A Critical Comparison of Website Marketing at For-Profit Colleges and Community College

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Abstract—In light of the disproportionate number of students of color enrolled in the for-profit and community college sectors, the author explores website messages that might influence such students to enroll. Data from a comparative textual and visual analysis of the website homepages of 10 community colleges and 10 for-profit colleges illustrate the nature and frequency of race-targeted content. The study ultimately highlights variations in the positioning and representation of students of color on both for-profit and community college websites. From this study, future directions for for-profit and community college research are highlighted.

Key Terms—For-profit Colleges, Community Colleges, Marketing, Websites, College Choice, Critical Race Theory, Privatization, Higher Education

Today, more students of color are gaining access to higher education by enrolling in for-profit and community colleges. Community colleges enroll approximately half of all undergraduate students of color in the country (AACC, 2011; Snyder & Dillow, 2011). And in 2010, private, for-profit colleges and universities (FPCUs) enrolled 11% of all students in postsecondary education (Borden, 2012). Students of color represented approximately 40% of these enrollments, compared to 29% and 23% at public and private, not-for-profit institutions respectively (Borden, 2012). Empirical research on for-profit college choice is still emerging, however public discourse has already questioned why students would choose to attend a for-profit institution that places them at risk for debt and uncertain job placement, over a community college that is a lower cost option (Iloh & Tierney, 2013).

The purpose of this study was to analyze the websites of for-profit and community colleges to discern marketing messages targeted to students of color. In response to the lack of existing research on the admissions and enrollment culture of community colleges and for-profit institutions in particular, this study sought to examine more intently what answers could be derived from a website content analysis. Accordingly, I first highlight the missions and practices of for-profit and community colleges. Next, college choice is defined and discussed, with particular attention paid to the importance of college websites. I then discuss the critical race framework that informs the analysis of the study. Fourth, I present the methods and findings of a comparative textual and visual analysis of for-profit and community college websites. The paper concludes with new directions for for-profit and community college research and higher education overall. I use this study to address the lack of research regarding students of color at for-profit and community colleges, while also asserting that the website marketing of these institutions are a window into understanding the racially stratified enrollment culture present in higher education today.

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COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND FOR-PROFIT COLLEGES: MISSIONS AND PRACTICES

Community Colleges
Today’s comprehensive community college is both a principal provider of academic instruction and a major provider of vocational preparation and workforce development (Kasper, 2003). Community colleges offer a variety of services, including academic and career counseling, tutoring, and developmental education, as part of their effort to respond to a wide range of students who differ in terms of college readiness. As many as 60% of incoming students at community colleges require at least one developmental (or remedial) course, and many students drop out before receiving a credential, often because they never progress beyond developmental classes (Scrivener, 2008). Due to their rapid expansion and wide-ranging missions and student needs, community colleges are sometimes poorly understood, and policy makers often struggle to determine how to utilize them to meet educational and labor market goals (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen & Person, 2006).

Community college students usually are accepted on a first-come, first-served basis, up to the capacity of the institution (Bailey, Badway & Gumport, 2001). Because of this admissions culture, community colleges are often referred to as “democracy’s college,” the “open door college,” and the “people’s college” (Pusser & Levin, 2009). Community colleges’ open admissions policies have contributed to their burgeoning enrollments as well as to concern about their funding and capacity constraints. Community colleges are of particular importance for marginalized student groups as these institutions are the primary source of postsecondary education opportunity for students of color, low-income students, and students who attended poorly funded high schools (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen & Person, 2006).

For-Profit Colleges
The for-profit postsecondary school sector encompasses privately funded, tax-paying institutions that generate profit by providing post-high school degrees or credentials (Deming, Claudia, & Katz, 2012; Dill, 2005; Ruch, 2001). For-profit providers have highly focused missions targeted to specific segments, particular industries, and are limited to specific fields of study (Ruch, 2001). In responding to labor demands of numerous employers, trades and professions, FPCUs develop and offer programs that train students for positions where there is sufficient demand, and for which investment in schooling is likely to be “recoverable” with increased wages they can accrue (Hentschke, Lechuga & Tierney, 2010). The essential financial distinction between non-profit and for-profit universities is not a matter of profitability or profit motive, but one of taxation, as either a source of revenue or form of expenditure. Non-profit colleges, public and private, are exempt from paying taxes while for-profit institutions are tax-paying (Breneman, Pusser, & Turner, 2006; Ruch, 2001; Sperling, 2001).

