The Role of Critical Inquiry in (Re)constructing the Public Agenda for Higher Education: Confronting the Conservative Modernization of the Academy

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INTRODUCTION

Public agendas have sprouted up across the higher education landscape, seemingly becoming the *modus operandi* for staking claim to higher educa-

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tion's significance. The public agenda, in its discrete, finite, yet increasingly ubiquitous and multiple forms can be found in federal, state, private, and academic discourse communities. At the federal level, initiatives such as the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education have attempted to set out a universal code of obligations that higher education should fulfill for the continued advancement of American society. At the state level, numerous individual states, such as Kentucky, Washington, New Mexico, and Oklahoma, have brought together legislators, policymakers, and researchers to establish the roles that higher education should assume for the well-being of the state itself.

Education and public leaders have initiated national discussions about the relationship between higher education and the public, working toward comprehensive goal-setting, expectation-building, and/or task lists that bring benefits to higher education systems and institutions that adhere to their standards. Indeed, the State Higher Education Executive Officers (2008) synthesized much of this work in their open letter to the U.S. presidential candidates when they called for increased federal support for improved educational attainment and advances in discovery and innovation. Outside the public realm, private policy centers, such as the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, have convened think-tanks to address the increasingly omnipresent calls for higher education to establish an agenda for working with, and ostensibly for, the public. Finally, academic associations, such as the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), have become acutely interested in public agendas, as seen in its 2007 annual meeting theme, "Informing the Public Agenda for Higher Education." Clearly, some policymakers, practitioners, and scholars are working hard to make public agendas and higher education fast friends.

We enter this discourse with trepidation. It seems that the wholesale embrace of a public agenda for higher education has gone unquestioned, unchecked, and uncritically investigated in mainstream and dominant academic circles. This observation surfaced for us at the ASHE conference in Louisville, Kentucky, in November 2007, where dissent from the push for public agendas was nearly absent and the call for papers failed to include questions that stemmed from a critical and interpretive analysis of higher education. In this article, we question the dominant discourse of public agendas for higher education and apply a critical inquiry lens to add an emancipatory layer to this complex process and to make our own critical contribution to the production of public agendas for higher education. Specifically, we explore the question: "What is the role of critical inquiry in (re)constructing a public agenda for higher education?"

We begin with a brief overview of the contemporary context of public agendas. We make note of their longstanding histories in American higher

education and their current instantiation in late capitalism's globalized and transnational socio-political context. We introduce Michael Apple's concept of conservative modernization (2006a) to frame this context, which leads us to a brief deconstruction of the "the public" and "the public good" as they are entwined with the public agenda for higher education. We then bring critical inquiry to bear on two contemporary examples of public agendas[1]: (a) *Setting a Public Agenda for Higher Education in the States,* a report by Gordon Davies (2006), and (b) the U.S. Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). We conclude our essay with recommendations for how public agendas might be (re)constructed within a critical framework, providing a strategy to disrupt hegemonic practices of higher education and transform the mutually constitutive relations between higher education and the public.

THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT OF PUBLIC AGENDAS

Public agendas are not novel to the history of higher education. Indeed, rather than original contributions to the construction of relations across social institutions (i.e., the university and the public), contemporary versions of public agendas are more likely the vogue of higher education policy. Previous instantiations of an agenda relating the public to the university include the public charters that authorized the creation of many of the first American colleges and universities (see, e.g., Kezar, 2004), the Morrill Act of 1862 establishing the nation's land-grant colleges, and more recently, the California Master Plan for Higher Education (California State Department of Education, 1960) establishing the role(s) and functions of California's public (and to an extent, its private) higher education institutions in relation to their service for the broader California politic. Each of these efforts sought to establish guidelines, criteria, and key objectives for higher education in relation to a public context. Still, even if today's public agendas, in their local, state, national, and federal instantiations are not new, there is something markedly particular about them.

The contemporary revival of public agendas is not void of political, social, and cultural context. Quite the contrary. From our critical perspective, higher

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[1]We acknowledge that many individual states have generated their own state-based versions of public agendas, yet we do not engage them in this article. Rather, we feel that the critical discussion of state-based public agendas for higher education has already begun, and our purpose in this article is to disrupt the broader national discourse of public agendas, troubling the assumptions that guide them and exposing the potential effects that emerge from them. For a deeper engagement with individual states' public agendas for higher education, see, for example, Shurlock (2006).

education is engaging and being engaged with the public against a very spe-
cific socio-political backdrop characterized by the increasingly globalized and
transnational social relations that mark any social production and exchange
(Bruna, 2007; Suárez-Orozco, 2006). Simultaneously, dominant forces of late
capitalism continue to be driven by the Americanization of commerce across
the globe (Gonzalez & Fernandez, 2003). Education, including higher educa-
tion, is in a reactionary state. More specifically, the contemporary context of
public agendas for higher education and educational discourse in general
springs forward from a European-American socio-political context marked
by paradigmatic forces of neoliberalism, neoconservatism, authoritarian
populist religious conservatism, and managerialism (Apple, 2000, 2006a,
2006b). Cumulatively, these forces contribute to what Michael Apple (2006b)
has called "conservative modernization":

> a new hegemonic bloc . . . a very creative articulation of themes that resonate
> deeply with the experiences, fears, hopes, and dreams of people as they go
> about their daily lives . . . integrated . . . with racist nativist discourses, within
> economically dominant forms of understanding, and within a problematic
> sense of "tradition." (pp. 27-28)

The effects of conservative modernization, according to Apple, can be seen
in the persistent achievement and attainment gaps between dominant and
nondominant cultural communities. Indeed, this achievement and attainment
gap provides one of the motivating criteria for many of the contemporary con-
structions of public agendas. Yet as we hope to expose in our analyses, many
of these public agendas—purporting to reunite higher education institutions
with their publics and their social contracts, and to celebrate their potential
for uplifting society in times of struggle and strife—counterintuitively oper-
ate to exacerbate the unequal and hegemonic social relations that mirror and
perpetuate the state of conservative modernization.

CONSERVATIVE MODERNIZATION

Conceptually, conservative modernization signifies a hegemonic bloc of
social forces that collude to effect conservative changes in education. Effec-
tively, this hegemonic bloc forms a movement to sustain the dominant power
structure and exacerbate social inequalities, under the guise of rhetoric that
espouses "freedom" and purports the values of meritocracy. Temporally, con-
servative modernization represents a contemporary condition of education
wherein conservative agendas rule and progressive agendas are illegitimate.
Conservative modernization can be understood as the era in which education
finds itself today. As a framework for understanding the social contexts of
public agendas and for deconstructing their potential consequences, conser-

vative modernization must be understood by its formative dimensions: its outcomes, strategies for achieving them, and colluding constituents.

The state of conservative modernization is marked by its desired and achieved outcomes, particularly the discourses it makes available for understanding education and its role in society. Conservative modernization shifts the social foundations of education to be primarily economic. Students serve as both consumer and product, albeit in different forms. One purpose of education is to serve the economic interests of society by producing future workers with what has been named, "twenty-first century skills" (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2001; Zemsky & Cappelli, 1998) to succeed in the knowledge economy of the global marketplace. As such, education becomes a tool for class warfare, premised on a need for students to learn "real knowledge"—the content of which is based solely in a Western European frame of reference. Further, knowledge is considered "real" only if it can be parlayed into an economic contribution for the public good (i.e., home economics and the arts do not count). Social reproduction becomes a guarded and trusted function of education, based on desires to protect one's social status and to reward individualism. The protectionist and individualist values that in many ways fuel conservative modernization reinscribe racist, sexist, and classist human relations, justified by particular religious convictions and effectively curbing freedom for entire cultural communities, often demarcated along racial and ethnic lines.

