of funding as institutional mission, and am drawn to Gildersleeve (2016) and Smyth (2017) regarding neoliberalism's non/essential existence—arguing that capitalism is *not* essential, but it is important politically. This reaction stance to neoliberalism recognizes the importance of

funding and return on investment in discursive context, while using that funding to decrease student share of higher education's revenue—regardless of quantifiable returns. My reaction stance does not accept the inevitability of capitalism and market approaches to all human interaction and embraces that worthwhile human social (and individual) endeavors exist that are not quantifiable through financial measures. Some of these endeavors are provided by institutions of higher education, and while higher education does have a quantifiable cost, it does not fit squarely into the seller-buyer model. When considering the complex role of students as “customers,” it is important to recognize that placing too strong an emphasis on individual benefits from postsecondary education exacerbates inequities in society, while providing no private benefit removes personal motivation to complete credentials (Williams, 2016).

### **Literature Review Summary**

Though the United States has a varied history of funding higher education, recent declines in state appropriations for public institutions have been substantial and have largely fallen on the shoulders of students and their families to cover. Meanwhile, institutional costs and budgets have continued to increase as the service elements of higher education have grown. Colorado is in line with these trends, and in fact, has been one of the lowest-performing states when it comes to appropriations, ranking fourth lowest for funding per student as of 2020. Though some methods for lowering costs or finding new revenue streams have been attempted, these have largely been marginal and have had little effect on the costs that students end up bearing—and in fact, much of the conversation from official sources in Colorado have sought to justify costs through emphasis on private benefits of degree attainment.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of the theoretical frameworks employed in the study, and I explore the usefulness of poststructuralism, its connection to feminist thought, and how it recognizes and allows for multiple narratives and voices. Further, my reaction to neoliberalism as pervasive throughout political discourse and higher education is examined, acknowledging the strong lens of the framework while also denying it complete power over the narrative and desired outcomes of higher education in the context of this study.

### Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

Exploring political language from a poststructural perspective allows for analysis that examines many parts and types of discourse, including delivery, speaker–receiver perspectives, and meaning-making dissociated from *prima facie* factual content. This type of analysis seeks causal explanation, but not causal description (Maxwell, 2020; Shadish et al., 2002), and builds towards finding the ingredients that must be combined for one or more outcomes, referred to as “causal cakes” by Cartwright and Hardie (2012, p. 62-63). Through these lenses, a take on whether or not higher education advocacy discourse in politics is using a model that matches the mindset of policy-makers was discernible—as well as a reflection on mismatches between policy framing discussions and financial outcomes.

Mentioned above, the ideas of speech delivery, speaker–receiver perspectives, and meaning-making are all related to policy creation contexts and framing (Druckman, 2001). In the policy arena, voices and discourse perceived as “elite” are more likely to be able to promote frames that are accepted and embraced. Druckman’s policy framing work has also suggested that, as the perception of higher education as an elite voice is eroded, reliable discourse advocating for increased resources for higher education also suffers and framework mismatches become more common. Discussed in detail below, policy discourse analysis allows us to incorporate these elements into review of published and spoken policy materials.

## **Policy Discourse Analysis**

Rising out of feminist poststructuralism, policy discourse analysis (PDA) neatly combines several important aspects of poststructuralism and critical frameworks, and invites conversation with normalized dominant discourses that need examination or questioning (Allan, 2009). In this case, the normalized discourse is neoliberalism and its effects on higher education—an area ripe for questioning (Smyth, 2017). The aspects of postmodernism engaged with PDA include varied narratives, multi-vocality, and examination of power and symbolism present in textual sources. PDA utilizes deep reading to examine what is between the lines and left unsaid on artifacts or in official speeches. Finally, critical frameworks are secondarily engaged when acknowledging equity efforts (or lack thereof) in discourses.

PDA, in the approach used here, is based not on structural approaches to language, but on the idea “that language is socially constituted and shaped by the interplay between texts, readers, and larger cultural context rather than carrying any kind of fixed meaning that can be ‘discovered’.” Allan (2009) went on to note the importance of symbolism in language and the power dynamics that occur, recognizing that language not only reflects and reports on culture, but also constructs it. Furthermore, Baxter (2003) asserted that discourse analysis techniques embrace multiple meaning in three ways (p. 6): plurality, multi-vocality, and non-fixity. This variety of possibility within policy discourse analyses opens a wealth of options for recognizing the perspectives of both speaker and receiver within the medium and its context.

In addition to its use as a methodological framework, policy discourse analysis is also a qualitative method (Check, 2004). Originating in anthropological and cultural

studies in the early-to-mid-20th century, qualitative research utilizes a variety of techniques to develop research outcomes (Jovanović, 2011). It also embraces the de-/reconstruction, pluralism, structural complexity, self-reflection, and “linguistic-relativistic epistemology” (Jovanović, 2011, p. 3) inherent to the postmodern-poststructural lens. Borrowing from case study, this project utilized the idea of a “bounded system” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 148), and is both a methodological approach and a unit of analysis, assisted by the ideas behind particularistic type of case study (Merriam, 2009). Particularistic case study works well as an adjacent framework for this study as it is centered on a specific phenomenon—in this case the discourse from various stakeholders relative to Colorado higher education appropriations for the 2021-22 legislative cycle. While many policymakers highly value quantitative data for decisions (Maxwell, 2020), policy discourse analysis—centered in the ideas of poststructuralism and a braided stream of narratives and power—is well suited to the issue at hand, especially when contemplating multiple paths that policy advocates might find informative, depending on the circumstances of need.

Colorado’s higher education and government landscapes in 2021-22 were uniquely suited for analysis because of the politics in the state. Though the 2021-22 fiscal year was entirely controlled by Democrats in all three branches of the legislative and executive parts of the state’s government, Colorado’s governor was a moderate Democrat and the Republican party controlled a non-trivial percentage of both chambers of the legislature (Ballotpedia, 2021). Additionally, the 2021-22 budget cycle presented unique and substantial challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in significant



state budget cuts (though these were largely made up by federal funds in Colorado) (SHEEO, 2021c).

## **Methods**

Proceeding in several overlapping phases, my research explored Colorado's public higher education funding policy discourse to learn about how it is used to try and influence appropriations decisions. Collection and analysis (detailed below) were guided by my research questions and utilized the PDA framework to ask how and why language was used to argue for various appropriations decisions—and their effects on students—in the budgeting process. In addition, critical and power dimensions were considered relative to the sources of information and their identities and relationships. Policy discourse analysis's emphasis on finding symbols and meaning in texts was an ideal approach for studying these materials and their role in the legislative appropriations space.

Noted in preceding sections, I acknowledged neoliberalism as a dominant discourse, but not as an ongoing construct through which all public educational discourse must necessarily flow (Smyth, 2017). Throughout the discourse, I noted specific instances of neoliberal language, such as use of words like *brand*, *market*, *return-on-investment*, and others. Neoliberalism views market supremacy as the only moral lens with which to view society and culture; poststructuralism (and postmodernism more broadly) has provided an ideal framework to respond and react to neoliberalism's single narrative and cast a skeptical eye on use of neoliberal concepts in describing non-market ideas. In partnership with these two frameworks, policy discourse analysis has allowed

for powerful and robust scrutiny of political speech and its origins, sources, effects, and visual cues.

### ***Data Collection***

The data collection methods presented below are not presented in a hierarchical order but were considered as equal method techniques in the process. Several weeks were spent on data collection efforts, with additional documents identified and added to the mix during the first coding pass.

**Document Collection.** Two primary means of document collection were utilized: publicly available documents accessible through stakeholder and legislative websites, and affecting documents surfaced or referenced through the initial cache (Bardach & Patashnik, 2020). Documentation carries unique advantages, including being non-obtrusive, convenient for analysis, and typically using thoughtful formulation on the part of the contributor, with no need for transcription (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Finally, policy briefs are a unique distillation of already-researched work that the Colorado Department of Education and Colorado Commission on Higher Education (to which the institutional boards are responsible) provided openly to garner public support for their initiatives. In particular, the CDHE employs individuals engaged in primary and secondary research, allowing perceptions of that direct research with the state of Colorado to be analyzed. All materials were reviewed for general themes and then analyzed for deep reading and coding (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Gildersleeve, 2016). Utilizing the initial research question, the coded document group was selected to represent a variety of source perspectives, types, and diversity of intent, and analysis took

place in a deep, methodical, and deliberate practice that aligned with the methods in PDA and in reaction to neoliberal ideals for quick hyper-productivity (Gildersleeve, 2016).

Recognizing that a variety of texts and narratives are essential to the idea of multi-vocality (Baxter, 2003), attention was taken to find and analyze documents from several sources. The Colorado Department of Higher Education was a strong source, but the legislative staff, Joint Budget Committee, and Governor's Office all provided materials that were analyzed for alternative narratives. These documents were readily accessible from public-facing websites.

