# *Decoding the Public Good of Higher Education*

Tony Chambers, Bryan Gopaul


## *Abstract*

This study analyzed 217 descriptions of "higher education for the public good" that were provided by participants in two national programs that focused on the public role and responsibilities of higher education. Both programs were created and administered by the National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good at the University of Michigan. Four independent content analyses were conducted on the 217 descriptions, which yielded five main themes and nineteen subthemes of "higher education for the public good." Additionally, several overarching foci emerged that cut across many of the thematic areas. This article concludes with a discussion of important implications for public policy, institutional practices, community relations, research, curricular and cocurricular offerings to students, and the choices and quality of relationships institutions engage in with other social entities.


## *Introduction*

> To be sure, both the character and needs of the nation have changed dramatically over the past two centuries. . . . While the details of the social contract between America and the [public] university may change, its fundamental character remains intact—manifested in a bond between the society and its universities to educate, to discover, and to serve. The fundamental mission of the [public] university continues to be that of advancing the public good but in a way that serves an ever-changing society in a new age.
>
> —*Duderstadt and Womack 2003, 219*

Over the past decade or so, the theme "higher education for the public good" has been used to focus national conference discussions, institutional planning campaigns, book and article themes, areas of private and public funding priorities, and calls for accountability from multiple publics. Whether higher education *is* a public good or *is for* the public good remains secondary to the general sense that higher education plays a significant role in addressing complex social challenges *(Duderstadt and Womack*

*2003; Chambers 2005; Shapiro 2005)*. Surprisingly, with the significant growth in the focus on and use of the phrase "public good" within higher education circles, there has been little empirical examination of the meaning(s) ascribed to "public good" as it relates to higher education. In this article, we explore the perspectives of a select group of higher education leaders, supporters, scholars, and graduate students in the United States, as they reflect on what it means for higher education to be for the public good in U.S. society. During this project, we assumed that perspectives about higher education's public good role would vary widely among those who were queried. Neatly characterizing higher education's public good role was not an expectation of this research effort. Clearly, there is no single voice that adequately or accurately describes the purposes of higher education. With over 4500 independent institutions representing considerable institutional and individual diversity, varied histories and futures, distinct funding and governing sources, as well as missions, it would be foolish to ascribe a single meaning of "public good" to such a broad, complex system as U.S. higher education.

*"[T]he voices of higher education leaders, scholars, and supporters provided a frame through which we can begin to make sense of this multidimensional concept."*

The terms "public" and "good," as they relate to the purposes of higher education systems or institutions, represent important constructs that institutional leaders and supporters, as well as critics and opponents, use to frame the discourse about the role of higher education in a democratic society. Knowing the possible meanings of these powerful constructs should assist institutional leaders, supporters, and public decision makers in setting an informed course of action for institutions and the broader system of higher education, as they relate to social improvement, or the public good. In this article, the voices of higher education leaders, scholars, and supporters provided a frame through which we can begin to make sense of this multidimensional concept.

Others have attempted to express their sense of the notion of higher education for the public good; however, again, there has been no systematic examination of what is meant by "public good" as it refers to higher education. Longanecker *(2005)* presented the public good as a dialectical tension between the "betterment" of individuals and of society.

> Generally, the "public good" referred to the betterment of individuals and society. The public good was served when better-educated citizens advanced both their own lives and the standards of living within the communities. By advancing civilization and helping to drive economic development, higher education served the public good. . . . *(p. 57)*

Chambers *(2008)* takes a complementary position on the notion of the public good of higher education as a moral, communal imperative:

> The Public Good is an aspiration, a vision and destination of a "better state" that we can know in common that we cannot know alone.

Both of the preceding perspectives of "public good" suggest a collective or social process that impacts more than just those directly engaged in the specific public good. This notion is captured by the Latin phrase "non nobis solum," which is loosely translated as "not for ourselves alone" *(Shapiro 2005)*.

In economic terms, the shift away from higher education's public good relationship, or charter, with society is often framed as leading to neoliberal consequences. As Kezar *(2005)* puts it,

> Astute observers connect the change in the social charter to larger societal forces, for example, neo-liberalism, the philosophy that the common or public good emerges from focusing on protection of individual rights and freedoms and the accumulation of private goods; the trend toward greater individualism and a move away from community involvement; privatization and corporatization of public life as represented through the HMO system in medical care; and further commercialization and marketization of public life, in part due to supply-side economics of the 1980s and 1990s. *(p. 24)*

Neoliberalism, as the antithesis of public good, is not simply an economic structure; it is also a philosophy structure. Higher education is seen as a central force in the knowledge economy, and as a direct result higher education institutions are being encouraged to establish relationships with corporate partners to support and shape the practices and values of these learning institutions. The recognition

of higher education's economic importance in sustaining the viability of states, regions, and nations has led to the increased valuing of individual educators' entrepreneurial behaviors, as well as institutions' adoption of various key performance measures and achievement targets that are directly tied to enhanced economic outputs *(Olssen and Peters 2005)*.

Clearly the "public good" role of higher education yields financial and nonfinancial benefits to society, as well as to individuals and institutions. Oftentimes institutional and individual intentions, decisions, and language, relative to desired public good benefits, emphasize financial and individual outcomes more than nonfinancial and social outcomes. How public good is framed within the context of higher education can have important implications for public policy, institutional practices, community relations, curricular and cocurricular offerings to students, and the choices and quality of relationships of institutions with other social entities. This examination of how the public good of higher education is interpreted and internalized will help those involved in and committed to the higher education enterprise sort out and make conscientious decisions about what public good role(s) we want higher education to play.

## *Context for the Study*

This study is an examination of open-ended responses to the question, "What meaning does 'higher education for the public good' have for you?" The question was asked of each participant in two separate programs sponsored by the National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good: the National Leadership Dialogue Series and the Rising Scholars Award to Advance Research on Higher Education for the Public Good (subsequently referred to as the Rising Scholars Award).

*National Leadership Dialogue Series*: In 2002 the National Forum developed and coordinated the National Leadership Dialogue Series, which ran during the months of May and June, with dialogues held in Maryland, California, and Minnesota. The three-part leadership dialogue series involved three-day dialogues among groups of state legislators, university presidents, faculty, administrators, national foundation representatives, education association leaders, community organizers, and graduate students that examined various dimensions of higher education's role in contemporary society and set the stage for the formation of a shared common action agenda.

