

A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF THE COLLEGIATE STUDENT BINARY  
FUNCTION AS CONSUMER AND PRODUCT AT  
PRIVATE HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

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## Abstract

This dissertation studies how institutions of higher education occupy a unique space that can add to the discourse of business studies by relating how consumers can simultaneously function as products. This is substantiated by defining the word “student” beyond the traditional meaning of a student as learner when considering the higher education business model. As such, the student as defined in this research co-exists as both consumer and product, shifting institutional culture and power dynamics while influencing senior-leadership decision-making. Given current research on the topic shows a one-sided view, concentrating on students as consumers rather than products or both, this study addresses gaps in the current research, with a focus on how the concept of higher education has not only two products (the curriculum and the student), but also two consumers (the student and the corporate structure who seeks to employ graduates at the lowest value, but the most productivity). A further gap in the research that served to benefit this study considered low-resourced, minority serving institutions with business models that depend on student enrollment, particularly Full-Time Equivalencies (FTE), to meet institutional budget constraints. Such a definition of the student binary that exists at tuition-driven, mission focused institutions create challenges that exist with accommodating and somewhat acquiescing to student socio-economic needs, organizational behavior, and institutional culture. Thus, using grounded theory, this qualitative study identifies semiotics as a business practice that not only creates symbolic meaning of the word “student”, but also identifies how *that* definition shifts depending on function, influencing the institutional power structure and decision-making practices of institutional leadership particularly at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). In particular, this study used a sample of nine senior-level administrators at the 37 small, private HBCUs under the UNCF umbrella to determine how leadership redefines the

student as an economic binary that influences and sustains the financial business model at these institutions.

*Keywords:* Students as products; Students as consumers; Leadership in higher education; Organizational Culture; Organizational Behavior; Students as consumers; Students as products; Higher education and business, Historical Black Colleges and Universities

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my family, friends, and employers both present and future,  
and to every student who will benefit from the results of this work.

## Table of Contents

Chapter 1. Introduction .....	1
Conceptual Framework .....	2
Research Question .....	3
Definition of Terms .....	3
Chapter 2. Literature Review .....	6
Current Research: The Student as Consumer .....	6
Current Research: The Student as Product .....	9
Current Research: The Student as Both Consumer and Product .....	13
Theory and Practice: Understanding Structure and Symbolism as a Business Strategy .....	15
Chapter 3. Design and Methodology.....	17
Description of Research Participants.....	17
Reliability and Validity.....	19
The Researcher’s Role.....	20
Measurement and Instrumentation.....	21
Data Collection Plan and Procedures.....	22
Data Analysis Procedures.....	22
Chapter 4. Findings .....	30
Results.....	31
Evaluation.....	41
Chapter 5. Results, Recommendations, and Conclusion .....	43
Introduction.....	43



Summary of the Study.....	43
Discussion of Findings.....	44
Limitation.....	53
Implications for Theory and Research.....	55
Using Semiotics to Create Meaning.....	55
Process of Theoretical Application: Deconstruction, Interpretation, and Communicative Action of Semiotics in Business.....	57
Recommendations for Future Research .....	66
Conclusion.....	76
References.....	81
Appendix A. UNCF Network of Member Institutions .....	87
Appendix B. Manual Coding Table .....	88
Appendix C. Interview Protocol .....	89

## List of Tables

<b>Table</b>		<b>Page</b>
1	Overview of the Solicitations.....	24
2	Profile of the Respondents.....	27

## Chapter 1: Introduction

This dissertation focuses on how the definition of what it means to be a student plays a defining role on administrative decisions and the business strategy for validating a nuanced conceptualization of higher education within small private tuition-driven institutions. Part of understanding the student's role in the business modeling of the institution from a marketing and organizational perspective is related to understanding the concept of higher education institutions both as a school and as a business. This was not an attempt at redefining the role of the student by disregarding others. Rather, the research seeks to show a different construct of the stakeholder relationship of the student that allows for questions of representation, agency, and power relative to higher education leadership and management in an ever increasingly, but arguably, capitalist society.

In addition, this researcher has inquired of the organized business strategies of higher education institutions, if they exist, and how the student as a key constituent plays a role in that process. One of the ways private institutions differ from public institutions is that they depend on students as a critical part of obtaining money for financial solvency (Beamer, 2011). In the case of this research, the use of private historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) seemed appropriate given their mission for educational access to academically, socially and economically disadvantaged students (Schexnider, 2017; Smith-Barrow, 2019). Having used the HBCU as a market segment, made it possible to assist with understanding the role of the student, and the potential binary role students play in strategic plan of these institutions. And how the concept of the student binary, which defines students as both a commodity and a product, at resource challenged institutions that depend on student tuition, and how the treatment and evaluation of this concept impacts institutional activities such as student recruitment, retention,

and how this binary view plays into the institutional outcomes such as student success and completion rates.

This study has showed how current representation of the student is as identified either a consumer or product; thus, intentionally creating a space for critical discourse on the complex personas and performance that encompass the body, consumption, power, and creation of agency. In this space, one has critically examined a construction of student identity that was fixed and fluid, stable and malleable. Thus, we have considered the meaning of student as more than a physically manifested body, but a conceptualized symbol that represents important aspects of business modeling within the higher education institution. This was especially interesting as those meanings were revealed to various individuals vested in contemporary instances of buying and selling within the higher educational space.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In a twenty-first century that convey ideas of social enlightenment, equality, and cultural cohesion, higher education institutions continue to make use of their public good to effect change. However, studies have shown that students who attend college have a greater chance for employability and higher salaries (Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities; Hout, 2012; Torpey, 2019; n,d.). Nevertheless, this researcher intends to address the ways in which the public good of colleges and universities are potentially in conflict with the capitalist view of western society in a way that may not have been considered in prior literature.

Thus, this research has more of defining a stratagem in market research, leadership, and management using a theory of consumption behavior to relegate constructs of fixed student identities. As a result, the binary of the student as consumer and student constitutes an

alternative strategy of identifying appropriate business practices within the higher education space.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that have been addressed are the following: Do institutional leaders seem to perceive students as occupying a space as both a consumer and product? Has for-profit education impacted the consumer mentality in the traditional higher education model? Are there any issues related to the student as a consumer (ie. grade inflation)? Does that pose a problem for educators? What role does Institutional Effectiveness play in the consumer/product mentality (ie. course evaluations, strategic planning, accreditation)?

Therefore, this study attempted to contribute to the current knowledge by exploring the current models of how management decisions influence the business models present in the higher education sphere. Given much of the literature concentrates on either the student as a commodity or as a consumer, this study examined the intersection of both and the direct effect on the institution. Hopefully, colleges and universities will be better equipped and prepared for the students they serve by understanding the business role of education, while not sacrificing the quality and tradition of the educational process by choosing one perspective over the other.

### **Definition of Terms**

The central concepts and terms of the paper are:

1. Consumer – Students as consumers bring the same expectations of higher education as they do to other consumable services and products, i.e., they comparison-shop different institutions and are more concerned about utilitarian goals rather than intellectual growth (Zhu & Anagondahalli, 2017). Research suggests the customer

mentality of students leads to a self-perspective that they are customers of higher education and subsequently, teachers serve as customer service representatives (Zhu & Anagondahalli, 2017; Delucchi & Korgen, 2002; Lippmann et al., 2009; Singleton-Jackson et al., 2010; Twenge, 2006). However, there is an additional consumer, the employer; as Mark (2013) states, future employers are “the true customers of education” as students are expected to meet specifications these employers.

Therefore, the university as an enterprise has two consumers, one of which, the student, also simultaneously serves the dual role of product.

2. Product – Students as products are those who are like raw materials that are converted into a finished product through a process of meeting learning outcomes that prove competency to meet degree requirements without directly contributing to the development of curriculum and planning while meeting specifications for future employers (Mark, 2013; Sirvanci, 1996). However, for students who serve as consumers, the academic services provided are also a product for the student to purchase at a nominal fee.
3. Return on Investment – As a consumer and product, students seek a return on investment, either a better job or to make more money which makes students seek majors with higher paying career outcomes (Zhu & Anagondahalli, 2017; while corporate partners who contribute financially to institutions are seeking qualified, career ready individuals, or at least interns, to get the most productivity, with minimal training after graduation (Mark, 2013).
4. Blindspotting – the concept of how a person’s mind will only focus on the first perception of an item; although there can be two images within the picture. The

concept of blindspotting is based upon Rubin's Vase, "an optical illusion in which the viewer sees either a vase or two faces, but never both at first glance (visual 'blind spots')" (Harrison, 2018). The duality of visual within one image reflects the notion of training the mind to see both visuals simultaneously. Similarly, as a psychological phenomenon, it takes a mental retraining to effectively see both images at once as a holistic image, not one distinct perceived image over another depending on perspective.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Since this was a newer area of research, the literature covered information beyond higher education that includes management, the perception of students and theoretical analysis. In trying to locate literature relevant to the topic of students as both students and products, the literature was found not to exist explicitly, but rather implicitly was discussed in this literature review. However, even more interesting was that much of the research that discussed students as either consumers or products was found to be published in the late 1990's and early 2000's. Nevertheless, the literature shifted focus to a more consumer based theme from 2010 until roughly 2016, when the research again appeared sporadic, with many of their reference to literature found in the 1990's through the first decade of the 2000's as critical foundational material. Therefore, the literature has attempted to show through these documents, why it was important to conduct such a study, which hopes to enrich administrators and institutional stakeholders by critically assessing the function of business in the higher education sphere.

### **Current Research: The Student as Consumer**

Current research did not address the simultaneous functioning of students as both consumer and product. Often, the literature focused on either one or the other of the two perspectives, with a stronger concentration on the student as consumer (Mark, 2013; Ruch, 2001). This research was very clear on the stance of the student as consumer and the student driven philosophy of higher education as a consumer-based business. For example, Mark (2013) in "Students Are Not Products. They Are Customers," focused on the student driven philosophy of higher education and this influence on the university as a consumer based business. Mark (2013) asserted that students are not passive consumers, which would ascertain their role as products. Rather, students play an active role in their pursuit of a college degree, which was



initiated by the student's payment of tuition. This payment of tuition assumes that the students are paying for a service offered by the faculty member. He defined this transaction as the place where the student now became a consumer of curriculum, and as such, the grading process allowed the student an additional layer of active consumption rather than a passive stance on their education outcomes. Unfortunately, Mark did not consider the potential negative impact paying for one's education had on the assumption that the customer is always right. However, this source did give a clear understanding of consumerism from the perspective of post-secondary education in the specifics between the ways in which students as consumers versus students as commodities was defined.

Similar to Mark's analysis of the customer driven aspect of student behaviorism as it related to consumerism was addressed in the book, *Academic Freedom in an Age of Conformity: Confronting the Fear of Knowledge* is a critical analysis of the impact economics and politics has on post-secondary education. However, Williams (2016) asserted the threat of today's "market-driven focused on institutional reputation and image management" (p. 6). Similar to Mark (2013), Williams (2016) addressed the student consumerism model that leads to a sense of entitlement; yet, counters the argument presented in Mark's analysis of the student as consumer as the student had very few rights by when the student's academic freedom was censored, reaffirming the passive nature of the student in his/her own academic career. Therefore, the student still functioned as a consumer, but it was the student's behaviors and level of input into their own educational decision-making that determined how the student as consumer was defined.

Additionally, the perspective of the student as consumer could best be articulated in the difference between non-profit and for-profit college sectors. Students played an active role in

their pursuit of a college degree, which was initiated by the student's payment of tuition; a transaction where the student now becomes an active consumer of curriculum (Mark, 2013; Ruch, 2001).

Ruch (2001) in *Higher Ed, Inc.: The Rise of the For-Profit University* was an insightful look into the perspective of the for-profit sector of higher education and the perception and acceptance of the student as consumer. Traditionally, higher education had been a non-profit entity that reflected the notion of free thought, scholarly inquiry, and intellectual production. However, in the marketplace, education has been scaled to accommodate access to any and all individuals, regardless of academic experience, integrity, or preparedness. Ruch (2001) asserted that because for-profit institutions perform a service for students through facilitating classwork, that the student was in fact a customer, and thus, as an enterprise does not care about the way students receive or retain information. Rather, this new model was driven by profit margin and not intellectual quality, producing degrees in mass for consumption versus bodies of knowledge.

A second perspective of the student as consumer involves the role of recruitment and the student experience (Saunders, 2014; Hanley, 2005). For both Saunders (2014) and Hanley (2005), political and social structures that relate to capitalist modes of consumption, have driven universities to focus more on the business and productivity of services and classes as related to student satisfaction rather than learning and student engagement.

Yet, another customer driven aspect was student behaviorism as it related to consumerism. Williams (2016) addressed the student consumerism model that leads to a sense of entitlement. Such ability to create spaces of conformity allow for optimization of curriculum and a continual production of graduates. Williams addresses the results associated with discouraging academic freedom as more student complacency and entitlement, while little

question to social, economic, and political structures that are benefiting from the lack of academic freedom, translating to fewer instances of such criticism in those areas after graduation. Similar to Mark (2013), Williams addresses the student consumerism model that leads to a sense of entitlement; nevertheless, Williams counters the argument presented in Mark's analysis of the student as consumer as the student has very few rights by when the student's academic freedom is censored, reaffirming the passive nature of the student in his/her own academic career. Therefore, the student still functions as a consumer, but it is the student's behaviors and level of input into their own educational decision-making that determines how the student as consumer is defined.

### **Current Research: The Student as Product**

Conversely, research on the student as product is a little more obscure and finds itself in a myriad of descriptions related to higher education and productivity. Baker and Brown (2007) trace the movement of higher education driven by employers and the state (government) rather than the initial premise of the university as a place for critical inquiry and social change. Such economic factors, such as paying for one's education, influence the psycho-socialization of the student and the contention of the consumer/product binary. By tracing the movement of higher education in conjunction with social, economic, and educational trends, Baker and Brown (2007) assert that higher education plays a greater role in the establishment of social behaviors due to historically social, political, and economic relevant events that have influenced education. As such, the university of today is more concerned with training students for a skill that will make them more employable rather than free thought (Baker & Brown, 2007). Baker and Brown also complicate Mark's assertion of the student consumer as an active participant of their own educational endeavors.