Although they are often discussed as a recent phenomenon, FPCUs have been a component of the educational enterprise since the 1800s (Kinser, 2006). Since 1994 to present day, FPCUs are considered to be in the Wall-Street era where publicly traded corporations drive the expansion of the for-profit sector (Kinser, 2007). One of the most profound aspects of for-profit institutions is their recent impact on postsecondary higher education enrollment. In 1999, FPCUs enrolled approximately 629,000 students, or a little over four percent of the nation’s then 15.2 million students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). By 2009, this sector increased to 2.2 million students, or almost 11% of the nation’s 21 million college students (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2011). For-profit colleges have also increased overall college attainment. The share of de-
Degrees produced in the U.S by for-profit colleges and universities has grown from less than 1 percent 40 years ago, to nearly 10 percent in 2007 (Tierney & Hentschke, 2007). While for-profit enrollment growth has slowed down in the past two years, they maintain over 40% of their enrollments as students of color.

Overall, FPCUs educate more marginalized students compared to traditional public and private non-profit universities (Bennett, Lucchesi, & Vedder, 2010). When compared with their counterparts attending other postsecondary educational institutions, for-profit college students are more likely to be older, women, students of color, and come from lower-income and less-educated families (Apling, 1993; Bailey, Badway, & Gumport, 2001; Cellini, 2012; Chung, 2012; Iloh & Tierney, in press; Iloh & Toldson, 2013; Kelly, 2001; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006). Only 75% of first-time undergraduates enrolled in for-profit colleges have a high school diploma, compared with 85% of students in community colleges and 95% in public or nonprofit four-year colleges (most of the other undergraduates have a General Educational Development diploma, or GED) (Deming, Goldin & Katz, 2012). In the 2007-2008 academic year, approximately 54% of the dependent students at for-profit institutions came from families with incomes below $40,000 (Baum & Payea, 2011). This income status compares to 35% of students at public two-year institutions, about 25% of students at public four-year institutions, and 20% of students at private non-profit institutions (Baum & Payea, 2011). Adult students are the majority age demographic represented in the for-profit sector. Over 56% of students attending for-profit institutions are over the age of 24, compared to only 30% of those at private and public non-profits, illustrating the appeal of for-profit colleges and universities to the adult learner (Silber & Fisher, 2005). The typical student pursuing a degree at a for-profit university fits the following demographic profile: 27-year-old female, ethnic minority (African American, Hispanic, or Asian), U.S Citizen, married with one or two dependents, holding a full- or part-time job while going to school, and having some prior college experience (Ruch, 2001).

While all sectors of higher education—two- and four-year, private and public—are assumed to bestow benefits upon their graduates, for-profit institutions provide the least certain educational and economic advantages, according to existing research (Bound & Lovenheim, 2010; Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2002). Empirical study of the for-profit sector is especially critical as they are currently the least understood and most scrutinized sector of higher education (Iloh & Tierney, 2014). Due to scandals concerning recruiting, loan default rates, and poor educational outcomes, FPCUs have been increasingly subject to regulatory pressures at the state and federal level (Government Accountability Office, 2011a; Government Accountability Office, 2011b; Hittman, 1995). The present study was designed to add to the empirical literature on for-profit colleges, specifically by studying their website marketing in comparison to two-year community colleges.

COMPARING FOR-PROFIT AND COMMUNITY COLLEGES

At the broadest level, scholars have tried to ascertain the distinctive value propositions and competition present between for-profit colleges and community colleges. Cellini (2009) presents the first causal evidence that public and for-profit 2-year (and less-than-2-year) colleges do, in fact, compete for students. Using a regression discontinuity design, her results reveal that when public community colleges receive increased funding and media attention with the passage of a bond measure, students switch from for-profit colleges to community colleges, driving some for-profit colleges out of the market.
Three broad arguments are common in the discussion of the growth of the for-profit sector in comparison to community colleges: (a) for-profits are a competitive threat to community colleges and other sectors of higher education; (b) for-profits provide more flexible, convenient, and responsive education than community colleges; and (c) for-profits “train” while community colleges “educate” (Bailey, Badway, & Gumport, 2003). Similarly, Bennett, Lucchesi, and Vedder (2010) argue that three factors work to the advantage of for-profit schools with respect to responding to the demand for higher education services over institutions such as community colleges: a) they generally do not have fixed costs in a tenured faculty, and can add and subtract instructional resources faster and more comprehensively than most traditional institutions; b) they have fewer resources tied up in buildings and equipment because they typically lease their facilities, which allows them to expand or contract space more readily; and c) they do not follow a shared governance model common in most of higher education, where major decisions often have to go through a complex series of committees and negotiations. Further, Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person (2006) find that community colleges are challenged with trying to fulfill multiple institutional goals including sending students to four-year colleges or providing them with vocational skills to support a move directly into the labor market.