*Rising Scholars Award*: The National Forum also developed and cosponsored the Rising Scholars Award to Advance Research on Higher Education for the Public Good, which ran for the years 2002, 2003, and 2004. The Rising Scholars Award was cosponsored by five international higher education associations: American Education Research Association, American Association for Higher Education, Association for the Study of Higher Education, American College Personnel Association, and the Association for Institutional Research. Early career academic scholars (pretenure faculty), practitioners, and advanced-level doctoral students in U.S. higher education institutions applied for research awards that supported scholarship focusing on higher education's public good role. Recipients of the award were provided registration and travel support to attend one of the sponsoring organization's national conferences, invitations and support to participate in the National Forum's activities, dissemination of their completed proposed research project, and the inclusion of the authored chapter about their project in a published edited book *(see Pasque, Martinez, and Bowman, forthcoming)*.

*The National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good*: A grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation created the National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good in 2001 at the University of Michigan. Its mission is to "significantly increase awareness, understanding, commitment, and action relative to the public service role of higher education in the United States."

## Conceptual Framework for the Study

As grounded theoretical approaches—that is, the perspectives of study participants on the phenomenon of higher education for the public good—are grounded in their lived experiences and the subsequent meanings made of those experiences *(Glaser and Strauss 1967)*, this study adapted the combined paradigms of *phenomenology* and *constructive inquiry* to serve as conceptual frameworks for both designing the study and guiding the organization of data collection and analyses.

### Phenomenology

Phenomenology has its origins in the thinking of the German philosopher Husserl and the French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, which Crotty *(1996)* calls the classical phenomenologist approach. By phenomenology, Husserl *(1913)* meant the study of how people described things and experienced them through their

senses. As well, according to van Manen *(1990)*, phenomenology is an exploration of "the essence of lived experience."

According to Patton *(1990)*, phenomenological inquiry focuses on the question, "What is the structure and essence of the experience on this phenomenon for these people?" The two implications, as well as the source of considerable confusion about the phenomenological perspective, are (1) it is important to focus on what people experience and how they interpret the world, and (2) the methodological mandate suggesting that the only way for someone to actually know what another person is experiencing, is to experience it for themselves. Patton clarifies the apparent source of confusion in this approach by positing that the phenomenological perspective can mean "either or both" of the suggested implications. Depending on the context of the phenomenon under investigation, it may or may not be necessary that the researcher actually share the experience of the study participants.

The phenomenon being explored in this study is individuals' experiences with the notion of higher education for the public good in the context of U.S. higher education, and the subsequent meaning they make of those experiences. The researchers in this study are using secondary data collected from open-ended questionnaires, not direct interviews with study participants. However, each researcher involved in this study has discussed his own experience with the notion of higher education for the public good, as well as its subsequent interpretation.

### Constructive inquiry

Consistent with the phenomenological approach is an adaptation of the constructivist inquiry approach *(Lincoln and Guba 1985)* used in this study. According to Manning *(1999)*, the purpose of constructivist inquiry is "to produce depth of understanding about a particular topic or experience" *(p. 12)*. Within the perspective of constructive inquiry, knowledge does not and cannot produce representations of an independent reality, but instead is rooted in the perspective of the knower *(Piaget 1954; Vygotsky 1978)*. Therefore, our intention in the study is to explore those contextualized understandings that emerged through experiences, social interaction, and reflections of various individuals regarding the notion "higher education for the public good."

## *Methodology*

### Leadership Dialogue Series participants

Participants in the National Forum's Leadership Dialogue Series were identified and invited based on a broad scan of impact

through literature reviews (scholarly and public), national organization involvement, issues leadership, and reputation for impacting change in higher education. Additionally, individuals that represented nonprofit organizations, community groups, philanthropies, and educational associations were invited to participate in the dialogues. Dialogue organizers also used a process of key informants to identify others to be invited. The process was iterative. Approximately 20 percent of the participants in each dialogue participated in more than one of the dialogues. In other words, there was a 20 percent overlap of participants from dialogue to dialogue. Invitations to specific participants were determined by the appropriate fit between their backgrounds and the general theme of a particular dialogue. Altogether, there were 58 participants in the first dialogue (held at the Wye River Conference Center in Maryland), with the theme "the role of public understanding, public support and public society in shaping the covenant between higher education and society"; 59 participants in the second dialogue (held in Oxnard, California), focused on "educating for the public good: implications for faculty, students, administrators and community"; and 58 in the third dialogue (held in Monticello, Minnesota), focused on "practical strategies for institutional civic engagement and institutional leadership that reflect and shape the covenant between higher education and society." The total number of participants in the three dialogues was 175. The total number of nonduplicate participants (those who attended no more than one dialogue) was 140.

Prior to each dialogue, all affirmed participants were sent an online, open-ended survey, which asked, among several questions, "What meaning does 'higher education for the public good' have for you?" Responses to the online questionnaire were received and organized by staff members in the National Forum, and subsequently shared with participants in the particular leadership dialogue. The total number of usable completed surveys from the 140 participants in all three National Leadership Dialogues was 75, roughly 54 percent of all those who participated in the Dialogue Series. Of the 65 (46%) participants from the National Leadership Dialogues who did not respond to the survey, 8 (12%) were graduate students, 25 (38%) were faculty members, 5 (8%) were institution presidents, 16 (25%) were institutional administrators, 5 (8%) were from foundations, 4 (6%) were from education associations, and 2 (3%) were community organizers. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the categories in which survey respondents are represented.

**Table 1. Leadership Dialogue Series survey respondents**

| | Total | Private | Public |
|---|---|---|---|
| Graduate Students | 7 (9%) | | 7 (9%) |
| Faculty | 31 (42%) | | |
| University | | 5 (7%) | 23 (31%) |
| College | | 3 (4%) | |
| Community College | | | |
| State Legislators | 1 (1%) | | |
| Presidents | 10 (13%) | | |
| University | | | 4 (5%) |
| College | | 5 (7%) | |
| Community College | | | 1 (1%) |
| Administrators | 10 (13%) | | |
| University | | | 8 (11%) |
| College | | 2 (2%) | |
| Community College | | | |
| National Foundation Representatives | 1 (1%) | | |
| Education Association Leaders | 13 (18%) | | 13 (18%) |
| Community Organizers | 2 (3%) | | |

*While representatives from other populations were invited to and participated in the dialogue series, this chart represents those who actually responded to the pre-dialogue survey.*

## Rising Scholars Award participants

As a part of the review process for the Rising Scholars Award, each applicant was required to answer a set of questions, one of which was a request to describe what the term "higher education for the public good" meant to them. Over the three-year period of the Rising Scholars Award, 142 independent nonduplicated descriptions were received from pretenure faculty, early career scholar-practitioners, and advanced-level doctoral students in U.S. higher education institutions. Specifically, during 2002–2003, there were 77 (54 percent) descriptions; during 2003–2004, there were 24 (17 percent) descriptions; and during 2004–2005, there were 41 (29 percent) descriptions. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the categories in which the Rising Scholars applicants are represented.

