Journal of
Higher Education Policy
And
Leadership Studies

JHEPALS (E-ISSN: 2717-1426)

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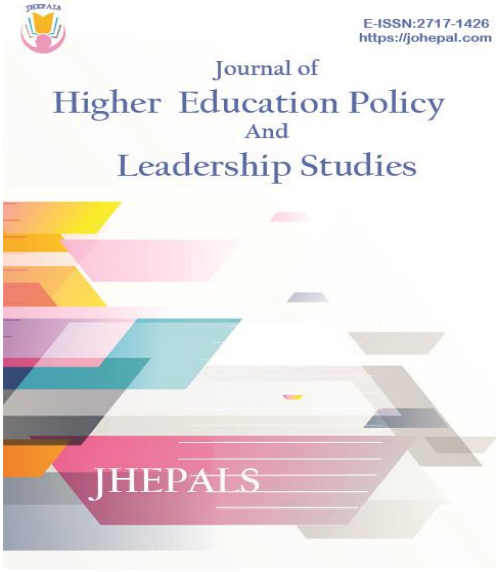
Affect Theory and the Community College Completion Agenda



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Article Received **2022/10/30**
Article Accepted **2023/03/03**
Published Online **2023/03/31**

Cite article as:

Harbour, C. P., Killam, R., & Wolgemuth, J. R. (2023). Affect theory and the community college completion agenda. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies*, *4*(1), 64-82. DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.52547/johepal.4.1.64

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[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.4.1.64]

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E-ISSN: 2717-1426
Volume: 4 Issue: 1
pp. 64-82
DOI:
10.52547/johepal.4.1.64

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Abstract

In this article we offer a critique of the 2012 landmark policy report, *Reclaiming the American Dream*, published by the American Association of Community Colleges. *Reclaiming the American Dream* is a critical policy document that advances the Completion Agenda, a policy, national in scope, that advocates for the organizational and cultural changes needed to improve completion rates. Because American community colleges have notoriously low completion rates, the Completion Agenda is a critically important policy currently impacting these institutions. The critique presented is grounded in the mobilities of policy literature and incorporates recent research and scholarship regarding affect theory. States, institutions and companies appeal to affect in advancing policies and priorities. However, scholars have only recently begun to explain how affect works as a factor in mobilizing policy. Our critique shows how an understanding of affect, as integral to the mobility of policy, illuminates and explains the manner in which the Completion Agenda is being transmitted to community colleges and also how community college presidents are pressured to support the implementation of this policy at their institutions.

Keywords: Community College; Completion Agenda; Affect Theory; Mobilities of Policy; Neoliberalism

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Introduction

The Completion Agenda is the dominant policy movement influencing American community colleges today (Baldwin, 2017; Harbour, 2015). But, the policy is not driven by an altruistic concern for students. At the institutional level, the goal of the movement is to transform the culture, organization, and operations at community colleges to improve institutional performance, specifically, student graduation and transfer rates. At the national level, the goal of the Completion Agenda is to improve the efficiency and productivity of the American workforce. In a globalized economy, advocates claim, a better educated workforce will help decrease the rise in income inequality, make American producers more competitive with their global counterparts, and increase the nation's gross domestic product (Baldwin, 2017; Harbour, 2015). Consequently, the anticipated positive impact on institutional performance and the national economy are the primary reasons why policymakers promote and defend the Completion Agenda.

In the United States, community colleges are a leading public provider of workforce education (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004). However, their completion rates are notoriously low (Harbour & Smith, 2016). For example, as Baldwin (2017) noted, in 2015, the national three-year graduation rate for community college students pursuing a two-year Associate's degree was 19 percent. In comparison, the six-year graduation rate for public university students pursuing a four-year Bachelor's degree was 55 percent. Policies to improve completion rates at community colleges have been studied from a variety of perspectives, often with a specific focus on how reformed advising, curriculum, and student support services have improved student graduation and transfer rates (e.g., Bailey, et al., 2015; Fink & Jenkins, 2017; Li & Kennedy, 2018).

Baldwin (2017) described how different policies employ various strategies, incentives, and penalties to boost completion rates. However, the design, implementation and evaluation of policies cannot be comprehensively explained by rational flow-charts and Excel spreadsheets. Campus leaders apply policies to specific settings and problems. And, policies, in effect, apply campus leaders to specific settings and problems. The policy – campus leader relationship, when viewed against settings and problems, is not unidirectional. In this article, we are interested in the discursive (or social) nature of policy. That is, we want to explore how policy is not simply used by campus leaders but also creates affective conditions that may influence what campus leaders do.