Ultimately, conservative modernization serves to undermine certain conceptions of democracy and freedom in education and supplant them with conceptions that serve the ruling classes and their private interests. Freedom in the era of conservative modernization is envisioned as "a modernized economy of stimulating desire and giving individual choice . . . combined with a set of backward-looking visions . . . closer to supposedly traditional Western values and to the God that established them" (Apple, 2006a, p. 14). Democracy in the era of conservative modernization becomes nearly synonymous with and at least dependent on capitalism. In sum, the educational goal of conservative modernization is to support a "rightist" agenda for education in which privileges are secured for White middle- and upper-class persons with the values, beliefs, and cultural practices concomitant to sustaining the power relations that allow such inequality to continue unchallenged. Of course, all of these outcomes are realized in ways that cloak these perverse ideals as actually promoting and fostering equality (Apple, 2006a; Gotanda, 2004).

Conservative modernization succeeds in these goals by strategically developing and executing educational reforms that allow for conservative values to be legitimated over progressive formulations of education. Chief among these reforms are the privatization and marketization of education

(Apple, 2006a). Access and opportunity must be released to the free market to affix quality to the product and equality to the consumer, both of which happen to take form in the student. The student serves as the subject of the educational enterprise when she or he exercises free choice over the type of education she or he receives, and then becomes the object when undergoing that treatment, emerging as an enterprising worker to contribute productively to the economy. The best way to create the educational market is to privatize it, removing government's responsibility for ensuring its success and sustainability.

Yet government is required to play an integral role in dictating what counts as a worthwhile education (Apple, 2006a). The product (student) must be shaped into an enterprising individual, and the surest way to do this is to exercise authority over what counts as "good knowledge." The best, or truest, knowledge is that which restores cultural order (Apple, 2006a, Denzin & Giardina, 2006, 2008). To sell this concept of education, it must be reframed in language that attracts a diverse set of identities, all of which can rally around critiques that seem self-evident in almost any personal experiences with the educational enterprise. According to Apple, and as empirically shown by a growing number of theorists, especially those drawing on Critical Race, Queer, and Indigenous frameworks, changing the frame of education to subvert the interests of the many in support of the few by appealing to the sensitivities of all nearly universally relies on fostering fears of the Other, which in turn reinforces protectionist tendencies and values of social reproduction (Blumenfeld & Raymond, 2000; Brayboy, 2005; Butler, 1990/1999; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Deloria, 1988; herising, 2005; Honeychurch, 1996; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Smith, 1999; Yosso, 2006a).

As a movement, conservative modernization relies upon loose, yet mutually reinforcing, alliances among four political groups that make up the dominant "rightist" ideologies. These groups include neoliberals, neoconservatives, authoritarian populists, and the new middle class—professionals and managers with the expertise to keep the administrative systems running that sustain conservative reforms (Apple, 2006a). To be clear, these four political groups are each formed by shared beliefs in the economic, social, and/or cultural values that should govern society. Although not mutually exclusive, these four groups are not wholly congruent in the values they privilege in their worldviews. Indeed, there are tensions among all of them. It is the ways by which they work through these tensions to form their alliances that give rise to the state of conservative modernization that permeates higher education today. For clarity, we provide the following definitions of these key terms that are integral to understanding conservative modernization as a framework for critically examining public agendas in higher education.

Neoliberalism calls for a weak state in which goals for social life can be met by free market policies. Private enterprise reigns supreme to ensure maximum

choice for individuals (McChesney, 1998). As Apple (2006a) concludes, "Neo-liberalism transforms our very idea of democracy, making it only an economic concept, not a political one" (p. 15). *Neoconservatism,* in contrast, relies on a strong state (Hunter, 1988; Williams, 1977). Government is called upon to enforce the cultural order of society, which should resemble as closely as possible (a somewhat romanticized notion of) the Western tradition. Values of discipline, punishment, and constraint are assumed to bring order and organization to human relations, which in turn protect individual freedoms (Bennett, 1988, 1994; Larrain, 1996). Government protects what is sacred about the state—the shared values that hold it together.

Authoritarian populism affirms the religious convictions of a growing number of conservative constituents. God, and in particular, the Christian God, dictates the values that individuals should uphold to live meaningful and productive lives (Apple, 2006a; Nord, 1995; Vryhof, 2004). God is the authority over the human population. *Managerialism,* represented by the new middle class of administrators and other midlevel professionals with bureaucratic expertise, develops and keeps running the systems that sustain the efforts of neoliberals and neoconservatives (Apple, 2006a, Clarke & Newman, 1997; Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996). Afforded a certain amount of privilege that makes life comfortable for them, they seek to protect these privileges for their families. Therefore, even if more socially progressive than conservative, they can be called on to support policies that are seen as ensuring that their privileges will be passed on to their children and that the comfort of their families will remain intact.

These political groups exist in tension over their imagined future society and the roles that education should play in creating it. Strategic alliances between and across these interests allow them to work through these tensions, examples of which will follow later in our analyses of the public agenda for higher education. It is in the resolutions of these tensions that the hegemonic bloc called conservative modernization effectively takes hold and in which the neoliberal, neoconservative, authoritarian populist, and managerial interests collude to fundamentally reframe and reshape education within a "rightist" agenda.

At stake in the era of conservative modernization are the purposes, roles, functions, and outcomes of American higher education in society. Indeed, as our critical analyses will show, the imagined future society in which higher education is constitutively embedded will be shaped by the effects of conservative modernization and the ways in which critical scholars, practitioners, and policymakers confront the conservative modernization of the academy. As Apple (2006a) puts it, "Who we are and how we think about our institutions are closely connected to who has the power to produce and circulate new ways of understanding our identities" (p. 8). Our focus in this article is to demonstrate how contemporary public agendas serve as instantiations of

conservative modernization. Our purpose is to disrupt these instantiations by using critical inquiry to (re)construct the public agenda and enable paradigmatic shifts to occur in the imagining of higher education's relationships within society, to the public.

"THE PUBLIC" IN THE ERA OF CONSERVATIVE MODERNIZATION

Before moving into our deep analysis of public agendas, we feel compelled to deconstruct and make problematic the concepts of "the public good" and "the public" themselves, taking a brief historical overview of how the public good has come about in what we are calling the Era of Conservative Modernization. In some ways, the dissonance between perspectives about the private good versus the public good has not changed much over time. Public agendas for higher education have historically included a mix of private and public goods. For more on the distinctions that higher education makes for the public and/or private good, see Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP), 1998; Kezar, Chambers, & Burkhardt, 2005; Pasque, 2007, 2010.

In *Scholarship for the Public Good: Living in Pasteur's Quadrant,* Ramaley (2005) reminds us that the struggle for shared goals of higher education goes back to contested values addressed by the ancient Greeks. For example, the Sophists believed that education was to prepare a person, through rhetoric and other skills, to engage in public affairs. Plato and Socrates, on the other hand, believed that education was to guide the student in understanding truth and beauty in the human experience. Aristotle stated, "Not being self-sufficient when they are isolated, individuals are so many parts[,] all equally depending on the whole which alone can bring self-sufficiency" (quoted in Parker, 2003, p. 3). In his writings, Aristotle privileges education to create and sustain his notion of this "whole" of public society. Further, Aristotle was one of the few classical thinkers about democracy to explicitly talk about three spheres of human activities, the *oikos* (private), the *ekklēsia* (public), and the *agora* (the overlapping of the *oikos* and *ekklēsia)* The *oikos* consists of the family household, a domain where, in principle, political power should never intervene. The term *ekklēsia* is the site of political power, or "the public/public domain" (Castoriadis, 1997, p. 7). The *agora* is the public meeting place comparable to the Italian *piazza.* This domain is where community members come together freely to discuss business matters, establish contracts, buy books, and perform other daily chores. The a*gora* is the intersection of the public and private spheres.

In a more contemporary context, Carlos Fuentes (2005) theorizes a third sector of society, the social sector, which is separate from, but in some ways a hybrid of, the public and private sectors of civil society. Fuentes writes from an international/global perspective, while situating his concerns in his experiences as Mexico's leading scholar of letters in the late twentieth century.

