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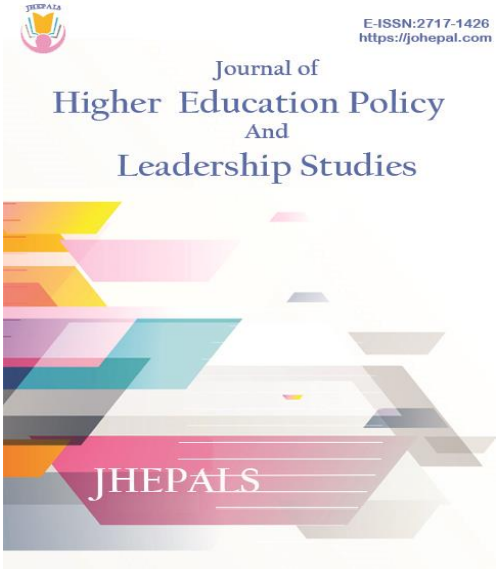
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# Unfulfilled Promises: Tensions in Mission Statements of For-Profit Colleges and Universities




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# Unfulfilled Promises: Tensions in Mission Statements of For-Profit Colleges and Universities

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## Abstract

While collegiate missions of non-profit institutions have been extensively studied, missions of for-profit colleges in the United States have received less attention. This study examines the mission statements of 98 degree-granting for-profit colleges to articulate how these colleges describe the educational opportunities available to students. Our conventional content analysis found that these institutions emphasize career training, student learning experiences, student outcomes, and post-graduation opportunities. These findings suggest that FPCU missions may reflect isomorphic practices that allow FPCUs to compete with non-profit institutions in the higher education market. Furthermore, we propose that the unique career focus in FPCU missions may reflect credentialing theory, which suggests that the credential students earn, rather than the knowledge they attain, is what will enable success in the job market—a claim that is at odds with prior research indicating that FPCU graduates earn less, receive fewer interviews, and carry more debt than graduates of non-profit colleges. We argue that the language of FPCU missions highlights these institutions' contradictory aims of seeking profit while promoting access and success for students. We advance a deeper understanding of these institutions' self-ascribed purposes so that policymakers can ensure adequate student protections at for-profit colleges.

**Keywords:** Content Analysis; Mission Statement; For-Profit Colleges & Universities; Credentialing Theory

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## Introduction

In the modern economy and higher education landscape, for-profit colleges and universities (FPCUs) may be uniquely positioned to supply workforce training for students seeking job stability and competitive wages. They often offer short-term, flexible, and online programs that grant professional credentials and, increasingly, bachelor's and graduate degrees, suggesting a level of educational access that may better meet the needs of students from groups that have historically been underrepresented in non-profit higher education (Cottom, 2017; Tierney, 2020). At FPCUs, over one-third of students are low-income and almost 60% are Students of Color—the highest percentages for any higher education institution type (Fry & Cilluffo, 2019).

However, what FPCUs promise does not always align with what they provide. Increased scholarly and regulatory focus on FPCUs has highlighted misrepresentative marketing to students (Department of Justice, 2015; Federal Trade Commission, 2019), high levels of student debt and default (Armona et al., 2020; Looney & Yannelis, 2022; Shireman & Miller, 2020), low attainment rates (Gelbgiser, 2018), and lower labor market returns than public and non-profit peers (Cellini & Turner, 2019; Liu & Belfield, 2020). These negative outcomes at FPCUs that intentionally recruit students from underrepresented groups illustrate a "negative social insurance program" and allow companies to profit by monetizing predictable inequities (Cottom, 2017, p. 174).

Recent developments in FPCU enrollment, regulation, and policy have suggested a growing public awareness of the risks associated with for-profit higher education even as these institutions remain entrenched in the higher education landscape. For example, four-year FPCUs experienced a sharp enrollment decline in Academic Year 2018–2019 yet were the only sector to experience growth in Fall 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021, 2022). Some FPCU faculty, students, and administrators feel that FPCUs can provide both individual and public benefits (Cottom, 2017; Iloh, 2016), yet recent research has demonstrated that FPCUs' commitment to shareholder interests contributes to higher student loans and lower graduation rates (Eaton, 2022). In today's tumultuous higher education landscape, it is imperative for scholars and policymakers to consider whether and how FPCUs can ensure fair and necessary opportunities for today's diverse college students rather than providing access only to perpetuate social, educational, and economic stratification (Harris, 2020).

To better understand the self-purported goals of FPCUs in this era of increased scrutiny, we analyzed mission statements of 98 degree-granting FPCUs that enrolled at least 1,000 undergraduate students in Fall 2018 through conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Mission statements provide an important data source, as missions can legitimize institutions to accrediting bodies as well as internal and external stakeholders (David et al., 2014; Devies & Guthrie, 2022; Fugazzotto, 2009; Meacham & Gaff, 2006; Morphew & Hartley, 2006), provide evidence of an organization's purpose and strategic direction (Breznik & Law, 2019; Ireland & Hitt, 1992), and impact organizational behavior (Alegre et al., 2018). Although research has examined higher education mission statements at various institutional types (Ayers, 2005; Cortés-Sánchez, 2018; Delucchi, 1997; Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Okuwobi et al., 2021; Pressimone Beckowski & Winfield, 2021; Taylor & Morphew, 2010), only limited research has considered FPCU mission statements (Bailey et

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al., 2001), which predates the FPCU peak enrollment in 2010 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022a).

