College on the Margins: Higher Education Professionals' Perspectives on Campus Basic Needs Insecurity

KATHARINE M. BROTON

University of Iowa

GRAHAM N. S. MILLER

Suffolk University

SARA GOLDRICK-RAB

Temple University

Background: A substantial share of undergraduates are basic needs insecure, meaning they lack consistent access to essential material goods like food and shelter. These material hardships are associated with poorer academic success, but we know very little about higher education professionals' perspectives on the matter.

Purpose: This paper examines how higher education professionals perceive, understand, and support college students who experience basic needs insecurity.

Research Design: Using data from interviews with 59 professionals who work at eight broad-access public colleges and universities across five states, we employ an institutional logics perspective to understand how they draw on normative scripts, rationales, and schemas to guide their responses to campus basic needs insecurity.

Findings: Higher education professionals have considerable discretion when working with students who are basic needs insecure, and they draw on organizational, professional, and broader social spheres to guide their interactions. We identify three distinct logics—systemic, quiescent, and cautious—that are unique from one another on two dimensions: locus of control and individual response based on perceived locus of control.

Conclusions: The design and implementation of initiatives designed to support vulnerable students must consider the ways in which on-the-ground professionals understand students, their needs, and the sources of their challenges.

There is growing evidence that as many as half of the nation's under-graduates are basic needs insecure, meaning they lack consistent access to essential material goods like food and shelter (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Bruening, Argo, Payne-Sturges, & Laska, 2017; Freudenberg et al., 2011; Martinez, Maynard, & Ritchie, 2016; Nazmi et al., 2018; Tsui et al., 2011). Estimates from the most recent surveys indicate that one in five has the very lowest level of food security, often associated with hunger, and one in ten is homeless (Broton, 2019; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, Schneider, Hernandez, & Cady, 2018). These financial and material hardships are associated with poorer academic achievement, degree attainment, and health (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Eisenberg, 2015; Maroto, Snelling, & Linck, 2015; Martinez, Webb, Frongillo, & Ritchie, 2017; Morris, Smith, Davis, & Null, 2016; Patton-López, López-Cevallos, Cancel-Tirado, & Vazquez, 2014; Tsui et al., 2011).

Most students who experience basic needs insecurity work and receive financial aid, but they still report problems making ends meet (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Gupton, 2017; Henry, 2017; Tsui et al., 2011). Over the past three decades, the net price of college attendance has risen while real family incomes have stagnated (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; The College Board, 2017). Financial aid has not kept pace, and while nearly half of all undergraduates receive Pell Grants, many others have scarce resources but do not qualify for that support because they cannot or do not complete the application (Author's calculations using data from the 2015–2016 National Postsecondary Study Aid Study; Kofoed, 2017). Other students are disadvantaged by the federal needs analysis, which allocates financial aid based on their parents' financial resources, even though many students cannot access those resources. Work requirements tied to public benefits programs like SNAP (food stamps) and the minimum wage's declining value further complicate the "new economics of college" and contribute to the basic needs insecurity problem (Duke-Benfield, 2015; Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

How are higher education professionals responding to these challenges and helping support students' basic needs? Some partner with social service agencies to provide subsidized food or housing, where others open food pantries, provide case management (sometimes with the support of external agencies), or even rethink their institutional mission to focus on poverty alleviation (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2016; College and University Food Bank Alliance, n.d.; Daugherty, Johnston, & Tsai, 2016; Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Frank, 2014; Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Hernandez, 2017; Goldrick-Rab & Cady, 2018; Lenhart & Petty, 2017). In almost all cases, college leaders charge frontline workers—including student services

practitioners—with administering and implementing such supports. These on-the-ground professionals have considerable latitude to shape how organizations address critical issues and can either support or undermine an institution's stated policies or values (Lipsky, 1980; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). It is therefore important to consider their perspectives.

This paper examines how higher education professionals at eight broad-access public colleges perceive, understand, and support students who are struggling to make ends meet. Although a significant share of research in higher education has investigated how organizations respond to challenging problems (e.g., Jaquette, 2013; Kraatz & Zajac, 1996), few studies examine the role of staff in implementing solutions. Hardly any examine how institutions support students who are basic needs insecure (see reports by Crutchfield et al., 2016, and Goldrick-Rab & Cady, 2018, for exceptions). We draw on qualitative interviews and employ an institutional logics perspective to understand how professionals draw on normative scripts, rationales, and schemas to guide their responses to campus basic needs insecurity (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). In particular, we investigate how individuals employ logics "on the ground" to inform their daily work with students (McPherson & Sauder, 2013).

The results suggest three distinct logics guide the work that college administrators and student affairs professionals perform in this arena: *systemic*, *quiescent*, and *cautious*. The logics are unique from one another on two dimensions: locus of control and individual response based on perceived locus of control. Higher education professionals who view students' basic needs insecurity as a *systemic* issue, for example, believe that addressing such challenges falls within their professional purview and often take direct action to improve the college experiences of students with unmet material needs. Professionals who believe students' material hardships are the result of chance misfortune (*quiescent logic)* or poor choices (*cautious logic*) view such challenges as outside of the purview of higher education and therefore respond to students' needs in an ad-hoc manner (*quiescent logic)* or in ways that erect barriers to additional resources (*cautious logic*). We explore these dimensions and the ways in which institutional and professional spheres influence individual behavior.

BACKGROUND

COLLEGE FOR ALL, DEGREES FOR SOME

Almost all young people and their families view college as a necessary step in their lives' progression, rather than something only for the particularly smart or wealthy (Eagan et al., 2017; Goyette, 2008; Jacob & Linkow, 2011;

B. L. Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). Since the early 1970s, federal financial and informational initiatives (e.g., Pell Grant and TRIO programs) have reduced barriers to college entry, particularly for historically underrepresented groups seeking higher education, including women, racial/ethnic minorities, and those with low incomes. More recent changes in the economy including globalization, union decline, new manufacturing technologies, and public policies that promote a knowledge economy have also induced students, often from working-class backgrounds, to attend college (Cottom, 2017; Demos & Young Invincibles, 2011; Kalleberg, 2011). This diverse group of undergraduates seeks the robust wage premiums and non-monetary benefits associated with degree attainment (Bartik & Hershbein, 2018; Baum, Kurose, & McPherson, 2013; Belfield & Bailey, 2011; Kane & Rouse, 1995; Leigh & Gill, 1997; Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013; Wolfe & Haveman, 2003).