According to Fuentes, "The third sector—the social sector—can play a critical role by building bridges between the public and private sectors, by putting an end to pointless antagonisms, by advocating the compatibility of collective interests and by acting on its own in areas that the other two sectors cannot occupy, describe, or even, occasionally, imagine" (p. 52). Fuentes argues that neither the state nor private enterprise can take care of all of society's needs, especially as long histories and traditions have sought to control the constitution of these needs (primarily through colonization), and have dramatically failed to do so with dire and dehumanizing consequences. Fuentes asserts, "Public interest does not have just one champion. Increasingly, solidarity and the desire to participate enable the creation, across the board, of non-governmental organizations whose work could very well be as important as the efforts of government and private enterprises" (p. 54).

A further distinction has been made between public–private society by C. Wright Mills (1959) who wrote on the promise of social science in addressing the relationships between social institutions and private individuals. Mills distinguished between personal troubles that "occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relations with others . . . those limited areas of social life of which he is directly and personally aware" (p. 8) and social issues "that transcend . . . the individual and . . . have to do with the organization of many such milieux into the institutions of an historical society as a whole" (p. 8). The role of social science, according to Mills, was to elaborate on the relationships between these two constructs in social life. From a critical perspective, Mills's historic distinction reminds us that, even as we strive to focus on developing the third sector, the *agora*, or any other hybrid site of social life, as *any* constructed relationship with higher education must inhabit, we must be vigilant in attending to the ways that social issues manifest as individual troubles—affecting real people with real lives who are dealing with real problems. Conversely, we are empowered to move from a personal trouble and retrace its genealogy to learn about its relation to broader social issues. Mills's contributions make it clear that social science has a stake in this discussion. As a nod to history, we take his ideas as a point from which to extend and disrupt the conversation.

Policymakers have also included conversations about "who" with the "public" should have access to education. For example, some early scholars felt that higher education should be available for every recognized citizen, while others felt that it should be provided only to the elite. Thomas Jefferson stated in 1787 that the only way to preserve liberty is to "educate and inform the whole mass of the people" (quoted in Barber, 1998, p. 183). Here, the strength of the American public good lies with education; however, it is important to note that in Jefferson's time, references to the "masses" excluded people across race, ethnicity, class, and gender. Also in the 18th century, Adam Smith (1776/1900) introduced the concept of the "invisible hand"

whereby the public good is achieved most efficiently through individuals acting in their own private interest. Smith's invisible-hand theory is utilized today as an argument for private, individual benefits leading to the public good (Crook, 2005).

This "private good" perspective has endured and today serves as a cornerstone of conservative modernization. From this perspective, educating the private individual will contribute to the public good through an increase in economic growth, thereby defining the public good as local, state, and national economic vitality. The primary argument is to sustain resources such as the continued government subsidization of colleges and universities, so that individuals may participate in higher education, which will, in turn, influence the public good. This approach is reminiscent of a traditional input-output model, which emphasizes educating individual people (input) who then work to increase the national, state, and local economies (output). This private-good approach is markedly distinct from that of scholars who argue that higher education is not a public good but who see any public benefit solely as a byproduct of a private, individual benefit (Friedman & Friedman, 1980; also see, for example, Bloom, Hartley, & Rosovsky, 2006). In addition, economic rationalists believe that the national economy will suffer if higher education does not privatize research to protect its own interests (Brown & Schubert, 2000; Currie & Newson, 1998). From this perspective, higher education is the "engine of growth" for the economy (Becker & Lewis, 1993).

This "private good" perspective is distinct from a "public good" perspective where higher education's primary role is to educate students to participate in a diverse society. This achievement will contribute to society in a positive manner. Further, principles of democratic education, community, and exemplary teaching pedagogy simultaneously help educators develop students for effective civic participation in a pluralistic society (Campus Compact, 2004; Cantor, 2003, 2007; Guarasci & Cornwell, 1997; Rosenstone, 2003).

It is important to note that a number of scholars argue that there is a mutual interdependence between the public and private goods of higher education; the point at which one ends and the other begins is blurred. The authors describe a crisis in higher education where action from leaders is needed to shift the focus of higher education from a capitalistic, market-driven emphasis to one that better serves the public good. In this rhetoric, "the public" is inclusive of all in our global and local communities (Giroux & Giroux, 2004; Kezar, 2005; Labaree, 1997; Parker, 2003; Pitkin & Shumer, 1982; Rhoades & Slaughter, 2004). Most scholars with this perspective identify an economic neoliberal view—supporting the marketization of higher education—as a problem. The scholars fear that, if there is not a change in how stakeholders perceive and act upon higher education's relationship with society, then higher education will be increasingly perceived as a private good, or a commodity.

We argue that it is not from the "public good" or the "interdependent" worldview that contemporary public agendas are conceptualized and furthered. It is from a private-good, conservative modernization perspective that public agendas are framed. From this understanding, we assert that, in this the era of conservative modernization, what was chartered as a public good becomes controlled (economically) by private enterprise and private economic interest. What was developed socially as goods/services for private citizens becomes socially the domain of the public. Speaking directly to our primary topic of concern in this article, the public agenda for higher education, we borrow from Potts and Brown (2005) to make explicit the following point:

> A topic may be readily converted into a research question with little regard for the political and epistemological implications of posing such a question in a particular way. In anti-oppressive research . . . we contemplate the possible effects of asking a particular question as opposed to other questions, and strive to unearth our assumptions about people, relationship, power, and knowledge that are embedded in each of the ways that we might construct the question. (p. 266)

As already mentioned, in this article we utilize critical inquiry to (re)construct contemporary public agendas to foster paradigmatic shifts in the imagining of higher education's relationships within society, to the public.

Critical Inquiry and the Discourse of Public Agendas

Our inquiry is set against a methodological backdrop that understands, as Ladson-Billings (2006) stated, "The work that we do must be in the public interest. We cannot hide behind notions of neutrality or objectivity when people are suffering so desperately" (p. 10). Furthermore, we write our inquiry in observance of a call for the promotion, participation, and engagement in cultural democracy fostered through education (Banks, 2006), which remains one of the most critically important ideas circulating in progressive discourses of education today.

In methodologically framing our analyses under critical inquiry, we want to make clear the differentiation we make between critical *inquiry* and the broader social theory known as Critical Theory. We take a cue from Carspecken (1996):

> Those of us who openly call ourselves "criticalists" definitely share a value orientation. We are all concerned about social inequalities, and we direct toward positive social change. . . . Up to the present however, criticalists have not really shared a methodological theory. Methodological theories provide the principles by which to design a research project, develop field techniques, and interpret data. Only quite recently have efforts been made to describe critical methodology, and the authors of these efforts do not completely agree with each other. (p. 3)

As such, we entered the analytical endeavor reported herein while holding firmly to a summation we have made elsewhere: *Employing a critical theory framework does not necessarily translate into a research design that adheres to a critical methodology* (Carducci, Contreras-McGavin, Kuntz, & Pasque, 2006; Carducci, Gildersleeve, Kuntz, & Evans, 2005). As such, our use of Critical Theory is where our (subaltern) perspectives on public agendas began; our use of critical inquiry is the mode of our analytical work presented in this article. We affirm critical inquiry as an important methodological approach for the examination of the public agenda phenomenon in contemporary American higher education. In delineating critical inquiry, as a methodological tradition, we borrow from Rossman and Rallis (2003), who hold that critical inquiry relies on four primary assumptions:

- Research fundamentally involves issues of power.
- The research report is not transparent, but rather is authored by a raced, gendered, classed, and politically oriented individual.
- Race, class, and gender [among other social identities] are crucial for understanding experience.
- Historically, traditional research has silenced members of oppressed and marginalized groups. (p. 93)

In this sense, critical inquiry draws from and contributes to other theoretical orientations that took shape in the postmodern era. Perspectives such as Feminist Theory, Neo-Marxism, and Postcolonial Theory share with critical inquiry an interest in working to disrupt the normative status quo through ongoing social analysis, critical engagement, and application of micro-level practices with the aim of progressive social change. Like principal tenets of poststructuralism, critical inquiry recognizes that discursive framing has material effects. Consequently, contemporary productions of public agendas in education both reveal normative social biases and implicate our daily material practices in the world. Thus it is that critical inquiry has informed our choice to examine instantiations of the public agenda, our methodological investigations into the agendas themselves, *and* our determination to open possibilities—newly critical spaces for a renewed understanding of the relation between educational systems and the public.