Relatedly, Piet van der Zanden (2009) addresses western higher education and its role in the next generation of scholars as more concerned with employability and skill rather than inquiry and social change. Creating spaces for competition, now non-profits must assume a level of market-driven business practices to compete, often facilitating the same narrative for its students and graduates. Like Baker and Brown, Piet van der Zanden gives a very clear trajectory of the university and the social, political, and economic forces that create transformational change in higher education. In this, educational technology is important to the facilitation of passive student engagement and the productivity of university student output (quantity) rather than outcomes (quality).

For van der Zanden, the student as consumer/product concept is important for those entities who wish to push the corporate brand and strategy of technology within the educational system. Such automation reinforces those structures in higher education that create automation of degree issuance. Therefore, universities at this rate will become nothing more than diploma mills that turn-out graduates in mass with a basic skill set, but little to no ability to critically think. The social and political implications are great in that the power structures that can result may be detrimental to the liberties and freedoms of individuals who are made to believe they have autonomy over their educational careers, while simply going through the motions of obtaining a degree by completing a series of classes that are no more than tasks. Van der Zanden gives a credible background and clear definition of the movement of higher education from first through third generation universities and how this movement is now influencing the university as a business rather than a place of thought.

Additional literature considers the role of employers in the productivity of higher education. Therefore, employers and alumni as stakeholders, contribute to not only the role of

the student, but also the management of higher educational institutions that struggle to define such roles. Lawrence and Sharma (2002) in “Commodification of Education and Academic Labour—Using the Balanced Scorecard in a University Setting,” address how political structures are driving the student and program outcomes of universities. Lawrence and Sharma assert that as the government is limiting the funding of higher education institutions, such administrations now have to find other methods to fund their non-profit organizations. One of the ways in which the government is restricting funding is by requiring institutions to perform through Total Quality Management (TQM) and Balanced Scorecards (BSC). Such strategies are leading institutions to create, according to the text, “quasi-market funding mechanisms” that use business terminology and efficiencies to evaluate productivity in an effort to be competitive in a government influences market.

Likewise, Williams (2016) in “Higher Education: Public Good or Private Commodity,” examines the role of economics and government in complicating the question of higher education and social responsibility. However, Williams (2016) emphasizes that higher education, access, and competition is driven by money, and that such influence benefits neither higher education, nor those who wish to pursue such credentials. By using the laws of supply and demand, the text indicates three pressures that shifted higher education away from public service: The financial, the sociopolitical, and the ideological. Such a shift has made the post-secondary educational arena a marketable commodity subject to the laws of supply and demand by individuals and organized groups. Thus, education as an investment makes the student a consumer of a product and therefore, requires a level of excellence and productivity as related to student success via programming and offering.

Through an analysis of the issues created by government regulation and recension of financial resources to post-secondary institutions, both Lawrence and Sharma (2002), and Williams (2016) articles fail to address the impact on the student, at least from a direct standpoint. There can be multiple assumptions made regarding the long-term impact within the social realm and the employability preparedness of college graduates; however, both texts limit those assumptions by qualifying the necessity for more economic support from government agencies without facilitating the degeneration of the educational process. Such impact has an eventual effect on the way students translate academics to investment and whether or not they take the academic process seriously.

Lawrence and Sharma (2002) address how political structures are driving the student and program outcomes of universities. Likewise, G. Williams (2016) places emphasis on higher education, access, and competition as driven by money, and that such influence benefits neither higher education, nor those who wish to pursue such credentials. This shift has made the post-secondary educational arena a marketable commodity subject to the laws of supply and demand by individuals and organized groups. As an indirect relationship to student perception as product or consumer, they must first acknowledge education as a service/product and not an opportunity for the expansion of knowledge, rather its consumption. Such a commodification of education allows for its consumption, and therefore knowledge is only power for those who control it, exploit it, and profit from it. The historiography of higher education from public good to commodity allows for a deconstruction of the model to hopefully address ways to reveals spaces for changes in student behavior and academic integrity.

### **Current Research: The Student as Both Consumer and Product**

There were only three articles found that spoke to the notion of the student consumer/product binary, either directly or indirectly. The first seeks to address the problems of both the product and the consumer constructs of higher education. Franz (1998) communicates through a thorough examination of stakeholder definitions, relationships and responsibilities of students and faculty, and the role economics has played in the success or failure of higher education institutions, that students are both viewed as products and customers – though in an indirect manner. Though much of the research on the binary of the student as consumer/product is more about the consumerism of the student and the educational process, Franz's (1998) article, "Whatever You Do, Don't Treat Your Students Like Customers!" addresses the problems of both the product and the consumer construct of higher education. Though the title may seem to assume that Franz will be addressing the student as consumer model, Franz communicates through a thorough examination of stakeholder definitions, relationships and responsibilities of students and faculty, and the role economics has played in the success or failure of higher education institutions, that students are both viewed as products and customers – though in an indirect manner. The article considers that importance of entertainment, educational choice, and the quantity of students versus the quality of graduates as the foundation for marketing and competitive recognition in the educational and business realm. These forces tend to influence that ways in which faculty view their students in terms of controlling knowledge and its transference, as well as the compliance and yielding to "customer" desires (Franz, 1998). This article is a critical piece in many other texts as it confounds both the product/customer binary in an effort to address how higher education needs to reaffirm its commitment to social change and betterment.

Another research aspect of the consumer/product binary of the student is related to the management and leadership of higher education organizations. The relationships between senior-level administration, faculty, and students, address a survival of the fittest mentality and how such mentality affects these relationships. For instance, “Why Students are Not (Just) Customers (and Other Reflections *on Life After George*),” reflects on the play *Life After George* and the realistic portrayal faculty and administrators face when combating the business of education. Sharrock (2000) asserts that faculty members are concerned with the quality of education and student inquiry, while administrators face the more harsh realities of economic survival and the competitive edge that results. University administrators often must balance budgets and find solutions to economic threats, while faculty choose not to address or acknowledge those issues. This creates a conflict within the university itself, as Sharrock ascertains that “traditionally, universities don’t regard education as a ‘product’ or ‘service’ to be sold to students, nor students themselves as ‘products’ for the labour market.” However, we must recreate the student narrative as customers, clients, citizens, or subjects. These interchangeable definitions can be used as necessary to create a balance between the educational space and the confluence of the business sector. Such research is quite beneficial to understanding the ways in which the product/consumer dynamic can coexist in the same space, while not sacrificing student academic freedom and thought. However, the power structures within the social, political, and economic spheres may threaten such collusion of this balance when it threatens the capitalist agenda and the power hierarchies that result.

Conversely, Cicarelli (1990) is the only reference found that supports both the customer/product binary. Many of the references reviewed either concentrate on one or the other; however, Cicarelli (1990) addresses both perspectives of the binary in a mutually



exclusive, yet equally important, simultaneously functioning part of the student journey.

According to the text, his experience as a faculty member and administrator allowed him to assert that the university perpetuates the dual nature of the student/product binary through its service, insisting that “Since, nearly all colleges try to satisfy students' needs and wants while attempting to mold their minds, the facile answer to the title question [are students customers or products] is ‘both’” (Cicarelli, 1990, p. 4). The article related a concise examination of both viewpoints to further iterate the defense of the student as customer and the student as product separately. In contrast to Franz and Sharrock, which confounds both the product/customer binary to address how higher education needs to reaffirm its commitment to social change and betterment or economic development; inherently, Cicarelli also justifies the reasons why students can actually be considered as both, giving more insight into the ways my research can be further supported. At the same time Cicarelli shows the way in which that separation further affirms how the student perceives their experience and expectation against that of the faculty and future employer, leading to the occupancy of the student as both consumer and product in the same space, at the same time. However, these texts really substantiate the opportunity to further examine the validity of the primary argument that students are both consumers and products at the same time, relating a concise examination of both viewpoints to further iterate the defense of this research.

### **Theory and Practice: Understanding Structure and Symbolism as a Business Strategy**

In researching students as consumers and products, it becomes increasingly evident that the development of the concept was much more than a straightforward understanding of the student as a person. From the business perspective, the purpose of the student and the role this constituent plays in the institutional business model is more of an abstract ideology than a body.

Thus, as the research continued to address the abstract conceptualization of the student as an institutional function, the literature moved to understanding the symbolism of the term student and the need to create meaning for business purposes. While it is understood that semiotics has its foundation in literary and media study, its use in the business setting is becoming increasingly useful (Faizen, 2019). Though Ferdinand de Saussure is considered the father of semiotics (Solomonik & Schwartz, 2015), William G. Tierney introduced the concept from a higher education leadership perspective in his 1989 article, “Symbolism and Presidential Perceptions of Leadership.” In this understanding of using postmodernism from a business perspective, an appreciation of semiotics will be sought to validate this research topic. This could then be incorporated into studies of higher education leadership, business management, and marketing.

Theoretically, my study examines leadership, agency, representation, and power relations in the student as a consumer and a product. It also expresses the psychological and socio-political significance of the concept of leadership strategies in understanding higher education as an institution. The exploration of leadership theories to explain the act of the consumer/product binary through historicism will examine how institutions of higher education function as businesses. In addition, the process of transitioning and existing in duality of these spaces creates a sense of double-consciousness. However, I argue that as universities and colleges understand the contemporary student’s function in duality of consumer and product, senior-level administrators can create better spaces for student education and better business strategies for a more viable and stable organization.

### **Chapter 3: Design and Methodology**

This study has used a postmodernist perspective of consumerism to understand the semiotics of higher education leader perspective in creating student meaning. While it was understood that semiotics has its foundation in literary and media study, its use in the business setting has becoming increasingly useful (Faizen, 2019). Though Ferdinand de Saussure is considered the father of semiotics (Solomonik & Schwartz, 2015), William G. Tierney introduced the concept from a higher education leadership perspective in his 1989 article, “Symbolism and Presidential Perceptions of Leadership.” In this understanding of the usage of postmodernism from a business perspective, an appreciation of semiotics was sought to validate this research topic.

#### **Description of Research Participants**

The primary collection of this study has been conducted on the campuses of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). As the umbrella for the nation’s 37 private HBCUs (UNCF, 2019), United Negro College Fund (UNCF) was used as a source to identify and solicit the nine research participants.

The nine research participants that responded to the solicitation for interviews were a sample of HBCU administrators from small private colleges. While the initial target segment was college presidents, the researcher expanded the research to include additional senior administrators, which included both institutional presidents and vice presidents in the context of the recruitment and matriculation experiences as well as post-graduation expectations of their students. This worked to provide a unique perspective on the conflict between institutional needs and development of the student’s workforce preparedness, and provided insight into the notion of the student as a commodity and economic investment.

Using a postmodern approach, the focus of this study was directed toward the perspective of institutional leadership and the ways higher education leaders identify and create meaning through the conceptualization of a student, that leads to their business decisions. Therefore, the student movement beyond just a body, but rather a socially constructed concept grounded in some form of essentialism. According to Fuss (1989), essentialism “is most commonly understood as a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the 'whatness' of a given entity" (xi). Thus the *whatness* of the student as ideological would be deconstructed from what is typically fixed characteristics. This abstracted conceptualization grounded in social and economic context, were then reconstructed using an essentialist understanding of consumer and product, “the definition of essentialism as opposition to difference” (Fuss, 1989, p. xii). This was achieved through the exploration of Saussurean semiotics and the process of understanding the establishment of the meaning of the term *student* through its deconstruction.

Further, moving forward with Derrida’s notion of deconstruction, the idea was that the student as consumer/product as predicated on oppositions “challenge the idea of a frozen structure and advances the notion that there is no univocal meaning...making the notion of a direct relationship between signifier and signified no longer tenable, thus creating infinite shifts in meaning relayed from one signifier to another” (Guillemette & Cossette, 2006, n.p.). The qualities of what makes a consumer and a product was then applied to the “student” as both, especially by leadership depending on audience, situation, and applied semiotics. Thus, the student becomes an abstract concept that is constantly fluid and functions in the binary space for purposes of power, economics, and agency, functioning somewhat like “the Rubin’s Vase, an optical illusion in which the viewer sees either a vase or two faces, but never both at first glance

(visual ‘blind spots’). Seeing both at the same time, is possible, but it takes a lot of effort” (Harrison, 2018). For the research participants, in particular, the perceptions and meaning attached to those experiences, as separate yet simultaneous, was expressed by each participant. This includes the assimilation of surprising events or information and making sense of critical events and issues that arise. Particular attention was paid to the role of the student in value proposition of the marketing, quality of education, relationship building, decision making, and gainful employment as alumni.

### **Reliability and Validity**

According to (Schutt, 2012), no set standards exist for evaluating the validity, or authenticity, of conclusions in a qualitative study. However, the need to carefully consider the evidence and methods on which conclusions are based is just as great as with other types of research. According to Becker, individual items of information can be assessed in terms of at least three criteria (as cited in Schutt, 2012, p.330-331), which the researcher will use:

1. How credible was the informant? Were statements made by someone with whom the researcher had a relationship of trust or by someone the researcher had just met? Did the informant have reason to lie? If the statements do not seem to be trustworthy as indicators of actual events, can they at least be used to help understand the informant’s perspective?
2. Were statements made in response to the researcher’s questions, or were they spontaneous? Spontaneous statements are more likely to indicate what would have been said had the researcher not been present.
3. How does the presence or absence of the researcher or the researcher’s informant influence the actions and statements of other group members? Reactivity to being

observed can never be ruled out as a possible explanation for some directly observed social phenomenon. However, if the researcher carefully compares what the informant says goes on when the researcher is not present, what the researcher observes directly, and what other group members say about their normal practices, the extent of reactivity can be assessed to some extent.

Ultimately, all phases of this project will be subject to scrutiny by an external auditor who is experienced in qualitative research methods to ensure the participants, researcher, and various forms of data collection are valid and consistent.

### **The Researcher's Role**

The researcher's role in qualitative research was important as one must consider their own biases and assumptions. One way to consider the role of the researcher was from the perspective of autoethnography, "a methodological approach to research and a genre of writing where the researcher is the focus of reflexive inquiry" (Cassell, Cunliffe, & Grandy, 2018, p. 57). Given the researcher's perception of students and their roles within the higher education landscape have been shaped by their personal experiences.

Because of the researcher's roles in higher education business and finance and as a faculty member, as well as their experiences in the corporate space, the researcher brings certain biases to this study. Hardcastle argued that "the need for the researcher to be self-aware of personal bias to 'reduce distortions of power' is fundamental to accurately portraying the underlying culture being explored" (as cited in Ross, Rogers, & Duff, 2016, p. 5). Although every effort was made to ensure objectivity, it was understood these preconceptions may shape the way the researcher views and understands the data collected as well as the way the information was interpreted.