While most comparative studies between for-profit and community colleges focus on inputs and student outcomes (e.g., Bennett, Lucchesi, & Vedder, 2010; Cellini & Chaudhary, 2011; Deming, Claudia, & Katz, 2012; Mullin, 2010), fewer studies have compared the admissions and college choice cultures at for-profit and community colleges. In a 2011 GAO report, undercover tests at 15 for-profit colleges that four colleges encouraged fraudulent practices and that all 15 made deceptive or otherwise questionable statements to undercover applicants. In response to this study, Norris/Norris, Inc. sent 15 experienced mystery shoppers to 15 community colleges in Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa and Michigan to evaluate their admissions practices (2010). They found that all 15 community colleges failed to routinely disclose graduation rates, two institutions inflated salaries, and most institutions discouraged students from applying, citing unavailable classes (Norris/Norris, Inc.). In another recent study that compared the admissions practices of both for-profit and community colleges, Iloh and Tierney (2013) found that the for-profit colleges in their sample were more engaging and accessible than community college representatives, but less forthcoming with regard to pertinent institutional information via telephone and websites. The five community colleges in their sample provided limited information via the telephone but were more thorough with regard to the information on their websites. The authors highlight how a students’ decision may say more about what information the institution provides and how they deliver it, rather than factors and preferences particular to a student that influence choice (Iloh & Tierney, 2013).

Overall the current research on for-profit postsecondary education is concerned with the social costs and benefits associated with the proliferation of the for-profit higher education sector, especially when juxtaposed with public community colleges (Iloh & Tierney, in press). This is particularly important due to the debt students incur to pursue an education at a for-profit college. For-profit institutions have tuition and fees significantly higher than those of community colleges, requiring over 90% of their students to take out loans, compared to just over 10% at community colleges (Mullin, 2010). Most of the publications that focus on proprietary higher education are based on anecdotal evidence, with a small number of studies basing their reports on quantitative and qualitative
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research methods such as including survey analysis, interviews, and analysis of data sets from the Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (Lechuga, Tierney, & Hentschke, 2003). The few qualitative studies on for-profit colleges, in particular, often involve interviews and focus groups with institutional leaders, faculty, or students (e.g., Howard-Vital, 2006; Iloh & Tierney, in press-α; Kelly, 2001). This study was designed to add to the literature by investigating the nature of messages conveyed to prospective students of color in websites; an understanding that can inform scholarship and practice regarding students of color in postsecondary education as well as for-profit and community colleges.

COLLEGE CHOICE

Students considering the pursuit of postsecondary education theoretically have a range of options from which to choose. They can choose a baccalaureate program at a four-year college or university, a certificate or an associate’s degree program at a two-year college, or a vocational program at a two-year or less than two-year institution (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Despite the list of options, there are many constraints that mediate these choices (Barnes-Teamer, 2003). Factors include what they want to study, relative to what other institutions offer, admissions practices, their financial resources, the availability of financial aid, and family or work responsibilities that require them to live in a particular location or take classes on certain days or times, to name a few (Barnes-Teamer, 2003).

The “college choice” process is complex, especially when met with the needs and circumstances of the individual student. The most commonly used conception of college choice was developed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and is defined as a process or stage(s) students go through to determine which college to attend. Models of college decision making generally comprise three critical stages: (a) predisposition, in which the person makes a decision to attend college, (b) search, wherein a person begins to seek information about colleges and narrows his alternatives, and (c) choice, during which the student considers alternatives and decides which college to attend. As students develop firm aspirations to attend college, they begin to focus on where they would like to attend.