The total number of independent, nonduplicated respondents to the survey question from both the National Leadership Dialogue Series (75) and the Rising Scholars Award (142) was 217. Of all those who participated in the two programs (282), the 217 usable responses represent a 77 percent response rate.

## Framework for data analyses

We approached the exploration of the description of "higher education for the public good" using a content analysis approach

**Table 2. Rising Scholars Award survey respondents**

| | Total | Private | Public |
|---|---|---|---|
| Pre-tenured Faculty | 65 (46%) | | |
| University | | 8 (6%) | 54 (38%) |
| College | | 3 (2%) | |
| Community College | | | |
| Early Career Practitioners | 28 (20%) | | |
| University | | 5 (4%) | 19 (13%) |
| College | | 4 (3%) | |
| Community College | | | |
| Advanced-Level Doctoral Students | 49 (34%) | 12 (8%) | 37 (26%) |

*Total applicants equal total respondents (100% or 142 respondents).*

*(Patton 1990)*. According to Patton, content analysis "is a process of identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns in the data" *(p. 381)*. Additionally, the purpose of classifying qualitative data for content analysis is to "facilitate the search for patterns and themes within a particular setting or across cases" *(p. 384)*. The responses to the open-ended question posed to participants in the Leadership Dialogue Series and applicants to the Rising Scholars Award represented viable qualitative data, and hence warranted the kind of analysis we chose for this study. Again, according to Patton,

> Qualitative methods consist of three kinds of data collection: (1) in-depth, open-ended interviews; (2) direct observations; and (3) written documents.
>
> Document analysis in qualitative inquiry yields excerpts, quotations, or entire passages from organizational, clinical, or program records; memoranda and correspondence; official publications and reports; personal diaries; *and open-ended written responses to questionnaires and surveys*. *(p. 10; italics added)*

Busha and Harter *(1980)* categorize two general types of content analysis: conceptual analysis and relational analysis. Traditionally, content analysis has most often been thought of in terms of conceptual analysis. In conceptual analysis, a concept is chosen for examination, and the analysis involves quantifying and tallying its presence. Also known as thematic analysis, the focus is on the occurrence of selected terms within a text or texts, although the terms may be implicit as well as explicit.

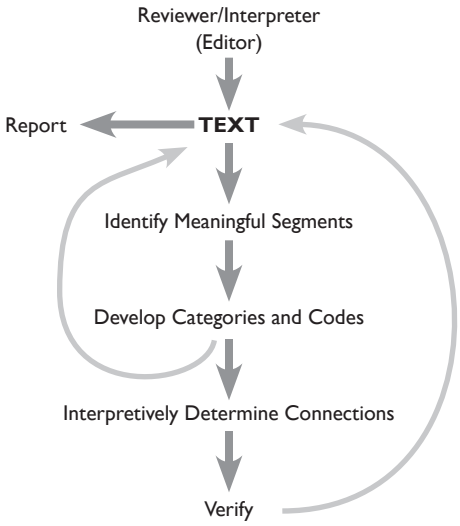
Relational analysis, like conceptual analysis, begins with the act of identifying concepts present in a given text or set of texts. However, relational analysis seeks to go beyond the presence of common concepts and terms by exploring the relationships between the concepts identified. Relational analysis has also been termed semantic analysis *(Palmquist, Carley, and Dale 1997)*. In other words, the focus of relational analysis is semantic, or meaningful, relationships. Individual concepts, in and of themselves, are viewed as having no inherent meaning. Rather, meaning is a product of the relationships among concepts in a text.

Thus, in this article, the results of the content analyses are presented according to categories or themes that reflect the frequencies of the concepts' occurrence in respondents' open-ended comments, as well as the interpretations of the relationships between and among those concepts.

## Reviewer training

Each independent reviewer was trained by the principal investigator of the research project on how to organize, read, code, categorize, interpret, and review independent interpretations with their respective review partner (i.e., the other person who was reviewing the same set of data within the same round of analysis). Consistent with the two conceptual frameworks used to organize the study (phenomenology and constructivist inquiry), the model used to train independent reviewers and assist with data analyses was an adapted version of the *editing analysis model* (see figure 1), a flexible form of content analysis that embraces the principles of both relational and conceptual analyses.

**Figure 1. Editing analysis model**




Within the editing analysis model applied in this study, the researchers entered the text in an attempt to search for meaningful segments, cutting, pasting, and sorting until an interpreted "truth" of the text was revealed. Within this model, no template or predetermined codebook was used, and the reviewers tried to identify and distance themselves from preconceptions of

the studied phenomenon prior to examining the data. As reviewers reviewed the text data, they searched for meaningful segments of text that both stood on their own and related to the purpose of the study. Once these segments were identified, they were sorted and organized into categories and codes. These categories were then explored to determine patterns and themes that may connect them. At this point researchers started to explore the patterns and connections for emergent hypotheses about the studied phenomenon. Within this approach, as the reviewers identified, organized, and sorted meaningful segments of text, there was flexibility to allow the emerging interpretation of text to alter the codes and categories.

## Data analyses process

Four independent analyses were conducted on the 217 responses to the question regarding the meaning of higher education for the public good. Some descriptions contained more than one code, depending on the responses. Hence there are more codes than the total number of descriptions recorded. There were a total of 240 nonoverlapping/nonduplicate individual codes from the 217 participants who provided responses to the open-ended question. Before each analysis, the 217 descriptions were randomly sorted to further reduce the possibility of reviewers receiving clusters of responses from any given group of participants.