Our exploration focuses on a particular policy text, published by the American Association of Community Colleges (2012), that was distributed to community college presidents at the organization's annual meeting in April 2012 in Orlando Florida. This text, *Reclaiming the American Dream: Community Colleges and the Nation's Future*, was produced by a special Commission formed by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, ACT, and the Educational Testing Service. The Commission producing *Reclaiming the American Dream*, based the report on relevant research literature as well as an analysis of feedback collected through intentional meetings over a ten-month period with 1,300 individuals (including community college students, faculty, staff, administrators, trustees, and legislators).

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Affect Theory

AACC is a private nonprofit advocacy group, headquartered at One Dupont Circle in Washington D.C. It is the dominant national organization lobbying for community colleges on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. Besides advocating for community colleges, AACC also mobilizes its membership around issues that are viewed as central to their success. As noted in the Forward to *Reclaiming the American Dream*, the report was offered in support of an earlier and larger AACC initiative to produce, "… an additional 5 million students with degrees, certificates, or other credentials by 2020" (AACC, 2012, p. v). Accordingly, the intended purpose of the report was to show

> … community college leaders [how] to breathe life into the vision outlined by the Commission, in which students' educational experiences are redesigned, institutional roles are reinvented, and the system itself has been reset to meet the needs of students, their communities, and the nation. (p. vi)

Reclaiming the American Dream, therefore, was specifically intended for community college campus leaders and the report encouraged these leaders to subscribe to the Completion Agenda, a policy that AACC had previously endorsed.

As we discuss below, a critical examination of *Reclaiming the American Dream* shows that community college presidents have been called to initiate a wholesale transformation of their institutions in order to improve completion rates. Using insights reported in the mobilities of policy literature (e.g., McKenzie, 2017), as informed by affect theory (e.g., Anderson, 2016; Berlant, 2011), in this article we offer a critique of this particular policy text. This critique examines the ways in which *Reclaiming the American Dream* leverages fear and anxiety to advance its arguments and motivate its readers. Our focus on anxiety and fear as a motivator is a priority for three reasons. First, when anxiety and fear are used to motivate leaders, this leaves little room for creativity, critical thinking, or even effective policy implementation and evaluation. Second, the narrative of the AACC Report is premised on the implicit adoption of neoliberalism as a meaningful way to understand community college education. Third, the rhetoric of *Reclaiming the American Dream* is explicitly nationalistic. The danger of interweaving neoliberal ideology and educational nationalism with fear and anxiety (especially when disseminated through social media) is now clear and apparent (Kries, 2017). This behavior taps into a powerful affective undercurrent that often bypasses or dismisses a rational discussion of policy (Trigg, 2014). It spurs urgent action without attending to ideological assumptions. It asserts that global economic victory is a valorous goal. And, yet, as we note below, educational nationalism and neoliberalism can reinforce the inequities that impede college completion, especially for vulnerable student populations.

What distinguishes this article from earlier related works critiquing the Completion Agenda (e.g., Ayers & Palmadessa, 2014; Harbour, 2015; Lester, 2014; Levin, 2017) is our demonstration of how the mobilities of policy research literature, as informed by affect theory, may explain how community college leaders understand their challenges and responsibilities. We are not suggesting that a critical analysis of *Reclaiming the American Dream* can provide a conclusive or comprehensive explanation of how legislators, trustees, and others use anxiety and fear to motivate community college campus leaders. Our claim is more limited. We are only intending to show how an important text operates in the domain of affect to influence community college leaders.

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To accomplish our objective, we have organized our discussion in the following manner. First, we review literature concerning the Completion Agenda, especially as this relates to community colleges. Second, we show how the Completion Agenda is aligned with key tenets of neoliberalism and what we identify as "educational nationalism" both of which are now operating in the higher education environment. Third, we examine the role of affect theory in the mobilities of policy literature as explained by McKenzie (2017) and informed by Anderson (2016) and Berlant (2011). Fourth, with this theoretical foundation in place we turn to *Reclaiming the American Dream* to note how its affectively charged language attempts to make meaning for campus leaders. Fifth, we assess the promise of the mobilities of policy literature, as informed by affect theory, and then suggest empirical projects to understand how community college leaders are targeted by the recommendations made in *Reclaiming the American Dream*. We then conclude with recommendations for how campus leaders might respond to the pressures mounted by the Completion Agenda.

The Community College Completion Agenda

Historically, community colleges did not emphasize credential completion (Cohen, et al., 2014). Instead, their mission was to expand access to higher education through open-door admissions, low tuition, community campuses, and a comprehensive curriculum that included transfer, occupational, and adult education programs (Dougherty, 1994; Eells, 1931; Gilbert & Heller, 2013; Vaughan, 1985). Beginning in 2006, however, with the publication of *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, education policymakers began to focus on what they viewed as "an alarming stagnation in U.S. educational attainment compared to emerging economies in China and India…" (Baldwin, 2017, p. 3).