Although mission statements are only one component of FPCUs' identity, analyzing them helps us consider the role FPCUs claim to have and how they position themselves in higher education through our research question: How do mission statements of FPCUs describe educational opportunities available to students? Our inductive analysis found that these mission statements most frequently described a career focus, student learning experiences, and student outcomes. These themes largely mirror prior research on mission statements in higher education (Kosmützky & Krücken, 2015; Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Pressimone Beckowski & Winfield, 2021; Taylor & Morphew, 2010), which may reflect institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The emphasis on careers and job readiness is unlike missions in other sectors of higher education—a potential manifestation of credentialism, which theorizes that the earned credential, rather than acquired knowledge, is the key to opportunity (Brown, 2001; Collins, 1979/2019)—and mirrors the language of policymakers (Ayers, 2005; Committee on Education & Labor Republicans, 2021). The focus of these missions indicates that a core function of FPCUs is, allegedly, providing credentials that will allow students to gain access to a competitive workforce (Tierney, 2020). By understanding the self-ascribed purposes of FPCUs through mission statements, we further the field's understanding of the complex and conflicting motivations for FPCUs in the United States.

## Literature Review

Our literature review first analyzes various aspects of FPCUs and then presents the importance of mission statements in research of higher education institutions. Together, this literature demonstrates how analysis of mission statements can advance research and deepen our understanding of FPCUs.

### For-Profit Colleges and Universities

FPCUs in the United States date back to the colonial era, often providing technical training (Angulo, 2016; Ruch, 2001; Tierney, 2011). In the second reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in 1972, accredited FPCUs were granted the ability to receive federal funding (Angulo, 2016; Thelin, 2019). Since then, FPCU enrollment consistently increased, peaking at just over two million students in fall 2010; it has since declined to just over one million students in 2020 (NCES, 2022a). The FPCU sector is diverse, including different organizational structures from small, career-focused institutions to large, online multi-state universities that offer doctoral degrees (Deming, Goldin, & Katz, 2012; Hentschke, 2010). However, these institutions are more growth- and profit-oriented than non-profit colleges and universities (Hentschke, 2010; Looney & Yannelis, 2022), so analyzing FPCUs broadly provides insights to the common themes in the sector's self-representation.

As FPCUs rely on tuition and fees for over 90% of their total revenue compared to 20% for public schools (NCES, 2022b), and as individuals shoulder more of the operating costs at FPCUs, it is essential to understand who attends these institutions. Historically, FPCUs have educated individuals who were excluded from higher education, including women and Black and Indigenous people (Ruch, 2001). Today, students at FPCUs are disproportionately lower

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income, older, Black, Latino/a, and female than students at other institutional types (Deming, Goldin, & Katz, 2013; Fry & Cilluffo, 2019). FPCUs provide access to students who have been underrepresented in higher education and whose complex needs should be supported to promote positive college outcomes.

Even though this diverse enrollment suggests that FPCUs provide educational opportunity to students historically excluded from higher education, these institutions have been critiqued for their "predatory inclusion" of students, especially Black students (Seamster & Charron-Chénier, 2017, p. 199), by promising access to higher education but then providing students with inferior support and educational experiences. Recruitment processes at FPCUs streamline the enrollment process for students (Campbell et al., 2020; Cottom, 2017; Iloh & Tierney, 2013), and admissions professionals have described the emphasis in their work at FPCUs as educational sales instead of student counseling (Cottom, 2017; Davidson, 2016). While streamlined processes may support postsecondary access, they can also negatively impact students—potentially because of this emphasis on sales over academic support (Cottom, 2017). Another aspect of the recruitment process is marketing and advertisement. Marketing practices at some FPCUs have mischaracterized institutions through false claims about relationships with employers and staff qualifications; additionally, some institutions have engaged in repeated phone calls that overwhelm prospective students (Department of Justice, 2015; Federal Trade Commission, 2019; Government Accountability Office, 2010). Similarly, scholars have found that FPCUs' marketing materials emphasize expediency and convenience, career training, and applied experiences of faculty (Holland & DeLuca, 2016; Iloh, 2014; Pizarro Milian & Quirke, 2017; Thelin, 2019). The findings of these investigations and research are important for higher education policy as FPCUs spend significantly more on marketing than public institutions (Vazquez-Martinez & Hansen, 2020). Together, these admissions and advertising practices illustrate how FPCU students are heavily targeted and supported through the enrollment process.

This targeted inclusion and overrepresentation of historically marginalized students is problematic given the often lower returns on a student's educational investment. Students who attend FPCUs and earn a certificate are less likely to be employed and have 11% lower earnings than those who attend a public institution (Cellini & Turner, 2019). Audit studies have found that individuals with credentials from FPCUs are less likely to receive call backs than graduates of public institutions (Deming, Yuchtman, et al., 2016). At the same time, students at FPCUs take out more in loans than similar students who attend public colleges, have slower repayment rates, and have higher rates of default (Armona et al., 2020; Belfield, 2013; Deming, Goldin, & Katz, 2012; Hillman, 2015). Given these uncertain employment returns and the high costs of FPCUs, the overrepresentation and targeted recruitment of minoritized students indicates a need for further analysis of these institutions.