Three of the analyses were conducted manually (by hand) by separate research teams of two. The other analysis was done by one other researcher using NVivo Version 7 software for qualitative data analyses. A meta-analysis of the four independent analyses was conducted as well. This process of triangulation through multiple analysts—having two or more persons independently analyze the same qualitative data set and compare their findings *(Patton 1990, 468)*—is a strategy to reduce systematic bias in the data. Having multiple analysts review the same data and compare their findings helps ensure that a study's findings are not simply an artifact of a single method, a single source, or a single investigator's biases *(p. 470)*. Guba and Lincoln *(1989)* suggest that these types of efforts in qualitative approaches increase the finding's dependability, or reliability.

The first independent analysis was conducted by two staff members at the National Forum in 2004. Each of the 217 descriptions was reviewed and a first-level set of themes and subthemes for each theme was formulated. Two years later, in 2006, a researcher at the University of Toronto and an independent research consultant, both of whom had no connection with the National Forum,

the Leadership Dialogue Series, or the Rising Scholars Award (nor access to the previous analysis of the same data), conducted an identical content analysis on the descriptions that resulted in a set of themes and subthemes. Additionally, a statistics research consultant (from Canada) conducted another independent analysis of the 217 descriptions utilizing NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Finally, the principal researcher on this project (a former staff member at the National Forum, and lead on the development and administration of the Dialogue Series and Rising Scholars Award) and a graduate research assistant, both currently at the University of Toronto, conducted their own independent content analysis of the 217 descriptions, and they additionally conducted a meta-analysis of the four independent analyses intended to increase the reliability of the study.

*"[A]mong each of the independent analyses, the emergent themes and related subthemes were virtually identical."*

It is important to acknowledge that among each of the independent analyses, the emergent themes and related subthemes were virtually identical. This observation supported the choice to engage in the process of triangulation through multiple analysts—having two or more persons independently analyze the same qualitative data and compare their findings—for purposes of increasing the findings' dependability, or reliability.

*Reliability*: Weber *(1990)* notes that "to make valid inferences from the text, it is important that the classification procedure be reliable in the sense of being consistent: Different people should code the same text in the same way" *(p. 12)*. As Weber further states, "reliability problems usually grow out of the ambiguity of word meanings, category definitions, or other coding rules" *(p. 15)*. Yet it is important to recognize that the people who have developed the coding scheme have often been working so closely on the project that they have established shared and hidden meanings of the coding. The obvious result is that for the pairs of reviewers who had been working closely together on the project, the reliability coefficient they reported may be artificially inflated *(Krippendorff 1980)*. In order to avoid this, one of the most critical steps in our analysis process involved developing a set of explicit reading, coding, and categorizing instructions. These instructions then allowed other independent reviewers to be trained to analyze the same data until reliability requirements were met.

Reliability may be discussed in the following terms: (1) intrarater reliability reflects how consistently the same coder gets the same results try after try, and (2) interrater reliability reflects how consistently coding schemes lead to the same text being coded in the same category by different people. In this study, the data were coded four separate times: the first and second times during a two-year period and the third and fourth times a year later. Altogether, the four independent reviews occurred over a three-year period. Since each reviewer reviewed the data only once in this study, only the interrater reliability was calculated. For interrater reliability, in three of the independent analyses all data were coded by two reviewers, and in one independent analysis the data were coded by one reviewer using NVivo qualitative analysis software.

*"The interrater reliability of each of the four analyses . . . suggests significantly high reliability."*

*Interrater agreement*: Each pair of scores was categorized as being in complete agreement when raters gave identical ratings, and it was categorized as being in close agreement when there was a difference of one point. Out of 217 descriptions rated, raters completely agreed on 110 (50 percent), closely agreed on 95 more (45 percent), and disagreed on only 12 (5 percent). The interrater reliability correlation between rater pairs was .75 for the first set of independent raters, .74 for the second set of independent raters, .74 for third set of independent raters (including the analysis conducted using the qualitative data analysis software), and .71 between the third analysis and the fourth analysis using NVivo. To see if some raters might be systematically more lenient or harsh than others, we compared the mean rating of each rater with that of the raters with whom they were paired. The largest mean difference between a rater and those with whom s/he was paired was about half a point.

Another reliability estimate was calculated to determine the reliability between sets of raters (versus the reliability correlation among the raters within a particular independent analysis). The correlation between the four independent analyses was .72, which suggests consistency in coding/rating across the independent sets of analyses. The interrater reliability of each of the four analyses, as well as the between-group (or meta-analysis) reliability, suggests significantly high reliability.

**Table 3. Themes and subthemes**

| Themes | Subthemes |
|---|---|
| **Higher Education and the Community** | Collaborative relationships |
| | Service to the community |
| | Support community diversity |
| | Improve quality of life |
| **Higher Education and Society** | Economic benefits |
| | Education for work |
| | Regulation of social change |
| | Transmission of culture |
| **Higher Education and Knowledge** | Knowledge creation |
| | Dissemination of knowledge |
| | Critical reflection |
| | Diversity of thought |
| | Problem solving |
| **Nature of Higher Education** | Democratic citizenship |
| | Civic participation of graduates |
| | Social responsibility |
| | Broad access |
| | Inclusiveness |
| **Institutions of Higher Education** | Change |

## *Findings and Results*

Our findings were based upon a qualitative analysis of the descriptions of the phrase "higher education for the public good." A multilevel content analysis was applied to 217 different descriptions, and various themes and subthemes undergirding the themes emerged. We organized the results as "themes" and then further examined how "public good" was conceptualized within these descriptions. The four independent analyses and the subsequent meta-analysis yielded the following main themes: (a) higher education and the community, (b) higher education and society, (c) higher education and knowledge, (d) the nature of higher education, and (e) institutions of higher education. These main themes arose with varying frequencies in the data. Table 3 reflects the themes and subthemes based on the coding scheme for the project.