The comparison of national postsecondary education attainment rates, as reported by the United States and China, is important for two reasons. First, economists have argued that nations with higher rates of postsecondary education attainment have higher rates of economic growth (e.g., Goldin & Katz, 2008). Second, China is a leading economic rival of the United States and a comparison of economic growth rates is commonly regarded as a critical indicator concerning the status of this competition (Baldwin, 2017).

Because community colleges are important adult vocational education providers, these institutions are regarded as central to the effort to make the U.S. more competitive in the global economy (AACC, 2012; Grubb & Lazerson, 2004; Harbour, 2015). Additionally, college credentials are viewed as essential in helping disadvantaged students secure higher salaries in the labor market. Economists contend that as credentialed workers secure higher salaries, this will limit the growth of income inequality (e.g., Goldin & Katz, 2008). Consequently, the Completion Agenda, as applied to community colleges, has garnered attention because of the perceived connection between community college completion rates and two national economic priorities: the need to increase economic growth and the need to reduce the rise in income inequality. We pause for a moment to note that we are not defending this argument. We are only noting that these claims have been incorporated into policy texts advancing the Completion Agenda and are regarded by policy makers (e.g., AACC) as true. Of course, some economists have identified other factors contributing to low economic growth and rising income inequality (e.g., Piketty, 2014).

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Affect Theory

The Completion Agenda has been advanced by several national policy initiatives (Baldwin, 2017). For example, beginning in 2004, the *Achieving the Dream* initiative assigned teams of outside experts to coach campus leaders on how to improve institutional performance to achieve higher completion rates. Four years later, the Ford Foundation (2008) published *Bridges to Opportunity for Underprepared Adults* which reported on data-driven strategies to develop better educational and career pathways for underprepared adults. In 2012, as noted above, AACC published *Reclaiming the American Dream* which offered recommendations for changing the culture and organization of community colleges to provide more efficient student pathways designed to achieve higher completion rates. These initiatives all sought to achieve new institutional efficiencies to graduate more students prepared for the workplace or university transfer. But, as Baldwin (2017) noted, while community colleges were encouraged to improve completion rates across their curriculum, the prioritized focus was on occupational programs. These programs were regarded as having a more immediate and concrete impact on economic development. As Baldwin noted, "the primary factor driving the completion agenda is global economic competition" (p. 83).

Neoliberalism and Educational Nationalism

Any attempt to understand the emergence of the Completion Agenda, without acknowledging the role of neoliberalism and educational nationalism, is incomplete. The influence of neoliberalism in American higher education (Brown, 2015; Busch, 2017), and specifically at community colleges, has been the subject of frequent study (e.g., Ayers, 2005, 2015; Ayers & Palmadessa, 2014; Levin, 2017; Levin & Aliyeva, 2015; Levin, et al., 2018; Levin & Montero-Hernandez, 2009).

Evans and Sewell (2013) noted that neoliberalism operates simultaneously through ideology and public policy. Neoliberal ideology is comprised of several core beliefs. It holds that markets are more effective and efficient than public institutions in addressing social problems (e.g., education, health care); that a smaller and less intrusive government is better suited to facilitate the limited regulation required by global capitalism; and that people make better life decisions when they act as consumers and employ cost-benefit analyses (Cahill & Konings, 2017; Evans & Sewell, 2013; Konings, 2018). In public higher education, neoliberal public policies may be most evident when they use market-based mechanisms to manage public colleges and universities (Harbour, 2006; Olssen & Peters, 2005).

Perhaps the best example of this approach to managing public colleges and universities was developed in Colorado following the state legislature's enactment in 2004 of Senate Bill 04-189, which restructured the traditional appropriation of state funding based on block grant and enrollment mechanisms with three explicitly market-based mechanisms (Harbour, 2006). These were (1) a state-wide voucher system for undergraduate education; (2) fee-for-service contracts between the state Department of Higher Education and individual institutions for the delivery of specific undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs; and (3) institutional performance contracts between the Department of Education and institutions regarding their pursuit of specific statewide goals such as improving access to higher education.

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These efforts to use market-based mechanisms – a central strategy for neoliberal higher education policy – produced mixed outcomes and cannot be regarded as effectively changing the direction or operation of public colleges and universities. In Colorado, in some cases, performance funding seemed to promote achievement of state higher education goals (e.g., Li, 2020). In others, it did not (Li & Kennedy, 2018). Furthermore, in some cases, legislators developed these market-based mechanisms with only limited attention to the relevant research (Gándara, 2019). Instead, political think tank policy statements were key sources of evidence, not more relevant empirical research.