The present study relates to the search stage of the college choice process, where a student examines the attributes and characteristics of colleges in which they are interested. According to Chapman (1986), relevant college attributes might include cost, academic quality, future career prospects and opportunities (upon graduation), quality of life while a student is at the college, and related considerations that might be of interest to students in the ultimate college choice decision. The search phase concludes with the application decision, which is when a student decides on the set of colleges to which formal applications for admission will be submitted (Chapman, 1986). During the search stage, students utilize a variety of strategies and avenues to obtain information that will ultimately inform their college decision-making.

The search stage is not uniform for all students and tends to vary in intensity over time (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). More recently Holland (2013) identified two search processes that students engaged in when exploring their college options: systematic and haphazard. Systematic searchers were exposed to college campuses earlier in their lives, were able to articulate a clear set of criteria, and when making decisions, weighed schools against their criteria (Holland, 2013). Haphazard searchers on the other hand, had very little exposure to colleges and harbored misconceptions about college life. These students often started with few criteria and because they started late in the process, were not able to refine their preferences, and when making decisions, were highly influenced by college
marketing strategies (Holland, 2013). Much of this has implications for enrollment at proprietary colleges as they spend more on marketing than all other sectors of higher education.

College Websites and College Choice

The decision to enroll in higher education is a major commitment requiring high-quality information to facilitate the process (Stein, Wanstreet, Saunders, & Lutz, 2009). An institution's website is now second only to campus visits as the most important source for researching colleges (Schneider, 2004). Web marketing that meets or exceeds a potential students' expectations regarding the institution and the anticipated educational experience adds important information useful in the decision-making process (Razzouk, Seitz, Lamude, & Kapekci, 2005). Between 1997 and 2001 recruitment of students by colleges and universities through the use of websites increased from 40 percent to 100 percent. In their three-year study of home pages of more than 1,300 higher education institutions, Kittle and Ciba (2001) found that most institutions began using the web to initiate more contact with prospective students (Stein, Wanstreet, Saunders, & Lutz, 2009). It is clear that college websites are playing an increasingly important role for colleges and universities as well as the college choice decision of students.

A CRITICAL RACE APPROACH TO COLLEGE WEBSITES

Critical race theory (CRT) is an evolving methodological, conceptual, and theoretical construct that attempts to disrupt racism and dominant racial paradigms in education (Solorzano, 1998). CRT theorists in education seek to explain the persistent inequities that people of color in education experience (Ladson-Billings, 1998), which implies that although scholars have used race to analyze social inequity; "the intellectual salience of this theorizing has not been systematically employed in the analysis of educational inequality" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p.44). Although a variety of intellectual traditions and disciplines (e.g., critical legal studies, radical feminism, Marxism, conventional civil rights thought, and nationalism) inform CRT, there is not a single set of tenets to which all critical race theorists subscribe (Janinska, Wright, & Rocco, 2013). Neither CRT nor critical theory is, in reality, a single theory. Like critical theory, CRT is a collection of related premises nestled within an interpretive framework that can be used to explain the continued inequities that people of color experience (Closson, 2010).

A critical perspective might see phenomena (e.g., marketing) as depicting a number of things about society, such as who does the laundry, who prepares the breakfast while someone sits at the table, and who drives and who rides around in the passenger seat of the car (Kennedy, 2000). Such marketing plays an important role in weaving cultural messages about race into the consciousness of consumers (Kennedy, 2000). These messages often have a profound impact on people of color. Historian John Henrik Cark, noting the “importance of imagery and symbols” in the black community, stated, “Because what we see about ourselves often influences what we do about ourselves, the role of images and messages and how they control our minds are now more important than ever.” In the present study, a CRT approach would involve the systematic examination of the politics of racial representation through visual and textual communication in for-profit and community college websites.

METHODS

Sample

The institutional sample consisted of ten community colleges and ten for-profit colleges within a metropolitan city in California. To make certain that the institutions selected were similar and all accredited, IPEDS 2011
data were utilized (see Tables 1 and 2). This was done to ensure that the study accurately simulated the types of institutions a student within the search phase would potentially examine. After specific criteria were developed regarding the institutional sample, names of possible institutions were selected randomly. I did not use preconceived notions of institutions that were known as excellent or poor to guide selection. Institutions were narrowed based on a set of predetermined institutional characteristics and randomly pulled names of institutions were used as the sample for website content analysis.