It is important to recognize that these institutions are not monolithic and that student experiences at these institutions are not exclusively negative. FPCUs adapt more quickly to employment needs than community colleges and have increased availability for short-term certificate programs (Deming, Goldin, & Katz, 2012; Gilpin et al., 2013). These features may make FPCUs more enticing to prospective students who are heavily motivated by employment. Some students perceive their FPCU to be high quality (Iloh, 2016). Considering these positive experiences while investigating signs of practices that can impede student

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success in the short and long term (Seamster & Charon-Chenier, 2017) can illuminate the nuance and complexity of student choice and attendance at these institutions.

## Missions in Higher Education

Mission statements are considered a key component of strategic planning, articulating an organization's core values and fundamental purpose (Breznik & Law, 2019; Devies & Guthrie, 2022; Ireland & Hitt, 1992). Through the mission statement, this mission is communicated to both internal and external audiences (Meacham & Gaff, 2006; Morphew & Hartley, 2006). If a university's mission statement is well developed, fully understood, and leveraged by administrators, it can promote organizational culture and direction; however, a weak mission statement may muddy institutional goals (Tierney & Lanford, 2018). Mission statements can also help to legitimize colleges and universities to accrediting bodies, the government, and other stakeholders (Morphew & Hartley, 2006).

Beyond these strategic and legitimizing roles, a growing body of research has examined the role mission statements may play in marketing and branding initiatives for organizations in general and higher education institutions. This function may be especially relevant for FPCUs, considering their dual roles as profit-seeking businesses and education providers. David et al. (2014) suggested that developing customer-oriented mission statements could boost consumer satisfaction. In a study of German universities' mission statements, Kosmützky and Krücken (2015) argued that mission statements encapsulate both the institutional image conveyed to external audiences and the institutional identity understood by the institution's stakeholders—both of these perspectives are critical for branding efforts in a competitive higher education marketplace. In light of this, university mission statements simultaneously describe how the institutions are the same as and distinct from their competitor institutions (Kosmützky & Krücken, 2015).

Some scholars have criticized university mission statements for their generic, vague language; for example, while many mission statements include references to diversity, how diversity is defined and who it includes is often unspecified and may reinforce normative assumptions that minoritized groups are different than dominant stakeholder groups (Delucchi, 1997; Pressimone Beckowski & Winfield, 2021; Wilson et al., 2012). Even so, as mission statements become a core component of institutional strategy, investigating them can provide insights into universities' approach to market competition (Kosmützky & Krücken, 2015). Research on university mission statements has examined how and to what extent they can express and contextualize specific values or purposes across higher education institutions (Devies & Guthrie, 2022), considered mission statements' relationship to many institutional dimensions (e.g., size, control, and institutional age), explored the missions of distinct institutional types (Ayers, 2005; Delucchi, 1997; Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Okuwobi et al., 2021; Taylor & Morphew, 2010), and compared mission statements from around the world (Cortés-Sánchez, 2018). However, FPCU mission statements have not typically been distinctly examined or explicitly included in these analyses. An analysis comparing the mission statement of one FPCU with three community colleges' found that the FPCU had a narrower mission focused on student preparation in a few technical careers (Bailey et al., 2001). By examining the contemporary mission statements of FPCUs, we may be better able to consider the core values and purposes of these institutions within today's higher education landscape. FPCUs are frequently omitted from or deemphasized in higher

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education research (Harris, 2020), which may obscure important considerations on how these institutions compete with or distinguish themselves from non-profit public and private institutions. Explicitly examining the mission statements of degree-granting FPCUs, particularly in light of shifting enrollment trends and a national decline in the institutional diversity of U.S. higher education (Harris, 2020), can help illuminate the promises FPCUs make to students and shareholders and how FPCUs prioritize their objectives as credentialing institutions.

## Research Methodology

This study examined mission statements of degree-granting FPCUs in the United States to understand how institutions market themselves to prospective students through an inductive approach. We used the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS; U.S. Department of Education, 2020) to generate a list of all degree-granting FPCUs, including their fall 2018 enrollment. We limited the sample to the institutions that had at least one campus with more than 1,000 undergraduate students and offered degrees. This excluded institutions that exclusively offered certificates to allow for easier comparisons of our findings to other research on mission statements of colleges and universities. We focused on institutions that served at least 1,000 undergraduates to identify commonalities among institutions where most students are enrolled. This returned 98 FPCUs that enrolled almost 540,000 undergraduates, representing approximately 73% of all students enrolled at FPCUs in fall 2018 (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). See Table 1 for the highest degree offered and enrollment of institutions in our sample.

Table 1.
Characteristics of FPCUs in the sample

| | Count | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| **Highest Degree Offered** | | |
| Associate | 15 | 20.5 |
| Bachelor's | 13 | 17.8 |
| Graduate | 45 | 61.6 |
| **Fall 2018 Enrollment** | | |
| 1,000-4,999 | 49 | 67.1 |
| 5,000-9,999 | 11 | 15.1 |
| 10,000-19,999 | 7 | 9.6 |
| 20,000+ | 6 | 8.2 |

**Note**. There are 73 institutions in this study.

Mission statements can vary depending upon where they are published (Taylor & Morphew, 2010), so we collected mission statements from institutional websites. When an FPCU had multiple campuses listed in IPEDS (e.g., University of Phoenix, Arizona and University of Phoenix, California) but used the same institutional website and mission, the mission statement was included once in the dataset. For multi-campus institutions, we combined their Fall 2018 enrollment when determining institution size. Some organizations own multiple FPCU brands, and when organizations expand, they occasionally choose to retain the previous college's name for its value (Ruch, 2001). For instance, American Public Education, Inc. operates American Public University System, Hondros College of Nursing,

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and Rasmussen University as separate institutions (American Public Education, Inc., 2020). However, this practice of multi-brand for-profit organizations can obscure the underlying organizational identity, shielding each brand from reputational damage (Goldstein & Eaton, 2021) and may obscure organization-wide practices and mission. For our analysis, when FPCUs were owned by the same company but had unique mission statements, each institution that met the inclusion criteria described above was included separately. This reduced our dataset for to 73 mission statements.