Any account of neoliberalism and its impact on public higher education must also consider another responsibility of institutions, one that goes beyond the effective and efficient use of resources. This concerns its impact on democratic institutions and norms. As Konings (2018) observed, neoliberalism does not simply reinforce global capitalism. It also weakens democratic institutions. When state neoliberal policies, for example, frame budgetary priorities and colleges respond with "… deliberate movement away from the diversity and access missions of community colleges to an emphasis upon course, program, and degree completion" (Levin et al., 2018, p. 205) this results in a hollowing out of institutions and impeding the potential for achieving democratic social justice. And, this hollowing out does not simply eliminate democratic practice or policy within higher education institutions. We contend it takes over and redirects practices or policies, as might a virus, utilizing the machinery of the institution to reproduce neoliberal values and ideologies. As Konings (2018) explained, democratic discourse is not merely "… limited or constrained [by neoliberalism] but shaped and driven by this economic logic" (p. 127).

We take Konings' (2018) observation as a warning that as higher education researchers we should scrutinize policy texts more closely to better understand not only the neoliberal rationales offered, but, as we contend here, to become more aware of how these texts are intended to appeal to leaders, affectively. Until we understand this, we will be limited in understanding precisely how leaders are being pressured to make the decisions they do. Of course, as we noted above, *Reclaiming the American Dream* did not inscribe just a neoliberal perspective but also a distinctively nationalist perspective.

The resurgence of populist nationalism in the United States has been a frequent topic of discussion in scholarly texts (e.g., Mounk, 2018). Although this subject is exceedingly complex and interwoven with racism and xenophobia, some general discussion is needed. For example, political scientists and political theorists have explained how, in an era of increasing global competition, President Trump has used "exclusionary nationalism" as an ideology to blame specific people, immigrants, and ethnic minorities for the consequences of globalization and poor public policy (e.g., Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018; Mounk, 2018). Researchers in the field of education have concurred, noting that nationalism in the United States has also been used as a form of political oppression (Rapoport, 2015). Trumpian nationalism does not seek to expand the American Empire, a common ploy used historically by nationalists to secure their power. Instead, as Judis (2016) observed, "domestically, Trump wants to build a wall to stop illegal immigration. He wants to strengthen America's borders not expand them" (p. 157). The desire to Make America Great Again, articulated as a central theme in Trump's Presidential campaign of 2016 and 2020, uncomfortably rhymes with AACC's mantra of *Reclaiming the American Dream*.

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Affect Theory

For higher education institutions, and specifically community colleges, this "educational nationalism" and its aim to reclaim the American Dream, casts students, faculty, and staff in roles that prioritize the interests of a world power and not its people. Institutions are called upon to work for the nation in its struggle to compete economically. Westheimer (2019) recognized this and called for a renewed commitment to civic education in schools to counter educational nationalism and to help stop the erosion of democratic norms. Others have called for community colleges to play a more energetic role in bringing people together to solve shared problems in the community and not just those of major corporations or the government (Harbour, 2015; Harbour & Smith, 2016). The ongoing struggle at community colleges to secure democracy and check the advance of neoliberalism and educationalism nationalism occurs in specific settings and often involves the implementation of policy or practice. In these cases, successful challenges to regressive policies must be cognizant of how such policies are mobilized.

The Mobilities of Policy and Affect Theory

Within the realm of critical policy research, scholarship on the mobilities of policy constitutes an emergent interdisciplinary subfield (McKenzie, 2017). This work strives to understand how "policy priorities move globally and are also transformed or 'mutated' through the movement" (p. 189). However, as research on the mobilities of policy has become established in different fields and disciplines, two important developments have become evident (Ball, 2016). On one hand, the scope of research has increased and researchers are studying the mobility of policies in education, health care, and government. These investigations seek to understand how specific policies are passed from one state or institution to the next and are then modified and adjusted to accommodate the interests of different power centers. On the other hand, researchers have also begun to focus on more granular instances of policy mobility. These more targeted inquiries examine how particular documents, meetings, and conferences facilitate the dissemination and ultimate adoption of policies (McKenzie, 2017). Whether the focus is on large scale mobilities or more specific instances, in either case, researchers have often adopted a perspective that is "overtly political and critical" (p. 190).

One of the factors that distinguishes mobilities of policy research, is its receptivity to the role of affect. For McKenzie (2017), affect may be understood as "… that which encompasses and exceeds more individualized conceptions of emotion, as interactive and embodied intensities" (p. 187). These interactive and embodied intensities circulate in groups as forces impelling or impeding human action. Affect can also be described as a pre-cognitive, pre-discursive, and subconscious influence on individuals and collectives (Trigg, 2014).