Despite wide recognition of higher education's importance, college completion gaps by family background are large and growing (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). According to one estimate, just 11% of young adults from the lowest socioeconomic status (SES)[1] quartile earned a bachelor's degree or higher by age 24, compared to 20% and 41% of students from the second and third quartiles, respectively and 58% of those from families in the highest SES quartile (Cahalan, Perna, Yamashita, Wright, & Santillan, 2018). These attainment gaps persist among academically prepared students, and those who leave college without earning a degree often cite the high price of attendance as a major contributing factor (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, & DuPont, 2009; National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Indeed, grant aid improves degree attainment for students from low-income families (Castleman & Long, 2016; Goldrick-Rab, Kelchen, Harris, & Benson, 2016). Emerging evidence additionally indicates that basic needs insecurity also impedes college success (e.g., Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2017; Gupton, 2017). Undergraduates who lack adequate food or secure housing while attending college, on average, have lower grades and are less likely to graduate than their materially secure peers, even after accounting for prior academic preparation and background characteristics (Bianco et al., 2016; Broton, 2017, 2018; Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; El Zein et al., 2017; Maroto et al., 2015; Martinez et al., 2017; Morris et al., 2016; Patton-López et al., 2014; Silva et al., 2017).

MATERIAL SUPPORTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

When students are in elementary and secondary school, federal initiatives such as the National School Lunch Program, the McVinney-Vento Act for homeless students, and many affordable housing policies offer support for those who need it. But none of those supports exist once students transition to postsecondary education. Instead, the financial aid system serves as the sole means for addressing living expenses while state, local, and institutional efforts work to fill in the gaps.

There is extensive evidence that financial aid fails to cover food and housing costs for the majority of college students (Dancy & Fishman, 2016; Goldrick-Rab & Kendall, 2016). For example, the Pell Grant amounts to just 30% of the total price of attendance at a public four-year college and 60% at a public two-year school (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). More than half of undergraduates face net prices (full cost of attendance minus grant aid) greater than 25% of their family income, including 23% whose net price is equal to or exceeds total family income (Kelchen, 2018b). Moreover, the financial needs analysis systematically overstates the amount of money students are able to pay toward their college education, and many colleges understate living costs (Kelchen, Goldrick-Rab, & Hosch, 2017).

Though rigorous research shows that additional financial resources improve degree attainment for students from low-income families (e.g., Castleman & Long, 2016; Dynarski, 2003; Goldrick-Rab, Kelchen, Harris, & Benson, 2016; Nguyen, Kramer, & Evans, 2018), the current financial aid system leaves students short of financial security, and maximum federal student loans cannot make up for unmet need (Goldrick-Rab, 2016).[2] Students are left with few options: they can take private loans, work for pay, apply for additional scholarships, seek out public or private philanthropic resources, or stretch their budgets and cut back on basic material goods to try to make ends meet. Approximately three-quarters of undergraduates work while in college, and students experiencing financial or material hardships are more likely to work than their peers, stating a need to work to help pay for college (Broton, Goldrick-Rab, & Benson, 2016; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Kalenkoski & Pabilonia, 2010; Scott-Clayton, 2011). Unlike prior generations, however, today's students are increasingly unable to work themselves through college (Allegretto & Filion, 2011; Lambert, Fugiel, & Henly, 2014). According to one estimate, students would have to work 50 hours per week year-round in order to cover the costs of attending a public four-year college (Scott-Clayton, 2011). Special rules restrict college students' access to means-tested public benefits; to qualify for SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps), for example, students must meet income and asset

criteria and qualify for an exception related to caring for a child, working at least 20 hours per week or through work-study, a mental or physical disability, or participation in certain programs (Duke-Benfield, 2015). Even among those who qualify, enrollment is often low: according to one estimate, just one in five *eligible* students use food stamps (Bianco et al., 2016). Wary of taking on student debt, a substantial share of students have trouble securing their basic material needs while pursuing their educational goals (Boatman, Evans, & Soliz, 2017; Cochrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2014).

THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS

Approximately three-quarters of undergraduates attend public institutions, and the majority of those attending public four-year institutions enroll within 50 miles of home (Eagan et al., 2015; Hillman, 2016). Among those attending public community colleges, the median distance from home is just eight miles (Hillman, 2016). Since students struggling to make ends meet often have little practical choice in where to attend college, the decisions that broad-access institutional leaders and front-line staff make regarding policies, programs, and procedures have important consequences for students' success.

Today's college leaders must negotiate declining state resources and increased accountability pressures while meeting demands from multiple and sometimes competing constituencies (Kelchen, 2018a). For example, 44 states spend less per student on higher education than before the Great Recession, and in 12 states, state support has declined by more than 25% (State Higher Education Executive Officers, 2016). Community colleges have been especially hard hit: they educate students with greater needs, on average, but receive less direct public funding than four-year colleges (Kahlenberg, 2015). At the same time, more than two-thirds of states are developing or implementing models that tie public institutions' state appropriations to student outcomes, such as retention and degrees awarded (Dougherty & Natow, 2015; Snyder & Boelscher, 2018). In short, broad-access public colleges are asked to do more with less for students who face significant challenges (M. Schneider & Deane, 2015; Wyner, 2014).

We therefore seek to identify, analyze, and report different strategies that higher education professionals use to address basic needs insecurity among undergraduates. Prior research indicates that recognition of and response to people in need often hinges on how they are viewed by society and those with decision-making powers. Dating back to the last century, policymakers, academics, and others have categorized people facing economic and material hardship based on their level of "deservingness" (Katz, 1989; Piven & Cloward, 1971). While categories were often defined

under the guise of merit and limited resources, characteristics such as nation of origin, home language, and mental health status frequently influenced these typologies. The "deserving poor" are characterized as facing financial plight outside their control: for example, a widowed wife or child born to poor parents. The "undeserving poor," on the other hand, are characterized as indolent or morally deficient. Because society blames the "undeserving poor" for their unfortunate life circumstances, public policies create incentives that encourage personal responsibility or reduce individual autonomy among the "undeserving" (Katz, 1989). Materially insecure adults pursuing a higher education straddle the boundary between deserving and undeserving. Public rhetoric does not characterize them as independent, hard-working adults, nor does it describe them as blameless youths who deserve relatively strong social support (Broton, 2017). This study investigates how higher education professionals respond to and serve these students who attend college while living on the margins.

