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Applying for Justice? A Critical Discourse Analysis of Community College Grant Applications for Justice-Impacted Student Program Funding

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This study uses Critical Discourse Analysis through a Critical Race Theory lens to analyze grant applications of community colleges that applied for funding to build or support programs for justice-impacted students. I analyze how colleges problem-frame the need for their program, finding that 'colleges' use of race-evasive and ahistorical discourse is potentially detrimental to the larger goals their programs seek to address.

Education has typically been framed as a path for social mobility (Haskins, 2008), yet federal, state, and institutional policies have regularly and systematically denied justice-impacted students (JIS) from accessing these benefits (Middlemass, 2017). California has one of the highest incarceration rates in the world (Prison Policy Initiative, n.d.); however, only about 3% of incarcerated or formerly incarcerated (FI) Californians are accessing higher education, and there is a dire need to serve these students (Murillo, 2021). There has been increasing momentum behind creating support services for justice-impacted college students. In 2019, a California budget bill awarded the California Community College Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) a one-time \$5,000,000 grant to create or support existing programs for JIS enrolled in community college. This investment is an important step forward, as funding can help increase educational access and support for these students. Yet, how do colleges describe their programs and frame the need to serve JIS? In this paper, I used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

through a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens to analyze grant applications submitted by the colleges. I found that colleges primarily relied on an economic and recidivism framework to justify the need for their program. Colleges advocated for the need to expand higher education access in prisons and jails and provide individualized support services to aid students' reentry transitions. However, they often wrote about their programs through an ahistorical and race-evasive lens. I conclude with a discussion of implications of this work and how to carry it forward.

Background

Community colleges often serve as the first points of contact to higher education for justice-impacted students, as they provide most of the college coursework in prisons and jails (Royer et al., 2021). Moreover, with their open-access admissions policies and cheaper tuition, they play an essential role in democratizing access to higher education for JIS. During the 2018-2019 school year, California Community Colleges served at least 5,896 formerly incarcerated and 23,759 incarcerated students (CCCCO, n.d.). Given that community colleges play such an essential role in the educational pipeline of JIS, there is growing demand to support them.

California's Budget Assembly Trailer Bill 1809 awarded the CCCCCO a one-time \$5,000,000 grant to create or expand programs for JIS enrolled in California community colleges (Opportunity Institute, 2018). Of the 52 community colleges that applied for funding, 44 received funding. Each funded college received \$113,636 beginning July 1, 2019, and funded colleges were required to provide matching funds.

Theoretical Framework

Racism and racist policies have defined the U.S. legal system since its inception, and these practices have continually adapted to criminalize Blackness and codify it through the multiple arms of the state (Davis, 2003). Racial disproportionality throughout all access points to and exits from the legal system reveals "an intentional form of structural violence" (Ortiz & Jackey, 2019, p. 498). Acknowledging this, I used Critical Race Theory (CRT) to guide my analysis of grant applications. CRT studies the relationships between race, racism, and power, and seeks to transform and dismantle them through scholarship and action (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001). Delgado and Stefanic (2001) describe five key tenets of CRT as: (a) racism is a regular occurrence, not an issue of the past; (b) interest convergence upholds racism, as it benefits both the white elite and working class, which disincentivizes them to eradicate it; (c) race is a social construction that society "invents, manipulates, and retires when convenient" (p. 7); (d) people have intersecting identities that carry privilege in different ways; (e) the experiences of people of color allow them to communicate and challenge structures of racism through counterstories. Analyzing the applications through a CRT lens highlights how colleges problem-frame the necessity of their program and reconcile serving the needs of JIS and the greater justice-impacted community within the broader schema of legal reform efforts and demands for racial and social justice. The following research question guided this study: 1) How do community colleges frame the need for programming for justice-impacted students?