While each of the groups that provided descriptions of "higher education for the public good" (see tables 1 and 2) generally supported each of the themes and subthemes that emerged from the analyses, in some areas (subthemes) the voices of members of groups diverged from the general conceptualization of the subthemes. In

other words, while these voices may have generally supported the thematic categorization of the descriptions, the way they described the particular meaning of "higher education for the public good" may have been slightly distinct from the majority of descriptions for a particular theme or subtheme. Where appropriate, these distinct voices will be reflected in the discussion of each theme and subtheme. Additionally, the researchers in the study did not find that any particular group reflected preferences of any theme or subtheme over another. All in all, there was consistency within and between each of the groups' descriptions, and there were no "unassignable" data items, which suggest a basic strength in the study's coding and categorization system *(Guba 1978)*. The absence of divergent or significantly varied perspectives from participants about the main themes and subthemes satisfies Guba's test for "completeness" of the category system or set of categories determined by the analyses:

1. The set should have internal and external plausibility, a property that might be termed "integratability." Viewed internally, the individual categories should appear to be consistent; viewed externally, the set of categories should seem to comprise the whole picture.
2. The set should be reasonably inclusive of the data and information that do exist. This feature is partly tested by the absence of unassignable cases, but can be further tested by reference to the problem which the inquirer is investigating.
3. The set should be reproducible by another competent judge. . . the second observer ought to be able to verify that a) the categories make sense in view of the data which are available, and b) the data have been appropriately arranged in the category system.
4. The set should be credible to the persons who provided the information which the set is presumed to assimilate. *(pp. 56–57)*

## *Higher Education and the Community*

The idea of community was central to the concept of the public good for participants in both sets of data. What was not clear on the surface was what participants meant by *community*. Some specifically referred to the community in which the higher education institution was located. Others referred to the United States, the

world, or "society." The concept of community was reflected as both a place (i.e., a geographically or affinity bound space such as a neighborhood, city, state, or country) and a collective of people, actual or ideological (i.e., society, diverse members of groups, etc.). Often the same was true of how participants talked about higher education. Four subthemes emerged under the theme higher education and the community: collaborative relationships, service to the community, support community diversity, and improve quality of life.

*Collaborative relationships:* The notions of mutuality and reciprocity were central to the subtheme of the higher education and community relationship. Again, the sense of "community" varied in this subtheme. As one participant viewed the relationship, it was one of "action" within the local environment:

> Colleges and universities developing mutually beneficial, mutually respectful, genuinely democratic, action-oriented partnerships with their local schools and communities. (Participant #145)

For another, the mutual or reciprocal relationship between higher education and "community" was one that extended to a broad social level, yet maintained connection, guidance, and a sense of grounding from its engagements with members of a community.

> Importantly, higher education for the public good has a reciprocal relationship with society where it serves society, but also finds many of its guiding principles from community members. (Participant #117)

*Service to the community:* There were many references to the academy, as a social institution, or to students, staff, or faculty rendering service to the community. Some participants were quite general in their statements (any service rather than a specific kind), some more prescriptive. Participation of the academy and its members in matters outside those deemed "institutional" qualified as serving the public good.

> The academy must participate earnestly in the world beyond campus in order to accurately understand and serve society. (Participant #106)

> This phrase [higher education for the public good] describes the relationship between higher education

> institutions in the United States and how they do (and more importantly, can) serve the broader interests of society, as contrasted with narrower institutional interests. (Participant #144)

A more specific, or descriptive, sense of higher education's public good from an early career faculty scholar targeted more socially just ideals consistent with larger social democratic values:

> The concept of "higher education for the public good" grounds these inquiries in principles emanating from notions of equality, fairness, democracy, diversity, inclusivity, and caring for community. (Participant #4)

*Support community diversity:* Of particular concern to several participants was that in order to serve the public good, higher education, as a social institution, must commit to "acting" in non-discriminatory and equitable ways, as well as publicly opposing inequity and discrimination wherever it exists.

> Institutions of Higher Education should prevail over . . . the hate and prejudice that sustain the racial divide. (Participant #116)

> We are immersed in a culture of difference that results in competing paradigms about religion, political responsibilities and actions, means for educating our children, and other issues of public concern. A definition of the public good for me begins with a moral commitment to recognizing the myriad of participants and lived meanings in that public. (Participant #138)

*Improve quality of life:* When discussing higher education's role in improving the quality of life for people in communities, some participants focused on the specific missions and roles of faculty and others to target their professional efforts (i.e., teaching, research, and service) toward addressing social challenges.

> [The] work of the academy is best directed toward engaging, informing, and empowering citizens, providing them with the tools and knowledge to improve the quality of life in their communities—both locally and globally. (Participant #126)

> "[H]igher education for the public good" refers to the contributions (real and potential) of higher education to the improvement of community life, the creation of good citizens, and the advancement of freedom, justice, and equality. (Participant #195)

The voice of one of the participants from an education association framed the "improving the quality of life" role of higher education institutions as one of supporting and promoting social equity through the provision of access to educational opportunities.

> Higher education can have an equalizing effect on our population, enabling all people access to an education that opens doors of occupational opportunity and economic security. (Participant #84)

## *Higher Education and Society*

Within the discourse on higher education's public good role relative to "society," the concept of society was presented as a more abstract entity, rather than the ongoing everyday life of communities. The subthemes that emerged under the higher education and society theme were economic benefits, education for work, regulation of social change, and transmission of culture.

*Economic benefits:* A surprisingly significant number of perspectives presented by a broad cross-section of participants centered on the direct and indirect economic benefits associated with the role of higher education. Instead of framing the economic benefits as primarily individual benefits, participants presented the benefits as pertaining to a larger collective (public, majority, society, community, etc.). One public university administrator summed it up this way:

> [T]he economic benefits, such as increased tax revenue from higher salaries, profits, and consumption and increased productivity due to a highly trained workforce, business consulting services, and innovative products and technologies, are generally well known. (Participant #125)

Another perspective on economic-based benefits was offered by a national foundation representative:

> By framing higher education in the service of the common good, the acquisition of knowledge and skills function not solely to produce and validate economic and ideological imperatives of those in positions of power, but to serve and ultimately articulate the interests of the vast majority. (Participant #4)

*Education for work:* Closely tied to economic benefits is the provision of occupational and professional education. This particular subtheme reflected a common concern among three groups that could arguably be seen as representing the "grass roots" of community concerns: community colleges, community organizers, and state legislators. The community college participant reflected the "education for work" subtheme by suggesting that

> Higher education can contribute to the market-based goals of the corporate sector by training the workforce whose technical skills are increasingly important. (Participant #106)

One of the early career faculty members (with a particular disciplinary focus) connected the training provided in higher education with the liberal learning skill of "reasoning" and the benefit of direct work performance:

> One example is in the field of occupational therapy. Higher education is provided in order to facilitate clinical reasoning of practitioners in order to provide "best practice" to recipients of therapy. (Participant #18)

*Regulation of social change:* Higher education is seen to both promote desirable social change and sustain social stability. Through its various roles and responsibilities, higher education is viewed as a "gatekeeper" of opportunities for social mobility and an important social critic of potentially socially damaging changes. Balancing change with stability created a tension that was not easily reconciled for participants who generally equated the public good role of higher education with change. The descriptions within the subtheme regulation of social change tended to be more in line with cautions or conditions to be factored into the promotion of higher education's pubic good role and responsibility.