INSTITUTIONAL LOGICS

We employ an institutional logics perspective to identify rationales and schemas that govern individual professionals' responses to students facing basic needs insecurity. The institutional logics perspective draws on neo-institutional theory's general thesis that normative social rules and scripts guide organizational behavior (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton et al., 2012). As such, this approach examines the different institutional spheres that inform individual and organizational action. Logics, therefore, refer to the cognitive schemas that shape patterns of behavior within a given industry (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999).

Earlier research in institutional logics conceptualized logics as single, orienting schemas that guide all organizations within a particular industry (e.g., Thornton, 2004; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). More recently, however, research has examined how an organization's embeddedness in multiple institutional spheres provides multiple, sometimes conflicting logics (see Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011). For example, higher education institutions that are accountable both to their local communities, to religious obligations, and to federal laws may prioritize one sphere over another or may blend and switch logics when facing critical choices (Barnhardt, Reyes, Vidal-Rodriguez, & Miller, 2017). Logics are not single, orienting schemas, then, but are a repertoire—or tools in a tool-kit—of acceptable structures and behaviors that actors can adopt in order to pursue decided-upon goals (Swidler, 1986).

Individuals, like organizations, face similar challenges in navigating multiple institutional spheres (Dunn & Jones, 2010). Recently, work has

addressed differentiation among individuals and has investigated how individuals employ different logics within their organizational contexts (e.g., Binder, 2007; McPherson & Sauder, 2013). This work typically examines how actors within an organization invoke different frames to attribute cause to an issue and develop a response that addresses the issue's root causes (see Benford & Snow, 2000). For example, in their study of a drug court, McPherson and Sauder (2013) found that law enforcement and counseling professionals attributed drug use to different mechanisms and consequently arrived at different remedies for the problem. Law enforcement officials sought to punish "unrepentant and non-compliant" (p. 173) offenders, whereas counseling professionals sought treatment options and rehabilitation.

These findings suggest that within a single organization, individuals with different professional identities approach their work using different logics. McPherson and Sauder (2013) indeed state that a "ground-level perspective challenges institutional theory's conventional assumption that individuals strictly adhere to the dictates of their home group's dominant logic" (p. 167). Similarly, Blake (2018) finds that school counselors draw from two conflicting logics: a care logic, expressed in their professional guidelines and best practices, and a managerial logic, which is largely a consequence of counselors' embeddedness in schools. As such, multiple institutional spheres influence the ways in which individuals interpret information and develop responses in the face of new and challenging situations.

It is therefore important to understand how various social spheres—personal values, organizational identity, professional norms—influence on-the-ground professionals in higher education. Because these professionals are engaged in colleges' day-to-day operations, they are actively engaged with students and play an important role in shaping students' experiences and outcomes. For this reason, we investigate several social spheres that may influence higher education professionals when responding to students who are basic needs insecure.

METHODS

Between 2011 and 2014, two of the authors and two research assistants conducted 59 interviews including 30 with college administrators (i.e., college presidents, vice presidents, deans of academic and student affairs, financial aid directors, and institutional researchers), 23 with student services staff (i.e., they work for programs and initiatives that target low-income, first-generation or "at-risk" students), and 6 with college faculty (most of whom teach developmental education courses). The interviews

took place at eight public colleges (5 two-year and 3 four-year institutions) across five states: California, Florida, New York, Louisiana, and Wisconsin. We included these institutions in the study because they are broad-access institutions serving substantial shares of students from low-income and materially insecure backgrounds.

We also included them because they each provide supports for students struggling with basic needs insecurity, though specific support systems varied across institutions. All of the sample's two-year colleges provided some form of case management support to help students access local, state, and federal resources, including legal aid and public benefits. They were identified through part of a larger study examining how a "one-stop" approach operates in various college contexts and were selected to maximize variation, including geographic location, enrollment size, and length of time they had provided such student supports (Goldrick-Rab, Broton, et al., 2014). At the two-year colleges, interview respondents were selected according to their position; in some instances, we conducted additional interviews with individuals, including faculty members, whom colleagues deemed experts or who played crucial roles in poverty alleviation efforts on campus. At four-year colleges, we interviewed only financial aid directors because these institutions organized their primary support for students with financial or material need through their financial aid offices. All interviews were conducted in person and typically lasted 30–90 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed for data analysis.

ANALYSIS

In the semi-structured interviews, we asked respondents to tell us about the students at their college—including students' greatest challenges to success—and how their college is responding to these challenges. We then coded interview transcripts for any instances relating to students' basic material needs and individual or institutional responses to basic needs insecurity. We define basic needs insecurity broadly and included any references to students lacking consistent and adequate food or shelter or colloquially, struggling to "make ends meet." Respondents often answered the questions described above by identifying basic needs insecurity as a key student challenge and by describing what they perceived to be the causes of basic needs insecurity. In addition, respondents frequently explained how their institution—and how they personally—respond to students who are basic needs insecure. Analysts inductively identified potential themes in the data, documented these themes using analytic memos, and shared findings during weekly meetings (Charmaz, 2006). Potential themes were

refined and clarified through an iterative process of discussion and inclusion of additional interview excerpts. The Appendix describes this study's analytic process in greater detail.