In addition to documents related to discourse, the financial outcomes of legislative sessions (such as budget reports) were reviewed for appropriations decisions. In-depth knowledge of these budgets was a key element of discursive context as the stakeholders' discourse efforts were reviewed in the context of financial outcomes. In addition, the annotations and notes in appropriations reports frequently contained telling bits of information that informed policy discourse background and context.

These materials were found primarily through two sources—the Colorado legislature website and the Colorado Department of Education website. The legislature site has a variety of filtering and search options, and I was able to readily surface hearings and documents related to higher education budget allocations from both the Joint Budget Committee and legislative staff. Artifacts from the Colorado Department of Higher Education (and associated with the Governor's Office and Colorado Commission on Higher Education) were found through searches and digging through the CDHE website. This site was less straightforward for artifact discovery, but I used Google's specific site search functionality to find material more easily. During discovery of

artifacts, I encountered a few documents (primarily from CDHE) that were eventually removed from the study as, upon analysis, they were not found to contain appropriations discourse and were not helpful in answering the research questions.

**Audio-Visual Artifacts.** Presentations and speech utilized by the Joint Budget Committee and other stakeholders in the venue of legislative discussions were also analyzed for content and themes. Transcripts from publicly-available hearing recordings were created using Otter.ai with subsequent review and correction by myself. All told, approximately six hours of audio hearings were analyzed through my review and listening for nonverbal cues present in inflection or delivery. Recordings of this sort provided highly useful *in situ* information that not only offered direct information, but also insight that delivered information beyond mere text for more rich, detailed description. Use of this data benefited from being unobtrusive, easy to obtain, and permanently accessible (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These recordings were accessible from the Colorado legislature's website and were categorically organized and searchable for easy retrieval of higher education-related hearings.

Altogether, 12 publicly available artifacts were included in the analysis. These were comprised of four policy briefs, one presentation deck, one spreadsheet, two Joint Budget Committee hearing sessions (via audio and transcripts), two Joint Budget Committee staff reports, and two Joint Budget Committee Appropriations reports. A detailed list is in Appendix A.

### ***Data Analysis***

**Coding.** Initially, information from the sources above was used to create a coding database (Jones et al., 2014). Organization and analysis utilized qualitative study software

(*nVivo*) to organize and code data, organized in several passes to develop themes and sub-themes. I engaged in open coding, looking for emergent themes in the data, and organized the starting passes through the data by alternating between document analysis and audio-visual artifact analysis, mixing all three elements (discourse documents, budgets, and recordings) in sequential passes. A list of codes and themes (the latter referred to as “frames” in Chapter 4) can be found in Appendix B.

Utilizing the strategies from Allan (2009) and Druckman (2001), and implemented by Orphan et al. (2020), my open coding in document analysis sought patterns and arcs in the policy discourse process as well as power positions and contexts of actors and subjects. I examined textual elements for specific language used as well as design elements, photos, graphics, and conventions. Coding for legislative discourse transcripts used both the written text and the recording, resulting in a set of coded data from a variety of groups and sources. Likewise, discursive sources were also coded to ensure that this element of context was not lost and to examine the potential impacts that individual authorship identities (titles, committee rank, political party affiliation) have on policy discourse.

Visual elements of the discourse artifacts (where appropriate; hearing recordings had no visual elements) were analyzed and coded in similar ways—looking for repetition, emphasis, and differences between documents and their sources (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The design elements were analyzed from an artistic perspective with the understanding of art as objectified knowledge (Fuchs, 2016). Because knowledge is a form of power and neoliberalism (Springer, 2012), analysis of the visual elements of the artifacts is a key element of the study.

With policy discourse analysis's emphasis on non-fixity and multiple narratives, I sought to mix and match themes, looking for substructure and power relationships between various parties, and coded for the sources of these discourses that illuminated power structures or tensions. Three primary themes (frames) emerged from the data, with a strong undercurrent of effects from the pandemic, federal funding assistance through the CARES Acts, and competition for resources with other parts of the state budget. Observations and analysis from evaluation of visual and design elements were threaded into conversation with each theme and are discussed in a separate section addressing their unique effects.

### ***Trustworthiness***

Guidelines for ensuring trustworthiness in my study involved use of multiple qualitative validity procedures (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), including:

**Triangulation.** Utilization of materials from multiple disparate sources, including the Colorado Department of Higher Education, legislature, and staff allowed converging (or conflicting) themes to emerge (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

**Rich, Thick Description.** Recordings of legislative sessions and the graphical design methods used in materials like policy briefs allowed for picturesque description of the emphases, nonverbal elements, and choices utilized throughout the source materials. In particular, the legislative recordings provided an opportunity to describe passion or tension in the discursive efforts used (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

**Bias Clarification.** Discussed further below in the Positionality section, my own biases and background were explored, including the professional and personal ideas that I brought to this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

**Discrepant Information.** Mentioned above, tensions present in the data present a realistic picture of the legislative process. Colorado's appropriations measures were not arrived at through a homogenous collective, but through bargaining, arguing, mixed opinions, and limited resources. Revealing these discrepancies connects to the methodological tenets of PDA and poststructuralism and increased authenticity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### *Narrative Strategy*

Utilizing the multiple discourses model described above, the narrative described a variety of perspectives through an in-depth discourse analysis of the materials, noting themes, structures, and contributor/receiver perspectives as appropriate. Some chronological presentation was used to describe timelines of discursive events or other significant influences. Quotes from source materials illustrated certain points or themes. Special attention was given to power relationships and critical perspectives, as well as my embrace of reaction to neoliberalism.

### *Limitations*

**Materials Availability.** Limitations of these sources and techniques included document or artifact availability issues—historical documents can be difficult to locate or retrieve. Unbeknownst to me, protected legislative information may have been impossible or difficult to find. Artifact unavailability may have reduced the number of perspectives present in the study or allow some themes to be over- or underrepresented. Though this was a concern to be conscious of, based on reviews of stakeholder and legislative websites, I believe that saturation was reached, and sufficient discursive artifacts were analyzed to establish trustworthiness (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

**Bounded Analysis.** Necessarily focused as part of the PDA method (Orphan et al., 2020), this study deliberately narrowed focus to a bounded system and purposely separated the system from other influences or occurrences. Though I endeavored to incorporate significant effects from outside the system when applicable (such as the pandemic), the bounding necessarily creates a somewhat blurry line regarding what is “in” or “out” of bounds for inclusion. I was guided by the research purpose above and it provided clarity to determine how far the bounded system extended. This, by definition, limited the study results to Colorado during a specific point in time—the fiscal year 2021-22 budget cycle.

**Inarticulation and Inaccuracy.** Provenance and reliability of discursive artifacts will vary according to the source’s ability to articulate their ideas and texts. Furthermore, errors of omission (purposeful or not), perception, fact, or otherwise may be present in the source data. Discourse analysis also assumes that choices about language and appearance exist intentionally—and in particular, design discourse must be treated with care. Sometimes people just pick a template for design because to them, it looks nice, and has little to do with intentionality or theoretical connections to their work. Though I did not endeavor to make assumptions about the calculation behind design, I believe it was clear when design intent was in play and analyzed accordingly (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### ***Positionality***

While I have not personally been affected as a student by public institution appropriations in Colorado, I am a resident of the state with all the connections inherent with that relationship. In addition, as a white male, educated to graduate (master’s) level,



I benefit significantly from society's perceptions of my gender and race. Though I am evaluating public higher education for this project, I went to private institutions for both my undergraduate and graduate degrees and finished with relatively small, manageable levels of student debt. I have been uniquely privileged both into and from the higher education system in the United States (and through my family) and acknowledge that my experience with the system is atypical compared to many students navigating the world of public higher education in 2022.

In addition, in early 2020, I was a Colorado Department of Higher Education Policy Fellow. As part of that program, I became loosely acquainted with several of the department's personnel and operations. Through the fellowship, a small team that I was part of also offered a policy brief pertaining to the Colorado Opportunity Scholarship Initiative. Though the fellowship provided professional contacts, I do not believe it had significant influence on my analysis in this study.

While I do not feel that my previous experiences with higher education have had much influence on my analysis or interpretation of the discourse, my interest in it comes primarily from my work in the field—both professionally and as a volunteer. I have also personally been significantly affected by my experiences in higher education and am a strong believer in its promises and vision, when implemented thoughtfully and equitably. I have viewed higher education's changing priorities and neoliberalization with a skeptical eye, even before I knew the terminology to describe what I was seeing, and these changes have profound effects for the future. I am interested because my daughter has a future that will likely include some form of higher education in Colorado, and I want the state I live in to support and nurture students to become fully realized adults. All

of this contributes to answering, “why this study, and why now?” Lastly, as detailed below, I also have passion and expertise in the disciplines used in discourse analysis.