To analyze our data, we conducted a conventional content analysis by deriving codes from data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Conventional content analysis is an inductive approach and is useful when little theory is present to guide the analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), as is the case with missions of FPCUs. We first open-coded for emergent themes in the 73 mission statements, followed by collaborative axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During collaborative axial coding, we looked for common codes among authors and combined codes with similar meanings to reduce the total number of codes. Through conversations, we refined our inductive codes by crafting shared meanings. Table 2 shows the definitions, examples, and code names that were derived from this process. In a second round of coding, each author used these axial codes to code each mission statement independently; we then conferred to ensure that the codes were applied consistently. When coding disagreements arose, both authors discussed and agreed if a code was present or absent. The mission statements and codes are publicly available (Winfield & Pressimone Beckowski, 2022).

Table 2.
Operationalization of codes

| Code | Definition | Count | Example |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Post-Graduate Expectations** | | | |
| Career Focus | Connecting education to employment needs of students, including specific fields | 62 (84.93%) | The mission of Southern Technical College is to provide **education and training in a variety of medical and technical areas** that enable graduates to obtain entry-level employment. |
| Outcomes | Desired outcomes for students including soft skills, commitments to community service and professional outcomes | 60 (82.19%) | Walden University provides a diverse community of career professionals with the opportunity to **transform themselves as scholar-practitioners** so that they can effect positive social change. |
| Job Market | Mentions of larger economic systems or a global marketplace | 19 (26.03%) | Grantham University: To provide quality, accessible, affordable, professionally relevant programs in a **continuously changing global society** |
| **The Student Experience** | | | |
| Student Learning Experiences | Descriptions of the institution's curriculum | 50 (68.49%) | American Sentinel University's mission is to provide **high-quality, innovative degree and certificate programs** that enable students to enhance their professional and civic lives. |
| Students | Descriptions of prospective students | 31 (42.47%) | National American University provides innovative learning experiences in a caring and supportive environment **for individuals of diverse backgrounds, cultures, and abilities**, preparing them for success in competitive |
| Access & Affordability | Mentions of access or affordability for students | 19 (26.03%) | Central Penn College **opens opportunities to students from a variety of academic backgrounds** by providing the |

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| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | education needed for employment and advancement in their fields. |
| Faculty & Staff | Instructors' skills or qualifications | 16 (21.92%) | FIDM's engaging learning environment and rigorous programs of study develop graduates who become leaders in the industries of global design and business. **Under the guidance of faculty who are industry professionals**, students learn to strategically integrate design thinking with technology, producing work that is grounded in critical and creative thought. Graduates embrace cultural diversity and ethical choice while advancing the well-being of their communities. |

**Note:** Missions could be coded with multiple codes. The relevant text for each code has been bolded. n=73

We engaged in multiple practices during our research to ensure trustworthiness of our findings. We maintained written memos from our team meetings to serve as an audit trail of our decision-making processes, providing documentation for our decisions including crafting definitions of the axial codes and working through any disagreements about the application of codes (Berger, 2015). We utilized these memos as we wrote our findings. We also consulted with peers outside of the project for feedback as a form of peer debriefing (Berger, 2015; Spall, 1998).

## Positionality

We recognize that our social positions influence our relation to this study (Sword, 1999). Jake is a White, male graduate of two non-profit institutions of higher education. He is a former high school teacher who taught in schools with predominantly low-income Latinx students in Phoenix, Arizona. Many of his students applied to the for-profit Grand Canyon University. While few students attended Grand Canyon University, those that did took on high levels of student debt and often disenrolled after a short time. The experiences of his students led him to review these FPCU mission statements with skepticism, understanding that written missions may vary from students' experiences.

Catherine is a White, female graduate of two non-profit institutions for her undergraduate and graduate degrees. During her time teaching at a small, Catholic four-year liberal arts university, the university undertook a rigorous mission revision process that distilled the institution's commitment to its Catholic identity and social justice. Observing how this mission statement was centered in institutional decision-making processes yet did not always reflect the experiences of faculty, staff, and students shaped her interest in how mission statements may embody or contradict implicit and explicit institutional purposes.

Understanding and reflecting on our positionality allows us to conceptualize how previous experiences inform our analytic lens, especially aspects of power and privilege in our identities (Berger, 2015; Parson, 2019). This is important for our study as both authors attended non-profit institutions for undergraduate and graduate school. We, as White researchers from middle-class families, also recognize our privilege as outsiders who are largely shielded from the predatory practices FPCUs often utilize to recruit Students of Color and low-income students (Campbell et al., 2020; Cottom, 2017; Iloh & Tierney, 2013).