**Procedures and Data Analysis**

For purposes of this exploratory study, a qualitative and descriptive content analysis of web pages from 10 for-profit colleges and 10 community colleges was used to determine the frequency and nature of messages possibly relayed to prospective students of color. Content analysis is an established social science methodology concerned broadly with "the description of the content of communication" (Baran, 2002, p. 410). As media of communication, websites and web pages lend themselves prima facie to content analysis (Weare & Lin, 2000). A template for the analysis of these websites was adopted from a Stein, Wanstreet, Saunders and Lutz (2009) study that examined the quality of college website messages dedicated to adult learners. For this study, each homepage of each website was scanned for references to race, people of color, and differential treatment along racial lines. This included analysis of any relevant text, images, and advertisements that were an indication of appeal to students of color. Table 3 shows the examples of the data units used in this study. Boyatzis’ (1998) approach for interpreting qualitative data through thematic analysis and code development was used. After assembling the frequency and descriptions of website messages, data were coded, recoded, and organized into relevant themes.

**LIMITATIONS**

One limitation of this study is its inability to generalize findings across for-profit and community colleges. This study only drew from community colleges and for-profit colleges in one state and effort was made to ensure the sampled institutions were similar. Thus the study is limited by not being able to reflect the heterogeneous nature of for-profit and community colleges across multiple geographic contexts.

This study is also predicated on the assumption that college websites serve as marketing platforms, even though marketing may not be as salient in the community college sector. While many for-profit and com-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit Type</th>
<th>Unit Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sampling unit</td>
<td>Home page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning unit</td>
<td>Statements, Photographs, Headlines, Links, Slogans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recording unit</td>
<td>Marketing messages identified on the coding template</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis unit</td>
<td>Frequency and content of marketing messages tailored to students of color</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Adapted from Stein, Wanstreet, Saunders, and Lutz (2009).*
Community colleges compete for students, the money and effort spent in marketing at for-profit colleges is significantly greater than community colleges. Due to the necessity to deliver returns, for-profit institutions allocate more money to student recruitment. Estimates suggest that the average for-profit college or university spends about 15% of its revenues on sales and marketing (Tierney & Hentschke, 2007). This rate is similar to what is spent by firms in other direct-to-consumer markets (Gallagher & Poroy, 2005). Thus while there may be multiple reasons for a given message on a community college website, more intentionality might be assumed by for-profit colleges that tend to invest significant funds into marketing campaigns.

The last limitation pertains to the manner in which data is illustrated. In order to avoid revealing institutional identity of sampled colleges, only website images that did not include a reference or indicator of the institution were shown in the findings section. This subsequently limits the amount of data that can be presented visually, with more reliance on text descriptions. Despite these limitations, this study is positioned to contribute to the scarce empirical research on students of color within the context of for-profit and community colleges.

FINDINGS

The goal of this study was to understand the marketing messages of for-profit and community colleges. Accordingly, website homepages were the unit of analysis and particular focus was paid to how images and text conveyed messages or signals to students of color. In the sections that follow, I highlight two themes that informed how marketing was utilized by institutional websites. Two areas that emerged as shaping the marketing profile of each institution were: a) mission-informed student narratives and b) differences in representations of institutional stakeholders. The first theme captures the

Table 2. For-Profit College Sample Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional Profile</th>
<th>Private 2–4 year institution that offers certificates and associates degrees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate Total Population</td>
<td>20-30,000 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual Tuition Cost (In-state and out-of-state same price)</td>
<td>$15,000 - $18,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accreditation Status</td>
<td>Accredited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Student-to-Faculty Ratio</td>
<td>30:1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Data Units

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ways in which the missions of each institutional type were reflected in messages as well as representations and portrayals of students of color. The second theme addresses how race informed representations of institutional stakeholder roles (e.g., student, administrator, and staff).

**Mission-informed Student Representations and Narratives**

This theme documents the ways in which racial messages worked to convey the missions of the institutions respectively. The for-profit colleges often used images and text to illustrate the ways in which they embrace and support students seeking career opportunities. The overwhelming emphasis of all ten for-profit college websites was vocational training and career development, which was often reflected by homepage text that highlighted a rotation of the following text: “jump-starting your career”, leaving “dead-end jobs” and “fulfilling career goals.” Figure 1 illustrates a common narrative on a for-profit college website, where a student is voicing a need to return to school for improved life opportunities. While graduation is referenced in Figure 1, most images similar to this one on other for-profit college homepages stressed students going directly into a career or job while graduation was less emphasized. Much of the text or captions also communicated the fast-paced nature of the academic programs. Nine of the ten for-profit colleges highlighted accelerated degree options, as illustrated by text that approximated how many months were necessary to complete their degree or certificate program (in all relevant cases, homepages highlighted certificate and degree programs that ranged from six months-to one year). Because many students who enroll in for-profit colleges also tend to have other obligations, such as work and family, text that highlights a shorter program may be especially appealing.