Method

I used Critical Discourse Analysis to analyze the applications. CDA examines social issues using language and discourse. van Dijk (1993) argues that macro-notions of institutional power and social inequality are often separate from the micro-notions of social power, such as language and text. CDA highlights the dialectical relationship between these micro-and macro-notions, emphasizing that language is not neutral and revealing how discourse embeds social and power structures (Fairclough, 1992). Finally, CDA underscores the historic nature of discourse and posits that it is a form of social action. I used CDA to uncover the explicit and implicit ways colleges discuss programming for JIS through a CRT lens. I paid attention to if and how colleges used discourse to critique and delegitimize racist practices and ideologies as they emphasized the need for their programming.

Data

Fifty-two of the 116 community colleges in California applied for grant funding to create or expand programming for JIS. I submitted a public records request with CCCCO to access the grant applications. Grant applications were often 30-40 pages long. They included a problem statement or justification for their program, a description of the program and its goals, a workplan, budget, and letters of support. For this article, I focused on the problem statement section, as it sets an ideological grounding for the programs' design and goals.

Data Analysis

For analysis, I first developed a set of deductive codes from CRT, reentry, and higher education in prison literature (e.g., *race-evasiveness*, *reentry barriers*,

educational attainment). Next, after reading through all the grant applications, I developed a set of inductive codes (e.g., *recidivism, crime rates*) which emerged from salient themes. I then coded the grant applications in Dedoose, using a combined codebook. After coding, I created a qualitative data matrix (Miles et al., 2014) to further synthesize findings across colleges.

Findings

I examined how colleges used discourse to describe and advocate for programming for JIS. In the sections that follow, I discuss key themes that emerged from the analysis: (1) the economics of reentry; (2) race-evasiveness; (3) multiple barriers to reentry, (4) continuity in services.

The Economics of Reentry

Colleges often used recidivism and economic arguments to advocate for funding their program. They argued that incarceration rates in their counties and California have historically been high, as are the recidivism rates of those released. Colleges further argued that high recidivism rates jeopardize the local and state economy and that education could be a potent mediator that would help disrupt this cycle. For example, one college wrote, "When impacts on the nation's public safety and judicial systems are considered, along with the overwhelming costs incurred by individuals, society, and taxpayers, this is a significant and concerning issue." Other applications echoed this college's concern about public safety and the costs of recidivism. This focus on economic arguments in problem-framing the need for the creation or expansion of their program relies on interest convergence logics. It signals an appeal to policymakers through an ahistorical, cost-benefit approach.

Race-Evasiveness

Nearly all colleges used race-evasive language and framing throughout all sections of the grant application. They argued how their college served a racially diverse student population, and, as such, providing reentry services was an equity issue that they sought to address. Additionally, some colleges discussed racial and economic disparities in prison populations and educational attainment in their communities when explaining the impact of recidivism; yet, they did not problematize or discuss how racism and racist practices have perpetuated these disparities. Moreover, few colleges acknowledged that mass incarceration was a longstanding issue affecting their community, state, and country, and how it was rooted in a historical lineage of racist policies (Middlemass, 2017). Such practices embody how people use race discursively when it is convenient, yet doing so ignores the systemic violence enacted on those communities.

Deficit Language

The use of deficit language remained a stark refrain throughout almost every application. Colleges often used the word "inmate" to reference currently incarcerated students, and some used "ex-offender" for FI students. Although language for JIS has evolved over the years, these terms are thought to be derogatory and degrading. The CCCCO currently tracks JIS as "incarcerated" and "ex-offender" in their database system, which may explain why colleges use ex-offender. Yet, use of inmate is concerning and may stem from partnerships with corrections and parole offices.

Multiple Barriers to Reentry

All colleges referenced the myriad barriers formerly incarcerated students face when navigating reentry into their community, including access to housing, employment, and transportation. Some colleges also referenced challenges in navigating higher education, which necessitated an on-campus reentry program with dedicated support staff to assist JIS with their transition. While colleges named that students face discrimination due to their record, few called out the structural barriers and policies in place that hinder individuals during reentry. Moreover, as stated early, they often described reentry through race-neutral or race-evasive language, which ignores people's intersecting identities and how they affect the reentry process (Couloute, 2019).