Berlant (2011) viewed affect as a "visceral response, and intuitive intelligence" (p. 53) and the "body's response to the world, something you're always catching up to" (Berlant, as cited in Hsu, 2019). Accordingly, individuals and groups can be motivated to act without awareness of affective influence. This explains how nationalist and neoliberal sentiments can work themselves into our collective affective undercurrent, at the national and institutional level. At community colleges, the rhetoric in *Reclaiming the American Dream* operates as a linguistic mediation of affective power.

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For McKenzie (2017), affect may be socially and culturally circulated through human organizations and institutions. This means affect can be studied in organizational media that privileges language. But, affect may also operate in material and nonlinguistic institutional objects such as brands, artifacts, and facilities. In either case, affect may be manifested and therefore studied as collective moods and feelings. The importance and relevancy of affect in policy mobility matters cannot be underestimated. As McKenzie (2017) noted,

> … affect is an important topic for future policy mobilities research, given its centrality in why [p. 188] certain policies are appealing or felt necessary at different times, why particular policy actors are motivated to champion or adopt such policies, or in what sentiments are mobilized to encourage policy engagement in sites of uptake. (p. 187-188)

And, as McKenzie (2017) noted, "While a focus on affect or emotion has recently been engaged in critical *education* policy research [citations omitted], for the most part this has not been explicitly in relation to the movements of policy" (p. 188, emphasis added). Recent works by Aikens and Hargis (2019) and McKenzie and Aikens (2021) are providing examples, however, of how affect is being integrated into mobilities of policy research in the field of education.

We also note that the use of affect in mobilities of policy research is not limited to understanding how affect advances oppressive or unjust policies (McKenzie, 2017). Policy mobilities research may also seek to understand the affective conditions that facilitate the movement of progressive or equity-focused policies from one institution or nation to the next. Still, in either case, the role of affect in moving policy is contingent and messy (McKenzie, 2017). McKenzie's (2017) work was particularly informed by the work of the late Lauren Berlant (2011), a literary scholar, and Ben Anderson (2016), a geographer. Affect theory is now often addressed in the humanities (e.g., Berlant, 2011; Stewart, 2007; Trigg, 2014) and the social sciences (e.g., Anderson, 2016; Peck & Theodore, 2010, 2015), and it is also receiving increased attention in the field of education (e.g., McKenzie, 2017).

Anderson's (2016) engagement with affect theory was particularly important for us because it was guided by a critical perspective of late capitalism and especially its prioritization of image and information. Anderson acknowledged that in the so-called Western world, the study of affect does not easily fit into dominant theoretical frameworks and research methodologies. As he stated, "affect is not a part of the standard Euro-American lexicon" (p. 6). Traditionally the study of affect, like emotions and feelings, was marginalized. However, as Anderson (2016) explained, it has now become a recognized source of powerful insights. As he explained,

> The affective turn emerges from: a concern with the intimate textures of everyday life and the marginalising or silencing of specific experiences (often gendered or raced) (Probyn 2005; Ahmed 2004); from a nascent recognition that affect is formulated and transmitted in biopolitical formations addressed to 'affect itself' (Hardt and Negri 2004; Adey 2010; Clough 2004); from an acknowledgement of the emergence of new ways of tracking and knowing affectivity, including neuroscience and behaviourism, that stress the interimplication of affect and cognition (Jones, Pykett and Whitehead 2011); from changing ways of governing that address persons and collectives as

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> affective beings and affect structures (Isin 2004; Anderson 2007); and in relation to claims about the centrality of affective or emotional labour (as one subset of immaterial labour) to post-Fordist modes of generating value (Lazzarato 1996; Hochschild 1983; 2012). (p. 8)

For Anderson (2016), there are three complementary ways to understand affect. Affect may be understood as "… an *object-target* of apparatuses;… as a *bodily capacity* emergent from encounters; and… as a *collective condition* that mediates how life is lived and thought" (p. 18, emphasis in the original). For purposes of our critique, we focus most closely on the first and third mechanisms, that is, (a) affect as a target of apparatuses (an emotion to be exploited by national policymakers and their funders to develop an organizational structure and culture compliant with neoliberalism's increasing vocationalization of higher education) and (b) affect as a collective condition (the attempt to "train" community college presidents to comply with the notion that community colleges should be more focused on achieving goals that are regarded as important to the national economy).