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### Limitations

This analysis is limited by our methods and techniques. We do not examine the ownership structures of FPCUs. Because multiple FPCUs can be owned by the same company (Ruch, 2001), ownership groups may selectively advertise through multiple mission statements tailored to particular audiences or shield individual brands from reputational harm after legal sanctions (Goldstein & Eaton, 2021); however, our analysis cannot capture this nuance. Similarly, we do not consider the history of each FPCU. Some institutions in our dataset like Grand Canyon University and Ashford University were previously non-profit religious institutions, while other FPCUs have partnered with non-profit colleges. FPCUs with histories like these may have unique traits and emphases that may warrant closer analysis. Additionally, we acknowledge that some institutions periodically revise their mission statements; our analysis reflects missions collected at one point in time and will thus not reflect any changes. Our focus on mission statements also means that our analysis cannot consider student perceptions or experiences.

## Findings

We categorized the content of FPCU missions into two themes: post-graduate expectations and student experiences. These findings show that these missions often acknowledge the value of credentials for students but also suggest that mission statements may overpromise on the opportunities and resources they provide students.

### Post-Graduate Expectations

The mission statements of the FPCUs in our sample commonly highlighted a strong career focus, emphasized various outcomes, and described the contemporary job market and economy, suggesting graduates' post-college experiences were an institutional priority.

#### *Career Focus*

The most common code in the dataset was a focus on careers, present in 62 of the 73 missions. These descriptions were in two broad categories: explicit career fields and general preparation. When FPCUs—particularly smaller institutions—discussed explicit career opportunities, mission statements offered specific career fields including business, allied health, and the arts. The Musicians Institute, which described one of their purposes as "preparing students for careers in the music and entertainment industry," was a typical example. Additionally, some FPCUs explicitly aligned their training with entry-level positions; for example, the College of Health Care Professionals' mission included a commitment to "fully prepare students for entry-level employment in their selected allied health care field."

Institutions that expressed commitments to general career preparations stated a desire for students to be "competent in their professional field" or to gain the "education needed for employment and advancement." The mission of Bryant & Stratton College, which "offers a personalized career education" so that graduates "are prepared for their career" in a high demand profession, illustrated this generic language. Some institutions also described their education as "career-oriented" or "industry-relevant," as in the case of DeVry University and Colorado Technical University, respectively.

Notably, the institutions that did not have a career focus in their mission statements included some of the largest institutions in the dataset. Grand Canyon University and the

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American Public University System, with enrollments well exceeding 20,000, did not make any explicit mention of career training in their mission statements. Rather than following the traditional model of FPCUs that are rooted in trades or industries (Ruch, 2001; Tierney, 2011), this set of institutions emphasized credentials that are more comparable to degrees from non-profit higher education institutions.

These findings highlight stratification within FPCUs and may indicate how FPCUs embed predatory practices in their missions by positioning themselves as alternatives to non-profit institutions. Field- or industry-specific references to career opportunities may reflect FPCUs' efforts to persuade students that certain credentials are desirable or necessary for the attainment of secure, well-compensated employment; however, the credentials provided by FPCUs do not always qualify students for the best paying or most desirable careers in an industry (Cottom, 2017). FPCUs that do not have an explicit career focus signal to students that attaining any credential may provide access to multiple post-graduation career opportunities. Although generally degree attainment is associated with positive outcomes (Ma et al., 2019), the quality of the credentials offered by FPCUs and the opportunities those credentials provide may be obscured when mission statements do not attend to career outcomes. This may also be the case at non-profit schools, but if FPCUs compromise the quality and relevance of the credentials they offer to increase profit margins, these institutions may hinder marginalized students' access to post-credential benefits (Cellini & Chaundhary, 2014; Charron-Chénier, 2020).

### *Outcomes*

Our dataset included many statements relating to FPCUs' aspirations for their graduates. Similar to the statements in the *Career Focus* code*, Outcomes* statements often tied directly to preparations for employment but went beyond general statements about "career-oriented" curricula by explicitly describing career outcomes. Most of these instances described general aspirations about future career success; for example, Platt Colleges aimed to prepare students to "pursue their career goals while meeting current industry and employer demands." Such statements suggest that some FPCUs view the credentials they provide as points of direct access to the labor market and may indicate that the credentials promise opportunities from which students might otherwise be excluded.

FPCUs also had broader representations of outcomes for students than career outcomes. One common outcome focused on creating leaders in, and sometimes beyond, students' future industries. Rocky Mountain College of Art + Design, for instance, sought to prepare "learners to be forces of change in their communities and the world." Institutions also expressed a desire for students to become "life long learners" or to improve their communities using their new skills. Some institutions identified concrete, measurable skills that students would obtain. Grand Canyon University described how they prepare "learners to become global citizens, critical thinkers, effective communicators and responsible leaders" without tying these goals to professional objectives or a professional field.

Mission statements that explicitly reference career paths signal that employment access and growth are possible outcomes for prospective students. When outcomes such as leadership are directly acknowledged in a mission statement, it may signal to both students and institutional stakeholders that such outcomes are rooted in the values and purpose of the institution (Devies & Guthrie, 2022). Missions that identify specific qualities related to

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outcomes can help make good on the educational promise at FPCUs by aligning credentials with clear benchmarks for student success. By using mission-aligned benchmarks in assessment and accreditation, FPCUs can better ensure that students' education, not just the credential itself, meets employers' needs and ensures positive post-credential outcomes.

### *The Job-Market & Economy*

About one quarter of mission statements in the sample discussed the job market or the economy. These statements were most common at institutions where a bachelor's degree was the highest degree available. Most of these discussions focused on the global or competitive nature of the contemporary economy. For example, Post University claimed to "prepare students to become confident, competent, and competitive participants in the global marketplace." Some institutions incorporated ideas of diversity into their description of the economy. The American Public University System provided "online programs that prepare students for service and leadership in a diverse, global society."