Our decision to examine the discourse of public agendas through the lens of critical inquiry reflects our distinct methodological positioning as researchers committed to recognizing the emancipatory imperative of educational scholarship—that is, research should happen for, by, and in collaboration with social change (Brown & Strega, 2005; Carducci, Contreras-McGavin, Kuntz, & Pasque, 2006; Carducci, Gildersleeve, Kuntz, & Evans, 2005; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Tate, 2006). Thus, when examining the production and construction of social texts, like public agendas, which presumably seek to effect change in the social institutions that sustain our

ways of life, critical inquiry is not simply a shared value orientation but is rather a system of critical assumptions about how research can happen and the purposes toward which it should seek to participate. We use critical inquiry to answer Patti Lather's (2004) call "for critical readings of current policy and direct engagement in policy forums—putting critical theory to work" (p. 759).

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) provides the tools to analyze public agendas for higher education from a critical inquiry perspective when placing it against the backdrop of conservative modernization. These tools offer ways to explore what is said (content), how it is said (process), and the implications of what is said (Johnstone, 2002; Trenholm & Jensen, 1992).

Specifically, Fairclough (2001) describes CDA as a way of studying "how language figures in social processes" (p. 229). With this connection between language and social processes come areas within which social life is produced, such as social identities, means of production, economics, cultural values, political and social relationships, and consciousness. The focus of this particular analysis is the way in which public agenda discourse shapes the social processes between higher education and the public. According to Fairclough (2001), CDA is *critical* because it

> seeks to discern connections between language and other elements in social life which are often opaque. These include: how language figures within social relations of power and domination; how language works ideologically; the negotiation of personal and social identities (pervasively problematized through changes in social life) in its linguistic and semiotic aspect. Second, it is critical in the sense that it is committed to progressive social change; it has an emancipatory "knowledge interest" [the phrase quotes Habermas, 1971] (p. 230)

CDA relates to this analysis of public agendas in that it explores multiple dimensions of discourse and simultaneously acknowledges power and domination, considers the ideological perspectives of authors, and explores the complexities of power in a socio-political context. Further, it offers a critical lens with which to view the wide-range implications of the agendas on multiple dominant and nondominant cultural communities.

As Cameron (2001) explains, CDA is concerned with the "hidden agenda" of discourse, or its "ideological dimension" (p. 123) where choices about discourse are viewed, not as random, but as ideologically patterned. This concept connects to our policy agenda analysis, which uncovers the patterned ideological patterns and implications of the authors of those agendas. For example, the identities and ideologies portrayed in the agendas were imbued with the knowledge of, or the interpretation of, the authors' experiences of

academic and national cultural dispositions (Pelikan, 1992) toward higher education and society. Our article also explores the ideological positions of authors through identifying emergent patterns in the discourse. Specifically, this methodological approach utilizes an iterative research process of reading, writing, reflecting, and analyzing with research colleagues.

More pointedly, the field of higher education is itself extremely context specific, is situated in a continually shifting and evolving historical context, reflects the identities and ideologies that authors construct for themselves, and is shaped within reciprocal relationships among authors of the national agendas and the people who are influenced by those agendas. It is for these reasons that we chose critical discourse analysis for this article. We believe that this is the lens best suited to productively understand national agendas and their implications. Further, critical theory always tries to move beyond the theoretical realm to create concrete social change (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). This critical discourse approach has the potential to shed new light on a topic not often discussed in or out of the academy: the power dynamics and ideologies of authors who argue for a coherent national agenda for higher education.

By exploring the broader question "What is the role of critical inquiry in (re)constructing a public agenda for higher education?" we disrupt normative (hegemonic) understandings of the contexts of public agendas, the process of pulling them together, and their purported purpose and implementation. We do this by critically engaging with two public agenda efforts: (a) *Setting a Public Agenda for Higher Education in the States* (Davies, 2006) and (b) *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education. A Report of the Commission Appointed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings* (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Our critical engagement reveals that the discourse of public agendas for higher education in the currently popular context is inherently hegemonic and is based on neoliberal and neoconservative assumptions of social life. This discourse perpetuates dominant social relations and reinscribes oppressive educational practices. When applying critical inquiry, we call into question and find possibilities for transforming the material practices of public higher education policy.

Setting a Public Agenda for Higher Education in the States

Setting a Public Agenda for Higher Education in the States (hereafter referred to as the Davies Report) summarizes lessons learned from a collaborative project between the Education Commission of the States, the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, and the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (Davies, 2006). The specific goal of this collaboration was to "help states improve higher education performance by assisting with [the] examination of state higher education policies and with establishing broad agreement around statewide priorities for improvement"

(p. iv). In the end, five states (Missouri, Rhode Island, Virginia, Washington, and West Virginia) formally participated in the collaboration, while seven other states participated informally (Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Nevada, North Dakota, South Carolina, and Tennessee). The overarching goal of the Davies Report was to provide advice based on the collaborative experience "to states interested in gaining broad agreement around a new agenda for higher education that is grounded in performance in the state and directed toward meeting the needs of state residents" (p. iv). Key to our critical reading of this report are the ways in which it asserts a particular worldview, framing a discussion of "lessons learned" within an assumed social context of globalization. Though the promising practices discussed throughout the report are meant to be implemented specifically at the state level, the introductory sections of the report clearly delineate a social context that extends beyond state boundaries, implying the relevance for reading the report against a backdrop of both national and global contexts.

The actual "lessons learned" that stem from the Davies Report are, by themselves, relatively benign. The report offers seven lessons for consumption: (a) Setting a public agenda for higher education requires sustained leadership; (b) Data analysis is a critical first step; (c) Policy issues overlap and extend beyond higher education; (d) The face of America is changing; (e) Every state needs its own public agenda; (f) State relationships with higher education are changing; (g) Performance incentives in the state budget have to align with the public agenda (pp. 10-17). Consequently, we, as critical inquirists intent on effecting change at the level of policy, might shift the focus away from the actual "lessons learned" of the report to the cultural and social frames in which the report is situated. That is, perhaps progressive change is to occur not by addressing and deconstructing the specific lessons that the report offers but within a framing that encourages particular *interpretations* of such lessons. A primary assumption of critical theory and critical inquiry is that framing is an ongoing process—one that reifies meaning through discursive repetition. As a result, positive change might come about through a critical evaluation of the framing that the Davies Report offers, merged with an articulated reframing that sets the report's suggestions against a new backdrop—one that reinterprets key terms such as "globalization," "data," and "the public."

Structurally, one of the more significant aspects of the Davies Report is the establishment of a contemporary social context that spells out the need for the report itself and the best practices it presents. Early on, the report constructs a hyper-globalized world in constant transition and full of external threats as the pace of technological advancement threatens to overtake, overwhelm, and overthrow the sovereignty of tertiary education in the United States. In the end, the Davies Report plays on the collective social anxiety of

being conceptually left behind in the current context of globalization, thus justifying its recommendations for specific change in higher education.