Continuity in Services

Colleges were preeminently concerned about understanding barriers that impact the continuity in services for justice-impacted students. Almost 60% of colleges applying for funding had not operated an on-campus reentry program for students, but many had provided courses in the local prisons and jails. Colleges understood and accentuated the need to provide transitional support for students after their release from incarceration. They highlighted the importance of having a "safe space" for formerly incarcerated students, where they could regularly meet with dedicated program staff. For example, one college wrote how their program sought to "welcome formerly incarcerated students to [name of college] and provide a safe space to address their educational and reentry needs." Colleges underscored how these spaces would serve as "healing" environments for students. In this way, campus reentry programs would

function as a counter space that contrasted the harsh and punitive prison environment. Instead, they would honor justice-impacted students' lived experiences instead of criminalizing them.

Discussion and Concluding Implications

In this paper, I used CDA to examine grant applications of community colleges seeking funding to create or expand programs for justice-impacted students. I used a CRT lens to analyze how colleges used discursive practices to frame their problem statements. Most colleges framed their work economically, historically, and race-evasively. I briefly discuss the implications of these practices and offer suggestions for colleges to consider in the future.

Colleges undergirded the economic necessity of reducing recidivism, yet rarely acknowledged how reentry is shaped by structural policies designed to oppress FI people systematically (Ortiz & Jackey, 2019). The use of economic arguments to bolster support for justice-impacted student programming is problematic, unsustainable, and reinforces neoliberal models for change that protect private property rights. Indeed, Mackall (2018) argues that we should be weary about using an economic logic not only because it inherently sets a value on human life but also because it relies on economic justifications to hold true. Relying on an economic problem statement also underscores interest convergence logic, suggesting that programming for justice-impacted students is only prudent when it benefits the local and state economies and their taxpayers. Instead, suppose colleges are truly committed to helping repair the harms caused by the legal system. In that case, they should acknowledge these harms and the systems and policies that promulgated them and identify and implement ways to dismantle them.

When colleges use ahistorical and race-evasive presentations of the problem, it denies the racist history and public policies embedded within our social and legal systems. Moreover, colleges' avowal of a racially diverse student campus contradicts their use of race-evasive language when discussing the history of incarceration, illustrating how race is a social construct retired when convenient for those in power (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001). Colleges should address how race and racism shape the experiences of justice-impacted students throughout their educational and reentry journeys and how their programs seek to redress them.

Additionally, the college's use of derogatory terminology to describe incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students is worrisome, especially if such language is used in addressing their students. Such language strips away student identity and agency. Colleges should use humanizing language when describing students, and if there are concerns over what terms to use, a best practice is just to ask students how they prefer to be named.

Finally, many scholars have critiqued the "Prisoner Reentry Industry" (Thompkins, 2010) and the community reentry programs that operate within it (Couloute, 2019; Miller, 2014; Ortiz & Jackey, 2019). Scholars argue that the design of the reentry process systematically oppresses FI individuals and merely offers the "illusion of rehabilitation but operates using mechanisms that ensure the formerly incarcerated are unable to succeed" (Ortiz & Jackey, 2019, p. 498). Reentry programs have emerged to help formerly incarcerated people transition back into their communities, yet often they focus on changing individual behaviors and characteristics that ultimately increase their employability but do not materially change their lives nor

challenge the organizational structures that constrain them (Miller, 2014). While education is important both during prison and after release, contrary to popular rhetoric, it is not a panacea for the ills begot by the legal system. Colleges should be wary of purporting this type of discourse, as it reinforces meritocratic notions of success. Community colleges have a great opportunity to genuinely serve the needs of justice-impacted students, provide safe and nurturing counter spaces for students, and make a difference in their communities. However, when creating their programs, colleges should deeply investigate how they design and implement their programming to ensure they are not reproducing inequities for their students.

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