**Communications Training and Experience.** After I discovered poststructuralism and policy discourse analysis, I realized how close they are to my professional and personal experiences and passions. Having studied communications and rhetorical criticism in my undergraduate program, this project is a satisfying union of my professional and academic lives. While my career has not always required a strong sense of communications theory (particularly when engaged in marketing-oriented positions), I have tried to stay current with communications philosophies and frameworks, having believed that an intentional communications strategy derives from conscious attention to the “why” of what is done in the field.

Recently, Fuchs’s *Critical Theory of Communication* (2016) has been meaningful to me as a compilation of modern social communications frameworks, with contributions from leading thinkers in the field. Though I anticipated social media—heavily discussed in Fuchs—driving some of the discussion relative to influences on public policy, I found through the discourse analysis that it had little influence on the funding portions of the legislative process. To a large extent, study of the effects of social media and the ways that humans use it to communicate is still in its infancy and there will be many more studies that address the topic and perhaps reveal some of its long-term influences on public funding policies.

In addition to the social media topic, Fuchs and the book’s other contributors also explore the overwhelming effects of neoliberalism (or digital capitalism) on the field of communications, putting the two in direct conversation against the backdrop of the

Frankfurt School, Lukács, Habermas, and others. Topics such as knowledge commodities vs. commons, administrative vs. critical scholarship, and ideological vs. emancipatory epistemologies all pique my interest as a scholar of education with a background in communications.

**Design Experience.** Similar to communications, my experiences and studies in the practice of design also inform my work in this study. Having trained as a graphic artist early in my career, I sought to connect the visual elements of my work with the subject matter, and I find that most graphic artists who I have worked with over the years tend to bring a similar approach to their trade.

Likewise, my background experience in performing arts gives a unique perspective on the nonverbal cues in spoken language. Though lengthy, I enjoyed listening to the legislative speeches and discussions in this study with an ear toward what was left unsaid—one of the emphases found within PDA. I found the “performance” aspects of this spoken material fascinating. The aesthetics of artifact analysis in discourse study were perhaps some of the most challenging to engage with but I also believe they were some of the most rewarding aspects.

### **Methodology and Methods Summary**

As both a methodology and method, policy discourse analysis is an ideal tool for analyzing the artifacts and speeches given by political actors to examine the underlying frameworks, power dynamics, and relationships present in their communications. I have connected policy discourse analysis to poststructuralism and postmodernism and gave reasons for why this study, why at this time, and why I am qualified and interested in performing the work. Data collection techniques, coding, theming, and trustworthiness

were all established, as well as narrative strategy and limitations. Finally, I explained how this work is important to me and my positionality in relation to it.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

The political efforts and fiscal decision making for Colorado’s public higher education funding fall largely into the auspices of just four groups: the Governor’s Office, the Colorado Department of Higher Education (and associated Colorado Commission on Higher Education), the legislative Joint Budget Committee Staff office, and the Joint Budget Committee itself. These four groups formulate the majority of the spending bill and its details, which is then passed to the state legislature for vote. Because the Joint Budget Committee is controlled by the ruling party in the legislature, the spending bill(s) are largely already in line with that party’s spending priorities by the time they arrive on the floor for a vote. In the case of Colorado and its 2021-22 fiscal year, the Governor’s Office and the Department of Higher Education were also under the same party control as the legislature, resulting in a process that saw many adjustments to the higher education funding platform moved through discussion with little contention, as will be seen in the findings below.

Proceeding with a policy discourse analysis on the materials revealed three emergent frameworks, each discussed in detail below with their relevant themes. The student financial frame, as the most frequent lens used in the discourse, is discussed first, and is tied to ideas of how the funding decisions made by the legislature will affect students and their families—either financially or otherwise. Second, the institutional funding frame was also a common viewpoint, and shows how the individual institutions

(or subgroups, such as community colleges) will be affected by funding decisions. Finally, the economy and workforce frame was used to think about how the funding decisions would have an impact on Colorado's larger public economy, workers, and businesses. Issues such as unemployment, industry shortages, and rural gaps in education or healthcare featured prominently in this area.

In addition to the frameworks that emerged from the data, I also analyzed the visual and design elements present throughout the materials to find links back to the themes and offices discussed above—and to see if visual or subtextual cues survived from office to office as information and requests moved through the structures.

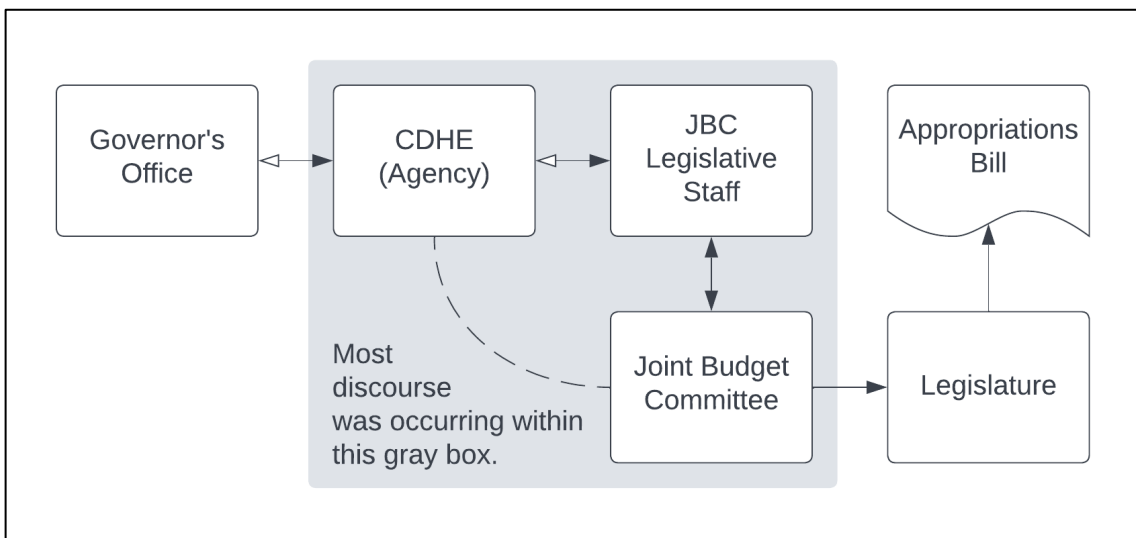
Power, legitimacy, and influence can all be seen flowing back and forth between the various offices and actors contributing to discourse in this material. In some cases, power, particularly in the form of influence, was wielded from unexpected sources such as the JBC legislative staff. The elected Committee members frequently relied heavily on their staff colleagues to provide important data and knowledge (power) on which significant decisions were based. Likewise, the Governor's Office was viewed as a key initiator of several projects and contributed significant influence through the Colorado Department of Higher Education, which also provided a variety of ideas that were generally strongly considered. The wielding of power—and the legitimacy and influence that flow both to and from power—is highlighted throughout the findings below.

In most of these frames and themes, a clear line of discourse (and power) can be identified from the Colorado Department of Higher Education (or occasionally the Governor's Office), to the legislative staff, to the Joint Budget Committee (JBC), to legislation. This is illustrated in Figure 2. Funding requests frequently initiate with state

agencies (such as CDHE), who make requests to the JBC Staff office. From there, most decisions are made via recommendation from legislative staff to the JBC, which generates a budget bill that is passed by the legislature. The Joint Budget Committee in the 2021-22 fiscal year was made up of four Democrats and two Republicans, and the Joint Budget Committee Staff office is expressly nonpartisan (CJBC, 2021a).

**Figure 2**

*Discourse Pathways*



Colorado’s 2021-22 fiscal year budgeting process was noted as “extraordinarily complex” (p. I-3) by the JBC Legislative Staff in their comments at the beginning of the Appropriations Report (CJBC, 2021a), largely due to fluctuations and unpredictability of tax revenue to the state during the COVID pandemic. In addition to direct tax revenue flux, the availability (without guidelines) of federal stimulus funding made determining where to place available state funding challenging for lawmakers as well as state agencies (CJBC, 2021a). Despite enormous (but backfilled) cuts to higher education from the state budget as outlined previously, forecasting by staff indicated that tax revenues would

make a complete turnaround from limitations in the 2020-21 budget and allow for significant restoration—and even increase—in the 2021-22 budget (CJBC, 2021a). This context provides some insight into the mindset of policy advocates and legislators as they began to consider agency requests for higher education.

### **Student Financial Frame**

Legislators and staff both thought about higher education funding from the perspective of students and families and the financial burdens that they carry. In fact, particularly for legislators, the student finance frame, or mindset, was the most frequent angle mentioned in discourse. There were several themes that developed in this area, including affordability, access, and comparative underfunding compared to other states.