Through anchoring the report in a neoliberal discourse, Davies (2006) implies that ongoing change is a necessary means by which social institutions must respond to the globalized world. According to the report, the United States needs to act, to move, because it is being challenged "technologically, scientifically, and economically" (p. 1). In response to this challenge, the report claims, "US residents are becoming more aware that globalization will be beneficial only if we are not passive about it—only if we behave as if this is not a matter of 'letting the good times roll'" (p. 1). Such claims invoke rather layered meanings. First, the inclusion of the awareness of "U.S. residents" as a justification for change in our educational system presents the report's first definition of "the public." Here, the rhetorical strategy is to make claims on behalf of all U.S. citizens. In this sense, the diverse populations of the United States are drawn together by a shared awakening to the context of globalization. Second, the appropriate response to the perils of globalization is to take action; we can benefit from globalization only if we actively play a role in relation to it, perhaps even contributing to it. Rather than "letting the good times roll," the U.S. public needs to "roll with the times" and take part in the rapid transitions that globalization implies.

Of course, failing to act, to move, and to change in some manner as a response to the threats from abroad has potentially significant consequences:

> Educational achievement in the United States has stagnated over the last two decades. If we do not address this issue in the next several years, the educational advancement of other nations compared with the United States may change both the way we live and the freedoms we enjoy. (p. 1)

Here, Davies clearly plays on a cultural anxiety of losing our freedoms to a threat emerging outside our borders. Thus, the suggestions of the report stem from a desire to protect—to propel to action to save "both the way we live and the freedoms we enjoy." This call to protectionism appeals to neoconservative nostalgia, which assumes that the American way of life has been better in previous times and is constantly under threat today. Further, as states individually follow the suggestions of the report and develop their own public agenda for higher education, their individual efforts create a collective—and nationwide—response to the stagnation of educational achievement throughout the entire country. Though the threat from abroad is often unnamed in this report (much like the ill-defined threat of "Communism" that is characteristic of many propaganda films of the 1950s), the report does name "two emerging economic giants" to be feared, China and India (p. 1). Nevertheless, one might recognize the particularly xenopho-

bic tendencies that this report plays upon to establish a context for urgent change out of which the report offers its suggestions. Perhaps more specifically rendered, the Davies Report posits its suggestions as responding to an inevitable context of globalization, one which necessitates specific changes to our educational systems or else we will collectively remain *acted upon* by the forces of globalization, instead of *acting within* a globalized world. Positioning forces of globalization in this way harnesses populist fundamentalist notions of national sovereignty, making globalization a threat to Americans' rights as God-fearing people.

This entire backdrop frames the suggested promising practices as a degree of hope and vision amid otherwise bleak realities. To return to the report's notion of "the public," it is clear that Davies speaks to a public devised and bound by both national boundaries and a collective anxiety of globalization. Such visions of the public remain insular, needing to simultaneously respond to, and be protected from, globalization.

The rest of the report continues the sense of urgency, a feeling that, if the United States does not keep up with the pace of globalization, it will fall behind and be dominated by it: "To ensure that we succeed, both the federal government and the states need to develop new public agendas for higher education, and they need to act with urgency because the world is changing rapidly" (p. 6). Finally, the introductory portion of the report submits that tertiary education is "indispensable" in "our complex, technologically sophisticated society" because it develops "human potential" and "contributes substantially to the public good" (p. 6). Though many of us might concur with such assumptions to a degree, these statements paint a particularly alarming picture when set against the backdrop in the report's first few pages (noted above). How are we to read "human potential" and the "public good" in relation to the anxiety about globalization and technological change with which the report begins? One might surmise that perpetuating a managerial middle class is the only way to sustain democracy. Therefore, increasing human potential not only relies on the skills of the new managerialists but also works to secure their position in society.

Critically engaging with the positioning of globalization as an object of collective anxiety that, for example, challenges the safety and sovereignty of the United States potentially changes the ways in which we read the state-based conclusions of the Davies Report. Might such reframing change key terms of the seven lessons and thereby the very implementation of the report itself? If we refuse to accept the interpretive worldviews laid out in the introduction of the Davies Report, we perhaps change the way in which the lessons of the Davies Report are known. Conveniently, key terms within the Davies Report remain undefined, relying on culturally assumed understandings of the very concepts that sustain its "lessons learned." Such terms find definition within

the cultural contexts of hyperglobalization, analyzed above. Thus, shifting frames necessarily alters the meanings asserted by select terms; out of new frames, new meanings are possible. We might, for example, come to a different understanding of *leadership* (a key term in suggestion #1) that draws meaning, not from the protectionist and individualist values emblematic of conservative modernization, but from a more localized, collaborative understanding of what it means to lead in alternative circumstances. Similarly, *data analysis* remains a key aspect of the report's second suggestion. How might a reframing of the Davies Report create new possibilities for what we understand as "data" and the types of analyses that can be performed on such data? In this way, deconstructing the social framing that permeates the Davies Report provides a space for critical theorists to reconstruct, to reinterpret, in ways that progressively alter policy and its implementation.

The U.S. Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education

Another contemporary higher education public agenda that instantiates the political and economic ideologies of conservative modernization is *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education,* the final report of the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The 19-member commission, established by U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings in September 2005, was charged with developing a "comprehensive national strategy for postsecondary education" (U.S. Department of Education, 2005a). The formation of this blue-ribbon panel was justified by the alarming news that the United States had slipped to 12th in higher education attainment among major industrialized countries at a time when 90% of the fastest-growing jobs require at least some postsecondary education. The secretary challenged the commission to examine the broad themes of higher education access, affordability, accountability, and productivity with the ultimate objective of offering concrete recommendations for helping America recover lost ground in the global marketplace and maximize return on public investment in higher education. Similar to our analysis of the Davies Report, a critical reading of the Spellings Commission's final report provides an opportunity to interrupt and interrogate the seemingly progressive yet ultimately oppressive "common sense" rhetoric of conservative modernization which plays on American fears of global competition as a means of advancing rightist political, economic, educational, and cultural agendas.

The neoliberal orientation of the commission's higher education agenda is expected, given Spellings's selection of Charles Miller as the commission's chair. Miller is a former Board of Regents chair for the University of Texas system and the architect of the Texas K-12 education accountability system identified as the model for the No Child Left Behind education reform,

which draws heavily upon the principles and strategies of the conservative modernization alliance (Apple, 2006a; Hursh, 2007). The remaining commissioners were drawn from corporate America (i.e., Boeing, Microsoft, IBM, and Kaplan), institutions of higher education (e.g., a number of current and retired university presidents along with three faculty members), and several nonprofit education policy groups (i.e., American Council on Education, Hispanic Scholarship Fund, The Education Trust). After a year of deliberations, the commission submitted its final report to the Secretary of Education. Endorsed by 18 of the 19 commissioners, the report presented findings related to the themes of access, cost and affordability, financial aid, transparency and accountability, innovation, and learning. In addition, the commissioners outlined six broad recommendations for improving postsecondary education: (a) establishing a national strategy for lifelong learning; (b) creating a consumer-friendly information database on higher education; (c) fostering a culture of accountability, transparency, and innovation; (d) initiating a complete overhaul of the federal financial aid system; (e) pursuing global leadership in the key strategic areas of science, engineering and medicine; and (f) embarking on unprecedented efforts to expand higher education access and success.

As one might expect, the commission's national agenda for the future of higher education has not met with unanimous support. Higher education pundits have called into the question the limited range of perspectives represented on the panel's membership roster (no student or union representation) and the commission's decision to focus exclusively on the future of undergraduate education while remaining silent on the challenges and opportunities of graduate education, community partnerships, and faculty contributions to the teaching/learning mission of higher education (American Association of University Professors, 2006; Baskin, 2007; Field, 2006; Tierney, 2006; Zemsky, 2006). Others expressed frustration with the broad nature of the commission's recommendations that offer little in the way of substance or direction and thus seem destined to collect dust on the bookshelves of college presidents and government officials (American Association of University Professors, 2006; Ashburn, 2006; Baskin, 2007; Levine, 2006). Finally, commission member David Ward, president of the American Council on Education during the time of his commission appointment and the only member of the panel who did not sign the final report, asserted that the final document established a "false sense of crisis" and blamed higher education officials and institutions for problems with multiple origins (Ward, 2006).