## **Measurement and Instrumentation**

The type of instrumentation that was used to facilitate the data collection in this project was interview questions. Additional research used data gathered by government and compliance agencies – i.e. accreditation agencies – regarding requirements to be gainfully employed via career readiness projects and projections was used as supplemental resources to develop the questions asked. Though UNCF was mentioned earlier as providing opportunities for research and data collection, research conducted by other non-profit organizations such as the National Institute for Learning Assessment and Outcomes (NILOA), along with the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) were assessed to determine the creation of interview questions and the related validity and reliability to engage universities in the forward movement of student graduation and subsequent job placement. Subsequently, this information was eventually one premise used to develop a subset of interview questions related to the perception of students as key business components.

Furthermore, these research instruments were used to provide a level of consistency and repeatability, leading to a greater reliability. This was more evident not only across varying institutions in which data will be collected. As different individuals were given the same questions, the utilization of similar population dynamics and stratification, the behavior of the instrument was tested for reliability.

## **Data Collection Plan and Procedures**

The type of design that was used in this qualitative study was one of virtual field interviews rather than an experimental. Data was collected from April 2021 through August 2021. Because of the current restrictions on travel and the raising cases of coronavirus (COVID-19), the interview protocol was implemented using the Zoom meeting platform as the key

collection tool for the purposes of the project; which all of the interviews averaged about 34 minutes in length and ranged from 26 minutes to just about 52 minutes and all interviews were recorded and transcribed via the Zoom transcription feature.

### **Sample**

The first problem of this study focused on the senior leadership's conceptualization of creating the meaning of "student" in particular at small, private, tuition driven Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). In particular, these institutions depend on student enrollment and tuition dollars as a sustaining mechanism in their business modeling. Therefore, in addressing RQ1, "Do institutional leaders seem to perceive students as occupying a space as both a consumer and product?" it was critical to the data collection and research to have a specific concentration on leaders of these institutions – Presidents. The preliminary participants were identified from the nation's 37 private HBCUs that are member institutions of the United Negro College Fund (UNCF, 2019). The United Negro College Fund (UNCF) was used as a source to compile the email contact list to solicit interviews with the various Presidents who serve at these institutions.

After careful review of the list, it was strongly recommended that not only Presidents, but quite possibly the Chief Operating Officer (COO), or second in command, at these institutions might also be also to provide some since of understanding the operational effectiveness and business modeling necessary to create policy and provision for student recruitment, retention, and completion. This recommendation came as a consideration that many Presidents or institutional leaders may not be available, or even more so would not have the intimate knowledge of the day to day operations of working directly with students. Therefore, the final primary source of solicited participants consisted of current Presidents and Provosts or the Chief



Operating Officers serving at one of the identified institutions. As institutional organizational structures constituted different individuals maintaining the day to day operations of the institution, in some cases the President was able to constitute the ultimate authority, while at other institutions, the COO functioned as the institutional stabilizer. Further, as a part of my conversation with participant five, a College President, it was stated

People would be surprised at the level of engagement between the Presidents at HBCUs and the intimate involvement we have at our institutions. As President, I am responsible for the institution, and I because of our size and the limited human resources, I have an obligation to make sure everything is functioning and running. This is not the norm for many Predominately White or large-scale, research institutions as they have the funding and girth to hire the individuals delegated to do the vision and mission of the leadership and the institution. However, at small, private HBCUs, we all wear many hats – and that includes the President. So we are very familiar and aware of *everything* that happens on our campuses, and are hands-on with those processes.

Ultimately, the researcher was able to get nine volunteers from the 37 institutions to participate in virtual Zoom interviews, which were all recorded and transcribed via Zoom transcription. Table 1 – Research Participant Demographics identifies the solicitation and response rates, with the profile of the respondents.

**Table 1***Research Participant Demographics**Overview of the Solicitations*

<b>Institutions Represented</b>	<b>Solicitations</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<i>Population Size</i>	37	100%
<b>UNCF Network of Member Institutions</b>	37	100%
<b>Position / Institutional Role</b>	Presidents / Chief Executive Officers	50%
	Provost / VP of Academic Affairs	50%

*Overview of the Respondents*

	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<i>UNCF Network of Member Institutions</i>	37	100%
<b>Institutions Represented</b>	9	24%
<b>Institutions Not Represented</b>	28	76%
	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<i>Sample Size</i>	74	100%
<b>Accepted</b>	9	12%
<b>Declined</b>	36	49%
<b>Did not Answer</b>	29	39%

*Participant's Interviews***Interview Length**

<b>Average Interview Time</b>	34 minutes
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Overall, the nine participants represented about 19% of the total institutions eligible for the research and about 12% of the total solicited invites sent. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes and after each interview the transcripts were verified with the recording and after the initial six interviews were conducted, the interviews were coded in a batch. The original interview protocol, including the subsequent interview questions are provided in Appendix A.

While the collection of interview data was critical for appropriate analysis and engagement of the material for best outcomes, this analysis had to rely on the ability to establish a rapport with the interviewee. Nevertheless, a number of prearranged questions were asked to all interviewees to maintain consistency in an effort to code their responses appropriately. Having to rely on virtual interviews, the following items were obstacles that were encountered: Schedule conflicts; firewall and administrative filtering, managing technical issues; and a difficulty establishing a level of professionalism and comfort while video conferencing with participants that the researcher was meeting with for the first time.

### **Data Collection**

Initially, the research participants were grouped into an initial solicited batch of 30 of the 74 total potential institutions, with a secondary solicited batch of those outstanding 44 potential respondents to see if potential participants were willing to volunteer for a 30-60 minute virtual Zoom interview. The researcher's contact list was compiled from the individual institution website directory that was found on the UNCF website. During the initial solicitation batch, an obstacle was discovered that many of the individuals in senior leadership were not reading their own emails and/or institutions had generic mailboxes setup to filter the communication that reach the institution's president. This obstacle was discovered after talking with one of the potential participants directly via LinkedIn.com communication. During that communication, the

researcher was looking to verify the communication was received and not blocked by any type of institutional firewalls. The participant verified that the email on the directory was not the correct email and the personal institutional email was provided.

Once the researcher was ready to send out the second batch of solicitations, the researcher attempted to contact the Office of the President of each institution via email, as well as call each office as a follow up to see what would be the best approach to have communication forwarded to the president. During those calls to the president's offices, the researcher had to provide a little background of the study being conducted and the rationale behind why the study was being researched. In some cases, the researcher was told the institution was in the middle of planning Spring commencement or the participant's schedule was not available to participate in the study.

Thus, of the 74 solicitations, the researcher was able to confirm and complete nine research interviews. In particular, those that featured the six Presidents served as the primary source of research data, a yield of 16.21% of the total UNCF presidential institutions solicited and 8.1% of the total solicitations. Table 2 outlines the demographics and institutional role of each of the nine participants.

**Table 2***Research Participant Demographics & Institutional Role of Participants*

<b>Profile</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<i>Profile of the Respondents</i>	9	100%
<b>Presidents / Chief Executive Officers</b>	6	67%
<b>Chief Operations Officers</b>	2*	22%
<b>Provost / VP of Academic Affairs</b>	1*	11%

**\* Note: Proxies of two of the solicited Chief Executive Officers/Presidents**

<i>Years in Senior Administration</i>	<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<i>Profile of the Respondents</i>	9	100%
<b>1 – 5</b>	1	12%
<b>6 – 10</b>	2	22%
<b>11 – 15</b>	3	33%
<b>15 or Greater</b>	3	33%

<i>Occupational Background</i>	<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<i>Sample Size</i>	9	100%
<b>Academic / Higher Education</b>		
<b>Academic Affairs</b>	3	33%
<b>Enrollment Mgmt./ Student Affairs</b>	1	12%
<b>Management / Operations</b>	2	22%
<b>Lawyer / Legal</b>	3	33%

It was then confirmed after the initial four interviews that grounded theory was emerging as a methodology best suited for the development of the data collection process and thematic structure. Each of the interviews were transcribed, then analyzed in three batches of three at a time, so that evolving and reoccurring themes could be identified. The initial manual coding was performed to identify common themes and potential categories to be used throughout the coding process. This method of analysis further utilized grounded theory throughout the interview and information collection process, contradicting the original research questions of the study and the potential need to revise those research questions.

### **Data and Analysis**

All interview transcripts were initially coded manually based on the following research questions: (1) Do institutional leaders seem to perceive students as occupying a space as both a consumer and product? (2) Has for-profit education impacted the consumer mentality in the traditional higher education model? (3) Are there any issues related to the student as a consumer (ie. grade inflation etc.)? Does that pose a problem for educators? (4) What role does Institutional Effectiveness play in the consumer/product mentality (ie. course evaluations, strategic planning, accreditation, etc.)? The manual coding occurred with three batches of three participants during open coding, analyzing for categories and/or themes. The interview questions were maintained throughout the coding and analysis process and were not edited, nor were any questions removed or added during the process. Ultimately, the open coding resulted in 31 codes from the manual coding as show in Appendix B.

Later, theoretical coding was used to find categories that were similar to those found in the open coding process. All transcripts were uploaded into the computer software ATLAS.ti, for further analysis. Each transcript was coded again using the software and then compared to

see if all ten transcripts came back with the same themes. In this process, the ability to constantly compare the manual and computer coding allowed for the critical and comparative analysis that was necessary for grounded theoretical study. Thus, the research and resulting answers allowed the researcher to be stable in assessing key points established throughout the coding process, establishing five themes that were consistent between the open and theoretical coding as related to the preconceived perception of what themes would emerge upon the manual coding process in comparison to the actual themes that emerge at points of intersection per the ATLAS.ti results.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Identifying and refining important concepts was a key part of the iterative process of this qualitative research study. During data analysis, the data was organized categorically and chronologically by using a matrix as suggested by Schutt (2012). This information was reviewed repeatedly, and continually coded, and updated regularly using the matrix condensing data into simple categories, while reflecting on further analysis of the data. Direct quotes still imparted some of the flavor of the original text. A list of major ideas that surfaced was chronicled using the taped interviews as transcribed. Field notes and journal entries were regularly reviewed for inclusion and updating of the matrix. Additionally, the data analysis process used was ATLAS.ti computer software for coding and analysis after the initial collection of the data and thematic separation.

## Chapter 4: Findings

This study used a postmodernist perspective of consumerism to grasp an understanding of the semiotics of higher education leader perspective created around the meaning of students. It is understood that semiotics had a foundation in literary and media study, and its usage in the business setting has become increasingly useful (Faizen, 2019). Though Ferdinand de Saussure, who was considered the father of semiotics (Solomonik & Schwartz, 2015), William G. Tierney introduced the concept from a higher education leadership perspective in his 1989 article, “Symbolism and Presidential Perceptions of Leadership.” In this understanding of using postmodernism from a business perspective, an appreciation of semiotics was sought to validate this research topic. Therefore, to determine the “whatness” of a “student” through the semiotic relationship between perception, behavior, and socio-economic relevancy to the decision-making of leadership informing the business model of the institution, grounded theory as a method was used to create further meaning, affirming the creation of a different descriptor of student beyond the traditional denotative, dictionary meaning of the word as related to a body/person versus meaning of the word as a conceptualized application of business process.

Throughout this chapter the following research questions were analyzed: (1) Do institutional leaders seem to perceive students as occupying a space as both a consumer and product? (2) Has for-profit education impacted the consumer mentality in the traditional higher education model? (3) Are there any issues related to the student as a consumer (ie. grade inflation)? (4) Does that pose a problem for educators? (5) What role does Institutional Effectiveness play in the consumer/product mentality (ie. course evaluations, strategic planning, accreditation)?



## Results

As the research questions were considered, and after coding the responses of the participants, several themes/categories emerged. These themes determined an adjustment of the research questions, which as part of the grounded theory method will be discussed later in the evaluation and further explored in chapter five. However, the coding led to the following overarching themes.

### *Definition of the Term – Student*

As the research sought to identify how leadership in higher education institutions, in particular at HBCUs, interprets the meaning of the term student, the researcher had to begin with the participant's definition of the word. During this analysis, it was identified that 89% of the participants had a similar definition that was specific to the traditional, denotative meaning of the word "student". Because the initial question to the participants simply asked, "What is your definition of a student?" without any additional context to the purpose of the study, all participants answered the question with responses that address the student as a person that is attending a school for the purposes of obtaining knowledge or additional learning. For instance, participant one responded,

Well, I define students as those individuals that come to the university, in this case...University, which I'm President, to learn, come to learn broadly but more explicitly come with an idea of having an outcome of earning a degree from the University. So, that is anyone that comes to study with the pursuit of knowledge very broadly, but very specifically [in the] pursuit of earning a degree...In this case, that's how I would define the student.

Relatedly, participant four stated a similar construct defining the meaning of the word student as,

How would I define the word student? I don't know how to define the word, I mean it's an individual, irrespective of age or sex or gender, that there are seeking to earn a four-year degree. That's how I define a student within the context of my institution – any individual that is seeking to earn a degree.

Additionally, participant eight stated, that a student “aims of obtaining knowledge...knowledge and an education, both of which guarantees a better quality of life.” Interestingly, participant three was not able to give a clear definition of the meaning of a student, instead painting a picture of their experience in relationship to the student – as a former faculty member turned administrator and their relationship with the student in each capacity. Though the information was interesting to potentially later examine the correlation between institutional job responsibility and the development of the relationship with the student vis-a-vie that role, the definition of the term “student” was not as clearly articulated as the other eight respondents.

### ***Perception of Students***

The next theme that emerged was related to understanding meaning as related to the perception of leadership’s conceptualization of a student. This allowed the researcher to clarify the difference between definition and philosophy as related to the student’s purpose at the institution from more of a business perspective. For instance, participants were asked, “Based on your definition, what is your perception of your students? Do you view them as consumers, products, or both?” This was necessary to add context and further allow the participant to provide a specific answer as related to the student as consumer, product, or both. Once this question was asked, it was the consensus of all participants that students on their respective campuses occupied the space of both a consumer and a product. In particular, participant six stated,

Students within the higher education space are considerable both...I can never overlook the fact that our students are consumers by virtue of the exchange for the education and the experience they receive at this institution. Saying that, we can't ignore the fact that students become a representation (product) of the institution, once we attach our name to that student from admission to matriculation, and then even after as they move throughout their careers as alumni of the institution.