Although all of the colleges in our sample had programs or policies designed to support financially struggling students, we found significant variation in their understanding and response to basic needs insecurity. To gain analytical leverage, we examined the data within and across respondents' professional and organizational domains because initial analyses suggested that these domains constrain how higher education professionals employ discretion in response to students' material and financial challenges. For instance, at the 5 two-year colleges where we conducted interviews with multiple professionals, we identified characteristics that describe each organization's culture and observed similar patterns among individuals in the same organization or with similar organizational cultures. We also found commonalities among those who work in the same profession across institutions. Financial aid directors, for example, often couched their comments in the context of federal financial aid regulations, and upper level administrators sometimes linked their views to state accountability pressures. Faculty and students services staff, on the other hand, rarely mentioned any type of external regulatory domain. Importantly, we found variation across institutions within the same sector or state. Practitioners and administrators at two-year colleges did not necessarily behave consistently from one institution to the next, nor did administrators and practitioners at four-year institutions. Further, we generally found variation both within particular professions (e.g., financial aid officers and directors) and within single institutions. Findings consequently suggest that interactions between multiple institutional spheres, rather than a single sphere, influence how practitioners define and address problems. In the following sections, we describe the three logics that resulted from this analysis and explain how higher education professionals (1) integrate multiple spheres of influence to make sense of students' basic needs insecurity and (2) develop and employ responses to students' needs.

FINDINGS

PROFESSIONAL DISCRETION

Higher education professionals play a critical role in providing or limiting access to resources and services designed to support students' educational progress. Interviewed staff, faculty, and administrators were keenly aware of students' financial needs and understood that many students

faced challenges making ends meet while attending college. A college president explained, "We have people living out of their cars." In some cases, professionals reported that the scope and depth of students' financial and material challenged had increased in recent years. For example, a staff member stated, "You can imagine economically how bad things have been, so to a certain extent financial aid has been a means of support for certain individuals, and we're seeing a rise in the amount of students who are taking [aid]—it's a way for them to support themselves basically." We observed broad and deep knowledge of these problems across all of the colleges and professional positions included in this study.

Despite widespread recognition, however, higher education professionals responded to students' hardship challenges in multiple ways. While college administrators are in positions of power that routinely influence institutional policies or procedures, front-line staff members with limited authority also exhibited considerable professional discretion when working with students. In some cases, these professionals called in favors or leveraged supplemental supports to help students in need. For example, a staff member reached out to the college's scholarship office to advocate on a student's behalf: "I was like, I [have to] have some money for this student. Can you help me? And I got him two more scholarships. That helped supplement his income for a little bit of time, so he could continue to go to school." In another instance, a staff member indicated that he directs students to another organization to obtain rent money in order to tide students over: "If student's in need, if a student can't afford rent . . . we send you off to [community organization name]." In cases where resources exist, we met staff who worked backchannels and used their organizational savvy to help students get the support they needed. In other cases, however, higher educational professionals were simply overwhelmed by students' unmet material needs, feeling unable or not sure how to intervene. Still other higher education professionals reacted with skepticism and worked to protect their institutions from students they did not fully trust or understand, as explained in detail below.

Across professional positions and institutional contexts, higher education professionals used professional autonomy when working with students. Even financial aid officers, who work in a highly regulated environment, explained how they regularly exercise professional judgement when they respond to students' financial and material needs. When we asked if one such professional uses as much professional judgement now as he did 10 years ago, he responded, "Absolutely . . . probably more." Despite shrinking state higher education budgets and increased accountability pressures, higher educational professionals have considerable latitude to determine how they serve students and which students they serve.

LOGICS IN ACTION

The logics we identified drew on organizational cultures, broader social narratives on poverty, as well as professional pressures and informed how individuals used professional discretion in their responses to students' basic needs insecurity. First, these spheres of influence informed how professionals framed and constructed the issue of student material hardship (see Benford & Snow, 2000): as a systemic issue, as a consequence of individual students' misfortune or bad luck, or as a consequence of individual students' poor choices. Second, logics offered different actions in response to the issue. Below, we describe the dimensions of each identified logic: *systemic*, *quiescent*, and *cautious*.

Systemic Logic

Many professionals we interviewed viewed undergraduate basic needs insecurity as symptomatic of larger social issues, rather than an individual trait or weakness. As such, professionals expressed their view that *all* students who want to pursue a college education deserve to do so. College leaders embracing a *systemic* logic emphasized inclusivity and responsiveness. Acknowledging that students' needs can be "profound," a college president said, "You don't say, 'You're not prepared, you don't fit.' Our role is meeting a student where they are and giving them the things that they need to succeed . . . you're a [college name] student, and we meet you where you are, and we bring you to where you need to be in a variety of ways." By labeling struggling students as "[college name] students," the president underscored that fact that these students belong as full members of the campus community and should not be relegated to the margins.

When we asked this college president about the source of students' material and financial challenges, she explained that the challenges stem from society more broadly, not merely the higher education system:

> I think the [material] need is more profound now than it was in the past. Not that we didn't have a need before to help our students, but we're struggling. . . I just know that we still have some challenges, and it goes far beyond the school system. You know, we have societal issues that are profound, you know. We have issues with incarceration. . .

Similarly, a dean of students at another institution stated that it is "totally incorrect" to think that homeless undergraduates are not "college material." He clarified, "They are college material if they have the support that they need, but they need to have a place where they can go and

at least have the basics." These leaders viewed the source of basic needs insecurity as related to larger societal issues while the responsibility for helping students and subsequently improving society falls squarely within higher education's mission.

Respond through enrollment and retention efforts. Because professionals who follow a *systemic logic* see student hardship as within the institution's locus of control, they believe they can help resolve basic needs insecurity through systemic professional action. That is, they believe their actions can directly influence students' well-being and future success. They therefore develop strategies and harness organizational resources that help meet students' basic needs and promote student enrollment, persistence, and graduation. A president summarized this approach well, stating:

> If students do not have a safe place to live, food to eat, or a way to get to school, they cannot do their best in the classroom. There are these moments where you are going to continue in college or life is going to get in the way. . . It is not like they dropped their iPod or phone in the toilet. It is real. There are students that are studying under candlelight because they have not paid their utility bill, and they are still trying to persist. If we do not address some of those issues, they get in the way of the education process. So at the core of our work is this educational mission. That is at the core.

One of higher education's purposes, in this president's definition, is to serve as a solution to the problem of material hardship and enable students to reach their educational goals. Actions, such as student financial and academic support, stem from that definition.

Similarly, a financial aid director at another college recognized material hardship and resulting academic hardship as an issue and felt that higher education is a vehicle that can help to resolve that issue. When discussing a program on campus that connects students with social services, she stated:

> There's nothing more hurtful than to hear a student say, "I just couldn't come, because I didn't have my lights, I didn't have this, I didn't have that." And if their focus is to help the student to take care of those key critical areas to be successful as a student, and then we focus on what we need to focus on to help them from the financing side of it, then I think it's a good marriage [between the financial aid office and student services office on campus].