Though we find merit in the critiques offered by Ward and others, our critical analysis of the commission's national higher education agenda centers on an interrogation of the neoliberal constructions of education and democracy which frame the panel's vision for the future of higher education. In *A Test of Leadership,* the commissioners outline a compelling and seemingly

progressive higher education agenda (for example, calling on higher education leaders to address issues of access and affordability), yet a critical reading of the text reveals an alternate agenda which is focused on maintaining and ultimately expanding hegemonic power structures and social inequalities. Tightly intertwined with our critique of the commission's reliance on the principles of neoliberalism to frame the mission and purpose of higher education is an interrogation of the commission's seemingly empty call "for unprecedented efforts to expand higher education access and success" (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 17). Although the commission identifies improving access to higher education as a top priority of its public agenda, its rhetoric and recommendations fail to address the unique, specific, and systemic barriers encountered by students from underrepresented racial, ethnic, and language communities. This is certainly not an accidental oversight. Apple (2006a) notes that the articulation of empty "progressive" educational reforms is a hallmark of the conservative modernization alliance which frequently manipulates rhetoric and policy. The goal is to ensure that "proposals that seemingly lead to reforms that are wanted by the least powerful actors in society are instead largely used to gain legitimacy for very different kinds of agendas and policies" (p. 90). Both of these intertwined critiques of the commission's higher education agenda are elaborated below.

When the Secretary of Education convened the commission for the first time on October 17, 2005, she asked the panel to reflect upon "what we, as a nation, want from our fine system. What do we Americans expect from our shared investment in higher education?" (U.S. Department of Education, 2005b). The commission responded to these questions with the formulation of a national agenda for higher education that prioritizes the economic and workforce development missions of postsecondary education and calls upon American colleges and universities to rise to the challenge or run the risk of undermining the United States' dominant position in the global marketplace (Rhoads, 2007). Seemingly guided by what Gumport (2002) describes as a "logic of industry"—a framework concerned primarily with market forces, the commercial potential of knowledge production, and short-term economic results—the commission's findings and recommendations for higher education reform clearly establish as higher education's primary purpose the production of a skilled workforce prepared to take the lead in tackling the technological and scientific challenges of tomorrow and, perhaps more importantly, prepared to protect (or resurrect) America's economic and political global power.

Given the commission's neoliberal logic of industry, college students are first and foremost conceptualized as independent economic actors (i.e., workers, consumers) who must acquire at least some postsecondary education training to fulfill their economic destiny—providing the labor necessary to keep global capitalism's engines running smoothly (and profitably). Indeed,

Rhoads (2007) asserts: "Right from the start the commission's focus was clearly on a corporate/industrial model of higher education aimed at further vocationalizing academic study" (p. 22). A prime example of the commission's reliance on the logic of industry and the principles of neoliberalism to craft a national higher education agenda is its repeated call for the development of college curricula that match the expectations and needs of prospective employers. Specifically, the commission asserts:

> As other nations rapidly improve their higher education systems, we are disturbed by evidence that the quality of student learning at U.S. colleges and universities is inadequate and, in some cases, declining. . . . These short-comings have real-world consequences. Employers report repeatedly that many new graduates they hire are not prepared to work, lacking the critical thinking, writing and problem solving skills needed in today's workplaces. In addition, business and government leaders have repeatedly and urgently called for workers of all stages of life to continually upgrade their academic and practical skills. (p. 3)

Perceived declines in student learning are problematic not because they represent an inability to advance the critical thinking, writing, and problem-solving skills of empowered and engaged community leaders but rather because they translate into tangible economic costs that must be shouldered by government and industry. Within the commission's neoliberal frame of education, the recognition of diminishing returns on federal and corporate investment in the cultivation of capital—more specifically the human capital represented by students/future workers—demands immediate and swift action to reclaim U.S. dominance in the marketplace of global capitalism. Implicit in the call for quality student learning lie neoconservative concerns about what counts as learning. Packaging learning's value solely in its economic-return affords nostalgic and hegemonic notions of curriculum to prevail, thus potentially threatening the pluralistic vitality of fields like ethnic studies and the arts, each of which has histories of marginalization within the academy.

The development of a national plan for promoting lifelong learning is another example of a specific recommendation advanced by the commission, which seeks to address neoliberal concerns regarding the ability of higher education institutions to meet the ever-changing labor demands of the global economy via neoconservative values. The commission asserts:

> America must ensure that our citizens have access to high quality and affordable educational, learning, and training opportunities throughout their lives. . . . The plan should include specific recommendations for legislative and regulatory changes needed to create an efficient, transparent, and cost-effective system needed to enhance student mobility and *meet U.S. workforce needs.* (p. 26; emphasis ours)

As evidenced in this policy and practice recommendation, the driving engine behind the commission's agenda for higher education reform is the ever-changing labor needs of the new knowledge economy and global capitalism. Increased productivity and efficiency are the desired outcomes associated with this push to promote lifelong learning, not a commitment to the principles of personal growth, renewal, and myriad social benefits of education (IHEP, 1998). Through the expansion and deregulation of the higher education market, the commission hopes to increase higher education access and achievement which will then translate into an expanded labor market filled with skilled workers who are ready and eager to climb the ladder of economic mobility. Most of them will emerge in the managerial middle class, obtaining the security their parents hoped for them.

The commission's decision to frame higher education primarily as a tool for securing individual and thus national economic advantage in the global marketplace is a perspective consistent with the neoliberal economic agenda of the conservative modernization alliance, an agenda that frames individual economic achievement as a proxy for the collective good. In the eyes of the Spellings Commission, the nation's collective good is defined by the accumulation of wealth, power, and a competitive advantage in the ever-expanding global economy, an achievement that can be realized only by market-driven reforms of higher education. This definition meets neoconservative needs for a stronger state that enforces social order and protects the American way of life. Indeed, the commission asserts, "In tomorrow's world, a nation's wealth will derive from its capacity to educate, attract, and retain citizens who are able to work smarter and learn faster" (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. xii). As Breneman (2006) notes, "These are fine goals but it slights the non-economic, social benefits that we used to associate with higher education, including the cultivation of ethical and aesthetic capabilities, preparation for civic society and democratic government, the development of character and understanding of other cultures" (p. 2A). Indeed, conspicuously absent in the commission's agenda is an explicit recognition of what Gumport (2002) describes as the "logic of social institutions," a logic that underscores the multiple and intertwined educational, economic, social, cultural, and democratic aims of postsecondary institutions and that embraces a long-term perspective when it comes to realizing both the individual *and* collective benefits of higher education.

Individuals wishing to counter this critique of the commission's narrow neoliberal focus on workforce and economic development might cite the panel's recommendations regarding access and affordability as evidence of their efforts to craft a national higher education agenda that seeks to address the systemic issues of discrimination and inequity which continue to plague U.S. society. A critical reading of the access and affordability narrative constructed by the Spellings Commission, however, suggests that the underlying

foundation of these recommendations is not the pursuit of social justice but rather the desire to ensure that America's colleges and universities are able to fulfill the workforce demands of tomorrow (Rhoads, 2007). In the introduction to their findings regarding access, the commission acknowledges:

> Too few Americans prepare for, participate in, and complete higher education—especially those underserved and nontraditional groups who make up an ever-greater proportion of the population. The nation will rely on these groups as a major source of new workers as demographic shifts in the U.S. population continue. (p. 8)

Rather than calling for higher education reforms that address issues of access and affordability on the grounds that the perpetuation of educational achievement gaps along race, ethnicity, class, or gender lines is morally unacceptable and incongruent with the democratic values of our society, the commission focuses on the potential economic value of individuals from "underserved and nontraditional groups" and insinuates that an inability to increase higher education access and attainment for these populations will represent a failure of our economic power and national security—not a failure of our democracy. By claiming a commitment to social justice through shaping these underserved and nontraditional groups (read poor and non-White) into the economic worker bees necessary to sustain U.S. economic preeminence, the discourse constructs all subversive groups as a potential threat if left untreated by American higher education. This deeper critical reading demonstrates how authoritative populist and neoconservative agendas are met, as these perspectives seek hegemonic constructs of pluralism. The message, in short, is: "Immigrants are welcome, as long as they follow our vision for who and what they ought to be."