#### ***Affordability***

The affordability of college has long been a topic at the forefront of higher education conversations—as outlined above, students, parents, educators, and legislators all have concerns about rising costs and their long-term effects on students' financial wellbeing. Colorado is no exception to this conversation, and throughout the discourse student affordability was the most frequently discussed concern, appearing in all 12 of the artifacts analyzed, with more than 80 direct or related mentions.

Student affordability discussions centered around several strategies, including tuition reductions or limits on increases, tuition (or loan) forgiveness for specific fields, and reducing supplemental or barrier costs, such as textbooks, which form a substantial portion of costs for students in less expensive programs such as community colleges. One such discussion centered around the complexities of all the intersecting, moving parts—including tuition costs, state funding, and enrollment numbers—with Representative Julie



McCluskie (a Democrat on the JBC) asking the JBC legislative staff at a March, 2021 hearing,

So if I'm understanding correctly, we buy down tuition. This is certainly a big plus for students that they end up not having to pay any increase. If it's ongoing, however, how do we continue to facilitate growing student enrollment? And for the institutions, if they were, say, to see that influx of students, right? Because I'm assuming your projections here, and actually, I shouldn't assume if you can give me your projections on how you arrived at your numbers, but as we hope to capture the students that we may have lost and bring them back to higher education, what sort of increase in that tuition buy down will we have to maintain? And then tell me about that interplay with financial aid as well? (CJBC, 2021b)

In some ways, affordability discourse formed some of the least contentious discussions between actors—even on opposite sides of the political spectrum (Democrats vs. Republicans). Individuals on both sides seemed to feel that public college costs were too high. During the hearing discussion brought up by McCluskie above, Senator Bob Rankin (a Republican on the JBC) added,

I think this idea of buy down for access institutions is really valuable right now, given our unemployment rate, and we're trying to get folks back to work [and] find jobs. I just had a question on a Colorado Mesa proposal. I mean, we did have a proposal from them, which was a more permanent solution. And I wonder if we should consider that permanent solution since we're addressing the problem here. (CJBC, 2021b)

This agreement “in principle” on some issues primarily arose out of economic or workforce arguments that were framed in an affordability mindset—i.e., if the JBC made higher education more affordable then the state economy would be improved.

However, disagreement arose when discussing the causes and effects of higher costs, and this is where the discourse begins to reveal underlying frameworks and motivations. For example, a hearing discussion regarding restoration of Colorado's Educator Loan Forgiveness program, which was suspended due to COVID-related budget

cuts, had CDHE recommending permanent discontinuation of the program based on its funding level being so low that the only way to run it was through lottery (CJBC, 2021b). Individuals who received funds from it would only do so based on luck—and at that, only 1-5% of eligible applicants would receive funds. CDHE’s clear message to the JBC was that the program should be funded to a level that ensured every eligible participant would receive loan forgiveness—or it should not be funded at all as it was not a motivation for students to teach in rural areas of the state if they were not sure of receiving funds. Though members of the JBC liked the idea of the Educator Loan Forgiveness program, they also expressed understanding that the program was not financially motivating to residents when presented as a lottery—and thus had not fulfilled the targeted desires of the state to motivate people to start their teaching careers in rural areas.

What was clear throughout this and most other artifacts is that policy actors felt very comfortable using financial and market manipulations—the core of neoliberal philosophy—to try to compel individuals to behave in certain ways to drive specific outcomes. The use of taxes to try to affect change, either through expense or income to the state, was very normalized for all involved, and most legislative proposals reflect this method of attempting to monetize behavior, as opposed to legislation that would target specific activities.

In addition to discussions of use of funds to motivate specific, targeted outcomes, all actors seemed in agreement with holding tuition increases at all public institutions to no more than 3% for the upcoming academic year. An overview of allocated increases and institutional systems can be seen in Appendix C. This blanket policy had some notable exceptions, the first of which was for University of Northern Colorado at

Greeley, which was allowed to have a higher increase in tuition based on expected budgetary concerns. The budget concerns were related to declining headcount in enrollment, meaning that fewer students would have to pay more tuition dollars to maintain institutional budgets at status quo. Interesting to the discourse on this topic is that the JBC members did not question the increase nor the idea of fewer students paying more simply to maintain the institutional status quo. There was no discussion of reducing UNC's scope of operations or attempting to address declining enrollment. Furthermore, there was also no recommendation to grant UNC any increased funding through appropriations—the recommended increase was very similar to other increases for regional comprehensive institutions in Colorado at 2.4% (see Appendix C). Though reasons for this lack of discussion are not evident in the discourse, it is possible that UNC is perceived to not have a student market and not worth the effort and additional resources—a very neoliberal perspective that relates to “market trends” and influences.

The second significant exception to the 3% tuition increase was a “tuition buy-down” that would provide specific institutions with extra funding for the purpose of keeping their tuition at current levels with no increase. This extra funding would only be provided with the explicit understanding that there would be no tuition increase for their students, and it was primarily focused on access institutions. The discourse in this area became more nuanced during discussion. Though the members of the JBC overall agreed on buy downs for specific institutions, their motivations were very different. JBC Committee member Senator Bob Rankin (R) said, “I think this idea of buy-down for access institutions is really valuable right now, given our unemployment rate, and we're trying to get folks back to work find jobs,” indicating an understanding of the buy-down

unrelated to accessibility as it pertains to race or economic status, but rather in terms of its ability to reduce unemployment rates and benefit the state's economic situation. JBC Committee member Representative Leslie Herod (D) said, "Being new to this committee and this work, I'm just wondering what actual impact that shift will have? And then also wondering, where underrepresented students fall in this category? And if there's an increase for those students as well." In this topic, Herod shows an interest in the effects on underrepresented students and ensuring that the application of the buy-down to access institutions has concrete, real benefits for those students and not just overall financial and enrollment numbers at the organization.

Finally, the third exception to the tuition limit is a carve-out for Fort Lewis College, a non-tribal Native American-serving institution with a high percentage of Native American students due to unique structure related to the College's founding and subsequent litigation. As the result of a treaty agreement with the federal government, Fort Lewis College is required to serve Native American students free of charge. Colorado attempted to limit the free tuition to Colorado residents but was forced to rescind that policy by a federal court. Thus, Colorado now provides free tuition to all Native American students who enroll at Fort Lewis College, regardless of their home state (CJBC, 2021b).

While legislators agreed that free education for students is generally good, the situation at Fort Lewis College creates a perverse incentive for legislators to *actively* hold Fort Lewis's non-resident tuition increases to 0% per year, as the full rate tuition price is what the state must provide to Fort Lewis for each student, and some 95% of the College's costs to the state are for out of state students. Acknowledging the tangle of

(dis)incentives, confusion, and budgetary fuss that this situation has created, JBC legislative staffer Bickel told Committee members at the figure-setting hearing,

[T]he ... non-resident Native American student population has been increasing at a pretty strong clip, which results in Colorado paying about two-thirds of the costs of operating Fort Lewis College. So, Fort Lewis actually gets more state general fund than any other institution in terms of its ... total operating budget. At this stage, it's not clear that you have a good alternative. As I think we discussed during the briefing, it's a very nice thing that Colorado is doing for Native American people who have certainly been very mistreated by this country. It is expensive for the state general fund (CJBC, 2021b).

Legislators expressed a continuing desire to petition the federal government for funding relief in this area, but also agreed that no progress had been made despite some prior attempts at securing such funding. In addition, the phrase "... a very nice thing that Colorado is doing for Native American people ..." indicates a problematic perspective of frustrated colonialism and does not acknowledge the genocide of Indigenous peoples in Colorado, or that Fort Lewis College was originally a boarding school for cultural re-education of Native American students (Fort Lewis College, 2022). Though a full discussion of these issues is outside the scope of this study, it is worth noting that it is not obvious that a nuanced history of the FLC situation is well understood by those participating in the discourse.

There is a neoliberal irony in the Fort Lewis College funding situation in that a suppressed and minoritized group has found a method to work the system to their advantage in a way that the colonizers of Colorado did not anticipate and now cannot resolve without significant political capital expenditure or reputational damage. In a very practical sense, the neoliberal system has been used against its creators, who did not foresee these unintended consequences.

## *Access*

Issues of student access were also prevalent throughout much of the discourse. Mentions of access tended to center around financial accessibility, or the ability of students and their families to cover (or not) the costs of tuition. Discourse participants viewed some institutions—and their students—as “access” institutions, with a JBC legislative staff summary in the Committee’s figure-setting document (Bickel & JBC Staff, 2021a) stating:

Staff has been supportive over the years of efforts to direct a larger share of state support to institutions that serve the students with the greatest challenges: the “access” institutions. This is not because staff believes that other institutions are over-funded by the State but rather because, with few state resources to go around, the large research institutions have been far more effective at bringing in other resources, including through their recruitment of nonresident students. State support per resident student is not large at the research institutions. Indeed, state support per resident student FTE is less at most CU campuses than at Metropolitan State University of Denver. However, the state institutions that are not “R1” research institutions simply have fewer alternatives for supporting their operations, and their primary alternative to state support is tuition from students who are often already struggling both financially and academically. The access institutions have important weaknesses, including abysmal graduation rates, but their ability to improve these rates is dependent both on the support services they can provide and the level of financial strain faced by their students.