> But not only does equal education spur innovation, it also provides for social mobility. And as members of

> all groups rise to positions of leadership, it ensures that power will be distributed more equitably. (Participant #140)

One education association leader cautions against the uncritical acceptance of higher education's public good role, because of higher education's considerable influence on various social outcomes.

> However, individuals supporting higher education for the public good must recognize and negotiate tensions that exist between social change and stability because the systems of higher education are called upon to influence social outcomes by simultaneously acting as agents of social change and social stability. (Participant #142)

*Transmission of culture:* The transmission of culture is one of the traditional functions of education that is often referenced in documents regarding the purposes of higher education in the United States. However, participants in this study referred to the transmission of culture relatively infrequently as it related to higher education for the public good. The comments that mentioned it appeared to reflect a more moral tone in the roots and trajectories than comments on many of the other subthemes.

> Higher education has the added responsibility of transmitting to students the values and knowledge that comes from diverse human culture, and where the bottom line is educating for social and human capitol [*sic*]. (Participant #48)

> While providing this training, higher education goes further by instilling basic truths that benefit both the learner and their community: ethics, empirically driven values and acceptance of divergent beliefs. (Participant #90)

## *Higher Education and Knowledge*

Knowledge is presented as a currency in higher education. As well, the discovery, dissemination, and application of knowledge that is seen as socially "useful" are critical to higher education's public role and responsibility. The subthemes that emerged under the higher education and knowledge theme were knowledge creation, dissemination of knowledge, critical reflection, diversity

of thought, and problem solving. Faculty as a group, public and private, senior and early career, offered more perspectives consistent with the theme higher education and knowledge, as well as its subthemes, than they offered for any of the other themes, and more than any of the other groups offered on this theme. While knowledge is not the exclusive purview of faculty, the faculty who responded to the survey overwhelmingly positioned themselves in line with the "knowledge" creation, dissemination, and application role of higher education in society.

*Knowledge creation:* New knowledge that evolves from intentional behaviors, mostly research endeavors, and decisions in higher education institutions is perceived to demonstrate higher education's public good role.

> The University is a place of learning, where scholarship, through education and research, ultimately gives service to society through the uncovering and application of knowledge. (Participant #19)

Put succinctly by one faculty member at a private research university:

> The conduct of research and generation of new knowledge is a public good. (Participant # 36)

*Dissemination of knowledge:* The broad exchange of socially useful knowledge within and beyond higher education institutions was seen to have public benefits. Specific types of knowledge or types of benefits were infrequently mentioned by participants, though many expressed a general sense that knowledge dissemination for social improvement was a main responsibility of higher education and one for which the larger public should hold higher education accountable.

> It is our duty as higher education leaders to disseminate and implement useful knowledge to all those who may benefit from it. (Participant #14)

> Higher education, in general, has a responsibility to society as a whole and should be held accountable for connecting the development and dissemination of knowledge to the betterment of social conditions worldwide. (Participant #82)

*Critical reflection:* A number of participants referred to critical thinking skills and a critical approach to knowledge as a public good responsibility of higher education institutions. Preparing students to think critically about social issues, engaging communities in critical reflection on community issues, and integrating critical inquiry and examination into the teaching, research, and service decisions of the academy was viewed by participants as a demonstration of public good behavior and choices within institutions. Again, faculty across institutional types and professional levels saw both their own responsibility for critically and publicly reflecting on socially relevant issues and their responsibility to prepare students for critical reflection as indicators of higher education's public good role and responsibility.

> [T]he arena of higher education provides vital opportunities for inspection of all sides of issues, critical reflection on historical and current happenings, acknowledgment of marginalized perspectives, and prescient exploration of neglected phenomena and their implications. (Participant #106)

> [G]raduates need to have three essential qualities: critical thinking skills, compassion/empathic skills, and a profound respect for difference. (Participant #8)

> [M]aintaining society's critical intellectual self-consciousness through the unfettered debate of and inquiry into critical social and cultural questions. (Participant #125)

*Diversity of thought:* Several participants expressed deep philosophical concerns about higher education's inclusion of different points of view in the institutional teaching, research, and service missions. As well, there were expressed concerns about institutions respecting the origins of different points of view and their potential contributions to society's future. Among the descriptions that were coded and categorized in this subtheme, none provided a perspective on how limitations on diversity of thought might be considered in support of the public good. (e.g., How should we regard thoughts promoting hatred of or harm to specific populations?)

> Broad access to education ensures that new voices are heard in public discourse. That society does not converse about the same topics over [and] over. This

> is essential for cultural, technological, and economic progress. (Participant #140)

> [H]igher education for the public good considers and entertains all viewpoints so that respect for humanity and social responsibility are learned by all who enter her doors and responsible citizens are sent forth to lead the nation into the future. (Participant #170)

*Problem solving:* The knowledge produced and disseminated by higher education, in partnership with communities, should be useful in addressing problems in communities, as well as identifying and taking advantage of opportunities that are beneficial to communities, at whatever level.

> As a scholar practitioner, I hope to contribute to the "public good" by engaging in scholarly inquiry that can have practical application toward the resolution of current social problems . . . (Participant #19)

> Because institutions of higher education exist in and for communities, and greatly impact those communities socially and economically, and because those institutions offer the potential for generating critical resources and critical research on community issues, higher education is uniquely situated to collaborate with communities. This collaboration should both work to identify the causes of and solve community issues, but also to create opportunities to enhance the assets of communities to define and create humane and equitable living conditions. (Participant #72)

## *The Nature of Higher Education*

In one way or another, each response spoke to the nature of higher education. Many participants chose to focus their expressions of higher education's public good role on the more general purposes for higher education's existence. Within their interrogation of the general purposes for higher education, participants articulated a set of values that resonated with many of the specific themes and subthemes of higher education's public good role. The subthemes that emerged under the nature of higher education theme were democratic citizenship, civic participation of graduates, social responsibility, broad access, and inclusiveness.