The practitioner added that, "if [a student] make[s] a commitment, we're going to make a commitment. We're going to do it hand-in-hand. And I always say, 'Help me help you.'" This "hand-in-hand" commitment

extends well beyond narrow academic-focused conceptions of student support to include financial and material supports as well.

Similarly, a provost discussed how he successfully advocated for additional resources to better support students experiencing basic needs insecurity. As a consequence, the institution hired 25 new college advisors and cross-trained all of their existing advisors in academic, social, and financial supports. This new job description and cross-training prepared all college advisors—not just those affiliated with support programs for first-generation or low-income students—to recognize students' material hardships and to refer them to appropriate social services. Further, the institution sought to measure the training's impact by examining how students' interactions with advisors influence their college experiences. He said, "What we're trying to do is to really link it back to outcomes." The institution aimed to study "things like retention from semester to semester, the number of types of contacts that they have with the students, what kinds of communication do they have, what kinds of meetings do they have, do all the students in their case load have an educational plan developed" and so on.

This strategy clearly reflects an institution's efforts to promote a more systemic—rather than ad-hoc—institutional response to students' interrelated challenges. Moreover, financial aid officers within the same institution created a short-term, no-interest loan program for students with delayed federal financial aid payments. Here, practitioners identified late financial aid disbursements as a key contributing factor to late enrollment for low-income students and created a new program, rather than working with students on a case-by-case basis, to address the issue. Across institutions and professions, those expressing a *systemic* logic often explained that these types of programmatic investments are a win-win decision: helping students meet all of their needs *and* bolstering student retention at the same time. Respondents, and administrators in particular, explained that this is especially important in the context of diminishing state financial support and growing accountability pressures. Moreover, they argued for the importance of framing the provision of basic services as something that contributed to the school's "bottom line" by promoting enrollment and thus, collection of tuition and fees.

Quiescent Logic

Higher educational professionals who employed a *quiescent logic* saw students' basic needs insecurity as an individual issue, though they often wished that students' financial and material needs were better met. In the following quotation, the financial aid administrator sees material hardship as an important issue but one that is not resolvable through professional action.

I have students who tell me about their need for federal aid, but their need goes way beyond getting the amount of money they need to pay for tuition. If you do not have food on the table, if you do not know where housing is going to come from—I pray for them.

Although the practitioner sincerely would have liked to help, he felt it was beyond the institution's power and resources to do so. This type of emotional response was not uncommon among college leaders. For instance, a college president at another institution reported that upon hearing of a student living in his car, she cried, "You close the door and you cry." "Of course," she added, "you refer them, to the best of your ability, to the resources that are available," but she did not view a coordinated response as falling within her institution's purview.

College administrators were not the only higher education professionals with this type of response. A professor described her experience with a student falling asleep in class:

She had finished her test, but she had her head down sleeping. And when we got ready to, you know, go over the test after the others had finished, I said, you know, "Why are you so tired?" She said, "I just got off work. I am so tired." I said, "You work at night?" She said, "Yes, ma'am." She says, "Matter of fact, I work three jobs." And I'm like, "Oh, my God." This. It's just too much.

Although the professor expressed sympathy for the student in this quotation and is clearly invested in the student's well-being, she expressed exasperation because the problem was outside her control. When we asked another professor at the same institution how he can serve students facing material hardship, he simply stated, "Just hope for the best. Or give them some piecemeal advice." As such, they saw basic needs insecurity as a consequences of a student's chance misfortune, did not perceive the issue as within anyone's direct control, and indicated that one of the few responses available is to hope and pray for students in need.

Respond to make the problem go away. When professionals were faced head-on with students' material or financial problems, they often did just enough to make the problem go away. For example, when students at the same institution described immediately above were faced with a lack of childcare during class hours, they brought their children to school with them. A faculty member described the results of this lack of childcare as follows:

A few semesters ago I taught a class at 5:00 pm. I had a student who had four children, from ages eight to a baby in a carrier, and they sat outside the classroom on a bench. The door was opened and we could see the kids in the window, and I could barely teach because I was watching these children in a hallway.

The faculty member explained that the student, a father, could not afford childcare and did not have family or friends who could care for his children while he attended class. Likely in response to similar situations, students at the college created an informal, unlicensed community daycare in the campus library. A college success coach we spoke with explained, "They were bringing their babies to the library and it was kind of like a community daycare unofficially." She went on to say that "it was very scary because, you know, as an administrator I knew the liability involved, but I admired their ingenuity to try to get [it] done to be able to go to school. But you know, I was really torn." The practitioner, in this case, looked the other way, and students came up with their own creative solutions. When we inquired further about what happened to resolve the situation, she stated, "It just disappeared. So I do not know if someone did report it or just what happened to it." The care expressed by these professionals was matched by only a vague sense of the possibility of helping students. While sympathetic to students' needs, individuals with this logic preferred to look the other way and rarely took action in direct support of students' need. We found this "out of sight, out of mind" attitude common among those with a *quiescent* logic.

In some cases, professionals took more direct action on a limited, case-by-case basis, providing small-scale help for individual students. A faculty member at a different institution recounted a student's recent request for help: "[The student] said, 'I couldn't work last week 'cause I was sick. Could you give me some money for groceries and bus fare?' Now [this student] always pays me back with a little extra. So if he borrows thirty, I'll get thirty-five back. So he's a regular." The professor approached the issue individually, and his remarks suggest an informal arrangement between him and a trustworthy student under which the faculty member is compensated with interest. In this scenario, the professor accepted students' ongoing needs as real and dire and provided help. The help, however, was limited to individual cases and did not address hardship systemically even though college leaders at this institution tended to take a more systemic approach to basic needs insecurity.

Cautious Logic

A number of study participants expressed their view that basic needs insecurity was largely a consequence of students' own poor choices and actions. A financial aid officer operating under a *cautious* logic said, "With the amount of family issues or outside issues that they have, I do not know why they are in school." When asked to describe who struggled and why, she elaborated,

> It could be children, it could be parents; we have a number of homeless students [said in a whisper]. We have students with

mental health issues . . . and just juggling things. We have a large
number of transfer students, so we have a significant amount
of students who would be considered non-traditional. Veterans,
we have a large population of veterans – there is a whole slew of
things with that population too.