Our intention in making this critical reading of the Spellings Commission's national higher education agenda is not to discount the individual and national economic gains associated with higher education. These benefits are real and well documented (e.g., Baum & Payea, 2004; Becker & Lewis, 1993; Carnevale & Desrochers, 2002; College Board, 2005; Day & Newburger, 2002; DesJardins, 2003; Gottlieb & Fogarty, 2003). Rather, as critical higher education scholars, we are compelled to challenge the underlying neoliberal assumptions of the Spellings Commission agenda: that the primary and most important purpose of higher education is workforce training and economic development. Lost in the commission's vision for the future of postsecondary education is support for the important role higher education plays in advancing cultural democracy, cultivating civic engagement, nurturing creativity, appreciating diversity, and fostering social change (Banks, 2006; Breneman, 2006; Gutmann, 1999; Kezar, 2004, 2005; Rhoads, 2007). Rather than placing the needs and interests of the market at the forefront of our national higher education agenda, a vision for the future of higher education

informed by the principles and practices of critical inquiry necessitates the initiation of reform efforts that both acknowledge and seek to upend the systems of power and privilege that perpetuate the continued oppression of historically marginalized communities.

Tightly intertwined with our critique of the commission's narrow neoliberal vision regarding the purpose of higher education is our interrogation of the panel's empty call for "unprecedented efforts to expand higher education access and success" (U.S Department of Education, 2006, p. 17). As noted in the preceding section, the commission identifies improved postsecondary access for "underserved and nontraditional groups" (p. 8) as a top priority given the important role these groups will play in meeting the workforce demands of tomorrow. Yet despite the commission's trumpeted commitment to improving college access among underrepresented populations, an explicit discussion of race, ethnicity, and language is conspicuously absent from its agenda for action—an omission that seriously undermines the utility of the Spellings Commission report to serve as a blueprint for change. This is likely not an accidental oversight, however, as the conservative modernization alliance routinely uses seemingly progressive and "common sense" rhetoric to secure the support of historically oppressed groups "while simultaneously advancing key elements of the neoliberal and neoconservative agendas" (Apple, 2006a, p. 90) that seek to maintain hegemonic power structures and social inequalities.

The following excerpts from the "Recommendations" chapter of *A Test of Leadership* (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) synthesize the key elements of the commission's higher education access agenda:

1. Every student in the nation should have the opportunity to pursue postsecondary education. We recommend, therefore, that the U.S. commit to an unprecedented effort to expand higher education access and success by improving student preparation and persistence, addressing nonacademic barriers and providing significant increases in aid to low-income students.
   - A high school diploma should signify that a student is ready for college or work. States must adopt high school curricula that prepare all students for participation in postsecondary education and should facilitate seamless integration between high school and college. . . .
   - The commission strongly encourages early assessment initiatives that determine whether students are on track for college. . . .
   - The commission recommends support or initiatives that help states hold high schools accountable for teaching all students and that provide federal support for effective and timely intervention for those students who are not learning at grade level. . . .

- Students must have clearer pathways among educational levels and institutions and we urge colleges to remove barriers to student mobility and promote new learning paradigms (e.g., distance education, adult education, workplace programs) to accommodate a far more diverse student cohort. States and institutions should review and revise standards for transfer of credit among higher education institutions . . . to improve access and reduce time-to completion. Even though surveys show that most students and parents believe college is essential, numerous nonacademic barriers undermine these aspirations. Many student and parents don't understand the steps needed to prepare for college and the system fails to address this information gap. The commission calls on businesses to partner with schools and colleges to provide resources for early and ongoing college awareness activities, academic support, and college planning and financial aid application assistance. (pp. 18-19)

The strategies for improving higher education access outlined above are consistent with the neoliberal and neoconservative principles of accountability, assessment, deregulation, and increased participation of the private sector in the public sphere. What is missing from this list of recommendations, however, are strategies for improving access that challenge the social inequalities deeply ingrained in contemporary society and which require fundamental shifts in power, perspective, or resources. Thus, the access agenda mapped out by the Spellings Commission offers little guidance with respect to facilitating substantive and meaningful change.

In both the preamble and findings sections of the final report, the commission acknowledges that too few individuals from underrepresented and nontraditional groups attend college, citing data that document gaps in high school achievement, college enrollment, and degree attainment for Latina/o, Native American, African American, and low-income students. The commission does not explore specific inequities within groups (i.e., further disparities between Mexican, Cuban, and Spanish Americans). Furthermore, in its call to action, the commission fails to call on government agencies, researchers, and postsecondary institutions to explicitly examine and address the unique challenges encountered by students from historically marginalized racial, ethnic, and language groups. In the commission's recommendations for improving access, it explicitly mentions only low-income students. The decision to focus exclusively on low-income students is disappointing, though not at all surprising, as this narrow recognition is consistent with the national conservative movement to dismantle affirmative action and discount or ignore race and ethnicity altogether in higher education recruitment, enrollment, and retention policy development (Coleman, Palmer, & Winnick, 2008; Schmidt, 2007; Watson, 2007). Indeed, the commission's race-neutral—or perhaps more

accurately, race-*less*—higher education access agenda reflects the neoliberal perspective that the market, not social identities or government institutions, should determine "social worthiness" (Apple, 2006a). But the advancement of a race-neutral public agenda for improving higher education access is an empty call for reform not likely to bring about substantive, lasting, and/or socially just change; neoliberal attempts to "depoliticize" and "economize" higher education institutions through market-driven reform efforts that prioritize efficiency and merit will actually undermine the commission's access agenda due to the fact that "this very depoliticization makes it very difficult for the needs of those with less economic, political, and cultural power to be accurately heard and acted on in ways that deal with the true depth of the problem" (Apple, 2006, p. 36).

Critical race theorists contend that ideologies of color-blindness not only attempt to erase racialized differences, but also, in effect, discursively construct all students as wanting and needing to appropriate Whiteness—to be the same as the dominant (and privileged) group (Decuir-Gunby, 2006; Gotanda, 2004; Gutiérrez, 2005; Yosso, 2006b). Conceptually situated against the conservative modernization alliance, this color-blind ideology clearly serves the interests of neoliberals economically, neoconservatives socially and culturally, and authoritarian populists religiously. The logic is obvious: If there are no divisive differences between individuals, then individuals must conform to the way things are. In short, the disenfranchised need to engage in neoliberal economics (free trade and enterprise), neoconservative values of the Western tradition, and authoritarian populist views on God and religion.