*Democratic citizenship:* By far the dominant response in this or any category by all groups of respondents was educating students for democracy and citizenship. Only references that explicitly referred to the concept of educating students for democracy and citizenship were placed in this subtheme.

> Thus, a higher education for the public good means educating students to understand and embrace essential democratic values like pluralism and diversity, it also means equipping students to participate in public deliberations skillfully and intelligently. (Participant #134)

> For me, higher education for the public good requires us to practice public scholarship in the spirit of democracy. Public scholarship is the collaborative production of knowledge based on the conviction that ideas, discovery, and creation arise and are owned everywhere, in settings in and out of the academy. (Participant #157)

*Civic participation:* Some participants did not explicitly mention democracy or citizenship, but stressed the importance of graduates' active participation in civic affairs. This participation does not necessarily have to be political, but might involve socially relevant thought and action within their chosen profession or their personal lives, for example.

> It is important that the citizens graduating from and working in institutions of higher education be activists in our society. (Participant #117)

> [Graduate attorneys] have a strong sense of professional responsibility and commitment to civic duty among the legal profession in [the] state. (Participant #105)

> Higher education has a responsibility to educate students and prepare them to engage in their communities. (Participant #162)

> Colleges already perform a worthy function by educating future leaders and professionals—but society need not wait for that good, as integrating public service into a curriculum can pay social dividends now and upon graduation. I also see reciprocity as a crucial component. Concerned students are likely to become concerned

> citizens when their collegiate experience reaches its conclusion. In these ways higher education might serve the public good over the better part of whole lives. (Participant #143)

*Social responsibility:* Also related to the preceding subtheme of preparing graduates for civic participation is the expectation of educating students for an ethic of social responsibility. Again, participants varied in their conception of where students would reflect their sense of social responsibility (communities, society, nations, the world, etc.).

> For me, this phrase speaks to the broader mission of higher education—to educate students to be civically and socially responsible in our society. (Participant #162)

> . . . higher education should serve all of our diverse society. It also means that college students should learn, as part of their college education, the responsibilities of being a "citizen" of the nation and world. (Participant #155)

*Broad access:* Some scholars referred to the breadth of access to higher education as part of the public good. These participants viewed access to higher education along lines similar to Samuelson's *(1954)* characterization of a pure public good. Specifically, a pure public good is "nonrivalrous" (i.e., a public good is accessible to growing numbers of people without any additional marginal cost) and "nonexcludable" (i.e., it is impossible to exclude anyone from enjoying the benefits of a public good, or from contributing to its cost). However, those who recognize broad access to higher education as a public good also acknowledge the reality of limited access to higher education.

> As a public good, higher education is a shared asset or resource of society to which all members of society have the right of access, but also the responsibilities of support and maintenance. . . . higher education is a public good because excluding members of the society from this resource results in economic loss and damage to social stability, which impact society as a whole. (Participant #125)

> Higher education can have an equalizing effect on our population, enabling all people access to an education that opens doors of occupational opportunity and economic security. (Participant #84)

*Inclusiveness.* There were references as well to inclusiveness of higher education toward groups which have been historically excluded from, or underrepresented in, higher education on the grounds of race, gender, religion, ethnicity, disability, or other background characteristics unrelated to ability to perform in higher education institutions.

> [H]igher education must be far more inclusive and extended to Latinos, Blacks, Asian Americans, Native Americans and other people of poor economic means who have, because of their background, not had this opportunity. (Participant #105)

> Higher education for the public good involves creating spaces in our college classrooms in which our students can bring their own lived meanings to the table so that one, they are heard and their voices are validated, and two, so that they are exposed to the diversity of the culture around them as it is lived. (Participant #138)

## *Institutions of Higher Education*

Finally, participants focused on the behaviors and decisions of institutions themselves as reflections of their public good roles. The values, policies, procedures, relations (internal and external to the institution), and institutional cultures speak to the level of commitment to the public good. The sole subtheme that emerged under the institutions of higher education theme was change.

*Change:* In various ways, virtually all respondents to the survey suggested one or another form of change from the status quo in terms of higher education's current behaviors relative to the public good of society. While some participants referenced change as a general, nonspecific indicator of higher education's commitment to the public good, others were more specific in terms of what types of change were needed in order for higher education to significantly contribute to addressing the kind of complex challenges and opportunities within society generally, as well as more specifically within institutions of higher education themselves.

> In sum, higher education institutions may serve the public good by thoroughly examining societal transformations and related learner needs and by developing programs, processes, and structures that are dynamic, fluid, and as receptive to change as the society they serve. (Participant #43)

> Today's society is undergoing fundamental transformation and higher education has unique opportunities and responsibilities to prepare citizens to be active participants in improving the total quality of life in communities and schools. (Participant #100)

> Higher education is changing as we move into the new millennium for a wide variety of reasons. Some of these [changes] include: the changing demographics of student populations, the expanding diversity of reasons students have for seeking higher education, and the changing contexts for learning brought about by technology and distance learning. The role of colleges and universities must include helping future professionals think about some of the important questions facing educators for the 21st century: What are the aims of education? What is the relation of school to society? Whose knowledge is of most worth? (Participant #100)

## *Critique of Crosscutting Foci*

In addition to the themes and subthemes that emerged from the analyses of descriptions of higher education for the public good, several overarching foci emerged that cut across many of the thematic areas. The crosscutting foci that we observed were political, social, moral, economic, and higher education. The foci often presented themselves within and across multiple themes and/or subthemes from the study. Following is a brief critique of the crosscutting foci that emerged from the analyses.

*Political focus*: A primary focus among the themes included a political dimension to the descriptions. More specifically, respondents characterized higher education and the public good within a sphere of political discourse where the overarching conceptualizations of the public good centered on democracy, civic engagement, and civic responsibility. The notion of democracy was discussed through global citizenship imperatives including the development and/or production of citizens who are aware of social initiatives:

environmental concerns, social justice, equity, and so forth. Global citizenship included themes of moral development, critical thinking, future productivity, educating future students, lifelong learning, developing the future workforce, training and development of professions, careers, and so forth. In addition, themes of self-reflection and self-conscious practice were suggested as indicative of activities consistent with the public good.