Similarly, participant seven stated,

Our people were willing to give of their life for the opportunity to learn and be educated, so the idea of education from a consumer module is not a new concept and the ability to establish and create opportunity as an outcome of education is the true concept of productivity and the product mode, touched on the ability of students – especially at HBCUs – to occupy the space of consumer and product simultaneously based on the mission and the mode of the HBCUs and the place and purpose these type of institutions play in the historical role in American history and their purpose in the academy of Higher Education itself.

However, after assessing the responses, I found it necessary to return back to several participants to clarify the question further, identifying the student as simultaneously functioning in the space as both consumer and product, and not at various points in the higher education lifespan of the student. After revisiting the question, the responses became slightly more direct and concrete regarding the duality of the student as both. Participant one provided this more expounded understanding of such duality,

I view them as both. I view them as both consumers and products and I'll tell you how I make the distinction. They are consumers because they have come to the

university expecting a service, I mean you know, to use the business mind, which, of course, in this instance that service is an education and the outcome is their degree. They are products because their success, their opinion and expressed opinion of their experience at the university impacts the university's ability to market itself and to position itself within the higher educational space as an important place where other students might come, and are our products...it's one of those things that I think an astute institution really recognizes – that your students are your consumers, but they are also a reflection of what the broader higher education space views as your ability to actually provide what you say you want to provide to execute your brand promise, if you will.

Participant three noted initially,

Okay, so to make a long story short... it just kind of depends on the capacity of the institution and I'm in a very unique and nuanced position where I have to look at both. I have to look at students from the perspective of who it is that we're bringing in and being able to market to not only make us competitive with regards to students, but especially for tuition driven institutions that...typically at HBCUs – institutions that are mission driven – that a lot of times we take students that other institutions might not consider and how that in the end is going to impact our outputs and what do we need to do in-between, as an institution. So for us we're always vacillating between both.

After further clarification, participant three stated,

I worry about both because I'm always working with enrollment management to increase recruitment and retention strategies, but also at the same time I'm trying

to increase my graduation rates. So for me, I have to deal with the student as both a product and a consumer, and I have to do it in the same breath in the same time, at the same table because all these people are around the table with me and I have to be able to justify in in one breath.

***Student Influence on the Business Decision-Making of Senior-Level Administrators***

One emergent theme that yielded high results during the coding process was the influence of students on the decision-making of the President, Chief Executive Officer, and/or Chief Operating Officer as related to business planning and continuity. Three of the interview questions, IQ3, IQ4, and IQ6 all yielded connection to the thematic construct of student influence, the tuition driven business model, and leadership decision-making strategies.

For instance, participant three stated,

Student admission is critical to us as a small private HBCU. It is because of what it is to our mission, but also tuition impacts our operations as inputs. So, when you start talking about operations and you start talking about the operational effectiveness of the institution keeping the lights on, and the gas, and paying salaries and those different types of things that operational costs of the institution is really based solely upon the student tuition. All of those things are contingent with regards to not only the decision making, but how those decisions are going to eventually impact the outputs and how they are also going to impact institutional viability and sustainability.

In particular, when it comes to inputs, outputs, and return on investment for not only the student, but the institutional business model, participant nine stated,

Can I just use the term hybrid [as both]? They are consumers because they *are* actually from a business perspective, so I guess that's the budget manager in me and [in] the business space they are consumers. Here we have a product for them...they have purchased this product, and they are looking for the benefits what they can purchase so they are definitely consumers. But at the same time students are products because, as a result of their experiences we are seeking a particular product to create to go back around full circle.

Further, participant seven indicated,

The students that attend our institutions are both consumers and products. I look at and have the conversation on a regular basis about the fact that our institutions have to provide the same amenities as our peer PWI (predominately white) institutions. While that doesn't play a major role in the ability for our students to receive an education, but it does have a major play in the consumerism concept. We as institutions *have* to provide experiences outside of the classroom in order to produce a holistic and well-rounded graduate and productive member of our society.

However, later in the interview, a question related to role of the students function in their particular operational strategy and decision making provided the following response from participant four,

Well, I think I think for my institution, you know I always like to say, and then we try to always operate with the student's need...the student success at the forefront of every decision that we make...But again, you know I always my first question of inquiry is always, "How does this impact students?" That helps me understand

how does what it is that you are suggesting, how does this undergird and positively impact the trajectory of our students in terms of student success, though I think, you know, for us, student success has to begin to really, really take a hard look at how we are preparing our students for success post-graduation and in as much as we're offering them opportunities and giving them the skills and the tools that they need to be successful "after they've actually earned a degree."

Related to the same question, participant seven responded,

Well, I look back on my experience as I have moved up throughout the higher educational space from an adjunct instructor to a director, to a dean of a program, to Provost, to now having been a President at two HBCUs. Most people throw this statement of being student driven institutions, but I would say that my administration keeps a student focused mindset, while ensuring a shared governance approach toward running the institution. Most administrative decisions are centered around operations, safety, and the ability to best manage the limited resources available, not to exclude even managing student enrollment through recruitment and retention.

Ultimately, the participant responses provided context and information that determined a direct student influence on the ways in which senior-level administration make decisions that impact institutional business practices. While many of the participants recognize the need for consistency with institutional policy and procedures, that consistency is often forgone to maintain operations and cost benefits to the organization. As a strategic business model, this appears to work in maintaining continuity of business operations. However, the fluidity in

creating malleable policies provides opportunities to make impromptu decisions based on student influences – and often from the top down – that lead to potentially unsustainable business practices, consequential fiscal and operational instability, and deficiencies in shared governance and accountability within the organizational leadership structure.

### ***Student Entitlement as a Consideration or Consequence of Actions***

Further complications of student influence on institutional decision-making can result in issues of student entitlement, a realistic byproduct of recruitment and retention at small, private tuition-driven institutions. Unfortunately, student entitlement can impact the decision-making process of leadership, especially when students leverage their impact at institutions that become critically resource challenged and experiencing continual year-end net cash deficits.

Participant one was very open, responding with the answer to the question, *Do you see any potential issues with the concept of recruiting students as consumers and does that create an environment of a sense of entitlement or encourage student entitlement?*

But you're absolutely right, there is a vulnerability to that, to having it really sort of adopting a truism that's used in business, which is the customer's always right. Well, there is some modification in this because we recognize that we are, in fact, taking young people, primarily, young people... a part of their experience with us, even though they are all customers is we are helping them to become developed and a full human being. So while we introduced them to their intellectual development, we're also introducing them to social development, to their psycho emotional development and part of that comes with being able to teach them and say when they are acting out...and a little bit inappropriate, there is a sense of entitlement, so you know "if it weren't for me you wouldn't have a job."



Participant three responded with an even more transparent answer to the question,

The more students, we have enrolled, the more tuition/revenue we're going to receive, and the more we can do to operate our institution. For example, every private HBCU, and I mean every small, private HBCU I have ever worked for has extended registration past the deadline. They have allowed students to start classes well after the cutoff, sometimes one to weeks before midterm. The intention of this behavior is to minimize budget and salary cuts or reductions in staffing, but it also builds a culture of entitlement. Eventually, these policy breaks create student entitlement by communicating to the students, the importance of their presence. And students are savvy; they understand this, and eventually the dynamic shifts from the creation of student entitlement to decision-making that is driven by the actions of entitled students.

As noted, both participants recognize the impacts of the decisions to shape policies and procedures that may have a negative consequence of student entitlement. While Laverghetta (2018) notes that many institutions have “adopted consumerist models in an effort to increase enrollment and retention (e.g., open enrollments and hotel like amenities on campus)” (p. 278), allowing for “a high degree of perceived power and authority for the student,” which “could lead to uncivil behavior towards professors” (p. 281). This uncivil behavior manifests itself in students eventually not adhering to established institutional policies and procedures, as research conducted by Zitek and Jordan (2019) suggests entitled individuals have the propensity to not follow directions as a form of resistance that could be formulated as a learned behavior. Senior-leaders of institutions, as authority figures, are viewed as the guardians of policy and information. With leaders making impromptu changes or adjustments to institutional processes,

such perspective gives students the right to feel entitled as they traverse the academic enterprise, creating interloping effects between funding and curricular engagement.

Interestingly, participant nine responded to the question of entitlement and operational impact with a similar response related to adjusting institutional policy or rules – especially in the age of social media and student satisfaction.

You know individuals have this feeling of entitlement, and the entitlement can impact, you know their life, because when we you have a perception and their perception does not meet up with your reality, then that's a problem. Well, that just doesn't work; for some levels of entitlement we can accommodate and we try to encourage them, but there are some levels of autonomy that is very dysfunctional and could cause a student to lose out on this opportunity for academic achievement and credential building. It's important for us to help that student. And I keep going back, even though I say consumer...this is our product that we have to mold and shape because they are. But as a consumer, it is important to figure out what's going on in their life in order that we can retain them not only for their sake, but for the institution.

As students become more astute to understanding their place in the organizational structure as valuable consumers, leadership must learn to equally balance the consumer/product binary to develop an institutional culture that is consistent with viable business practices of students as valuable commodities and consumers. This value proposition becomes even more important as the millennial student and leader both extend their reach beyond the traditional politics of controlled paper and word of mouth marketing to that of social media and global outreach that limits the level of narrative control.

## **Evaluation**

This chapter identifies the results of the analysis using the research questions, while demonstrating how the grounded theory methodology provides a means of further data analysis to further ascertain validation of the proposed research questions. Nine participants were interviewed for this study, with interview questions structured to not only understand the conceptualization of the student, but also how that concept and meaning of student influences the business organization within the higher education system, in particular at small, private, tuition-driven Historically Black Colleges and Universities. All participants worked at small, private HBCUs, with the majority of those participants (seven of the nine) serving as Chief Executive Officers (Presidents), while two of the participants served in a Chief Operating Officer capacity (Provost/Vice President).

Congruent with a grounded theory study, there were three levels of analysis, open coding, selective coding, and theoretical coding. Results from opening analysis yielded twenty-three codes. After an initial comparison analysis using ATLAS.ti software, seven selective codes were identified as categories from the open codes. The resulting four themes were identified through additional comparison analysis to discover the similarities and intersections between and within the open and selective codes, leading to four themes. These four themes summarize the identifying characteristics necessary for the conceptualization of the student in higher education as a consumer and product are: (1) Definition of the Term – Student, (2) Perception of Students, (3) Student Influence on the Business Decision-Making of Senior-Level Administrators, and (4) Student Entitlement as a Consideration or Consequence of Actions.

These themes become important to understanding of key points that require concurrent responses and actions from leadership toward various constituencies within the same space and/or discussions without sacrificing one for the other or showing priority.

There were no differences how leaders viewed students from the traditional dictionary definition of students. However, additional data based on role and responsibility uncovered the need for further inquiry on behalf of the researcher, which identified similar experiences and organizational concerns that created perceptions of students regardless of institution or role (CEO as compared to COO). Other factors, such as enrollment, entitlement, and budgetary considerations contributed to the construction of the student as a construct within the academic space. While these factors appear unique to the institution, the research results identify a consistent pattern of responsiveness regarding concern and building the student concept for the purpose of cross-divisional consideration and overall institutional impact and success. However, the ways each of the leaders manage the navigation of the student as both consumer and product in a simultaneous position is as nuanced as not only the institutions they serve, but also varies depending on organization and situation. Chapter five includes the summary for the critical analysis and discussion on the four themes, including the endorsement of using grounded theory as a research method that led to a revisit and revision of the research questions – collapsing them from five to two:

***Research Question 1*** – Do institutional leaders perceive students as occupying the same space as both a consumer and product?

***Research Question 2*** – What are the impacts of this binary, including barriers and inconsistencies, as related to influence on the decision-making process of leadership and the operational effectiveness of the institutions?

## **Chapter 5: Results, Recommendations, and Conclusion**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, a brief summary of how the definition of what it means to be a student plays a defining role on administrative decisions and the business strategy for validating a nuanced conceptualization of higher education within small private tuition-driven institutions will be presented. The purpose of this grounded theory study was to show how the student binary of the consumer and product must be considered by senior leaders in order to make decisions for operational efficiency and effectiveness. Along with a discussion of literature on the topic of students as consumers and products, this chapter will relate the literature and analysis of the data to the theory of semiotics through a post-modernist lens. The chapter will conclude with the limitations of the study, implications for practice, and the opportunities for future research.

### **Summary of the Study**

The study sought to discuss the concept of the student, consumer / product binary and the impact the student's role in the business modeling of the institution plays in the decision making process. The study also sought to explore the potential for future research to assist with answering the following research questions:

- (1) Do institutional leaders seem to perceive students as occupying a space as both a consumer and product?
- (2) Has for-profit education impacted the consumer mentality in the traditional higher education model?
- (3) Are there any issues related to the student as a consumer (ie. grade inflation etc.)?
- (4) Does that pose a problem for educators?

(5) What role does Institutional Effectiveness play in the consumer/product mentality (ie. course evaluations, strategic planning, accreditation, etc.)?

### **Discussion of Findings**

After the completion of the interviews, collection of the data, and the overall coding and analysis of the information, it was determined that many of the answers to the questions did not substantiate the viability of the initial research questions that were presented earlier in the study. For instance, *RQ 2: Has for-profit education impacted the consumer mentality in the traditional higher education model?* was determined to be unrelated to this research as the initial hypothesis considered the potential influence of for-profit institutions as an economic influencer in the consumer relationship within the non-profit space. However, because the research was focused on Historically Black College and Universities (HBCU), for-profit institutions were a non-factor as all participants acknowledged that for-profit institutions were not a threat or consideration for competition at their institutions. In fact, it was noted that because of the student populations serviced at HBCUs that the major threat to the economic viability and student enrollment/productivity was that of community colleges, not for-profit institutions of higher education. This competitive influence opens the door for future research to be examined.

As a result of the findings, the original *RQ 2* was eliminated as a consideration for research within this scope of work, along with the collapsing of *RQ 3*, *RQ 4*, and *RQ 5* into a singular research question that spoke to a more concise understanding of student and the influence and impact of meaning to that of institutional decision-making. It must be noted that these research questions were revised as a result of the grounded theory study and the subsequent outcomes that led to the elimination of replication and more clarity in defining the research questions best suited for the research. Therefore, chapter five contains discussion and addresses

the potential for future research to assist with answering the following concise research questions that are critical to understanding the student binary and influence on institutional decision-making at HBCUs:

***Research Question 1*** – Do institutional leaders perceive students as occupying the same space as both a consumer and product?