By emphasizing the global, competitive nature of the marketplace in mission statements, some FPCUs may signal that the credentials they offer provide necessary, exclusive access to the global workforce. The promise of global access may appeal to students who pursue their first postsecondary degree at an FPCU; it may also appeal to students who have lost employment due to offshoring. Credentials that promise employability in a global market may suggest a pathway to job security and upward mobility. However, some FPCUs may not have reason to deliver access to global labor markets in part because not all sectors are likely to lose jobs overseas (Zumeta et al., 2012). For example, while the Art Institute of Atlanta's mission promised "an educational environment, consistent with…the global marketplace," the students who attend the institution will most likely be working to earn credentials for fields like "culinary arts" where the pressures of globalization may be less relevant. Without a clearer definition of how and why students will be prepared to compete in global markets, students may be misinformed about what qualities will best help them attain desirable employment, and they may be persuaded to pursue credentials that do not provide them any meaningful marketplace advantage.

## The Student Experience

Beyond identifying opportunities after graduation, mission statements in our sample described what a student would encounter in their educational journey. They frequently referenced the curriculum, students, access and affordability, and faculty and staff.

### *Student Learning Experiences*

Fifty of the 73 FPCUs described desired learning experiences for students. These descriptions were often vague, expressing a commitment to providing instruction through high-quality or innovative programs. Some FPCUs articulated concrete aspects of learning experiences, including a focus on online learning, curriculum-embedded professional training, and student support.

Many mission statements in our sample referenced online modalities, even though our data collection predated the COVID-19 pandemic. American National University committed to "distance education and blended learning" while the American Public

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University System provided "student-focused online programs." Bryan University expressed a commitment to improving online pedagogy with an objective of "revolutionizing the way students learn online and solving complex challenges in online education." Institutions that sought to capitalize on online learning, incorporate new technologies, and innovate within the field signaled an approach to accessing credentials without need for in-person instruction. Bryan University's mission affirmed the promise of online pedagogy as a "desired and preferred educational experience." Such language reflects the FPCU's intentional marketing of its services as a more accessible alternative to non-profit colleges and universities, a practice critiqued for its predatory nature (Seamster & Charon-Chenier, 2017).

Not surprisingly, institutions also described their ideal learning experiences for students by tying their education to career training. For example, LIM College expressed a commitment to be a pioneer in "experiential education" by fostering "a unique connection between real-world experience and academic study in business principles." The Los Angeles Film School similarly provided an "inventive method of education that concentrates on preparation for career opportunities in the entertainment industry" that included "reflective teaching methods and hands on learning." These practical, experientially focused missions connected learning experiences to the more common objective of career-focused education. Some institutions tied their career-focused education to online learning. For example, the Sonoran Desert Institute, where all of the courses are online, aimed to "provide students with current, firearms industry-driven, higher education programs delivered through distance education technology and practical application."

FPCU missions also promised supportive environments for students. These were described as "student-centered education" at YTI Career Institute, a "caring" environment at Western Technical College, and a "supportive" learning environment at Lincoln Technical Institute. These commitments focused on student needs for success; by promising to create a supportive environment, these institutions signaled a desire to promote student success at their institution. However, this broad language may reassure stakeholders and accreditors without clearly establishing how or the extent to which students can access learning resources.

Promises of online learning and industry-focused education may intentionally emphasize a departure from learning approaches often associated with non-profit colleges and universities. By implying that traditional (e.g., full-time, in-person) pedagogies are barriers to student access and success—whether or not this is true—FPCUs present themselves as alternatives that remove obstacles and present a "better" pathway to credential attainment, especially for non-traditional students. However, the lack of clear information about student support and the well documented high costs of FPCU education suggest that educational obstacles at FPCUs may be reconfigured rather than removed. Evidence from prior studies has suggested that promised supports are inequitably available (Iloh, 2016) and even antithetical to FPCUs' profit-making interests (Angulo, 2016). Such inconsistencies may suggest the need for increased oversight to ensure FPCUs are honoring their promise of environments and resources conducive to student success.

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***Unfulfilled Promises & Mission Statements***

*Students*

FPCUs in our dataset described the students they desired to serve. Most often, these institutions described their student body as "diverse" or from a variety of educational backgrounds. Institutions that provided more in-depth descriptions of their student body articulated who the institution desired to serve in various ways, including "adult learners" at American Career College, "motivated college-worthy student[s]" at Aspen University, and "first-generation college students, newly arriving immigrants, and international students" at Monroe College. Other FPCUs explicitly tied their mission to serving "the nation's military and public service communities," as at the American Public University System. Strayer University's mission directly addressed students as customers, claiming that they would "provide exceptional customer service to you and all Strayer University stakeholders." By conceptualizing students as customers, Strayer University foregrounded the transactional nature of credential pursuit.

Most of the FPCUs that described students offered graduate degrees. Since graduate education enrollment is Whiter than undergraduate education (NCES, 2022c), FPCUs may promise historically excluded student populations access to advanced credentials that students may perceive as necessary for upward mobility or stable employment. However, these institutions' emphasis on diversity or military veterans may reflect predatory practices. GI funding is not counted in an institution's calculation of the 90/10 ratio, which mandates that at least ten percent of an FPCU's revenue must come from sources other than federal student aid (Patton, 2012). This exposes veterans eligible for GI benefits and other diverse student groups historically excluded from higher education to aggressive recruitment that may overpromise returns on their investment and obscure the risks of debt.