Further, in nine out of ten for-profit institutions in the sample, students of color were shown in some type of uniform typically found in a job setting. Moreover, all but one of these occupational images pertained to nursing or some form of medical assistance. On the three occasions that White students were also shown on homepages, they were less likely to be shown in helping occupations, but rather those that were more entrepreneurial in nature. For example, on one for-profit college website, a White male was shown wearing professional attire in a captioned business program whereas both Latina and Black women on the same page were shown in nursing uniforms (see Figure 2). The other images were of a White male paralegal student and a White woman in a nursing uniform. Accordingly, gender is an important consideration in these analyses as the majority of student images were of women, particularly those of color, in helping occupations.

![Figure 2. For-profit college homepage.](image2)

Critical race theory often utilizes the "social construction" thesis, which holds that race is a product of social thought and relations that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). This notion reinforces the ways in which dominant society racializes different minority groups at different times, in response to shifting needs such as the labor
market (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). This is particularly salient to the for-profit institutional sample, as all websites were from institutions located in California, a state that has a documented shortage of nurses and medical-related workers.

Many of the community college students of color showcased on websites were at graduation or in some capacity involved in the campus community. On seven of the ten community college homepages, students of color were shown preparing for or attending graduation. Community colleges not only emphasized graduation but also intellectual development. For example, on one community college homepage there was a link to a video of a young Latina woman discussing her aspirations to learn and later transfer to a four-year college. And even though community colleges serve multiple functions including job training, all images of students of color suggested a focus on matriculation, student involvement, and intellectual growth only. This was evidenced through specific images of students immersed in student organizations, studying in class, or walking across the stage. In all cases where students of color appeared on home pages, no student was shown in a discernable vocation or field of study.

Race, Stakeholder Roles, and Representation

A second major theme of the study relates to race and representations of various stakeholders. This theme highlights the manner in which website images and text work to indicate racial distinctions between higher education providers and buyers. This finding was especially germane to for-profit college websites. Six out of ten homepages of for-profit colleges juxtaposed images of people of color as students with white administrators or service personnel. Many of these White personnel were described as representatives students should “call for more information” about the institution and often these images were placed above or below text boxes in which students could enter a phone number so that they could be contacted.

A critical race reading of these images might suggest a portrayal of people of color as the potential consumers of higher education and White individuals (i.e., administrators and staff) as the suppliers and facilitators of postsecondary education. While this study does not wish to infer institutional motives, such as intentional segmented and niche marketing based on race, the assignment of roles along racial lines can be discerned as either an unintended or intended marketing message on many for-profit college websites. One of the tenets of critical race theory, whiteness as property, is particularly relevant to depictions of Whites as institutional leaders at for-profit colleges. Whiteness as property is a historic system of ownership that reinforces and perpetuates a system to which White individuals benefit (Hiraldo, 2010). This tenet identifies how racism is not merely an ideology of prejudice and power but results in material discrepancies between White and racially minoritized people (Bondi, 2012; Brown et al., 2003; Lipsitz, 1995). Further, when one views whiteness as property it is also possible to see its necessary opposite, the absence of access, or the absence of opportunity for ownership, in this case for people of color (Bell, 2000). As it pertains to this study, the image of people of color as students and Whites as administrators or staff on for-profit websites reinforces a distinction between who represents the institution versus who purchases and participates.

Out of the ten community college websites, seven had no pictures of any institutional leaders and staff on the homepage. The three that did either had an image of a faculty member lecturing or an institutional leader with students at graduation, which in all cases were White individuals. These few examples may indicate a designation between the
“educators” and “learners” along racial lines, however such juxtapositions were far less frequent in the community college sample than the for-profit sample. All images on community college homepages that included people of color pertained to some aspect of traditional student life while most text related to student opportunities and logistical information about the institution, (e.g., enrollment, course offerings, and the semester calendar). Much of the messages reflected on community college websites seemed to indicate some sense of a social and academic community, which was much different than the for-profit college text that had multiple images and text that appeared more for the benefit of prospective students (e.g., messages about calling or being contacted for more information on all for-profit websites). Figure 3 illustrates a common type of image seen on community college websites where students embedded in a group environment. It is also worth noting in terms of analysis of images, students of color on for-profit college websites always looked directly into the camera. Students on community college websites, with the exception of one student testimonial video, were always engaged in specific activities and looking away from the camera.