Although the commission does acknowledge that access to education is "unduly limited by the complex interplay of inadequate preparation, lack of information about college opportunities, and persistent financial barriers" (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 17), the panel fails to recognize—and is therefore ill equipped to address—the root causes of educational inequity: pervasive and persistent discrimination and cyclical oppression in America's educational institutions and society at large (Anyon, 2006; Banks, 2006; Hagedorn & Tierney, 2002; Larabee, 1997; St. John, 2007; Valenzuela, 1999). Removing the higher education access barriers of inadequate preparation, information, and funding is not simply a function of mandating the adoption of high-stakes assessment initiatives or streamlining federal financial aid application and credit transfer processes. These strategies, although framed in rightist rhetoric as progressive measures aimed at increasing access to higher education, actually strengthen hegemonic power structures and reinforce social inequalities by continuing to narrowly define what counts (and therefore what can be assessed) as legitimate knowledge and by pursuing educational reform initiatives that equate efficiency with equality. Commenting on the

Right's preoccupation with high-stakes testing as a means of improving K-12 educational achievement, Apple (2006a) contends:

> The overriding attention given to that one goal—improving test scores at whatever cost—shifted attention away from the very real inequalities in resources, staff experience, tax base and support, impoverishment, lack of jobs with respect and a living wage, poor housing and health care, and so on between poor and rich districts and areas, thereby making it even harder to deal with some of the most difficult to solve causes of educational inequality. . . . When will we stop our demand for quick fixes and treat education (and educators) with the respect it deserves? Showing respect means that we stop assuming that educational reform can stand alone, that it can do it by itself, and that the answers we need can come from the part of the business community that is so enamored with bottom lines that it has lost its soul in the process. (p. 96)

Although Apple's remarks are directed at the policymakers and educators responsible for drafting the No Child Left Behind legislation, his critique of educational reform efforts is informed by the principles, aims, and strategies of conservative modernization. It is also relevant to our critical reading of the Spellings Commission's recommendations for improving higher education access. To translate the commission's call for "unprecedented efforts to expand higher education access and success" into tangible results, legislators, administrators, and education scholars must first acknowledge and then examine the complex and intertwined social, political, economic, and cultural forces that thwart the educational achievement of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. Indeed, Banks (2006) frames the pursuit of educational reform efforts that center on diversity as a "democratic imperative" given "the significant changes in the racial, ethnic, and language groups that make up the nation's population" (p. 144). Although the higher education public agenda articulated by the Spellings Commission and informed by the aims, principles, and strategies of conservative modernization falls far short of meeting this democratic imperative, the principles and scholarship of critical inquiry suggest opportunities for intervention and social transformation.

Rather than merely offering a critical reading of the Spellings Commission report, we identify our critique as a compelling point of entry for critical scholars interested in disrupting and transforming the commission's neoliberal public agenda for the future of higher education. The principles of critical inquiry are well suited for the development and dissemination of scholarship that addresses the intertwined racial, gender, language, economic, social, political, cultural, psychological, and geographic factors that shape the college-going and -completion rates of historically marginalized populations (Anyon, 2006; Gildersleeve, 2009, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999).

If the Spellings Commission is truly committed to ensuring that every student in the nation has the opportunity to pursue postsecondary education,

its recommendations for improving college access must move away from the empty promises of "our nation's egalitarian principles" (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 8) and toward the adoption of concrete policies and practices that acknowledge race, ethnicity, and language as three of the many important factors shaping educational achievement in this country (Banks, 2006). Critical scholars' commitments to interrogating power-relations, valuing the lived experiences of marginalized communities, and engaging in reflexive research practices that serve emancipatory goals expertly position them (us) to interrogate the conservative ideological principles, hegemonic power structures, and oppressive social relationships that perpetuate educational inequity in contemporary society. Building on these critical inquiry insights, legislators, educational administrators, and critical scholars can then move toward the collaborative development of educational reform efforts that recognize the complexity of the situation and frame institutions of higher education as vehicles for cultivating cultural and deliberative democracy, as well as economic prosperity.

Confronting Conservative Modernization

Our critical analysis of public agendas in the contemporary context illustrates key insights into ways that public agendas reinscribe and perpetuate dominant social relations. Specifically, in analyzing the Davies Report, we see that the socio-historical context within which public agendas assume that higher education works frames—and consequently provokes reframing—the possibilities for action. At stake in the Davies Report are concerns over who constitutes the public, what counts as good, and the quality and quantity of production that the American higher education system can sustain. While the Spellings Commission makes an overt attempt to usurp local autonomy in determining the purposes of higher education, it ultimately fails by providing only an empty agenda for access, blatantly ignoring one of its own key findings related to social justice and educational inequality. The effect is a managerialist stance toward higher education and its role in crafting the public as educated/uneducated, raced/unraced, classed/unclassed—coincidentally in congruence with the faces most reminiscent of the populist religious conservative movements that seek to sustain the status quo.

Independently, we have focused our critical inquiry lens on the effects most obscured by the discourse of each public agenda under our scrutiny. We do so intentionally to spotlight these obscured effects and draw conspicuous attention to their irrationality. Together, our analyses point to a broader public agenda discourse that perpetuates hegemonic paradigms. These paradigms attempt to preclude opportunity for contestation and real dialogue about the social dilemma that higher education faces, mirrors, represents, and has the potential to address in/for the contemporary United States. As shown through our analyses, the context, process, purpose, and implementation

of public agenda discourse collectively serves a neoliberal, neoconservative, authoritarian populist religious conservative, and managerialist knowledge-regime. In other words, these public agendas contribute to the conservative modernization of American higher education and propagate a constructed fear that the United States will lose its dominant position as a global economic and military power amid the inevitable forces of globalization.

Our analysis could lead us to an overly deterministic and cynical position in which higher education is abandoned to the rising storm of conservative modernist oppression. As critical scholars, we refute that position of hopelessness. We return to our broader question and concern: What is the role of critical inquiry in (re)constructing a public agenda for higher education?

In formulating a critical inquiry response to public agenda discourse, we call upon the foundational value from which criticalists must work: *Research should happen for, by, and in collaboration with social change.* From this position, we identify two primary lessons learned from our own analysis. First, language is important. Discourse is shaped by context as it simultaneously shapes its context (Johnstone, 2002). As seen in the Davies Report, the framing of the agenda and its purported outcomes matter in the real effects of the policies the report recommends. Second, tangible action must be congruent with any public agenda's process, purpose, and implementation. The Spellings Commission failed to meet our criterion for social change because it effectively silenced the voices, experiences, and expertise of marginalized people and nondominant perspectives.

Both lessons fundamentally call into question the framing of public agendas—in their contexts, processes, purposes, and implementation. As our analyses show, critical inquiry affords a methodological frame from which to find strategies that can facilitate shifts away from the dominant paradigms (e.g., neoliberalism) used cumulatively in constructing public agendas that perpetuate the current era of conservative modernization. As public agenda discourse contributes to the conservative modernization of the academy, public agendas effect little or no change in the materialist practices of higher education. In fact, as seen in the implementation of the Spellings Commission, the contemporary public agenda discourse actively works to perpetuate dominant paradigms of stratification.

Critically engaging with the discourse can disrupt the hegemonic bloc of conservative modernization and facilitate a context for change. We offer the core strategy of reframing through critical inquiry to draw attention to the ways that public agenda discourses fail to transform materialist practices in higher education. By reframing the contexts of globalization, the processes of inclusion/exclusion, the purposes for delineating relations between the public and the academy, and the implementation of these efforts, new possibilities emerge for transforming higher education and its relation to society. Yet these reframings must be shaped to serve local conditions in a

socio-political context. In a sense, we encourage deconstruction, but for the purposes of reconstruction.

We have presented our analysis of a contemporary discourse—that of public agendas for higher education, a fashionable artifact in today's socio-political reality where conservative modernization threatens the usefulness, autonomy, and transformative potential for social justice in and through education. In examining this discourse by our critical inquiry, we have struggled for and with the social change we would like to effect—increased democratic participation in the localized knowledges that mutually constitute relations between and among higher education and the public. We have disrupted the dominant discourse of public agendas, documenting ways that it works from and perpetuates the conservative modernization of higher education. Our disruption opens up new possibilities for reframing higher education's relationship to society in the contexts, processes, purposes, and implementation of the localized theorizing required to enact such a relationship.

In this way, we hope to interrupt the dominant conceptualizations of the public agenda in higher education through a critical positioning that promotes educational justice and equity. Public agendas are not new to higher education, but their contemporary instantiation in the era of conservative modernization makes their current manifestation markedly particular. As our analyses have shown, contemporary public agendas' uneventful recommendations and seemingly benign discourse indeed serve to perpetuate the consequences and reproduction of conservative modernization. Through critical inquiry, we may begin to reconstruct the relationships between higher education and an inclusive definition of the public.

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