*Access & Affordability*

Of the institutions in our dataset, 19 discussed access and/or affordability. Of these, 18 institutions discussed access to higher education, with a subset of these discussing both access and affordability. For example, Galen College of Nursing was "driven by a culture dedicated to expanding access to nursing education." Access and affordability were rarely operationalized. Commonly, they were instead listed among a group of desirable adjectives, like respected, high-quality, innovative, socially minded, or professionally relevant.

Two institutions stood out for their clearer internal operationalizations of access and affordability in the dataset. First, Pima Medical College was the only institution that solely discussed affordability, seeking to provide the "best value in medical career education." Second, Aspen University's goal was to "offer tuition rates low enough that a majority of our students will not incur debt through utilization of federal financial aid" and that "a majority of students will be able to afford to pay tuition in cash or through a monthly payment plan (maintaining Federal Financial Aid revenues below 50%)." Aspen University's goal of having students avoid federal loans provides a measurable definition of affordability. These more concrete operationalizations of affordability that emphasize value or responsible pricing may better guide institutional practices than general commitments to affordability. However, these operationalizations can remain problematic. For instance, Pima Medical College's discussion of "best value" also implies that credentials' cost should be tied to future earnings.

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### *Faculty & Staff*

Least common among the themes coded in our research were descriptions of the faculty and staff employed at the institution. Over 75% of the descriptions of faculty and staff were in longer mission statements and in institutions with between 1,000 and 4,999 undergraduates. Most descriptions of faculty and staff included general descriptions about how FPCU staff were qualified or had real-world experience. Typical of these missions, Monroe College described their innovative curriculum as "taught by experienced industry professionals," and Columbia Southern University's education was "delivered by qualified, student-centered faculty." Both the College of Health Care Professionals and Gurnick Academy of Medical Arts, two bachelor's-granting institutions with enrollments under 5,000, described their faculty as health care professionals. Gurnick Academy of Medical Arts stated that their education was "provided by trained academicians, nurses, physicians and technologists." These institutions clearly valued a specific type of experience in the faculty they hired, potentially signaling that the education offered is practical and teaches the skills necessary for success.

A few graduate institutions included discussions of faculty responsibilities beyond teaching, including research and service, as one expects at non-profit higher education institutions. South College, for example, included commitments to both research and participating in the academic community by publishing research or literary works "as consistent with the role of each faculty member." South College also included a commitment to service in their mission statement, encouraging "administration, faculty, and staff to invest their knowledge, experience, and expertise in community, professional, and institutional service." This indicates that some institutions attempt to signal how faculty and staff have important responsibilities at the institution beyond instruction that mirror responsibilities of full-time faculty at non-profit colleges to potentially increase their credibility in the marketplace.

The relatively infrequent mentions of faculty qualifications in our sample, however, may obscure the limitations of FPCU faculty. FPCUs employ faculty that are predominantly part-time and adjunct labor (Proper, 2017), and adjuncts at FPCUs are paid much less than those at other institutions (Coalition on the Academic Workforce, 2012). By masking such details, FPCUs may imply that the education they offer is equivalent to that available at non-profit institutions, but that education may in fact be of a lower quality (for example, because faculty may not be able to invest as much time in student support due to heavy adjunct loads). Additionally, the missions that do emphasize broader faculty roles may reflect isomorphic language worthy of deeper scrutiny, as FPCUs have been found to disregard academic freedom and disregard faculty control over learning experiences in order to maximize profit margins (Angulo, 2016; Tierney, 2020).

## Discussion

The above findings offer insights into our research question: How do mission statements of FPCUs describe educational opportunities available to students? Our inductive conventional content analysis of 73 mission statements of 98 degree-granting FPCUs with at least 1,000 undergraduate students uncovered two dominant themes: post-graduate expectations and student experiences. The FPCU mission statements in our analytic sample demonstrated a

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strong focus on post-graduation career opportunities, career relevant skill development, and job market access that suggested FPCU credentials could provide employment opportunities and social mobility. However, as prior research has suggested, the typically high costs of FPCU credentials, the limited resources available to students at some FPCUs, and the lower desirability of FPCU credentials to some employers may limit students' opportunities to capitalize on promised outcomes (Cellini & Chaundhary, 2014; Charron-Chénier, 2020; Cottom, 2017; Deming, Yuchtman, et al., 2016).

We also found that mission statements described students' learning experiences as supportive, innovative, accessible, and affordable; expressed a desire to enroll diverse students, often from underrepresented backgrounds; and at times promised students opportunities to learn from industry professionals. Research suggests that such commitments may contradict students' actual experiences at FPCUs, as not all students find that FPCUs offer adequate support (Angulo, 2016; Iloh, 2016). Furthermore, FPCUs' recruitment of minoritized and low-income students may in fact reflect predatory practices that use streamlined enrollment processes to provide educational access but then fail to follow through on supports and outcomes that can ensure return on investment (Campbell et al., 2020; Cellini & Turner, 2019; Cottom, 2017; Seamster & Charron-Chénier, 2017). While our findings highlight FPCUs' commitment to students as customers, our analysis may also indicate areas in need of greater scrutiny, as isomorphism and profit-driven goals may prevent FPCUs from making good on their promises to students.