This description of access and how it is viewed by state actors demonstrates a fiscal lens that embraces success and challenge in terms of market judgements and is a deficit frame for access institutions and their students.

Though the neoliberal lens on access is most frequent throughout the discourse and is referenced as a common precedent for policy-making, at least one of the state representatives, Leslie Herod, viewed access with a broader lens and acknowledged that sometimes it can also be limited by lack of diversity in programs, such as the Colorado Student Leaders Initiative, during discussion of which Herod stated: “I think my concerns

were that they [the students] are not as diverse as they could or should be. And I participated in some of these as an elected official, and that was the problem” (CJBC, 2021b). Lack of diversity in the Colorado Student Leaders Initiative was a concern for Herod because the program is a direct pipeline for high school students to be exposed to the campus environment at University of Colorado Denver and receive early college credit.

In addition, marginal barriers to access, such as the cost of books (Burgraff, 2016), were part of the narrative from both the Governor’s Office and CDHE (CDHE, 2021b) through the inclusion of the Open Education Resources program, a funded effort that encourages faculty to utilize open-access textbooks or materials in their courses. These materials are typically free or very low cost for students to use, and the state funding is used for faculty grants that allow for conversion of courses or institutional promotion of the program to faculty. This topic—while acknowledged to be on the margins of student cost—seemed popular among all the groups, with no disagreement about its funding or continuation (JBC, 2021b), or indeed, on increasing the budget far beyond what CDHE requested (\$100,000 was requested; \$1.1 million was recommended by JBC staff and ultimately sent to the legislature). Throughout the discussion of this topic, the discourse centered around “return on investment” for funding the program—another indicator of strong neoliberal leanings from all political players.

### ***Comparative Underfunding by Student***

Though Colorado’s underfunding of higher education relative to other states is well documented amongst scholars (see chapters 1 and 2 above), the question of whether this knowledge is well-known outside of academic circles was less clear. Review of the

artifacts in this study have shown that, at the very least, Colorado lawmakers, staff, and legislative researchers are all aware of the underfunding, though interest in discussing the topic was limited.

Legislative and CDHE staff seemed more willing to point out issues for students related to the relative underfunding, consistently mentioning that this results in higher tuition and fees for students, such as in this statement from JBC staff member Bickel: "... it does concern me to the extent that, you know, are we are making up the difference in costs with tuition and fees ... the difference between what the state can put in—and total cost is getting made up by student tuition and fees" (CJBC, 2021b). No committee discussion of the effects of underfunding for students followed this exchange or others, though underfunding from an *institutional* point of view was discussed at other points, perhaps illustrating the substantial power of institutions relative to students.

The stated comparative underfunding issue and the lack of will to address it through meaningful discourse is in direct conflict with long term goals stated by the Governor's Office and others to increase Colorado's credential completion rates and (thus) increase workforce development (CDHE, 2020b; CDHE, 2021c). That said, the Governor's Office is also not arguing for drastically increased funding for institutions of higher education—if anything—it is arguing (through the Department's materials) that higher education is already too expensive (CDHE, 2021a). This creates an interesting paradox relative to the mindset (a very neoliberal one) of attempting to rank Colorado's higher education funding in comparison to other states while simultaneously doing little to change it.



## **Institutional Funding Frame**

Perhaps more functionally, staff and CDHE policy briefs tended to think about financial decisions in terms of individual institutions or groups of institutions that shared similar characteristics, such as “community colleges” or “rural institutions.” Discourse in this area trended towards three themes: expense reductions, funding restoration to pre-COVID levels (or earlier), and underfunding compared to other states. Underfunding in this area centered around institutional differences rather than individual student effects. An additional item for note is the absence of discussion about the performance-based funding model and how it would affect Colorado’s institutions. Though the reasons for this absence are speculative, the Committee’s focus on COVID-related budgeting issues and the fact that the performance-based model had been discussed in detail in the last budget cycle (2020-21) may have contributed to the lack of direct discussion of this topic.

### ***Expense Reductions***

The CDHE encouraged legislation and incentives that push public institutions to find ways of reducing expenses, including through ideas such as the “The Roadmap to Containing College Costs” presented during a hearing to the Colorado Joint Education Committee (CDHE, 2021a). The idea of institutionally containing costs and reducing expenses as a way to lower the overall costs to students was frequently part of narratives related to both the Department as well as initiatives from the governor, such as the RISE Fund, which was

[D]edicated to providing grants, in partnership with the Department of Higher Education, to Colorado’s public institutions of higher education to support institution-led initiatives to reduce costs, improve operational efficiency, and adapt and lead in the post-pandemic ‘new normal’ (Bickel & JBC Staff, 2021a).

Originally funded directly from the Governor’s Office from federal pandemic-related stimulus (Bickel & JBC Staff, 2021a), the RISE Fund as discussed among the JBC legislators and staff in this discourse was being moved from federal stimulus to state support. Though staff described details on the program as “fairly thin” (CJBC, 2021b) and having no final reports from participants in the first round of RISE grants, there was glowing praise from all who commented, with Republican Senator Bob Rankin stating,

I don't want to pass over the fact that this has really been a very good program. If you read some of these descriptions, they are just amazingly innovative, crossing districts and institutions. So just wanted to put in a plug for the program. I hope we see it as a stimulus bill that continues this kind of work (CJBC, 2021b).

This was one area where members of both parties expressed similar sentiments, suggesting that all felt that public higher education institutions in the state needed to find ways to reduce or contain costs and pass those savings to students and families.

### ***Funding Restoration to Prior Levels***

During discussion, JBC staff also made clear that institutions and their governing boards had made strong requests for restoration of funding—plus annual inflationary increases—for the upcoming fiscal year (Bickel & JBC Staff, 2021a). These funding increase requests were unique in several ways: first, they were a request to restore funding from the state to FY 2019-20 levels—acknowledging the drastic reduction in Colorado’s higher education funding during the 2020-21 fiscal year due to COVID (though this was subsequently backfilled with federal stimulus funds—discussed above in chapter 1; SHEEO, 2021a). Second, the requests were made directly from the institutions to the Joint Budget Committee, without going through the Governor’s Office or the Colorado Commission on Higher Education (Bicket & JBC Staff, 2021a). Though not

discussed nor elaborated in artifacts reviewed for this study, this skirting of normal channels for funding requests suggests that perhaps the institutions did not perceive the normal channels as helpful or likely to result in their desired funding outcomes.

Regardless of the reasons, the JBC staff and legislators seemed accommodating to the idea of increasing budgets generously, though only because they anticipated a strong tax revenue income year ahead (CJBC, 2021b).

### ***Comparative Underfunding***

In discussion with staff, legislators showed a clear desire to influence policy at institutional governing boards through budgetary means, but staff repeatedly pointed out just how little influence the state's funding provisions for higher education meant for students and institutions. Staff member Bickel responded to a comment about whether or not the JBC could require or recommend raises to staff and faculty with "I think Representative Herod, because you are overall a rather small part of their overall funding, really, for many of these institutions, some of these institutions are less than 10% of their total revenue" (CJBC, 2021b), indicating just how little the state is actually contributing to the bottom line of Colorado institutions—frequently in the single digits as a percentage of overall institutional budget. Staff members (such as Bickel) and the CDHE seemed to understand this dynamic well, but legislators had varying levels of understanding, and some, such as Herod, seemed to believe that the state's contribution to institutional budgets should have a significant influence on the institutions' policies despite its minor contribution. Other legislators seemed resigned to the situation and viewed the underfunding of institutions as an intractable problem that could not be solved given the

tax revenue structure and other budget commitments, preferring to discuss marginal elements of the increase or general topics related to state unemployment (CJBC, 2021b).

In addition, the topic of nonresident tuition was raised for discussion relative to whether Colorado's institutions were charging enough to out-of-state students, and in fact, highly neoliberal language was used in this discourse, as shown in this comment from Democrat and JBC Chair Dominick Moreno (CJBC, 2021b):

As it relates to nonresident tuition, however, I'm curious about your perspective on that. Some institutions do subsidize in-state resident tuition rates with nonresident tuition rates. Something I know very personally because other states do it to my niece [who] attends the University of Washington, she pays a lot more than in-state residents would in Washington. What's the market look like for nonresident tuition rates right now? Are ... our institutions near the ... cap of that market? What are their options on the nonresident tuition front?