Before enrolling in college, she argued, students should secure their
basic needs and resolve the "slew of things" that might inhibit college
success. These quotations suggest that addressing hardship is outside the
college's mission. Indeed, many practitioners who expressed a *cautious*
perspective often questioned a "college for all" agenda that asks colleges
"to be all things to all people" because, in their view, not all students are
"college material." Higher education professionals and institutions, in this
view, have no role in helping students to acquire the basic material re-
sources needed to attend and succeed in college.

While professionals with a *cautious logic* recognize the extreme level of
need among some students on their campus, they often felt that the finan-
cial aid system was inappropriate for addressing that need. They lamented
"the expansion of the loan programs" that have allowed some struggling
students to "use financial aid as their income." A financial aid officer said,
for example, that "loans are helping students to get money to do whatever
they want. . . . I think they get loans and think okay, I'm going to pay my
rent and pay my car note and pay my light bill." Such costs, she argued,
were inappropriate uses of financial aid in her opinion even though hous-
ing, utilities, and transportation are explicitly approved uses of financial
aid according to federal regulations (Federal Student Aid, 2017). Another
financial aid officer at a different institution explained his "whole idea on
loans at the community college level":

> I don't think you should have them. My last school didn't have
> them. Our *tuition* is low enough that if you had Pell grant [and
> other state or local grants], you're going to have everything taken
> care of. Why would you have student loans at a community college?

These financial aid officers' opinions directly contradict the expressed
goals and intentions of the federal financial aid system (Goldrick-Rab,
2016). Federal student loans, in addition to grants, are intended to cov-
er the *full* cost of higher education, including living expenses (Federal
Student Aid, 2017; U.S. Code 1087(II)). Several practitioners, however,
disagreed with federal regulations and expressed their belief that financial
aid should not be used to these ends, ignoring the opportunity costs as-
sociated with college attendance.

Instead of relying on loans to help make ends meet, individuals drawing on this logic expressed a desire to promote individual responsibility through work opportunities for students. As a financial aid officer told us, "our [work study] waiting list is probably five times as long as the number of students that are in the program . . . a lot of students want it and we just don't have the funding for it." This type of response was common: higher education professionals would often prefer to provide meaningful work opportunities rather than student loans. As a financial aid officer put it, "my favorite financial aid program is work study, because in my mind, that is a way that you can earn your keep," suggesting that other types of student aid do not have a mechanism for cultivating personal development.

Respond through barriers. Given the proposition that students should be materially secure without relying on the financial aid system, practitioners operating under a *cautious* logic erected barriers to financial aid resources that support college attendance. Financial aid professionals specifically discussed whether or not their institution should even offer federal student loans to eligible students. A financial aid officer stated, for example, "We knew that if we offered student loans, we would risk having a high default rate, and then you risk losing your Title IV program," referring to his institution's ability to participate in the federal financial aid program by meeting certain benchmarks, including student loan repayment rates (Federal Student Aid, 2017). In this case, the professional argued that he "knew" the risks given his student population and the fear of loan default inhibited the institution from providing federal loans to students (Cochrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2014).

Other financial aid officers who worked at institutions that participated in the federal loan program developed additional bureaucratic barriers to prevent students from taking on debt that, in the practitioner's mind, the student should not need. For instance, a professional created an administrative hurdle to student loans that was not mandatory, but *seemed* mandatory to students.

> I'm going to word it in such a way that [students] feel like its mandatory—even though it's not—that they need to do all of that. So, I'm hoping that they'll see the steps and be like, God I don't want to do all of this. Because then it's [going to] say, if you're still interested in the student loan, click here. And then they have to click again to actually get to the one request form.

To protect institutions from the potential negative ramifications of student debt, financial aid officers operating under this logic attempted to block or dissuade students from taking on debt. As such, professional service, in this logic protects the institution from students who are viewed as untrustworthy. Though many of the financial aid directors we interviewed

couched their decisions in the context of legitimate accountability pressures, none reported that their institution had been or was likely to be sanctioned over failure to meet such loan repayment benchmarks.

Indeed, professionals operating under this logic indicated that their actions were not only driven by accountability pressures but also by a desire to protect their institution's identity or reputation. For example, a financial aid officer at a four-year institution indicated her concern that some students simply sought to extract resources from the university. She stated, "I feel like we've got a bit of a revolving door," and went on to add that in, "a conversation I was having with one of my colleagues over there, she was saying, you know, 'Sometimes I feel like we've become a halfway house,'" which is place for institutionalized individuals to re-enter society. Ultimately, she described, students merely wanted resources that attending college could provide: "Well, we have students that are coming here basically for a paycheck. Financial aid has become a sort of a paycheck." Though "thankfully," she said, "[these students] are in the minority." These quotations illustrate the financial aid officer's perception that some students who seek financial aid are doing so to "game the system" rather than earn a higher education. Importantly, such remarks were not limited to the four-year sector alone. Similarly, a financial aid officer at a two-year college explained that some students seeking financial aid must make their living through criminal activity. She indicated that the college enrolled "a large population [of students] that don't work." When asked how these students get by, she said that they were, "You know, robbing pure people probably. We had a large population that got social services." In both instances, these professionals conflated poverty or low incomes with criminality.

Regardless of the exact context or motivations for this viewpoint, a *cautious* approach toward students with basic needs insecurity places responsibility squarely on individual students and consequently creates barriers to financial and material resources. Importantly, this view was not shared among all financial aid officers, though these professionals were most likely to espouse a *cautious logic*. Instead, organizational culture appears to interact with professional identity. A financial aid officer at one institution, then, may define and respond to basic needs insecurity differently than a financial aid officer at a different institution. At the same time, individuals at the same institution but in different professional roles may address material hardship differently. Findings therefore suggest that individuals behave in varied ways based on the collective of institutional spheres in which they are embedded.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examined how higher education professionals at eight broad-access public institutions understand and respond to campus basic needs insecurity. Like prior research in public policy and in other domains, we find that on-the-ground professionals have considerable latitude in how they implement initiatives and shape students' college experiences (e.g., Lipsky, 1980; Spillane et al., 2002). In particular, some financial aid officers in our study reported that they use more professional discretion now than in prior years, though extant research suggests that this latitude may be on the decline (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Our study does not examine trends over time, but we find overwhelming evidence that students' access to resources can be contingent on the particular practitioner they meet and the college at which they enroll.