***Research Question 2*** – What are the impacts of this binary, including barriers and inconsistencies, as related to influence on the decision-making process of leadership and the operational effectiveness of the institutions?

The use of grounded theory was critical to support a broad to narrow scope of work related to an unclear understanding of where the research was going. This was mainly due to the lack of literature on the subject and the need to confirm the conceptualization of the student as a dual functioning, non-bifurcated entity. The theory of semiotics that emerged from the analysis of the data was comprised of four categories that summarized the identifying characteristics necessary for the conceptualization of the student in higher education as a consumer and product. These four categories led to three themes discussed in this chapter: (1) Definition of the Term – Student as Conceptualized through Perception, (3) Student Influence on the Business Decision-Making of Senior-Level Administrators, and (4) Student Entitlement as a Consideration or Consequence of Actions. All of these concepts factor into the understanding of how leadership defines the word student as a physical and economic entity that drives their logic and reasoning to make business decisions within the HBCU space.

While the career, titles, and experiences may be different for each participant, each of the three emergent themes were in the forefront of understanding perspective and creating student meaning for this study. These themes are impactful as how they influence and impact the

decision-making of the individual changes depending upon the way in which the theme functions at various cycles of the student tenure as well as the time of the year and area of function.

Therefore, each theme is described in further detail in the following sections.

### ***Definition of the Term Student as Conceptualized through Perception***

This study concludes that leaders create meaning of the word student as both consumer and product through the various perceptions and actions that take place within the higher education space. Interestingly, most of the literature on the meaning of student was related to the traditional denotative meaning of the word, or the application of consumer versus that of product in the creation of meaning (Mark, 2013; Ruch, 2001). While Franz's (1998) article, "Whatever You Do, Don't Treat Your Students Like Customers!" is the only piece of literature found that expounds on the student as both consumer and product, all of the participants concluded that though the student functions in isolation as a consumer or product, that ultimately as a President or Operational Officer, that the student functions as both when it comes to their institutional oversight. Participants cited the overall importance of creating synergy among divisions across the institution as well as multi-focused approaches to institutional operations that had competing interests related to the student as the reason for a binary conceptualization of the student as both consumer and product.

In understanding the meaning of metaphysics, binaries are necessary to create stabilization among competing interest in a singular space. For the purposes of this research, the study will consider the concept of binary opposition. The introduction of the concept of binary opposition comes from Saussure's theory on structuralism (Putri & Sarwoto, 2016). Binary opposition, according to Saussure, is "the means by which the units of language have value or meaning; each unit is defined in reciprocal determination with another term, as in binary code. It



is not a contradictory relation but, a structural, complementary one. In other words, binary oppositions are pair of related terms or concepts whose meanings are mutually exclusive” (As cited in Putri & Sarwoto, 2016, p. 82). Smith (1996) adds even more clarity to the Saussurean concept: “Binary opposition is the system by which, in language and thought, two theoretical opposites are strictly defined and set off against one another but simultaneously arranged, somewhat paradoxically, in pairs” (p. 383-384). These pairs are not unlike those which might be generated by a psychoanalytical word association test and are manifest in obvious combinations, such as good and evil; light and dark; day and night (Smith, 1996). Thus, the participants justified how such a need for the binary construct to create opportunities for problem solving and decision-making, in particular those related to academic programming and economic viability as their work encompasses the whole of the institution’s operations, not just as singular isolated functions that are mutual exclusive of one another.

Often, participants used the term student rather than that of *consumer* and *product* as an interchangeable synonym rather than as three separate phrases with differing meanings. Some participants identified the need to occasionally identify the student as a consumer as distinct from the student as a product depending on the time of year, scope of work, and need for information related to inputs versus outputs. However, the overall consensus of the participants all identified that ultimately they conceptualized the comprehensive and definitive use of the term of student for their specific role as simultaneously existing in both spaces – consumer and product, without distinction for either taking more precedent than the other.

*Student Influence on the Business Decision-Making of Senior-Level Administrators at HBCUs*

Before administrators can make strategic business decisions, they must first understand the desired impact on the student constituency as well as how that constituent influences the various areas of the institution. All participants expressed the importance of the student-centered perspective of access and productivity, and how as leaders of HBCUs, the mission-driven aspect of such institutions is guided by its student inputs and outputs. The student influence on the decision-making process of the administration was driven by institutional enrollment needs. Given the business model of the institutions of those leaders interviewed was that of being tuition-driven, it was determined that student influence on decision-making correlated to the stability or lack thereof within the institution's enrollment figures. The higher the enrollment numbers, the more economic stability, therefore leading to more autonomy of the leadership and less influence in the policy making and related accountability in maintaining policy and procedure.

Relatedly, increased and consistent enrollment often allowed institutions to be more selective in the student population, substantiating higher admissions standards which excluded students who might have not had access to such educational opportunities, while creating more power dynamics within administration to make decisions that are more operationally driven than student opined. However, the more an institution faced a decline in enrollment, or even the threat of declining enrollment, the power dynamic between that of the student and administration shifted, where the influence of the student increasingly impacted the policy creation and/or procedural implementation of policy by the administration. For instance, one of the participants mentioned they had worked at four private HBCUs, and that at every one of those institutions

“every year the institution never closed student registration on the actual date of registration,” remarking that sometimes registration went well into the middle of the semester, weeks after the close of registration date on the academic calendar. Such changes, as well as those related to waiving student admissions requirements, allowing students to carry balances well beyond the end of the semester while continuing to register for classes, as well as the flexible grading option that manifested during the COVID-19 pandemic, accommodated students in order to maintain retention, decrease student attrition, and ensure fiscal stability of the institution by meeting not only student headcounts, but full-time equivalencies (FTE) of credit hours. Interestingly, only those administrators savvy enough to understand the difference between student headcount and FTE have a handle on how economic viability of the institution correlates to not only how many students are enrolled, but rather how many classes and credit hours are charged. In particular, institutions that have flat rate fees after a minimum credit hour is met must consider formulas that best reflect the student population serviced, part-time versus full-time student status, and how these student status impact the business continuity of the institution.

Unfortunately, enrollment constitutes decisions that may not necessarily be in the best interest of the institution, creating organizational behaviors and cultures of students, faculty, and staff that are counterintuitive to the operational effectiveness and efficiency of the institution. These “immediate fixes” to operational problems have long-standing consequences in the future, especially when the institution cannot forecast long-term sustainability based on short-term policy amendments and inconsistencies in accountability practices. In the case of the aforementioned policy amendment to add/drop final registration deadlines, students with academic challenges are already at a disadvantage, leading to issues with academic student success at the semester’s end. Further, at small private HBCUs that have much higher tuition

cost than their public counterparts, students continue to incur massive amounts of debt. As one participant noted, their institution enrolls roughly 90% Pell eligible students, meaning these students estimated family contribution stands at nearly zero dollars for financial aid consideration. As many of these students are economically disadvantaged, even financial aid cannot cover the full cost of attendance, leaving the student with monthly payment plans they do not meet, end of semester balances, and institutions needing students to enroll as a business need. In the words of one of the participants, “We would rather have a student enroll and get their aid and some money than no money at all.” This strategy can have devastating consequences to not only the debt imposition on the student, but also the institution as many leaders do not right size for student enrollment, rather govern the institutions budget and expenditures according to the gross tuition versus the net tuition collected. Such business strategies lead to non-collection of funds, impediments to student retention, completion and graduation, and eventual institutional cash-net deficits that compound yearly and are difficult to resolve without major impacts on human capital and other institutional resources.

### ***Student Entitlement as a Consideration or Consequence of Actions***

Individual behaviors can create an institutional culture of entitlement, leading to a desire to please students that may affect the academic enterprise, integrity, and ethics of a post-secondary organization. With a special concentration on the Historically Black College and University (HBCU), minority serving institutions have a challenge with regards to the maintaining the cultural competency of the institution, while competing and being compared to majority serving institutions. Traditionally mission driven to allow access to students who either were marginalized, underserved, or underprepared, these HBCUs find their organization structure and culture transitioning to address the challenges of lowered enrollments, socio-

economically challenged students, and college-unreadiness, in addition to how all of these impacts the revenue streams of already financially challenged institutions. Therefore, the ways in which entitlement, consumerism, and the mode of production in generating workforce ready college graduates is critical to understanding how behavior influences organizational cultural shifts and effectiveness, in particular when it comes to decision making and leadership of such organizations.

Though not expressly stated, an analysis of the interviews and resulting data found what may appear to be in some cases unconscious, while in other a conscious recognition of higher education administrators regarding student entitlement. Interestingly, the participants recognize the necessity to guide novice collegians in a space they are not familiar; however, there is a corresponding response that warrants a need to allow these students to govern the way in which leadership considers imposing their guidelines, rules, and regulations. As one participant noted, there is a need to amend the “customer is always right” statement to ensure student satisfaction, while meeting institutional student outcomes. Unfortunately, this consideration of student entitlement becomes a part of the organizational culture of the institution, leading to policy creation, implementation, and process and procedural adjustment and amendment, and institutional power struggles, expectations, and outcomes. This is further justified by the following participant response, “These policy breaks create student entitlement by communicating to the students, the importance of their presence. And students are savvy, they understand this, and eventually the dynamic shifts from the creation of student entitlement to decision-making that is driven by the actions of entitled students.” In particular, the institution caters to the student, leading to the student being momentarily pleased in an effort to retain the student for financial gain; however, often at the detriment of both the institution and the student.

The continual, flux and change of policy and procedures mid-stream for the benefit of student retention and recruitment often leads to behavioral attitudes of entitlement that shape the culture of the institution yielding negative consequence. Relatedly, when the student does not meet the required expected academic outcomes, or upon graduation does not find gainful employment, those students sometimes consider it a “fault” of the institution. Whether it is a disgruntled alumnus, or an in-completer, in this digital age individuals take to social media and other platforms to indicate not only their dissatisfaction as a consumer, but also simultaneously as a product that does not meet industry standards as the entitlement projected onto these students backfires and reflects negatively as an institutional problem imposed upon such individuals rather than the student themselves.

Nevertheless, entitlement is a critical influence in organizational behavior and cultural changes. Lee, Schwarz, Newman, and Legood (2019) detail how employees participate in unethical behaviors to protect and promote the organization for which they work. According to Lee, Schwarz, Newman, and Legood (2019), employees consciously participate in activities that protect and/or serve the interest of the organization but use unethical behaviors in order to do so – referred to as unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB). Often, employees with a level of entitlement will commit unethical acts to benefit the organization with a self-serving premise. Further, the concept of academic entitlement has potentially devastating results. McClellan and Jackson (2017) indicate that the concept of academic entitlement, though “relatively new in published literature” can produce a “potentially damaging student culture of incivility and entitlement” (p. 160). Many examples of academic entitlement also referred to as “student incivility” can be seen in the university environment where “students can express academic entitlement through their behaviours or attitudes.

For example, a student may ask a teacher to raise a final grade (behaviour), or a student may feel entitled to certain services because of the tuition that the student pays (attitude)” (McClellan & Jackson, 2017, p. 161). Interestingly, this concept relates to one participant’s philosophy that often faculty and staff will accommodate student entitlement because of leadership expectations. The ethical implications that result is a bi-product and can have long-reaching effects on business continuity, including low employee morale, lack of trust in leadership, employee attrition, increased student indebtedness, and questions of academic preparedness and the perpetuation of student un/under preparedness that manifests itself into workforce un/under preparedness. Still, the complication between student influence on leadership to allows for innovative institutional change dynamics within the institution’s self-identity and brand proposition impacting not only the recruitment and retention of students, but also the appreciation of the academic enterprise and intellectual capital of the student in relation to a student’s (and workforce leaders) potential economic viability.

### **Limitations**

Throughout this study several limitations presented themselves. The most apparent limitation was the timing of the research, being that the research was conducted during a Global Pandemic (COVID-19). This caused several issues including the requirement to shift the planning of the data collection from a potential in-person collection process to that of a virtual interview. While the researcher does not put much weight on the impact of the adjustment on the actual data collection process, the researcher does contribute the limitation on the level of participation. The researcher was depending on solicitation of participants to be in-person at a number of annual higher education leadership conferences, which were continuously postponed and ultimately cancelled. This limitation would have potentially strongly impacted the research,

if the study had to be expanded to further examine the data collected to increase the confidence in the feedback from the participants and the area of focus within the higher education space.

The COVID-19 Pandemic, notwithstanding, additional limitations presented challenges to not only the data collection, but overarching concerns on whether enough data could be collected. The primary focus of the research, small, private historically black colleges and universities did not provide a large population of participants to yield a large sample. As the small, private institutions are provided membership and advocacy through the UNCF, it was determined these 37 institutions would provide the sufficient subject matter. However, the population of participants became even more challenging due to the preferred interviewee position at the institutions – Presidents and CEOs, limiting the number of interviewees as well as any potential sample. Though the researcher expanded the sample by incorporating Provost/COOs into the process, there still appeared to be limitations that then occurred with Presidents choosing not to participate and instead suggesting their Provost to complete the interview process. This created an unexpected dynamic that led to further complications in getting interviews from direct top leadership position, which was the goal and the preferred sample participant.

Another limitation that was considered was the ability for top leadership to clearly define the meaning of a student at their respective institution without placing some level of context to the parameters surrounding the institutional area of functionality (i.e. financial aid, business and financial services, academic affairs, admissions). Many participants struggled with their initial definition of a student at their institution because the question was too open ended, so it required follow-up, but that was intentional to develop more comprehensive definitions of the term. Although most Presidential participants initially responded based on their background



experience, they typically addressed the other areas of the institution from an all-inclusive institutional scope. This even spoke to the recruitment process of top leadership. Many institutions are now starting to direct their recruitment of senior leadership based on the current needs of the institution, which displayed itself a little based on the responses that the participants gave to validate and support their answers. Therefore, the participant's professional background and personal biases created a level of limitation as well. Each one of these limitations had to be considered, especially in the theory and research approach applied to this study.

### **Implications for Theory and Research**

Chapter two included a discussion of current literature, or lack thereof, related to the topic of students as a consumer/product binary entity. It was in chapter two, and further in chapter four that the research continued to confirm an abstract conceptualization of the *student* as an institutional function. Thus, the theoretical motivation of understanding the student as a critical piece to the small, private higher education business model moved to understanding the symbolism of the term student and the need to create meaning for business purposes. While it is understood that semiotics has its foundation in literary and media study, its use in the business setting is becoming increasingly useful (Faizen, 2019). To fully appreciate the use of grounded theory study in the application of semiotics to the higher education business structure, one must first understand semiotics as a theoretical practice and how the results from the data collection and analysis process confirms such an application as valid.