The questions were addressed to staff member Bickel, who responded that she felt that Colorado's institutions with substantial nonresident populations were already charging about as much as they could. This language with terms like *market* and *cap* shows clear thinking that aligns with neoliberal ideas about the ability of students to accommodate a maximum price that aligns with supply and demand. Legislators did not acknowledge that nonresident students may not fully understand or realize the complications of attending college in their home state vs. Colorado, or that the cost of higher education to a student would be borne regardless of the students' state of origin. There was also no discussion of what kind of incentives nonresident rates create for institutions with large nonresident populations—or institutions with few nonresidents but many budget concerns.

## **Economy and Workforce Frame**

Described in a statement from the Staff Budget Briefing document (Bickel & JBC Staff, 2020), Colorado’s lawmakers viewed funding of higher education in largely economic terms:

The State has historically subsidized higher education at state institutions based on the public benefits of providing educational access to all citizens and promoting a more educated population. An educated population is associated with higher wages, lower unemployment, and lower dependence on public resources. Higher education may also be part of strategies to fill unmet needs in the community, such as nurses or teachers or engineers. Finally, subsidizing higher education is frequently described as a form of economic development for the community, as it attracts business and cultural resources.

Though lawmakers mentioned private benefits of higher education from time to time, the statement above largely guided much of the discourse as it related to topics outside of direct student and institutional effects. This section explores three themes of these discussions: workforce readiness and industry partnerships, public economy and return on tax dollar investment, and “innovation.”

### ***Workforce Readiness and Industry Partnerships***

Further neoliberal discourse was evident in discussion of how Colorado’s higher education institutions prepare their students for a life in the workforce. A variety of topics and initiatives designed to encourage partnerships with businesses and drive better preparation for full workforce participation after college were discussed.

Much of the discourse centered around efforts that encouraged institutions to award college credit for various forms of “on the job” work, such as internships, or for years of equivalent work in a specific field. While there seems to be interest in this topic,

it did not arise to the level of the JBC—likely due to its perceived minimal impact on higher education budgeting.

Two other programs that awarded scholarships or discounts for specific behavior included a rural teacher tuition reimbursement for students who graduated and taught K-12 students in designated rural areas of the state, and an optometry training program that gave students financial assistance to attend optometry programs in other states as Colorado did not have a home-state program for those students to attend. Concerns with the rural teaching program have been discussed above, but the optometry program also received some discussion as it was not clear that Colorado has an optometrist shortage, suggesting that additional information or research was needed (Bickel & JBC Staff, 2021a). However, JBC staff solicited the input of the Colorado Optometric Association (a membership organization that lobbies at the state level (COA, 2022)), which requested legislators retain the program as is, but could not point to any clear evidence that optometrists were in short supply—or that they needed financial support to cover their college loans even if they had attended optometry school in another state (CJBC, 2021b). The information from COA was not presented with any caveats about its source, but the recommendation was largely accepted without further comment, though it should be noted that the effect of this program on the budget was considered very minor.

### ***Public Economy and Return on Tax Dollar Investment***

Return on investment and effects on the state’s economy clearly weighed heavily on legislative and staff minds as they discussed and considered proposals. Legislation was frequently stated, to paraphrase, as “if we spend X tax dollars, how much will the return be?” Returns were variably considered both in fiscal and non-fiscal ways. The

Open Education Resources project was widely viewed throughout the discourse through the lens of this return-on-investment idea—dollars spent on the program relative to dollars saved by students on textbooks (CJBC, 2021b). Non-immediate or non-quantifiable return on investment was stated as a reason for increasing access and improving educational gaps among the Colorado population, as erasing these gaps would lead to improvements in the state economy, greater efficiency, and lower unemployment (CJBC, 2021b). This was illustrated in a quote from Senator Rankin (R), who said, “I do want to go back to our current problem, which is to get people back to work. I mean, it’s our number one problem. So, I really liked the tuition buy down to the access schools” (CJBC, 2021b). Though Rankin mentioned this idea of providing extra funding to access schools (see Appendix C) several times, he did not quantify how much it would actually affect unemployment rates—indicating a mindset of non-quantifiable, long-term returns. In a policy brief advocating for funding for a new chief education equity officer position at CDHE (CDHE, 2021d), this was also an expression of non-financially quantifiable returns with long-term desires for

[A]dministering a diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) framework intended to assess state policies with an equity lens, while mobilizing existing networks of equity champions at institutions across the state to look at their own policies and campus climates (CDHE, 2021d, p. 1).

### ***“Innovation”***

Throughout the discourse, and particularly from the Governor’s Office and CDHE, the term “innovation” was used to describe a goal that needed to be addressed by institutions and the state alike. Many of the policy briefs mention innovation as a desired outcome. Throughout the discourse, the term was never defined, but appears in context

with pushes towards efficiency, lowering costs, adaptation, affordability, and “refreshing course curriculum” (CDHE, 2020c; CDHE, 2021a; CDHE, 2021b). Though the legislators did not use the term frequently in spoken discourse, it is used by Senator Rankin when discussing the RISE program—and related policy briefs and other discourse from CDHE use the term in connection with the program as well, indicating that perhaps the term had spread from those materials to the legislator (JBC, 2021b).

### **Visual Elements and Overall Appearance**

As discussed above, the visual elements of policy briefs and budget reports, including choices about graphics, fonts, color, and information density all have an influence on readers. These influences may be subtle or overt, but they combine to affect the readers’ ability to digest and recall the information. In addition, appearance can augment (or limit) feelings of legitimacy and trust in the source of the material. The printed materials reviewed all exhibited some level of design effort, indicating thoughtfulness and intent behind their creation beyond simply text on paper. Policy discourse analysis suggests that these decisions are made intentionally and show some level of underlying meaning in their contexts.

### ***Logos, Shields, and Seals***

Throughout the materials from the Colorado Department of Higher Education—primarily policy briefs—the CDHE logo is utilized extensively (see figure 3). This logo ties together several elements of the state’s overall visual style, including a stylized “C” that is also used by the Governor’s Office.



**Figure 3**

*Colorado Department of Higher Education Logo (CDHE, 2021a, b, c, d)*



Use of the CDHE logo on materials lends them legitimacy by tying visual indicators directly to the highest offices in the state. In addition, this use of visual identity creates consistency and builds awareness through repetition on each individual document. Indeed, every policy brief and presentation deck reviewed for this study contained the logo in prominent locations at the top of the first page.

Likewise, for materials produced by the legislative Joint Budget Committee staff, the Colorado State Seal was used—less frequently—but just as prominently throughout reports, staff recommendations, and other materials (figure 4).

**Figure 4**

*Colorado State Seal (Bickel & JBC Staff, 2020, 2021a, b; CJBC 2020, 2021a)*



The use of the seal ties the legislature’s work to traditional and historical roots in the state, again building legitimacy and consistency through use of visual cues. Use of

these visual logos and seals ties into neoliberal ideas of intangible assets and the concept of brand to establish de facto value and trust in an institution. In the case of use by state actors, they become a calling card of authenticity and trustworthiness.

### ***Textual and Visual Callouts, Pull Quotes, and Design Highlighting Specific Text***

Throughout materials used by all parties, specific points or ideas are frequently designed in different fonts, colors, or with boxes or lines around them in an attempt to highlight them visually. In the CDHE policy briefs, these text callouts are frequent and colorful, offering short bits of text designed to make the main points of the document easy to remember and understand. In legislative documents, callouts are less pronounced, but staff demonstrate clear willingness to also influence legislators with similarly short pieces of information, even in information-dense areas like budget figure setting documents (Bickel & JBC Staff, 2021a). These callouts frequently reference themes surrounding the above topics, such as return on investment, innovation, access, diversity, or other popular topics that staff or policy analysts hope to influence through financial levers.

### ***Visual Distinctions from Office to Office***

Though consistency within offices is high, as budgetary requests and reports make their way through the various parts of the state government, they are “rebranded” at each step—the Governor’s Office and CDHE utilize the stylized “C” logos, while the legislature uses the state seal. Neither group uses the other’s identification marks, despite that much of the financial information originates from the department and the Colorado Commission on Higher Education (and the institutional governing boards). Nor do any of

the institutional marks, such as the interlocking “CU” for the flagship system make their way to materials at the state level.

### **Findings Summary**

Policy discourse analysis provided a ready tool for analyzing the artifacts in this study and revealed clear power structure lines between the various parties: the Colorado Governor’s Office, CDHE, legislative staff, and legislators. Though there were some efforts to maintain independence between these groups, the discourse showed shared vocabularies, ideas, and themes that carried through all layers of policy making. Three primary thematic frames were identified through the data: student finances, institutional funding, and economy and workforce. Each of these had several interwoven topics of discussion, and a final discussion of the visual and design elements of the materials revealed additional ways in which the same discourse was used by multiple parties. Though many discursive arguments were rooted in language about students and families, the ultimate overarching thematic framework revolved around economic and market forces—or neoliberalism—and this remained true regardless of office or political party identification.