Consistent with recent research in institutional logics finding that individuals combine and employ logics from multiple institutional domains (Blake, 2018; Greenwood et al., 2011; McPherson & Sauder, 2013), our findings suggest that higher education professionals draw on organizational, professional, and broader social spheres when working with students who are basic needs insecure. At the societal level, for example, we find that some practitioners draw on well-established narratives that question individuals' personal responsibility and deservingness when describing students at their colleges who are basic needs insecure (Katz, 1989; e.g., Piven & Cloward, 1971). This finding suggests that rhetorical and political efforts to equate higher education programs for low-income students with unpopular social welfare programs may be working (Bolton, 2011; Broton, 2017; Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Noah, 2013; Terkel, 2011). Additional research is needed to understand how practitioners negotiate these multiple spheres of influence and when or why they draw on different spheres to inform their daily work with students.

We additionally find that higher education professionals frame the issue and sources of basic needs insecurity differently and, in turn, develop varied reactions or responses (Benford & Snow, 2000). Specifically, those higher education professionals who operated under a *systemic logic* attributed hardship to systemic causes, blaming social forces outside student control. These practitioners consequently sought to resolve hardship by enrolling and retaining students in higher education, whether through providing access to financial resources or to other social services. These individuals saw college completion as a key mechanism by which students can overcome basic needs insecurity. Professionals who operated under a *quiescent logic* assigned blame for hardship to chance misfortune. Students facing basic needs insecurity were simply unlucky. These practitioners therefore allowed students to pursue their own solutions or addressed hardship on a case-by-case basis, since they could not systemically

overcome students' bad luck. Finally, some higher educational professionals in our study drew on a *cautious logic*. Rather than seeing a force external to students, such as systemic inequality or bad luck, as the cause of basic needs insecurity, practitioners using the *cautious logic* saw students as the source of their own hardship. As a consequence, these professionals created barriers to financial aid—and loans, in particular—that prevented students from accessing resources that could have helped them achieve their higher education goals (Cochrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2014). Such barriers protected institutions against students who otherwise might take advantage of the college, damaging its cohort default rate or its reputation.

The logics we identified, which varied both within professional groups and within institutions, mirror findings in the two prior reports on this topic (Crutchfield et al., 2016; Goldrick-Rab & Cady, 2018). In their 23-campus California State University System study, Crutchfield et al. (2016) state that five institutions systematically incorporate basic needs insecurity as a part of their university mission though most campuses respond on a "case-by-case" basis. The authors also identified a group of staff, faculty, and administrators who appear to be operating under a *cautious logic* as they questioned "the veracity or depth of the problem," suggesting "students generally have the means to meet their needs, but squander their resources" (Crutchfield et al., 2016, p. 29). Goldrick-Rab and Cady (2018), on the other hand, conducted a case study of Amarillo Community College, where the charismatic and nationally recognized president, Dr. Russell Lowery-Hart, has taken an institutional approach to fighting student basic needs insecurity (e.g., Amarillo College, 2016; Bombardieri, 2018; Lowery-Hart, 2018a, 2018b; Wyatt, 2017). Yet, not all faculty and staff share their president's *systemic* view. Some professors reported that they "worry that this approach detracts from [the college's] academic mission and the overall 'quality' of the institution" (Goldrick-Rab & Cady, 2018, p. 20). In our study, professionals operating under a *cautious logic* also expressed concerns over quality, fearing that students who are basic needs insecure might tarnish the institution's reputation. It appears, then, that even within a college that serves as a national model for systematically serving students who are basic needs insecure (Goldrick-Rab & Cady, 2018), there is variation from one higher education professional to the next.

Given the complex ways in which higher education professionals make sense of students who are basic insecure, coupled with their significant professional autonomy, efforts to promote basic needs security must explicitly consider the role of frontline workers. The design and implementation of higher education policies and programmatic initiatives is dependent on how professionals view and understand students, their needs, and the sources of their challenges.

CONCLUSION

Research that examines how colleges and state systems respond to social issues and to accountability policies is certainly important (Jaquette & Curs, 2015; Kelchen, 2018a; Miller, 2018). Yet, much of what these studies consider as organizational responses may hinge on what professionals working at colleges and universities *do* on a day-to-day basis. Our study shows that practitioners carry out their work under very different assumptions and beliefs about college students who experience basic needs insecurity. Based on their own definitions of students' problems, higher education professionals craft responses to address students' circumstances. Yet students from vulnerable backgrounds who attend college while living on the margins often have little practical choice in where to attend college or over which college professionals they encounter. Thus, it is up to higher education leaders and scholars to examine the ways in which "on-the-ground" professionals implement initiatives and the consequences of these actions for student success.

NOTES

1. Students' SES is based on their parents' education and occupations as well as the family income in 2002 and is measured by a composite score. The "low" SES group is the lowest quartile; the "middle" SES group is the middle two quartiles; and the "high" SES group is the upper quartile. Education Longitudinal Study of 2002.

2. For dependent students, the maximum federal student loan is $5,500 for freshman, $6,500 for sophomores, and $7,500 for upperclassmen; only a portion of these federal loans may be subsidized.

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APPENDIX

Explanation of Data Analysis

The data were coded in Dedoose by two authors (one author participated in the interviews and the other author did not), who read all of the interview transcripts multiple times. A research assistant, who conducted some of the interviews, also participated in initial coding of all interview transcripts. The third author engaged in memo writing and discussion of themes with the three coders, as she led all of the site visits and conducted the majority of the interviews.

First, we coded interview transcripts line-by-line for any instances relating to students' basic material needs, including "child" or subordinate codes for food insecurity and housing insecurity. For example, one participant stated, "I have students come to me all the time. They can't afford to buy lunch, they can't afford to buy—they're homeless, okay?" [codes: student material hardship, food insecurity, housing insecurity]. Another said, "Well, I think that housing and childcare are our biggest barriers" to success for students [codes: student material hardship, housing insecurity]. During analyses, all authors wrote memos or discussed how participants identified basic needs insecurity as a key student issue of concern. This illustrates that respondents recognized that their institutions serve students who are housing and food insecure.