### ***Using Semiotics to Create Meaning***

Theoretically, this study examines leadership, agency, representation, and power relations in the student as a consumer and a product. Thus, defining the terminology of the word student became important in understanding meaning beyond the traditional denotative concept. While

many of the participants all agreed that students were individuals who were involved in the process of learning, this concept of the student was expressed from a strictly sociological perspective – the social institution of education. However, from the business perspective, defining the term student became more involved than simply the mental process of learning to the production of education and human capital. Therefore, the research determined that from a business discipline, a student was a more abstract concept and needed to be deconstructed in order to be reconstructed into a more concrete entity. The way this was accomplished was in using semiotics as a theoretically appropriate application to understanding how leadership communicates the meaning of *student* in order to adjust the multi-focused binary construct of the student as a consumer and a product without prioritizing one factor over the other.

To understand how theory functions in the creation of meaning in this research is to understand the theoretical concept of semiotics. As a theoretical application, semiotics is a complex and broad reaching understanding of how meaning is not only adopted, but conveyed. First, in the most concise sense, semiotics is defined as “the study of signs” (Chandler, 2017). However, the component to understanding the study of signs is to define what is meant by “sign.” According to Chandler (2017), “a sign is traditionally defined as ‘something which stands for something else’. All meaningful phenomena (including words and images) are signs. To interpret something is to treat it as a sign. All experience is mediated by signs, and communication depends on them” (p. 2). Semioticians study how meanings are made and how reality is represented (and indeed constructed) through signs and sign systems. Relatedly, Ferdinand de Saussure is considered the father of semiotics (Solomonik & Schwartz, 2015; Chandler, 2017), of which he “made the declaration that he could envisage, and staked a claim for, ‘a science that studies the life of signs within society’, which he called semiology”

(Chandler, 2017, p. 3). However, as a more expounded philosophy, “semiotics is perhaps best thought of as a way of looking at the production of meaning from a particular critical perspective. So far, it involves no widely agreed theoretical assumptions, models, or empirical methodologies. It has tended to be largely theoretical, many of its theorists seeking to establish its scope and general principles,” in particular for application across academic disciplines beyond the traditional linguistic arena (Chandler, 2017, p. 3).

Overall, semiotics must involve a sign (the object/thing), a signifier (the physical existence – sound, word, image), and a symbol (the actual representation of the ideology attached to the sign and results in realized meaning – the mental concept) (Faizan, 2019). From a business perspective, semiotics is important for leaders to create value proposition and meaning of not only their organizational mission, but also to define for their consumers the conceptualization of their product. Similarly, in higher education, signs are abstractly presented all around and it is typically the responsibility of the President to create meaning of the institutional ideologies as related to mission, vision, and constituency to not only their followers, but also external institutional partners as well. “Ideology, ‘the general framework that shapes individual consciousness, guides and legitimates belief and action, and renders experience meaningful’ shapes and is shaped by organizational symbols” (As cited in Tierney, 1989). Semiotics, thus, presents itself as a communicative process that dictates meaning for abstract concepts and ideologies for an organization’s members vis-a-vie its leadership.

***Process of Theoretical Application: Deconstruction, Interpretation, and Communicative Action of Semiotics in Business***

Semiotics, in the shaping symbols and ideologies, relies on a process that moves from the abstract into the concrete. As a field that is emerging beyond linguistics, semiotics has found

itself in the economic sphere, in particular through the use of binary oppositions and their deconstruction in an effort to create meaning. Jacques Derrida, considered the father of deconstruction, studied Saussurean structuralism and binary opposition. In his text, *Positions*, Derrida (1981) addressed the criticism of binary opposition as not the reversal of the opposition and the relationship between the two opposing forces, but rather the deconstruction of the binary. Such a deconstructive activity does not intrinsically favor one side of a binary opposition over the other. Deconstruction, according to Derrida, is the moment of contradiction within the binary opposition, which negates each position of opposing relational forces to produce meaning and value (Derrida, 1981). Therein lays the effectiveness of deconstruction as practice, as the act creates new ideologies or concepts in marking their difference and interplay, rather than the synthesis of the in opposition of each other (Derrida, 1981). Deconstruction allows for new meaning to be created without consideration of each side of the binary, but rather how both sides combine to form new and revised meaning through signifying in the semiotic tradition.

From a business perspective, creating meaning using symbols is critical to successfully marketing a product or service with the purpose of gaining and retaining customers. This is even more important in saturated industries where the competition is far-reaching to the same consumer base. For HBCUs, this competition for students is even more narrow given the 101 active institutions, of which 37 are small, private institutions that fall under the United Negro College Fund that compete for the same market-share. As minority serving institutions that are historically and primarily African-American in population, these institutions typically service and vie for a specific demographic that is limited in number. Thus, the ability to continue reinventing the institutional product and service, as well as marketing and branding the institution is invaluable to the maintaining enrollment through increased or at least consistent

recruitment and retention. For small private HBCUs that are tuition driven, understanding and creation of meaning what it is to be a student is just as important as defining the value of the institution to external constituents.

This definition of the student as both consumer and product is important to the business interests of the higher education institution, in particular the decision making of senior-level administrators. Therefore, semiotics and the creation of new meaning beyond the traditional meaning of student facilitate the ability to not only ensure all constituents are considered in the decisions that Presidents and their teams make. This means senior-level administrators must move beyond the traditional focus of students as simply learners and analyze the impact of the philosophical meaning of a student as both a consumer and product. Thus, the relationship between economics and semiotics is of beneficial consideration. One of the early pioneers of theorizing this relationship was Ferruccio Rossi-Landi. According to Bianchi (2015), the work of Rossi-Landi began in the fifties and ended in the mid-eighties, ranging from philosophy and linguistics to semiotics. Bianchi provided a systematic presentation of Rossi-Landi's similar to that of the process of semiotics to the student meaning presented in this study. Rossi-Landi's work took into account the various theoretical stages that led him to conceive and study language through a "homological schema" – the concept that material and linguistic production are conceived to be the result of a single process that is particular to human beings and that can best be understood in terms of work and trade (Bianchi, 2015). Further, Bianchi (2015) wrote "Rossi-Landi stated that, even though we are immersed in an intricate network of classifications and distinctions that none of us created, we have the freedom to accept or refuse them after establishing their adequacy to our goals. Thus, in philosophy it makes little sense to create new

terminologies continuously, even though in some cases, it might be fruitful to use technical language in a parsimonious manner” (p. 4).

Further, Rossi-Landi argued that critical investigation of any sign must begin from a fundamental distinction between "initial meanings" (*significati di partenza*) and "additional meanings" (*significati aggiuntivi*). This is where the application of deconstruction is used to reconstruct additional meaning. One important part to understanding the application of the semiotic theory to understanding the creation of meaning to the sign *student*, is to initially deconstruct the current symbol and referent of human body and learner to the word form. For the purposes of this study, the word *student*, once deconstructed, becomes a *signature* – defined as an abstract concept that results from a traditional referent. This signature awaits a new referent to be placed on it by virtue of the signifier, who interprets the experience and communicates meaning of the signature, creating a new symbol.

As such:

- Sign – S T U D E N T
- Signifier – Student (Person)
- Signified – Student (Upon seeing the word, understood to be) – A person who learns; person who attends an institution with the sole purpose of receiving an education (as per 89% of the participants responses to *IQ1: What is a student?*)

Now becomes:

- Sign – S T U D E N T
- Signifier – Student (Body)

- Signified– Student (Philosophical Ideology): A person who pays to learn with the intent of a better life experience, whether social or economic, while being a representative and/or result of the institution’s academic enterprise.
- New Concept: *Signature* – The communicated action of the individual who through experience connects sign to signifier and the resulting perceived or created meaning (signified).

This formulation of the student as binary structure versus a singular function is emphasized in the comprehension of what Rossi-Landi considers *Marxist Semiotics* – the function of material production as related to the social engagement and interpretation of objects.

The most radical characterization of human beings is that which emphasizes their ability to produce material (*faber*) and linguistic (*loquens*) artifacts. Moreover, one must bear in mind that human beings do not communicate only through words, but use the whole social organization. Therefore, as Rossi-Landi stated, we must elaborate a theory for understanding the two fundamental modes of human behavior: production and circulation of goods (as commodities) and production and circulation of sentences (as messages). Economic communication offers us a ‘particularly intriguing and fruitful’ schema for this. (Bianchi, 2015, p. 13)

Because Rossi-Landi studied the work of Karl Marx, he was able to analyze and interpret the non-verbal and verbal systems that mirror each other as similar processes. This interpretation of Marxism recognized that economics in itself is a language that is made up of a series of signs that are given meaning by the individual speaking about their products and communicating that product to a consumer at a particular instance. Regarding Marxist Semiotics, “By learning from

his work and looking ‘through the bodily density of the economic market, and beyond its non-sign aspects’ we have recognized that the economic system is truly a language” (Bianchi, 2015, 14). From the lens of Rossi-Landi, “by eliminating production and consumption as technological and physiological processes in his economic theory, Marx had investigated the manner in which a product (*non-sign*) becomes a commodity (*sign*) after material production and how it once again becomes a product, before material consumption. If we use semiotic language, we can say that Marx studied "the way in which the product is coded as a commodity and the commodity then de-coded as a product" (Bianchi, 2015, p. 14). From this perspective, a product is different than a commodity as a product can be formulated without being consumed.

Imagine an artist creates a painting. That is a product. However, only when that painting is presented to the public or an individual for an exchange of capital (money), then does it become a commodity. After purchase, it remains a product – only now on someone’s wall or museum, but not for consumption at that time. In terms of this study, imagine the student as an output – a product that is being formed through the process of attending a college or university. It does not yet have value or meaning, and even after graduation that student still remains a product. Only at the point the student seeks employment – an exchange of capital for services rendered by the product that is valued according to experience and education, does the student become a commodity for an employer. However, the student always is a product and represents the interest and symbol of the institution as a result of the academic enterprise. Interestingly, the institution’s academic enterprise and services are products that are exchanged for economic purposes by the student. The product exists with or without the student present. However, once the exchange of funds – tuition – takes place, the academic and institutional services is commodified, and the student officially becomes a consumer of this commodity, turning it back



into a product as the student goes to class, receives grades, and obtains all the services rendered by the institution.

In this case, the higher education institution has two products – the student and the academic enterprise; and two consumers – the student and potential employers. However, the student occupies both spaces simultaneously, the sign being created by the leader of the institution in the moment; thus creating new meaning through the semiotic lens without having to vacillate. Further, as a vested signifier, the President truly is the communicator that is able to use the conceptualization of the higher education organization as a business entity in order to navigate this space without blindspotting. The concept of blindspotting is based upon Rubin's Vase, "an optical illusion in which the viewer sees either a vase or two faces, but never both at first glance (visual 'blind spots')" (Harrison, 2018). The concept of blindspotting represents how a person's mind will only focus on the first perception of an item; although there can be two images within the picture. The duality of visual within one image reflects the notion of training the mind to see both visuals simultaneously. Similarly, as a psychological phenomenon, it takes a mental retraining to effectively see both images at once as a holistic image, not one distinct perceived image over another depending on perspective. Blindspotting can be applied to the binary concept of students as consumers and products as it is a normal occurrence given the difficulty in concentrating on two opposing perspectives in a singular space, and to avoid it there must be an intentional practice to see both images at the same time. This is even more important from the communicative perspective as Presidents have an obligation to ensure that all constituents are not placed in a hierarchal setting, but rather the President communicates in a way that individuals understand the important part they play at the institution. This means that institutions may want to refrain from such language as *student-centered* or *student-focused* to

that of *mission-engaged or mission-centric*. After all, academic organizations cannot exist without both students and employees, in particular faculty.

### **New Theoretical Construction: The Consumer-Product Binary Theory**

This study lends itself to the development of a new theory, *The Consumer- Product Binary Theory*. This theory asserts that a consumer and product can coexist simultaneously – in this practical case, a student within the higher education space. While most researchers promote the notion that one construct can be placed over another, this theoretical construct of the Consumer-Product Binary determines there are some industries in which the consumer is in fact the product. In this case, the need for a new and innovative theoretical construct requires that the binary is not mutually exclusive and leads to changes in developing new leadership, management, and business modeling to accommodate this paradigm. As such, the consumer and the product must equally coexist with the understanding that once one is given more importance than another it causes a shift in the hierarchy. In the case of higher education, this theory concludes the need for consideration of colleges and universities as a nuanced industry that cannot follow conventional business models for long-term sustainability and leadership development. Additionally, such a binary creates more stability within the student constituency space by understanding how semiotics can not only create multiple meanings to facilitate best practices within the space, but also maintain power and influence within the organization. As for higher education as the model of this theoretical construct, the meaning of the word student as both consumer and product through the various perceptions and actions that take place within the higher education space with an understanding that additional research and testing need to take place to further validate and apply Consumer-Product Binary Theory.

Therefore, communicating the importance of the student and academic product to faculty is more empowering and less hierarchal, establishing increased morale and faculty engagement. Conversely, communicating the importance of the academic and social productivity of the institution to the student and prospective employer-partner creates return on investment opportunities for the institution without creating entitlement and builds a value-proposition for the institution. However, these two things must happen at the same time – and sometimes in the same space with various, but competing constituents. Thus, the implementation of Consumer-Product Binary Theory allows for institutional leaders to practice avoiding blindspotting, while appreciating the dual nature of the student and institutional function in order to make effective decisions that are best for business continuity without sacrificing, offending, or even increasing the attrition of students, employees, or external partnerships that may result from unconscious bias and the creation of hierarchal structures within the institutional. In addition, the process of transitioning and existing in duality of these spaces creates a sense of double-consciousness.