## **Chapter 5: Interpretation, Analysis, and Implications**

### **Summary**

The goal of this study was to use a reactive neoliberal framework to study the materials and speech used in political discussions about public higher education funding. Policy discourse analysis was used to identify instances of funding discussion and look for relationships, power dynamics, and neoliberal underpinnings. Chapter one explores the origins of public higher education funding and the context of Colorado's appropriations leading into the 2021-22 fiscal year, including the disruptive elements of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Using policy discourse analysis, I examined 12 artifacts, including policy briefs, budget discussions, appropriations reports, and staff presentations. Based entirely in publicly available materials, the artifacts were sourced from the Colorado Governor's Office and Department of Higher Education, the Joint Budget Committee's legislative staff, and the Joint Budget Committee itself. Analysis included both textual and visual elements as well as consideration of source and audience relationships.

Multi-vocality and varied narratives were emphasized in policy discourse analysis and poststructuralism alike. Sources used in the study were specifically selected based on identification of artifacts from a variety of offices, political parties, politicians, and power dynamics. Furthermore, as Allan (2009) notes, language not only reports on culture, but also creates it. The discourse analysis shows how previous decisions and discussions

have created new situations that require new discourse—previous attempts at problem solving through policy are sometimes incomplete or result in unintended consequences. Indeed, the discourse actors and actions in this study were often attempting to remedy some past decision.

### *Addressing Research Questions*

The following research questions were considered:

1. What policy discourses were used by public officials to discuss and/or influence higher education appropriations funding for public institutions in Colorado?

And, within the context of question one:

2. How were these discourses used and what do they make possible or impossible through their policy arguments?
3. What was inferred in these discourses about relationships, power structures, or other non-textual elements?

The answer to the first question is overwhelmingly neoliberal. Market-driven mindsets completely overwhelmed all other arguments around funding at every level and office. Arguably, they were so prevalent as to render other frameworks diminishingly irrelevant other than as insincere arguments related to theatrical displays of “transparency” or “diversity” primarily engaged to help keep up appearances. Though this lip service was given to other thought frameworks, upon further inspection, underlying reasoning was almost always found to be quite neoliberal in origin.

Neoliberal discourses and imagery were used to connect threads of commonality from office-to-office and institution-to-legislature, and often established legitimacy or

consistency designed to influence funding decisions in mutually accepted ways. Speaking the language of neoliberalism through connections with market, return on investment, and other similar discourse terms encouraged discourse receivers to connect with material and accept its trustworthiness. This common language made further arguments along neoliberal frameworks more possible, while simultaneously blocking or delegitimizing other discourse frameworks and relegating them to “less-than” status in the “marketplace” of the legislative endeavor. In some cases, it also suggested that arguments outside of neoliberal benefits were immoral because they might have a negative effect on the economy—the ultimate god of the neoliberal state (Shamir, 2008).

The consistent and pervasive use of symbols, both through logos and seals as well as common language, suggested that these designs had significant influence on stakeholders and legislators. They also lent credibility and authority to materials, suggesting that legitimacy flows back and forth from office to office, depending on circumstances and speakers. They also suggested that staff have a significant amount of influence on policy formation even while seeming to be more in the background than agency officials or elected individuals. While staff had significant influence, however, they were not afforded the same consideration publicly (though, at least in the hearings considered for this study, legislators were always cordial with staff members). Differences between offices suggested clear lines where autonomy was preserved—for example, the legislative reports and documents had a vastly different appearance than agency or Governor’s Office materials.

## **Interpretation, Implications, and Recommendations**

The emergent themes in the discourse were remarkably consistent and threaded from office to office, and almost entirely neoliberal. While connection to budget and funding was expected in this analysis due to the selection of specific artifacts related to the Colorado fiscal process, the arguments for budgetary decisions were almost always set against the prospect of return on investment or market value. Though the entities changed—students, families, institutions, etc.—the mindset among stakeholders was strongly about how economic benefits will accrue to the state based on their decisions.

Sometimes power and influence flowed from unexpected sources, such as the Joint Budget Committee legislative staff. This is not to suggest that the staff had more power than the Committee or other parties, but that they were frequently leaned on to provide expertise and suggestions that were readily followed and believed. Overall, the process and the State's interest in wielding power over higher education institutions was very limited, primarily because of the State's relatively small contribution to overall institutional budgets. Staff and agencies were very aware of this limitation while legislators sometimes seemed confused or frustrated by it. In this case, the money that the State had available to try and influence behavior had little impact, particularly on the most influential institutions, where the State portion of operating budgets was smallest (such as University of Colorado Boulder).

### ***Thematic Discourse Analysis***

When students were discussed, legislators and staff rarely ventured into territory outside of financial or economic lenses. Student debt was a point of major concern, alongside students' abilities relative to finding and maintaining gainful employment

inside the state—providing a lifetime of economic contribution (and tax revenue) from each individual. Even areas related to diversity work in the state were viewed as a function of economics, not equity or justice. Rural concerns centered around rural economies (and building them), not around preservation of quality of life or culture in those areas.

Students at Fort Lewis College were not substantially considered in the significant discussion of that institution’s unique situation relative to the state’s higher education funding, although the institution’s work was noted as “good” (CJBC, 2021b) in the same breath as complaints about the nonresident tuition coverage requirements to the state. While it is perhaps understandable, given limited budgets, that the state would want to limit financial exposure at Fort Lewis College, there were no considerations given to other possible lenses through which to view the situation, such as colonial or oppressor frameworks—let alone reparations. All consideration was through the lens of return on investment (or, in this case, the lack of return given that Colorado is paying for most of the Indigenous Students at Fort Lewis, who then return to their home states and do not contribute to Colorado’s economy).

Perhaps one of the most striking observations on the discourse was how little impact legislators have on the higher education landscape in Colorado, despite their attempts to influence institutional policy through neoliberal methods. Most effects that had any success at all (as perceived and discussed in hearings or policy briefs) were marginal, dabbling around the edges of meaningful fiscal influence. Programs such as Open Education Resources (free or low-cost books), tuition buy-outs, and classified staff salary increases rarely moved the fiscal needle more than a few percentage points in any



direction. Though most legislators seemed to have a handle on this, some did not. Staff had to repeatedly explain that decisions made by the legislature had very little influence on institutional decisions related to tuition rates, faculty and staff salaries, or capital expenditures. Legislators' predecessors had largely abrogated neoliberal policy effects on students' experiences by consistently underfunding or defunding higher education budgets throughout the first two decades of the 2000s—and yet the mindset of influencing these programs through market means remains stubbornly entrenched.

Likewise, institutional discourse, reflected through policy briefs and agency funding requests, situated messaging strongly in market, ranking, and return on investment frames. Increases were based partially on returns to historical norms before the pandemic, but also on comparisons to funding levels in other states, inflation and cost-of-living increases, and adjustments to Colorado's funding formula. Institutional funding requests were not centered around program changes or alterations to student services models, or similar, and in one case (University of Northern Colorado Greeley), funding preservation was requested despite enrollment decreases. Legislators did attempt to influence tuition policy at most institutions by conditioning state funding on institutional limits for tuition increases (capped at 3% for FY 2021-22). However, legislative staff noted in discussion that the lawmakers' tuition caps may only be possible if the legislature committed to covering those caps through tuition "buy-downs," which back-filled the funding that the institution would have received from increasing tuition (CJBC, 2021b).

Though both staff and legislator perspectives were from neoliberal frameworks, legislators tended to posit their arguments and observations from the student and family

financial frame, perhaps reflecting their closer connection to voters and people in their districts. Staff and agencies, on the other hand, tended towards the institutional funding frame, and indeed, connections between the institutions and staff seemed to be strong as staff frequently cited conversations or data received directly from institutions or their governing boards. All parties utilized the public economy framework at points throughout their discourse, responding to decades of pervasive neoliberal influence on American politics and education. There was little discernable difference between Democrat or Republic discourse.

### ***Implications and Recommendations***

While unfortunately quite common among US states, Colorado's march towards higher and higher student share in tuition is likely not sustainable, especially given the repeated pronouncements from the top levels of state government about the importance of earning college credentials. When levels of student debt are added to the equation, the entire discourse from state leaders is out of touch with reality. The research in this study helps illuminate these inconsistencies and provide a foundation to speak publicly through articles and expertise.

Politicians and many of the staff in the study indicated through the discourse that student (or private) benefits are one of the primary motivators behind acceptance of rising student costs. The idea that higher education mostly benefits the individual is not new and has been used repeatedly to justify increased cost and debt burdens for students, as discussed in chapter one. However, current trends indicate that students (and their later-life selves) are increasingly unwilling to shoulder massive debt burdens that can be financially challenging for decades after credential completion (assuming that the

credential is completed). This compounds when considered against the backdrop of historically marginalized groups and the economic depression that has arisen out of racist policies and cultural exclusion.