Given participants' high level of awareness, we focused on understanding higher education professionals' depiction of and response to the problem of basic needs insecurity. We quickly identified and coded two broad types of responses: (a) something should be done to address this problem and (b) students who experience basic needs insecurity should not necessarily be in college. The "something should be done" response code included several child codes, including instances where respondents articulated that the college should intervene (e.g., "our new thing is we can put notifications on their accounts and it almost looks like a hold so students come in [to the resource center] all the time"), that an external agency should intervene (e.g., "we're personally doing a housing referral system" or "there's also the ability to connect with external partners to help bring some of those resources even if we can't provide them"), or that they did not know who should intervene or exactly how they should intervene (e.g., "so we did that on top of everything else that we were responsible for and we couldn't meet the need. There were more students who needed and there were too few of us"). These codes represented different ideas of how to respond or who is responsible for responding to the problem of campus basic needs insecurity. We then wrote memos focusing

on instances where participants described their beliefs about and inter-actions with students, in the context of students' need for money, food, housing, or social services. One participant, for example, described his belief about whether or not students should have access to loans:

> Their director knows them better than I do, and she already told me, don't give them student loans. Well I can't not give them student loans because as a college and as we're merging, I have too. So now I already know that I'm going to gain probably five hundred students that may potentially even further increase my default rate.

Once we found all instances where professionals described their inter-actions and beliefs, we saw that speakers frequently identified objects of blame in their statements. The above quotation specifically states that *students* will decrease the institution's default rate. As such, students are seen as the challenge that institution's face when addressing need. In another example, however, a financial aid officer clearly attributes blame to causes external to students:

> My perspective, and even the data shows it, is over 90 percent of our students are employed, a majority of them are first generation students as well. But you know, the income level and the need level, I mean, they're in just a little bit different place. I think they're just very hard working, more focused than I think some schools could argue because they're just coming from a little bit different place.

This quotation, rather than attributing student need to students them-selves, blames circumstances the drive students to work full-time jobs while attending school.

We therefore then began to code the objects of blame (i.e., students, soci-ety, no one/unclear) and discuss these codes in regular meetings. In these conversations, we also discussed the extent to which patterns in the data reflected organizational and professional affiliations, so we went back and re-read all of the transcripts within organizations and within professional affiliations. We identified characteristics that described each organization's culture (e.g., mission-driven) and observed some similarities within organi-zations and professionals, but also found significant variation within these groups, leading us to conclude that multiple spheres, rather than a single sphere, influence how practitioners define and address problems.

Through frequent examination and discussion, we synthesized codes and identified variation along two key dimensions: perceived locus of control and individual response based on perceived locus of control. That is, we

summarized codes into a systemic- or individual-level explanation of the problem and associated response. As Table A1 shows, respondents offered one systemic-level explanation and two individual-level explanations for the problem of basic needs insecurity: chance misfortune and poor choices. Participants' responses varied according to the perceived locus of control. Those who attributed the problem to chance misfortune or systemic issues acknowledged the need to support and assist students—either individually or systemically—depending on their definition of the problem.

Table A1. Logics by Perceived Locus of Control and Individual Response

Response	Source of Problem	
	Individual	**Systemic**
Acknowledge students need support & assistance	Quiescent Logic	Systemic Logic
Erect barriers to participation	Cautious Logic	*None*

As shown in Table A2, there was a small—but distinct—group of respondents who articulated that students who are basic needs insecure are the source of their own problems and thus, colleges should approach these students with caution and erect barriers to their full participation (e.g., "the reason to make them independent is if they can *prove* that they've been out of the house, that they've been thrown out of their house, there's violence in their house, there's policy reports, they're living in a homeless shelter, and they can prove all of this. We have to have letters. We have to have letters from documented agencies with letterheads"). Likely due to the research design, we encountered a larger group of respondents who acknowledged that students need help and assistance, but they differed in their understanding of the source of the problem (individual or systemic) and consequently, in their preferred response.

Table A2. Distribution of Dominant Logics, by Position

Logic	College Administrator	Faculty Member	Student Services Staff	Total
Systemic	17	1	20	38
Quiescent	9	5	3	17
Cautious	4			4
Total	30	6	23	59

Note that individuals may have expressed views that align with multiple logics. The table, however, presents each individual's most prevalent schema.

KATHARINE M. BROTON is an assistant professor in the Departments of Educational Policy & Leadership Studies and Sociology (courtesy) at the University of Iowa. Her research broadly focuses on sociology of education, social stratification, and education policy. She uses multiple methods to examine the role of poverty and inequality in higher education as well as policies and programs designed to minimize related disparities and promote college and socioeconomic success. Her recent work includes "Going Without: An Exploration of Food and Housing Insecurity among Undergraduates," published in *Educational Researcher* and "Hunger in Higher Education: Experiences and Correlates of Food Insecurity among Wisconsin Undergraduates from Low-income Families," published in *Social Sciences* Special Issue on Social Stratification and Inequality in Access to Higher Education.

GRAHAM N. S. MILLER is the Associate Director of Institutional Research and Assessment at Suffolk University in Boston. His research examines organizations and policy in higher education. Specifically, he explores organizational identity, organizational differentiation, and institutions' responses to public policy, especially in the context of public comprehensive colleges and universities. His recent work includes, "Merchants of Optimism: Agenda-Setting Organizations and the Framing of Performance-Based Funding for Higher Education," published in the *Journal of Higher Education* and "How organizational identity influences behavior at U.S. colleges and universities," an article forthcoming in *The Review of Higher Education.*

SARA GOLDRICK-RAB is Professor of Higher Education Policy & Sociology at Temple University, and Founder of the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice in Philadelphia, as well as the Wisconsin HOPE Lab. She is a Carnegie Fellow best known for her innovative research on food and housing insecurity in higher education and her work on making public higher education free. Her latest book, *Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream* (University of Chicago, 2016) received the 2018 Grawemeyer Award in Education.