However, as universities and colleges understand the contemporary student's function through the lens of the consumer-product binary, senior-level administrators can create better spaces for not only the educational process but also better business strategies for a more viable and stable organization. Interestingly, in studying higher education as a business model recognizing the value of the consumer, the added value then creates additional product bases for organizational and corporate brand recognition, marketing, and increased valuation. Thus, from a business perspective, for-profit and non-profit organizations alike remove the economic profitability as the primary focus and concentrate on the individuals who drive product innovation and value, resulting in an economic viability. In particular, industries that are driven by providing a public good or service can benefit from understanding how to define its

consumers as its final product. Whether it is the beauty industry, or social servicing, the result of these findings and facilitation of a new theoretical construct have expanded the thought-leadership of how organizations can create value and agency through the lens of the consumer as also the product, placing a creative value on the ways meaning and symbolism can have serious impacts in corporate brand loyalty while promoting individual self-investment for a return consumer and beneficial global product through the citizenry.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Minority serving institutions, in particular HBCUs, find it especially difficult to navigate among other higher education institutions when competing against schools with more economic and human resources and maintaining best business practices. More and more, society questions the relevancy of minority serving institutions, especially those labeled as HBCUs. Therefore, there must be an intentional and well-thought plan of action related to the mission, vision, and planning of the organization and the subsequent measure of how the institution's culture and traditions play in the outcomes to determine the best course of action for student success after graduation, which in turn has become a measurement of the overall success (or lack thereof) of the University.

Most research reflects the role of student as consumer or product and the correlation to academic performance in an effort to justify the student as one or the other. As such, the current research does not argue that students exist in both spaces simultaneously. Many of the articles on consumerism in higher education argue that students are not one or the other, suggesting that depending on the constituent, whether it is the faculty or the administration, that the argument is forged. In addition, because much of the research concentrates on student performance, there is

not information on the problems leadership of such organizations may face as it relates to the change in the traditional outlook of education and the meaning of education in today's society versus the outlook of why individuals pursued education in earlier eras within higher education within the United States. Ultimately, the current body of research does not support the argument of the student as both consumer and commodity, and how this concept functions in the current institutional culture of a minority serving institution. Therefore, this cultural analysis of behavior and appropriate leadership styles can create opportunities for organizational change.

This study focuses on how the definition of what it means to be a student plays a defining role on administrative decisions and the business strategy for small private tuition-driven institutions. Part of understanding the student's role in the business modeling of the institution from a marketing and organizational perspective is related to understanding the concept of higher education institutions both as a school and as a business. This is not an attempt at redefining the role of the student by disregarding others. Rather, the research sought to show a different construct of the stakeholder relationship of the student that allows for questions of representation, agency, and power relative to higher education leadership and management in an ever increasingly, but arguably, capitalist society.

In addition, this researcher has inquired of the organized business strategies of higher education institutions, and how the student as a key constituent plays a role in that process. One of the ways private institutions differ from public institutions is they depend on students as a critical part of obtaining money for financial solvency (Beamer, 2011). In the case of this research, private historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) was the market segment utilized based on their historically relevant mission for educational access to academically, socially and economically disadvantaged students (Schexnider, 2017; Smith-Barrow, 2019).

Having used this as a market segment, the researcher aimed to show the necessity of understanding the role of the student, and the binary role students play in the strategic planning of these institutions in order to display the need for development of creative funding sources by enhancing the importance of the student as both a consumer and a product of the institution. The necessity of the student binary concept is a critical aspect that senior leadership has acknowledged, especially when making decisions that impact the operations of the institution and managing the resource challenges, this population deals with based on their dependency of students' tuition for financial solvency.

This research is founded on the research conducted in 1972, Alexander W. Astin and Calvin B.T. Lee wrote the seminal text, *The Invisible Colleges: A Profile of Small, Private Colleges with Limited Resources*. Astin and Lee's research was critical at its time of publication as the Carnegie Foundation attempted to establish an understanding of higher education in America – its foundation, movement, and reformation. As higher education institutions were moving into the 1970's, the American social, economic, and political landscape was shaping the identity of the modern college and university, evolving “into a highly refined institutional status hierarchy that is unified by a common value system” (Astin & Lee, 1972, p. 1). Subsequently, state, elite private, and distinguished private institutions were known by the general populous; however, one-third of all four-year colleges and universities that were serving the largest overall population of college attendees were virtually unknown institutions (Astin & Lee, 1972, p. 1). Just as Astin and Lee's research has drawn an interesting dynamic, which has attracted scholars to conduct research on these institutions; this study was inspired based on the background of the researcher. At the time of the inspiration, the researcher was working for one of two historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the state of Ohio. The researcher had just

transitioned from an administrative role, as the Assistant Vice President of Business and Finance / Controller of the institution into a fulltime temporary faculty role within the College of Professional Studies at the same institution. This study's focus coupled with Astin and Lee's research conducted in the 70's revealed the need for these institutions, pinned "invisible colleges," to develop an intentional strategic approach toward operational funding. These institutions were identified based on the following qualifications:

- Four-year
- Private, not public
- Less than 2,500 students
- Average SAT score of less than 1,000

According to Astin and Lee (1972), the term invisible was intentional as a descriptor versus an evaluative tool given the "chief problem facing such institutions is their obscurity and the consequent lack of concern for their welfare within the community of higher education" (p.2). What resulted from the study in the 70's, there were a confirmed 494 institutions that qualify as invisible colleges, and as such, face the threat of closure due to the external and internal threats. These threats included lack of financial support, student under-preparedness, and reputational concerns (or lack thereof) (Astin & Lee, 1972). Astin and Lee's research confirmed the comprehensive analysis of small, private institutions in the United States and was further broken down according to religious affiliation, gender and race. Additionally, these colleges "were shaped by at least three historical forces: (a) the religious influence in American before the Civil War, (b) the demand for Negro colleges after the Civil War, and (c) the need for technical schools at the end of the nineteenth century" (Astin & Lee, 1972, p. 13). The second historical force created the need for predominately black institutions, otherwise designated as

Historically Black College and Universities. These institutions, according to Astin and Lee (1972), enrolled at least 50 percent black students, yet the vast majority of these institution enrolled close to 100 percent African American students. For all intent and purpose, any black private college can be considered invisible almost by definition and considered a subgroup among the invisible colleges (Astin & Lee, 1972).

Because Astin and Lee's research was conducted regarding small, private institutions across the United States higher education landscape, there has been a resurgence of interest in their study and the considerations within the 21st century perspective of what happened to these institutions. Did they succumb to the pressures of minimal resources and student-mission drivers? In a follow up to the Astin and Lee document, the article "The Invisible Colleges Revisited: An Empirical Review" determined that of the 491 institutions from the original report (the 494 number was revised in later updates to the Carnegie Foundation), 354 of the institutions were still open in 2012-2013 (Tarrant, Bray, & Katsinas, 2018). The research focused on not only what happened to the institutions, but also how the same narrative of threat is present today, yet these institutions still remain open, viable, and sustainable. Interestingly enough, it was determined that there was a need across the American landscape for diverse institutions that mirrored the American experience. This institutional diversity that occurs across those small private invisible institutions has since continued becoming a critical analytic tool in the examination of the factors that impact invisible colleges, their continued sustainability, and the role of these institutions in the access and education of populations that may otherwise have little to no ability to attend an elite private or state supported institution (Tarrant, Bray, & Katsinas, 2018). Further, "small, private 4-year institutions provide a vital component to the institutional diversity found in American higher education" in their unique missions that focus on liberal arts,



student development, and religious diversity as well as servicing millions of students, increasing not only “student diversity but mission diversity in a time of mission creep and isomorphism” (Tarrant, Bray, & Katsinas, 2018, p. 342).

Even more fascinating was that these 354 persisted for more than 40 years beyond their predicted lifespan and remained as invisible colleges. Of particular note, in 2012, the 36 persisting invisible colleges that were designated as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) of the 44 documented in the original Astin and Lee report survived and persisted at a rate of 82%, compared with 72% of the non-HBCU persisting invisible colleges (Tarrant, Bray, & Katsinas, 2018). Not only does this speak to the durability of these institutions, but also lends the question to how these institutions continue to adapt and survive. Additionally, the invisibility of HBCUs from the overall narrative of the American higher education conversation must be noted as these institutions continue to persist, even in the midst of negative positioning and absence from inclusion in mainstream media (Williams, Burt, Clay, & Bridges, 2019). These “dynamic institutions founded to address the educational needs of Black communities...increasingly serve a diverse student population” with recent statistics suggesting “nearly a quarter of all students at HBCUs are non-Black” (Williams, Burt, Clay & Bridges, 2019, p. 557). While Williams, Burt, Clay, & Bridges (2019) sought to better understand the modern contributions of HBCUs as described by their chief executive officers—HBCU presidents, this research seeks to further offer how the decision making of HBCU presidents continue to sustainability of the institutions they operate in very tenuous and sometimes hostile environments.

Thus, this research has a particular interest in how management and decision-making at small, private Historically Black Colleges and Universities are influenced by students.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) are nuanced in not only the type historically relevancy of the institutions, but also the students served (Astin & Lee, 1972; Williams, Burt, Clay, & Bridges, 2019). According to Williams, Burt, Clay, and Bridges (2019), “It is within the context of the historical oppression of Black people that HBCUs emerged” (p. 559). Thus, students and accessibility, in particular students of color in the United States, have always been at the center of the formation, education and sustainability of HBCUs. Unlike the first institutions of higher education founded in the 16th and 17th centuries, HBCUs were founded to educate students who otherwise would not have choice or even access to attend college due to their social condition and systemic racism. According to Astin and Lee (1972) these students needed more assistance given their academic inadequacies and preparation that was a direct correlation to their social stratification. Further, these institutions typically began as secondary institutions in order to prepare students for their movement into the baccalaureate space (Astin and Lee, 1972; Anderson, 1998; Williams, Burt, Clay, & Bridges, 2019). While Astin and Lee (1972) defined the predominately black institution as one with populations of greater than fifty percent African-American students, to better understand the actual federal designation of such institutions, the Higher Education Act of 1965 (2012) defines an HBCU as: Any historically Black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of Black Americans, and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association determined by the Secretary [of Education] to be a reliable authority as to the quality of training offered or is, according to such an agency or association, making reasonable progress toward accreditation.

Nevertheless, whether research from 1972 or as recent as 2019, similar to the social position of Black people, HBCUs have been historically marginalized within American higher

education (Williams, Burt, Clay, & Bridges, 2019). To take one example, HBCUs are often omitted or overlooked in mainstream news media and academic discourse about higher education, rendering them largely invisible (Williams, Burt, Clay, & Bridges, 2019; Gasman, 2008). HBCUs therefore function to give agency and advocacy to not only the student populations they serve, but also provide a counternarrative that allows for research into the management of these institutions for continued sustainability. At the heart of this process is the student, which drives the mission and decision-making process as small private HBCUs still serve primarily student populations that are of African descent (Williams, Burt, Clay & Bridges, 2019, p. 557). As invisible HBCUs<sup>1</sup> are reliant on student tuition dollars, it is no wonder that students become an integral part of the presidential decision-making process.

Additionally, it is how these leaders create meaning and descriptors of the “student” that addresses the business enterprise of the post-secondary institution, in particular the invisible HBCU. The student now becomes a part of the business language, semiotically given meaning by the CEO in order to effectively adapt and shift for sustainability and survival. Using the language of Astin and Lee (1972), the word “student” now is a descriptor rather than the use of the persona as an evaluative tool. Such conceptualization of the student and the influence on leadership is relevant in the scope of higher education “as both consumers and producers of knowledge, we must be aware of how our positionalities frame our thoughts, influence our actions, and affect our practice” (as cited in Exkano, 2013). Similarly, these producers of knowledge are themselves products of the institutions that provide a powerful contribution to the American economy by providing a viable workforce. Therefore, the business ecosystem of

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<sup>1</sup> According to Astin and Lee (1972), all private HBCUs were considered Invisible Colleges with the exception of two. As such, public HBCUs were not included and private HBCUs were hence considered invisible due to their meeting of the requirements, in particular their intentional exclusion and lack of regard for their survival by those economically vested in the higher education landscape. Invisibility then takes on a different perspective for such minority serving institutions, causing them to overly rely on student enrollment for tuition to be operational.

consumers and products within this particular market segment relates to the students and how their designation represents the interest of leadership in maintaining the economic structure of the institution for sustainability. Unlike other business entities, the small private HBCU relies on understanding the dual role of the student as consumer and product and the simultaneous function necessary for continued inputs and recruitment (consumer), student retention, engagement, and success (the moment of convergency within the binary of the student as both consumer and product), and the final product (graduate becomes employed – consumed by the workforce or the post-graduate institution who further engages in the binary as a consumer, but also viable product for a program). Defining the student as a consumer and product is important to understanding the inherent processes and decisions of the President as influenced by the tuition and mission driven aspects of the small, private Historically Black College and University.

Therefore, future research may speak to the ways in which semiotics within the higher education space is impacted by external forces, especially for HBCUs. In particular, theorists such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and bell hooks address race, marginalization, and meaning. Gates (2014) in his seminal text, *The Signifying Monkey*, addresses how semiotics functions within a racialized construct. Though the text speaks to how signs and signifiers of race and culturally-defined racial concepts reiterate the images seen on screen and how they come through in readings, using Rossi-Landi's example, more in-depth research not provided in this research allows for analysis on how signs and signifiers play into the defining of not only HBCUs and the impact of value (or in many cases the devalue) of students who attend these institutions. As this research concentrated on validating the meaning of student as a binary, additional research on the implications of race on reading students and the creation of multiple meaning is necessary,

especially when addressing minority students, marginalization, and Othering. Further, this understanding of the student binary as a consumer and product may be engaging to not only practitioners of diversity, equity, and inclusion modeling at majority institutions, but more so presidents and leaders in their making of decisions that inherently impact minority students. Other research that may be explored is the impact of such a binary on the student during and after their tenure in higher education and how that influenced their relationship with the institution, or even their own value proposition from a workforce preparedness perspective.

Ultimately, the introduction of semiotics into the ideology of not only the business, but the higher education space, further identifies such organizations as not just simply non-profit entities, but rather full-fledge businesses that have consumers and products, exchanging capital, imposing value, and producing outcomes and results in the form of employees to the workforce.