The content of FPCU mission statements is not substantially unique to the FPCU sector. Higher education mission statements frequently discuss curricula, outcomes, students, access, teaching, research, and faculty qualifications (Kosmützky & Krücken, 2015; Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Taylor & Morphew, 2010). Prior research has found that mission statements discuss student learning experiences at rates similar to those in this study (Pressimone Beckowski & Winfield, 2021). These similarities across missions of public, private, and for-profit institutions may indicate institutional isomorphism at FPCUs, through which they may attempt to assert their legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Morphew & Hartley, 2006). Normative language that emphasizes universities' traditional commitment to teaching and research (Kosmützky & Krücken, 2015) may run counter to FPCUs' primary objective of profit-making (Angulo, 2016; Tierney, 2020). Thus, the missions of FPCUs may be a false façade to meet the expectations of students, shareholders, and regulatory bodies.

For instance, FPCU mission statements typically did not explicitly discuss racial diversity, often relying on undefined diversity or race-neutral conceptions of diversity, mirroring what others have found among missions of other sectors of higher education (Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Pressimone Beckowski & Winfield, 2021; Taylor & Morphew, 2010). While FPCUs do enroll students historically excluded from higher education, these opportunities are tied to high levels of debt and low market returns, suggesting that this inclusion is predatory and potentially a profit-seeking behavior (Cellini & Turner, 2019; Deming, Yuchtman, et al., 2016; Hillman, 2015; Seamster & Charron-Chénier, 2017). Thus, even when FPCUs use language similar to non-profits to describe their purposes, student outcomes vary.

FPCUs' missions were more unique in mentioning specific disciplines and careers. This focus likely stems from narrowly tailored curricular offerings at many of the FPCUs in our sample, a key difference between FPCUs and non-profit colleges (Kosmützky & Krücken,

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2015). Our findings on FPCU mission statements share similarities with those of Pizarro Milian and Quirke (2017), who analyzed promotional profiles of FPCUs in Ontario, Canada. The consonance between these two studies may suggest that FPCUs take similar approaches in many countries. Future researchers could comparatively analyze international cases to investigate shared and divergent practices in different countries.

Additionally, FPCUs' missions discuss potential outcomes for their students related to career preparations and the global economy. Language about a globalizing job market have been found previously in non-profit mission statements (e.g., Morphew & Hartley, 2006). However, the most common code found in FPCU missions was career-focused education. This component of mission statements has not been previously identified as a dominant construct in non-profit higher education, potentially signaling that FPCUs are focused on job training instead of education—a shift in educational purposes in a neoliberal regime (Giroux, 2002). The increased prevalence of these ideas in FPCU missions indicates that this sector's self-identified distinguishing feature is an emphasis on credentials and job preparation. This emphasis may help FPCUs to assert their distinct organizational identity and give them some control over how they compete within the diverse higher education system (Kosmützky & Krücken, 2015).

## Implications for Policy and Practice

FPCU mission statements seemingly address common critiques of higher education—that higher education needs to change and adopt business principles to better prepare students for the workforce (Ayers, 2005; Committee on Education & Labor Republicans, 2021; Thelin, 2019; Wingard, 2022). In doing so these FPCUs generate an aura of authenticity about providing necessary and exclusive credentials that other sectors of higher education have, allegedly, failed to provide (Brown, 2001; Collins, 1979/2019). By heavily emphasizing career preparation, FPCUs may signal themselves as potential solutions to higher education's problems.

However, these "potential solutions" at FPCUs cannot, and should not, be taken at face value. First, the larger divestment in public higher education through the dominance of neoliberalism requires attention (Giroux, 2002). FPCUs, as independent, privatized entities, are potentially viewed as a solution because defunding has made public higher education unaffordable for students. The Biden Administration's regulatory efforts in the for-profit sector and in providing additional information to potential students about earnings (Douglas-Gabriel, 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2022; White House, 2022) highlight a small shift by some policymakers away from FPCUs as a potential solution to increase college-going rates.

Another concern with taking these commitments in mission statements at FPCUs at face value is that research does not generally support these institutional claims. If FPCUs are more focused on career training and the modern economy than other sectors of higher education (as our analysis suggests), then graduates of FPCUs would be at an advantage. However, FPCU enrollees take on more debt and have higher default rates (Armona et al., 2020; Belfield, 2013; Deming, Goldin, & Katz, 2012; Hillman, 2015), have lower earnings (Cellini & Turner, 2019), and are less likely to receive job interviews (Deming, Yuchtman, et al., 2016). This paradox between mission-driven commitment and results in the for-profit

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sector of U.S. higher education provides a path for future researchers to further examine FPCUs.

Policymakers can work to address these contradictions between promises and outcomes. The Biden administration has signaled a commitment to increasing regulation of FPCUs so that all federal education aid, including aid for veterans, is part of the calculation for the 90/10 rule (Douglas-Gabriel, 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2022), addressing a longstanding critique of the rule (e.g., Patton, 2012). Evidence shows that federal and state regulation can also play a meaningful role in improving institutional practices and protecting students (Hutchens et al., 2021; Kelchen & Liu, 2022; Looney & Yannelis, 2022).

FPCUs have long been a part of the higher education landscape in the United States and are likely to remain so. However, the current disconnect between practices and promises as articulated in mission statements needs to be remedied to protect public investment and students. Future critical analysis is necessary to untangle this contradiction and support policymakers and students to improve higher education opportunities and outcomes.

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