Berlant's (2011) work on affect offered a different perspective on the topic. Rather than focusing on organizations and policies, Berlant examined a particular dimension of affect as revealed in the relation between individuals and something they desire. Berlant referred to this relation as "cruel optimism" (p. 1). As she explained,

> A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially. (p. 1)

Through a fascinating interdisciplinary engagement with fiction, film, and culture, Berlant (2011) showed how neoliberal ideology restructures our fantasies of "the good life" to make them fit in our contemporary (neoliberal) world. For Berlant, our fantasies of the good life are the means by which we "hoard idealizing theories and tableaux about how [we]… and the world 'add up to something'" (p. 2). We view Berlant's attention to the relation of cruel optimism as key to our critique because community college presidents exist within such a relation when they pressured to subscribe to the Completion Agenda. More specifically, the relation of cruel optimism is bound up in the meaning of "success." That is, when presidents seek (and even attain) short-term "success" for their institution and their students as workers and consumers (as evidenced in higher graduation and transfer rates), this may come at the cost of more holistic deeper learning. And, it is this learning that may make students successful in the long-term as parents, neighbors, and citizens. Of course, this focus on success also puts pressure on faculty and staff to compromise their commitment to larger educational ideals in order to achieve the short-term goals deduced from the Completion Agenda. As Berlant (2011) might say, when community college presidents pursue higher graduation and transfer rates, it is this effort that can undermine the ability of their students to realize an American Dream grounded in democracy and the policies of inclusive society committed to social justice. When an American Dream,

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grounded in democracy and social justice is sacrificed to an American Dream grounded in consumerism and shaped by neoliberalism and educational nationalism, minoritized students, in particular, are further marginalized.

We acknowledge that some social scientists have discounted the significance of affective life in explaining social, economic, and political phenomena (e.g., Anderson, 2016; Sellar, 2015). As Anderson (2016) noted, however, "states, institutions and corporations now know, target and work through affective life" (p. 26). In these circumstances, the power of affect can incline leaders to experiment with policy, deregulation, and structural adjustments (Peck, 2011; Peck et. al., 2012). Given these conditions, we regard affect theory as a valuable tool to investigate how a policy text such as *Reclaiming the American Dream* attempts to exploit performance anxiety and fear by implying that a failure to subscribe to the Completion Agenda means the community college president does not support the nation or its economy.

Reclaiming the American Dream

Reclaiming the American Dream was released in the Spring of 2012 at AACC's annual meeting. The report was a synthesis of information collected and analyzed by AACC staff following a listening tour of the nation in which 1,300 participants spoke or submitted statements as meetings held in ten regions of the country. As the authors of *Reclaiming the American Dream* wrote,

> The report emphasized several dozen issues, including the need to reexamine the role, scope, and mission of the community college; the existence of an "achievement gap" and need for "scalable proven practices" to respond; the use of data metrics emphasizing transparency, inclusion, and accountability; and the need for strategic partnerships with the business world, local communities, and K–12 and baccalaureate institutions. (p. v)

An analysis of data collected led to the formation of seven broad recommendations. These recommendations focused on the need to redesign the student experience, reinvent institutional roles, and reset the nation's open access higher educational system to create new incentives, policies, and programs to improve completion rates.

As a policy text, *Reclaiming the American Dream* is directed at community college campus leaders. The report is a central artifact in the Completion Agenda. Some have argued that a renewed emphasis on achieving higher completion and transfer rates is essential for students, communities, and the nation. However, it has been criticized, especially by university researchers (Bragg & Durham, 2012). Three categories of critique have emerged in the literature (Harbour & Smith, 2016). The first group of critics concede that higher education institutions must streamline the pathways towards graduation. But, they contend, at poorly funded institutions, financial incentives to improve completion rates pressure community colleges to subordinate student learning to student completion (e.g., O'Banion, 2010; Rhoades, 2012). A better strategy, these critics contended, is to incentivize strategies to improve student learning. A second group of critics also accepts that community college graduation and transfer rates must improve. But, these critics contend, a prioritization of completion and transfer without acknowledging the need to address equity considerations

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would represent a step back in the effort to serve disadvantaged and minoritized students (Bensimon et al., 2012; Bragg & Durham, 2012). A third group of critics argues that although an increase in completion rates is certainly warranted, community colleges are essential institutions in addressing equally vital priorities and a privileging of economic considerations leaves these other priorities on the sidelines.

For example, as Tapia-Fuselier (2020) reported, community colleges are vital institutions in supporting undocumented students and yet many are struggling to provide basic services to support this student population. Furthermore, because of their presence in thousands of communities, community colleges are crucial institutions in addressing the consequences of anthropogenic global warming, through their role as an educational institution and community convenor and yet only a limited number have taken a leadership role in this work (Harbour & Bower, 2020). Finally, the civic malaise challenging the United States (Harbour & Smith, 2016), and the arrival of a new set of austerity policies and practices that are diverting students out of higher education (Harbour & Wolgemuth, 2013), effectively means that there is a large unmet need in preparing community college students for their role as citizens. The concern, therefore, is that the Completion Agenda, fueled by policies grounded in neoliberalism and educational nationalism, leaves other equally important priorities on the sidelines.