In the words of Chandler (2017),

Becoming aware of the processes of mediation involved in constructing the realities of everyday life is both inherently fascinating and intellectually empowering. Exploring semiotic perspectives helps us to realize that information or meaning is not 'contained' in the world, or in books, computers, or other media. Semiotics helps us to take apart what is taken for granted, making our interpretive systems more explicit. In defining realities, sign systems serve ideological functions. Deconstructing and contesting the realities they represent can reveal whose realities are privileged and whose are suppressed. To decline the study of signs is to leave to others the control of the world of meanings that we inhabit. (p. 8-9)

Interestingly, for Historically Black Colleges and Universities, whose stories and narratives are communicated often by members of communities that are not their own, this study and understanding of the importance of creating meaning for its students is reflective to the very reason and mission these institutions exist: to provide opportunities for students who otherwise may not have such opportunities to access, while scaffolding and providing the resources necessary to graduate African-American students prepared to enter the workplace, as well as be productive members of the citizenry. The leadership of these important historical, social, and economic drivers of their local, regional, and national communities is critical to their continued survival – and understanding the functionality of the students they lead is essential to moving these institutions beyond relying on tuition, but considering alternative revenue streams to be competitive, viable, sustainable, and no longer invisible.

### **Conclusion**

As such, the application of semiotics from the higher education leadership perspective was introduced by William G. Tierney in his 1989 article, “Symbolism and Presidential Perceptions of Leadership.” Tierney addressed how meaning and conceptualizations are made through a postmodern lens as related to semiotics and the field of business. In particular, Tierney (1989) stated that college presidents “employ a wide variety of symbolic forms to communicate their messages to different constituencies” in order “to adequately understand how leaders make sense of the organizational universe for their followers” (p. 154). These followers, in turn, interpret the abstractions found in the higher education space, following suggestions often made by their leaders” (Tierney, 1989, p. 155).

To adequately understand how leaders make sense of the organizational universe for their followers it is important to deconstruct the underlying conceptual and ideological orientations

that presidents bring to their leadership roles and contexts” (Tierney, 1989). Thus, if semiotics allows signs to have multiple dimensions and constructions based upon the signifier, then multiple conceptualizations of the student beyond the traditional denotative meaning can be reconstructed using the President’s experiences, the institutional history, mission, vision, organizational members, structures, and operational dynamics can be communicated by the President. As a result, the President can assess and evaluate a cross-section of the institution and make decisions that are not conducive to one constituency over another because the student function as a consumer or product takes precedent.

Further, within the perspective of the higher education institution, HBCUs are not homogenous as organizations or business entities and are nuanced in the relationships they develop with their students. In particular, the leadership and organizational structure at small private HBCUs allows presidents and chancellors the opportunity to be more hands on and intimate with the everyday operations of the institution. All of the participants within the study identified an intimate connection with the everyday operations. In particular, one participant noted that to be president of a small, private HBCU allows a certain level of intimacy with the day-to-day operations of the institution that they may not have if they were at a larger institution, public institution, or majority serving institution. The participant also stated, “I don’t think many people [from majority institutions] understand that HBCU presidents are typically available to their students. Many students have our phone numbers and access to us while in the office. We are very hands-on, which I really don’t think people out of the HBCU space get. Like this call, you got me, not my provost.” This form of leadership, the Behavioral Leadership approach, also known as the style approach to leadership, focuses solely on the tendencies of the person in leadership, and the habitual choices of behavior that the leader makes to move the entity /

organization forward toward a common goal or mission. Northouse (2016) suggests that these leadership tendencies are focused on one of two types of behaviors: task centered behaviors and relationship centered behavior. According to Durue, Nahrgang, Wellman, and Humphey (2011), an integrative trait-behavioral model shows that models where leaders examine particular behavior is more effective than those that exhibit just traits. The behavior mode is more effective because the behavior mode deals with building relationships; where the trait and skill mode focuses solely on the leader.

The task behavior is centered around results, what behaviors are leaders performing to get things done versus the relationship centered behaviors, which are being performed to maintain a relationship with individuals – it is focused on the people within the organization. Decisions made solely in order to ensure individuals feel comfortable and in order to maintain a healthy relationship. Generally these decisions/behaviors are based on consideration for others – in the case of higher education leaders, usually the student is considered above other constituents, and typically as prioritized as inputs (consumers) versus outputs (products). The Behavioral Approach to leadership has potential strengths and weaknesses as though the leaders are present and close to the engagement within the day-to-day operations of the institution, for presidents this may be too overwhelming for them and their leadership teams, leading to micromanagement and inequity among all constituencies. According to Meyers (2004), “the key is not so much the mission of the organization, but its structure – how it is governed and what values are promoted and sustained” (p. 270). Similarly, Wu (2017) argues that ethics is important to the how leadership influences not only the behavior of employees within an organization, but also how these behaviors impact consumer trust. Ethical sales behaviors can lead to long-term relationships, as well as “customer satisfaction, trust, and commitment (p. 548). Conversely,



unethical sales behaviors, such as misrepresentation and overstating product capabilities can lead to customer attrition (Wu, 2017). Sharifirad and Hajhoseiny (2018) further explore the dynamic between leadership, trust, and retention. Unlike Meyers process and structural analysis that drives ethical behavior, Sharifirad and Hajhoseiny (2018) state that “among the variables leading to the failure of organizational change (OC) endeavors, researchers and scholars have emphasized the role of the human element” (p. 716). Therefore, similar to Wu, “the perception of having a supportive leader reduces uncertainty and increases commitment to change” (Sharifirad & Hajhoseiny, 2018, p. 717), an organizational change that is the result of the recognition of the human condition as an extension to behavioral and cultural impact. Though these leaders feel they are being supportive in their direct engagement and involvement in the various units of the institution, too much involvement may make teams feel they cannot make divisional decisions without intrusion by the president. Further, these leaders may become self-involved, placing themselves above all constituents and making decisions, or even imposing decisions that ultimately are best for them and their self-preservation rather than the organization. Therefore, the structure of the organization is important to its governance, decision-making, with the student functioning as both consumer and product creating the space for and the equity among all constituencies – especially in “student-centered environments.”

As a result of the participant interviews and research concerning the semiotics of student meaning and power structure, this grounded study validates the student binary as a viable definition of students as both consumers and products, leading to the establishment of a new theory within not only the education, but business space – the Consumer-Product Binary Theory. Interestingly, the more participants tried to create distinction and divergence among consideration of student and function, the more the meaning of student from a decision-making

and institutional influence became more convergent. In particular, at the small, private HBCUs assessed during the research, there was revealed a desire for such institutions not only to create an institutional value proposition through mission and public good, but also through increased enrollment and financial stability. As Presidents and senior leaders find it difficult to navigate student inputs (admission and enrollment) in contrast to institutional outputs (graduation and career placement), the delicate balance between such student considerations become critical to the viability and sustainability of the institution. Even more interestingly, the more a student is considered a consumer, influencing the living and learning, social, and organizational behaviors of the institution and its other constituents, the more the student becomes a product because of the dollar value that is placed upon the student as headcount equates to economics – the traditional (and often sole) practice is the business models of many small, private, low resource institutions. As such, the more leadership accommodates the student to maintain and increase enrollment, the more a student becomes not only a consumer, but also a product – an institutional asset with an affixed monetary value that maintains the economic structure.

Therefore, this study affirms the meaning of the word “student” as more than just a body or person, but also as a concept whose meaning is contextualized by function and necessity. Through the establishment of the Consumer-Product Binary, this conceptualization of student further defines the “whatness” of what it is to be a student, adding to the existing body of knowledge while acknowledging differentiated ways of creating ideals that may not be consistent with traditional higher education and business practices through the creation of meaning, structure, and power via symbolism. Such conceptualization allows for expanded research opportunities in understanding higher education institutions as businesses and ways to diversify models and practices beyond traditional economic means.

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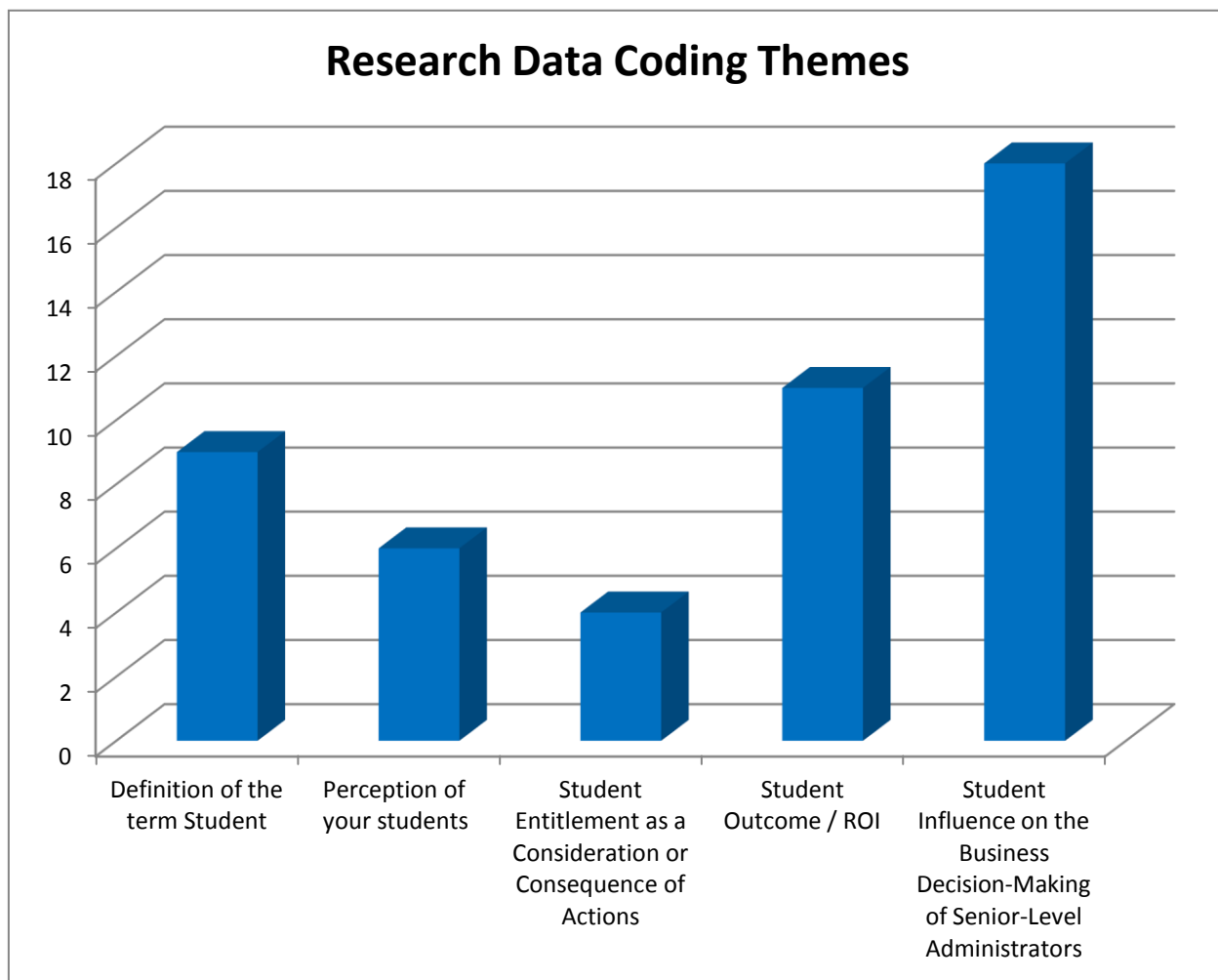
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**UNCF Network of Member Institutions**

<b>Allen University</b>	<b>Oakwood University</b>
<b>Benedict College</b>	<b>Paine College</b>
<b>Bennett College</b>	<b>Philander Smith College</b>
<b>Bethune-Cookman University</b>	<b>Rust College</b>
<b>Clafin University</b>	<b>Saint Augustine's University</b>
<b>Clark Atlanta University</b>	<b>Shaw University</b>
<b>Dillard University</b>	<b>Spelman College</b>
<b>Edward Waters University</b>	<b>Stillman College</b>
<b>Fisk University</b>	<b>Talladega College</b>
<b>Florida Memorial University</b>	<b>Texas College</b>
<b>Huston-Tillotson University</b>	<b>Tougaloo College</b>
<b>Interdenominational Theological Center</b>	<b>Tuskegee University</b>
<b>Jarvis Christian College</b>	<b>Virginia Union University</b>
<b>Johnson C. Smith University</b>	<b>Voorhees College</b>
<b>Lane College</b>	<b>Wilberforce University</b>
<b>LeMoyne-Owen College</b>	<b>Wiley College</b>
<b>Livingstone College</b>	<b>Xavier University of Louisiana</b>
<b>Miles College</b>	
<b>Morehouse College</b>	
<b>Morris College</b>	





## **INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FRANKLIN UNIVERSITY**

### **Introduction**

Good morning/afternoon. My name is Christopher Wilks. I am a doctoral candidate in the Business Administration Program at Franklin University. Thank you for agreeing to participate and complete an interview on your experiences as a college/university administrator.

### **Instructions**

This interview consists of a series of questions which I will ask you about your experiences as an administrator at your institution. The purpose of the research being conducted is to focus on how viewing students as both consumers and products can be a business strategy for defining and validating a nuanced conceptualization of higher education. Please know that in completing this interview there are no right or wrong answers. However, I would like you to be transparent and to feel comfortable with saying what you really think and how you really feel.

### **Tape Recorder Instructions**

With your permission, I will be tape-recording our conversation. The purpose of this is so that I can get all the details but at the same time be able to carry on an attentive conversation with you. In order to effectively discuss this topic, we must first state that the information discussed during this interview is strictly confidential and the information collected during this interview will be kept anonymous and no personal identifiable information will be shared throughout this research process. At any time throughout this interview process, you will have the opportunity to opt-out of the research process and any information shared during your interview will not be utilized without the consent of the participant. I will be compiling a report which will contain all participants' comments without any reference to individuals.

### **Questions**

- Q1. How would you define the word "student" and any correlation or distinction of such definition to the role of student at your institution?
- Q2. What is your perception of your students? Do you view them as consumers, products, or both?
- Q3. Is the role of a student viewed differently within different spaces around the institution? If so, how and how do you navigate those spaces pertaining to your decision making?
- Q4. How does the role of the students function in the operational strategy of your institution?

Q5. How does student tuition impact the business model of your institution?

Q6. Has the for-profit educational model or the community college / technical school model impacted the administrative decisions made at your institution related to recruitment and retention?

Q7. For small institutions that are tuition driven, how is the need to retain and recruit students impacted by the outside noise, whether it be economic situations, health and safety, or your potential for-profit competitors?

Q8. Do you see any potential issues related to the concept of students as consumers? Does that create an environment that encourages student entitlement?

Q9. How does your institution, walk the line between marketing your institution to students as a target market, which is ultimately going to become a walking billboard for your institution?