In addition to creating global citizens, civic engagement emerged amid descriptions that included engaging students within institutions. This concern extended beyond the notion of citizenship to reflect an imperative within the institution for the betterment of society (public good). Arguably, this idea could be tailored into a framework of citizenship; however, ideas of providing a forum for dialogue, discussion, and debate as well as challenging students were postulated and differ from that of citizenship and notions of democracy.

The relationship of the public good to conceptualizations of society was found within the political dimensions of these descriptions, but also served to illustrate a social understanding of the definition of higher education for the public good. This lasting political concern is embodied by a sense of political responsibility as individuals articulated notions of responsibility (that is, meeting the needs of society) but ultimately suggested a servitude to society and shaping of society. This service to society, including linkages with communities, was emphasized to the extent that it is in the best interest of higher education to participate in giving back to local communities. The importance of community cannot be overstated, as notions of education and public good are inextricably linked to an idea of community. While exact, defining parameters of a community were missing, survey respondents continually emphasized a commitment to community within the discourse of higher education for the public good.

*"The importance of community cannot be overstated, as notions of education and public good are inextricably linked to an idea of community."*

*Social focus*. Further linking the political with the social, notions of knowledge production and dissemination were included, as was conducting research that identifies and/or solves various social problems. The applicability of knowledge was emphasized within the descriptions. Here the production and dissemination of knowledge included the transmission of critical thinking skills

and critical reflection. To this end, the social and political arenas of these descriptions were woven together as the politics of knowledge merged with imperatives of democracy, civic engagement, and civic responsibility. The role and significance of the community as a stage for this merger emerged as the study participants recognized and reiterated the link between political and social understandings of higher education for the public good. The community can act as a location from which students originate and to which they gravitate; as a site where knowledge is applied; and as the soil for future scholarship, and hopefully where productive change is manifested.

*Moral focus:* While exploring the social foci of the descriptions, the perception of a moral dimension to higher education for the public good began to emerge. This moral imperative can be understood through notions of social justice, increased access, and a commitment to equity initiatives. Participants in the study suggested that the public good is best served when education acts as a vehicle for enhancing social mobility and decreasing systemic inequities that not only permeate the educational context but extend to general society. In addition, the public good was articulated within a context of change. Successful education for the public good contributes to the creation of individuals, paradigms, and spaces to enact social change and fuel social activism. In recognizing issues of access and diversity, and emphasizing societal change with linkages to community, participants suggest interconnections across other organizing themes, namely political and social.

*Economic focus:* The importance of higher education to act as a vehicle for increased social mobility, status, and earning potential was also suggested within the descriptions. Here "higher education for the public good" focused on an economic organizing theme where efficiency and productivity characterized the discourse. Several participants commented that society would benefit economically from a highly educated workforce through increased tax revenues due to higher salaries and more consumptive purchasing behavior. The economic discourse was also linked to more professionally oriented individuals who spend more time in higher education. Hence, as the argument goes, higher education for the public good would lead to more individuals who opt for advanced and/or specific training through higher education that, in turn, would lead to economic benefits for themselves as well as for the greater society.

*Higher education focus:* A crosscutting focus in this study, termed "higher education," emphasized the link between the public good and the traditional tripartite of the academy. Initiatives of

research, teaching, and service were linked to definitions of the public good by suggesting that activities within the institution and among its faculty and students should be aligned with serving society's needs. This focus was found with considerably less frequency than the other foci.

## *Summary*

This study represents the process and results of four independent content analyses of 217 descriptions of the meaning of "higher education for the public good" that were provided by participants in the National Forum Leadership Dialogue Series and applicants to the Rising Scholars Award to Advance Research on Higher Education for the Public Good. Both programs were created and administered by the National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good at the University of Michigan. The four independent content analyses yielded 240 coded items, 5 main themes, and 19 subthemes of higher education for the public good (see table 3).

The main themes of higher education and the community, higher education and society, higher education and knowledge, the nature of higher education, and institutions of higher education reflect a diversity of perspectives on higher education's public good role and responsibility and simultaneously represent common or similar ideals of what constitutes (or could constitute) a stronger relationship between higher education the various publics.

How public good is framed within the context of higher education can have important implications for public policy, institutional practices, community relations, research, curricular and cocurricular offerings to students, and the choices and quality of relationships institutions engage in with other social entities. This examination of the public good of higher education will help those involved in the higher education enterprise sort out and make conscientious decisions about what public good role(s) they want higher education to play. As this study has shown, an individual's view of higher education for the public good is influenced by combinations of social, political, economic, personal, moral, historical, and institutional factors. Decoding the combination of factors serves to strengthen the relationship between higher education and the broader publics.

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## About the Authors

- Tony Chambers is an assistant professor in the Department of Theory and Policy Studies in Education at the University of Toronto in the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), the founding director of the Centre for the Study of Students in Postsecondary Education, and serves as associate vice-provost, students at the University of Toronto. Tony was formerly associate director of the National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good and adjunct associate professor in the Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education, University of Michigan. Tony served as the program officer and founding director of the Fetzer Fellows Program at the John Fetzer Institute, a nonprofit operating foundation that explores the relationship between mind, body, and spirit. Prior to joining the Fetzer Institute, Tony served for seventeen years as an administrator and faculty member at several higher education institutions, including Michigan State University, University of Iowa, University of Missouri–St. Louis, University of Florida, and Illinois State University. He is a Woodrow Wilson visiting fellow, a fellow with the Salzburg Seminars in Austria, and was selected as a Kellogg Foundation national leadership fellow (Group 13). He has published widely, serves on editorial boards for several publications, including the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, and is coeditor of *Higher Education for the Public Good: Emerging Voices from a National Movement (Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2005)*.
- Bryan Gopaul is a doctoral student in the higher education program at OISE/UT. His research interests include understanding the experiences of students in postsecondary education and works as a researcher in the Centre for the Study of Students in Postsecondary Education. In addition to marginalized student populations, including first-generation students, students with disabilities, and racialized students, Bryan also engages in research about the graduate student experience and specifically examines doctoral student socialization. Many of these interests are framed in an understanding of the public and private returns of postsecondary education and the tensions that may arise

between students, institutions, and larger society. Bryan trains teaching assistants across the institution and integrates a social justice stance to his workshops and seminars by incorporating tenets of critical pedagogy. Bryan has published and presented on many different topics, including the role of research in community colleges, popular culture and higher education, higher education and the public good, media and higher education policy, and doctoral education within the knowledge economy.