Our critique acknowledges these problems but now asserts that *Reclaiming the American Dream* seeks to motivate community college presidents by providing them with a narrative and vision of the future that attempts to leverage and exploit an anxiety and fear of what would happen if completion rates do not increase. The AACC Report also appeals to presidents' sense of patriotism and their responsibility to help support the nation's economy in globally challenging circumstances. The Report's attempts to generate a sense of foreboding and general fear are transparent. Here are some examples taken from the Report:

> "The American Dream is imperiled. Upward mobility, the contract between one generation of Americans and the next, is under siege. Once unchallenged, this nation's primacy in college graduation rates has already been overtaken by committed competitors from abroad." (p. vii)

> "The American Dream is at risk. Because a highly educated population is fundamental to economic growth and a vibrant democracy, community colleges can help reclaim that dream." (p. vii)

> "Americans are slowly beginning to realize that the America of their imaginations might rapidly become a thing of the past. What was true for two centuries in this nation is now at risk." (p. vii)

> "In a rapidly changing America and a drastically reshaped world, the ground beneath the nation's feet has shifted so dramatically that community colleges need to reimagine their roles and the ways they do their work." (p. vii)

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> "The American Dream has stalled….A child born poor in the United States today is more likely to remain poor than at any time in our history." (p. vii)
>
> "The nation faces a simple but critical choice: It can actively create its future and control its destiny, or it can be shaped by uncontrolled social and economic circumstances." (p. viii)
>
> "What is at risk is the essence of the American ideal: the promise that each generation would do better than the last." (p. 3)
>
> "Community college leaders must ask themselves what legacy they want to leave for the next generation of community college students." (p. 25)
>
> "Change cannot be achieved without committed and courageous leaders. While many things need to happen to accomplish institutional transformation, none of them will happen without leadership." (p. 17)
>
> And, then later in the Report, the authors wrote that, community college leaders must "courageously end ineffective practices" (p. 26)

The dire warnings offered above do more than lament a stalled economy that has abandoned many Americans. These warnings combine this fact with a false nostalgia about the past and a sense of urgency to contend that something is slipping away, perhaps permanently. These warnings also imply that community colleges, institutions with low status in the American higher education hierarchy, must somehow take the lead in remedying this national economic problem. More ominously, in an era when a recent President and his administration have been relentless in their erosion of democratic norms, their hostility towards minoritized people and immigrants, and a reckless disregard for the critical needs of an endangered planet, the use of nationalist rhetoric in *Reclaiming the American Dream* creates, unfortunately, the illusion that economic success will compensate for the injuries inflicted on institutions, people, and places.

Our focus here on how the AACC report appeals to anxiety and fear should not be regarded as an isolated event. Community college presidents also articulated fears captured in interviews that Baldwin (2017) reported in his discussion of the implementation of Completion Agenda at community colleges. When asked about the prospects of implementing major change at their institution, one president of a small community college said, "My fear is that when we talk so broadly about completion, everyone is still in our society defining that as a four-year degree. We've got to get away from that. That is a mistake" (Baldwin, 2017, p. 86). Another president stated, "Mandating what we should do and how we should do it is overly intrusive. I think it really could lead to a one size fits all type of philosophy. I think that's what many of us are fearful of, that kind of intrusion" (Baldwin, 2017, p. 102). A third president addressed changes in funding to encourage higher completions and remarked, "I'm a bit afraid of the funding formula. I'm a bit afraid because if in fact we find ourselves financially penalized for not meeting goals that too rigid or too stringent… it's not going to help anyone" (Baldwin, 2017, p. 97).

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Affect Theory

We cannot infer, of course, that most community college presidents (or most campus leaders) fear the challenges posed by the Completion Agenda (or the consequences if the policy fails). But, these statements indicate, as do the excerpts from *Reclaiming the American Dream*, that community college presidents have a great responsibility that goes beyond their campus or community. They have been asked to take a leading role in protecting the nation and saving the American Dream. When policy texts pressure community college presidents to increase completion rates or else face a future "shaped by uncontrolled social and economic circumstances" the use of anxiety and fear is unambiguous.

Given the forgoing and following Anderson (2016), we conclude that *Reclaiming the American Dream* operates affectively by making presidents a target of policy apparatuses where they may be exploited by trustees and legislators to develop an organizational structure and culture that is compliant with neoliberalism and educational nationalism. Additionally, the AACC report uses affect to create a collective condition where the comparison of completion rates, now between individual community colleges, pressures presidents to "play the game" and use the strategies employed by competitors to graduate and transfer more students, without prioritizing what they have learned about their subjects, or perhaps more importantly, their communities, their nation, and their world. Perhaps most discouraging is the recognition that when reports like *Reclaiming the American Dream* exploit presidents' anxieties and fears, they are placing students in a precarious situation where they may know enough to get through their institution but not enough to survive and thrive in later life. In these circumstances, the Completion Agenda may be doing little more than ensuring that "unimpeded consumer privilege [can] prevail… [and] prop up the sense that the good-life fantasy is available to everyone" (Berlant, 2011, p. 194). Community colleges become another venue for cruel optimism.