Though there were hints of non-neoliberal mindsets in the discourse, particularly from Representative Herod, the idea of approaching higher education resources and their effects on students from frameworks other than neoliberalism is bleak. Given the entrenched mindset, the best course of action for those looking to influence funding policy may be to seek subversive neoliberal practices like students at Fort Lewis College. Another alternative is to become a cog in the system with the knowledge that cogs have influence and can also influence from inside, *a la* la paperson (2017).

The discourse analysis suggests that consistency in language as well as design elements are key characteristics of successful policy proposals in the funding arena. These discursive tools can be used in speech and materials from agency offices, commissioners, staff, and legislators to drive policy agendas and create change in both the ways that higher education is funded as well as how much it receives. These effects seemed to persist across political party lines in Colorado. Policy advocates, institutions, and others seeking to influence the policy process would do well to adopt neoliberal practices surrounding branding, consistency, and design elements to make discursive arguments from equity and justice frameworks. Similar to the subversive language approach above, presenting visuals in this way allows these ideas to enter the discourse without being automatically disregarded.

In addition to the methods of presentation, hewing to a neoliberal framework for arguments—particularly in relation to the public economy of the state—was widely seen

as necessary. No serious arguments were considered that did not include this mindset, and almost every policy option presented linked back to one or more neoliberal themes that were discussed above. This has an overall effect of crowding out any other perspectives and focusing solely on changing higher education through market-based levers, such as tying funding to certain behaviors. Policy advocates, such as state agencies, institutions, and lobbyists, must consider the way that they link back to economic and market themes in their proposals.

Furthermore, despite the separation of power between the legislature and the Governor's Office, there was clear evidence of language and legitimacy transfer coming from policy proposals that started with the governor, were refined by the Colorado Department of Higher Education, and recommended by the Joint Budget Committee staff—who work for the legislature, not the agency or governor. While some of this may be attributable to the agency making the proposals easy for the legislative staff to hand off to the JBC, there were strong discursive signs—from changes in “branding”—to indicate that preservation of separation was preferred by both sides.

Ultimately, the paradoxes and conflicts presented through the discourse—relative to actual funding—demonstrate an environment in which neoliberalism is not working well, despite comments about it above. Some policy discourse set firmly in neoliberal frameworks seems to have positive (albeit minor) effects, such as the Open Education Resources (free or low-cost textbook) program. But the larger issues of Colorado's student burden of tuition and its position near the very lowest per-student funding of all US states points towards systemic issues that policymakers seem unable to solve through market-driven approaches built on neoliberal frameworks. One of the most substantial

“successes” of the Colorado system for students and equity—Fort Lewis College—only exists despite policymakers’ efforts at stopping it (and, arguably, the FLC situation is problematic for other reasons, including colonialism and genocide).

If neoliberalism is not working well, what next? Additional pathways of discourse should be pursued that lay outside the market- and competition-driven frameworks of neoliberalism. Below, I discuss several possible engagement audiences, but ultimately policymakers and those hoping to influence them should begin to examine equity, public good, and critical lenses for their arguments. While neoliberalism’s pervasive presence cannot be ignored, there are opportunities to bring other frameworks into the conversation, including critical, equity, and public good lenses. Higher education has not always been dominated at the state appropriations level by neoliberalism (Levine, 2021), and there is urgent need to bring other mindsets to the equation of state funding.

**Engagement with Policymakers and Government.** How might this work be used going forward? It is important for Colorado policymakers at the legislative and agency levels to recognize and acknowledge the influence of neoliberalism on their work. While not necessarily needing to be named as such, the neoliberal emphasis in policy making can be called out in policy briefs, legislative discussions, and by those who influence the policy process, such as actors from the Governor’s Office and Colorado Department of Higher Education. Reducing focus on rankings and comparative statistics would allow institutions to focus more on service to their students in the specific communities and circumstances of their environments. Broadening the diversity of frameworks used to establish funding decisions will result in more equitable policies.

I also see potential for discussion of policy discourse analyses in more general publications such as the *Colorado Sun*. My hope is that the research would then influence policy stakeholders, such as the Colorado Department of Higher Education, Governor's Office, or legislators. This could lead these parties to improve and increase their efforts on behalf of Colorado's higher education students.

**Engagement with the Public.** There is an immediate and accessible (to a general audience) opportunity to write on the results of the work in industry publications, such as *Inside Higher Ed* or *Chalkbeat*. These publications are more popular amongst higher education readers, such as employees, who are able to influence policy through institutional lobbying or policy briefs. Many of these individuals also make direct requests for funding to the Colorado Commission on Higher Education, which then pushes for budget proposals with the Joint Budget Committee and its staff.

**Engagement with Policy Organizations.** While not analyzed for this study, higher education policy organizations, such as foundations, also offer a wide variety of policy briefs, conferences, workshops, and so-called best practice guides that are well positioned to influence both state and institutional stakeholders. Publishing this information in article form in industry publications such as those mentioned above also has the potential to influence and drive the way that policy is formed at these organizations.

### **Considerations and Future Research**

The primary consideration for this study's limitations is the year represented by the artifacts and the pandemic context surrounding them. COVID had significant effects on Colorado's public funding across the board—not just in higher education. Colorado's

institutions, enrollment, tax revenues, and expenses were all different in 2021-22 than they would have been in a “normal” year. That said, the context of the pandemic also offered a unique opportunity to examine the discourse that policymakers used to try and maintain a sense of “normal” when funding the state’s public institutions. A related limitation is that the study is limited to a single year, regardless of the pandemic context, and Colorado’s funding situation changes from year to year for a variety of reasons.

Further considerations included the availability of artifacts—by design, the study was limited to publicly available documents. Inclusion of emails between parties, non-governmental policy briefs, social media posts, or other materials may have provided additional data. The findings should, however, be useful for state agencies and others (including non-governmental parties) who seek to influence policy.

A final consideration is related to Colorado’s political context. For fiscal year 2021-22, all parties involved were controlled by Democrats and thus little serious conflict was expressed relative to party-line differences. For states with mixed party control or full Republican control, results and discourse analysis would likely have been different and perhaps more fraught. Colorado also faces a relatively unique growth phenomena due to significant immigration from other states. States with more stable or declining populations may have different funding environments and different infrastructure demands on their budgets.

With these considerations in mind, further research on policy discourse analysis in the public higher education funding area could proceed down several avenues. This study took place in an exceptional year relative to the overall environment of the pandemic, instability in tax base revenues, and special funding from the US federal government.

Further study might analyze a more typical year that does not include pandemic-related anomalies. In addition, more longitudinal studies might offer information on change in discourse over time, revealing how it evolves with new technologies, understanding, and styles.

Utilizing data from other states where the legislature and Governor's Office are both Republican, or where the government has a mix of party control would also illuminate other aspects of the discourse that are not sticking points when party control is entirely Democratic. Examination of policy discourse at the federal level related to the US Department of Education may also reveal additional information.



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## Appendix A

### List of Policy Discourse Analysis Artifacts

Description	Source	Format
CDHE Bills of Interest Status Update	CDHE	Spreadsheet
Funding a Chief Educational Equity Officer	CDHE	Policy brief
HED Budget & Legislative Agenda FY 2021-22	CDHE	Policy brief
SB21-215 Open Education Resources	CDHE	Policy brief
SB21-232 Displaced Workers Grant	CDHE	Policy brief
SMART Act Hearing	CDHE	Presentation
Appropriations Report FY 2021-22	JBC	Document
JBC HED Comebacks Hearing, March 19, 2021	JBC	Audio
JBC HED Figure Setting Hearing, March 10, 2021	JBC	Audio
JBC HED Figure Setting Comebacks	JBC Staff	Document
Staff Budget Briefing FY 2021-22	JBC Staff	Document
Staff Figure Setting FY 2021-22	JBC Staff	Document

## Appendix B

### List of Codes and Themes

Themes (called “Frames” in the text)	Associated Codes
Student Financial Frame	Student affordability
	Increased access
	Comparative underfunding by student
Institutional Funding Frame	Expense reductions
	Funding restoration
	Comparative underfunding by institution
Economy & Workforce Frame	Workforce readiness
	Public economy
	Innovation

## Appendix C

### Colorado Public Institutions and Staff-recommended Funding Increases, FY 2021-22 (Bickel & JBC Staff, 2021a)

Institution	Type	Increase	Note
Adams State	Rural RCU	1.5%	
Colorado Mesa	Rural RCU	7.8%	Increased for buy-down
Metropolitan State	Urban access	8.2%	Increased for buy-down
Western State	Rural RCU	2.7%	
Colorado State University*	Flagship	2.1%	
Fort Lewis College	Rural TCU	1.5%	
University of Colorado*	Flagship	2.1%	
Colorado School of Mines	Specialized	2.6%	
U of Northern Colorado	RCU	2.4%	
Colorado Community Colleges*	Varied	7.1%	Increased for buy-down

\* Systems