Figure 3. Community college homepage.

DISCUSSION

In this study, research efforts were directed to a racial reading of college website messages. The content of college websites studied here varied across institutional type and many of the websites within each sector were more similar than different. In each of the twenty websites studied, certain characteristics occurred more frequently by sector. Differences between the two institutions illustrate an emphasis on graduation at community colleges and career development (or readiness) at for-profit colleges. For-profit colleges may be more attractive to a prospective student concerned with employment, whereas multiple academic options may attract prospective community college students (Iloh & Tierney, in press). Further, for-profit colleges had more clear racial distinctions of certain stakeholder roles than community colleges, as people of color were only shown as students whereas any institutional leader or staff shown were White.

A CRT analysis recognizes the salience of oppression and draws attention to the perpetuation of such racial constructions reflected in college websites. Not only did CRT shape decisions about who to study, how to study them, and what questions to examine, it also demanded a more holistic interpretation of the results. Through a CRT analysis, a portrait of the students of color as consumers and representations of institutional mission emerged, while simultaneously illustrating how whiteness is positioned, a feature that may be overlooked by other frameworks. In the community college sector, marketing messages to students of color were less detectable and discernable through a CRT framework because many images and text emphasized students of color within a broader and diverse campus community and less as an isolated group of consideration. A focus on intersectionality of identity will be especially important to ascertain deeper nuances in the nature of for-profit marketing messages, as the majority of students represented on for-profit college websites were women.

While some elements of critical race theory were helpful for making sense of the messages that could be targeted to students of color, the framework has shortcomings for understanding college choice through analysis of college websites. Conceptions of college choice often assume that all the information necessary for students and families to make a college choice decision is known at the time of the decision (Turner, 2004). Information
asymmetry is one of the ways in which students can make decisions about which college to attend, even when important information has not been provided by the institution. Critical race theory, while useful towards understanding the nuanced racial messages within website homepages, may not sufficiently address problems of missing information that may allow certain types of college marketing to be especially impactful. For example, in the case of students choosing between a for-profit and community college, a student may make a decision to enroll based on how much information is presented (Iloh & Tierney, 2013), rather than simply because of the influence of identity-based marketing appeals.

For future research directions, it will be advantageous to qualitatively explore the prospective students’ perceptions of the websites of community colleges and for-profit colleges. Further, current students of color enrolled at either institution could be asked to reflect on what impact, if any, college websites had on their decisions to enroll. It may also be useful to duplicate this study in other postsecondary institutions such as non-profit public and private 4-year institutions, especially if institutional competition varies geographically.

Other frameworks, such as social norming, may also provide important lenses to interpret how ideals about race and place are disseminated via college websites. Social norms are fundamental in understanding human behavior, as norms are what the majority of people in a group do or how they behave (behavioral norms), and what the majority believes about how they and others should act (attitudinal norms) (Perkins, 2006). The social norms framework deciphers principles and values that regulate social thought and behavior in mass society and is mostly used in order to solve, correct, or modify social behavior of groups (Leach, 1986). In advancing this study, a social norms approach can be used to understand the ways in which the enrollment of students of color at for-profit and community colleges become normalized or reinforced by institutional websites.

CONCLUSION

This inquiry prompts us to consider the “why” behind the college enrollment of students of color in higher education and not just the “where.” The study also provides due cause for continued critical exploration of the college-going culture of students of color, particularly at for-profit and community colleges. Many opportunities exist as our changing postsecondary education landscape presents researchers with an opportunity to explore and reexamine the nature of students of color in higher education. This study considered the impact of college marketing and highlighted how two specific institutional contexts might provide different racial narratives that inform enrollment. Ultimately the findings of this study: a) illustrate how intended and unintended messages might be conveyed to prospective students of color, which may persuade or dissuade them from enrolling and b) highlight potentially problematic race narratives.

REFERENCES


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