How Community College Leaders Can Respond

How then might community college leaders respond? We believe that three strategies show promise if community college leaders are to remain committed to a mission of access and service to the community. First, in view of the observations made by (McKenzie, 2017), we contend that community college leaders would be more effective in achieving their mission if they develop an ability to understand how policies are mobilized and transcend organizations and government boundaries. Consequently, although the introduction of a new policy may be justified by an argument grounded in traditional policy research, community college leaders must recognize that there is always more than research motivating higher education policies. Today, higher education policies are developed and advanced by foundations and wealthy benefactors who have specific interests in maintaining the status quo. They may be advocating institutional change, but it is limited change, consistent with the core beliefs and values endorsed by advanced capitalism (e.g., the unrestricted right to own private property, the conceptualization of people as consumers and workers, and the belief that the people have a virtually unlimited right to exploit the earth for personal gain). Until this consideration is fully acknowledged, the impact of the Completion Agenda on students will be limited to their lives as consumers and workers.

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Second, we believe that after close scrutiny of *Reclaiming the American Dream*, most community college leaders would conclude, as we have, that the Completion Agenda and the AACC report do not make any substantive commitments to developing or expanding American democracy. The purpose of the Completion Agenda is limited to improving graduation and transfer rates. This reform movement is not focused on providing students with a greater capacity to advocate for themselves in a representative democracy. Nor is it focused on exposing and then addressing the consequences of white supremacy, structural racism, or other forms of identity discrimination.

Third, we would encourage community college leaders to retain and nurture their appreciation of students as beings-in-themselves and not as means to improve institutional performance statistics or form a more competent worker class. In most states, community colleges are dramatically underfunded as a sector in public higher education (calculated on a per student measure) and community college leaders have failed to reverse this trend. When campus leaders fail to improve the allocation of resources and preclude more personal and educational relationships between students and (full-time) faculty or student services staff, they are relegating students to a one-dimensional identity where they operate as purchasers of educational programs and services but not as multi-dimensional beings with a complex array of educational needs and interests.

Conclusion

Our critique shows that *Reclaiming the American Dream* operates in two dimensions. On one hand, the report is a traditional organizational treatise, warning campus leaders that changes are needed. On the other hand, the text seeks to mobilize policy by imploring leaders "to be courageous" and exploiting leaders' anxiety and fear of failure. Simultaneously, excerpts from the report show how it also encourages leaders to leave a "legacy" thus exploiting their performance anxieties and sense of professional inadequacy. Finally, although we cannot reach any conclusions about the intentions of the Report's authors, the use of nationalist rhetoric places community college presidents in a position where they are faced with the dilemma of either adopting the Completion Agenda or failing their nation and denying their students access to the American Dream. To summarize, our critique shows how affect is being used to manipulate campus leaders, facilitate policy uptake, and extend the reach of the Completion Agenda.

We note in closing that our purpose is not to denigrate the important work that community colleges do. But, we are mindful of the great pressure they are under to prioritize vocational programs and improve their completion and transfer rates (Baldwin, 2017; Opportunity America, 2018) all while state funding, calculated on a per student basis, has been reduced year after year (Palmer, 2013). Throughout this project, we have been guided by Apple's (2019) admonition that "we have an ethical obligation to make public the effects of ….[regressive neoliberal or nationalist] policies, to challenge these positions, and to defend a robust education that is based on human flourishing" (p. 277).

Moving forward, we offer three recommendations for further critical inquiry. First, we suggest that researchers study the patterning of affective life of community college presidents and then, more specifically, inquire how their experience is organized as an object-target of apparatuses engaged in mobilizing policy and practice regarding the

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Completion Agenda (Anderson, 2016). Second, we suggest that researchers critically inquire about the encounters community college presidents experience as they live affectively as leaders in neoliberal institutions (Anderson, 2016). Third, we recommend that researchers inquire about the conditions that mediate affective life for presidents engaged in the transformation of their institutions in response to Completion Agenda policies (Anderson, 2016). By focusing on apparatuses, encounters, and conditions, researchers might learn a great deal about how affect operates to mobilize policy on a wide range of topics influencing community college education. In all three cases, we anticipate that qualitative methods might best be used to understand these experiences although perhaps quantitative methods might also be employed in order to collect data from a large sample of individuals.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare they have no conflicting interests in the preparation or publication of this article

Funding

The authors declare that there was no external funding used to support the preparation or publication of this article.

Human Participants

Data collection did not involve human participants.

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