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Resetting the Narrative: Strategic Messaging Around Tuition Reductions at U.S. Private Not-For-Profit Colleges

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Abstract: This study analyzes how private not-for-profit baccalaureate-granting colleges frame significant sticker price reductions, or "tuition resets," to external audiences. Drawing on framing, institutional, and stakeholder theories, we use a content analysis approach to examine how 59 institutions frame tuition resets in institutional press releases and local media coverage. We find that strategic messaging often centers on transparency in postsecondary pricing, responses to broader economic pressure and student debt, alignment with institutional mission, competitiveness among regional peers, and bundling the reset with other institutional initiatives. In addition, the analysis

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reveals notable differences between institutional and media portrayals. Press releases emphasized affordability, access, and mission alignment, but conspicuously omitted financial strain or declining enrollment, which local news coverage highlighted in certain instances. We conclude that the framing of tuition resets seeks to influence how stakeholders interpret higher education affordability reforms, navigate economic uncertainty, and reinforce institutional mission.
Keywords: tuition reset, tuition reduction; institutional messaging; content analysis; college affordability

Reajustar la narrativa: Comunicación estratégica en torno a las reducciones de las tasas de matrícula en universidades privadas sin ánimo de lucro de Estados Unidos
Resumen: Este estudio analiza cómo las universidades privadas sin ánimo de lucro que otorgan títulos de grado presentan a públicos externos reducciones significativas en el importe de las tasas de matrícula, conocidas como reajustes de matrícula o *tuition resets*. A partir de las teorías del encuadre, de las instituciones y de los grupos de interés, empleamos un enfoque de análisis de contenido para examinar cómo 59 instituciones presentan estos reajustes de matrícula en comunicados de prensa institucionales y en la cobertura de los medios locales. Los resultados muestran que los mensajes estratégicos suelen centrarse en la transparencia de los precios de la educación superior, la respuesta a presiones económicas más amplias y al endeudamiento estudiantil, la alineación con la misión institucional, la competitividad frente a instituciones regionales comparables y la vinculación del reajuste con otras iniciativas institucionales. Asimismo, el análisis revela diferencias significativas entre las representaciones institucionales y mediáticas. Los comunicados de prensa enfatizaron la asequibilidad económica, el acceso y la alineación con la misión institucional, pero omitieron de forma llamativa las tensiones financieras o el descenso de la matrícula, aspectos que la prensa local destacó en determinados casos. Concluimos que el encuadre de los *tuition resets* busca influir cómo los grupos de interés interpretan las reformas orientadas a la asequibilidad de la educación superior, gestionan la incertidumbre económica y refuerzan la misión institucional.
Palabras clave: reajustes de matrícula; reducción de tasas; comunicación institucional; análisis de contenido; asequibilidad universitaria

Reajustar a narrativa: Comunicação estratégica em torno das reduções do valor das propinas em universidades privadas sem fins lucrativos dos Estados Unidos
Resumo: Este estudo analisa como as universidades privadas sem fins lucrativos que conferem graus de licenciatura apresentam, perante públicos externos, reduções significativas do valor das propinas, conhecidas como reajustes de propinas ou *tuition resets*. A partir das teorias do enquadramento, das instituições e dos grupos de interesse, recorremos a uma abordagem de análise de conteúdo para examinar como 59 instituições enquadram estes reajustes de propinas em comunicados de imprensa institucionais e na cobertura dos meios de comunicação locais. Os resultados mostram que as mensagens estratégicas tendem a centrar-se na transparência dos preços do ensino superior, nas respostas a pressões económicas mais amplas e ao endividamento estudantil, no alinhamento com a missão institucional, na competitividade face a instituições regionais comparáveis e na articulação do reajuste com outras iniciativas institucionais. Além disso, a análise revela diferenças significativas entre as representações institucionais e mediáticas. Os comunicados de imprensa enfatizaram a acessibilidade económica, o acesso e o alinhamento com a missão institucional, mas omitiram, de forma notória, as tensões financeiras ou a redução do número de estudantes matriculados, aspetos que a imprensa local destacou em determinados casos. Concluímos que o enquadramento dos *tuition resets* procura influenciar a forma como os

grupos de interesse interpretam as reformas orientadas para a acessibilidade do ensino superior, lidam com a incerteza económica e reforçam a missão institucional.
Palavras-chave: reajustes de propinas; redução do valor das propinas; comunicação institucional; análise de conteúdo; acessibilidade económica universitária

Resetting the Narrative: Strategic Messaging Around Tuition Reductions at U.S. Private Not-For-Profit Colleges

Public opinion surveys consistently show that most Americans believe college is too expensive and many struggle to understand or accurately identify college costs, contributing to growing scrutiny of how institutions price and communicate tuition (Cheslock & Riggs, 2020; Lumina Foundation & Gallup, 2024; Ward et al., 2025). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2024), the average sticker price of private four-year institutions in the 2023 academic year was about $40,700, compared to an average net-price of $29,700. Most students do not pay the full sticker price due to tuition discounting, which lowers the advertised cost through need- and non-need-based aid. Net price offers a more accurate estimate of students' actual financial burden and plays a central role in evaluating affordability. In this context, college affordability refers to whether students and their families can meet educational costs using available resources, such as financial aid, earnings, and family contributions, without incurring excessive financial strain (Hillman & Kindschy, 2018). Nevertheless, high sticker prices can still produce "sticker shock," deterring prospective students, especially those from underrepresented and/or economically disadvantaged backgrounds, from applying or enrolling (Grodsky & Jones, 2007; Levine, 2022; Levine et al., 2023; Nienhusser & Oshio, 2017).

At the same time and facing increasing concerns over sticker shock, private postsecondary institutions have adopted various strategies to boost applications and enrollments. An increasingly popular strategy is a "tuition reset," which involves a significant reduction in published tuition fees. Scholarly literature identifies a tuition reset as a reduction in sticker price by at least 5% (Lapovsky, 2015, 2019); however, research indicates that among institutions implementing a reset in recent years, the median reduction in tuition was almost 25% (Corral & Ward, 2024). Tuition resets have emerged as an innovative pricing strategy among private baccalaureate-granting colleges seeking to address two interrelated issues: 1) growing concerns about affordability for students, and 2) financial pressures caused by enrollment management challenges because private colleges' main source of revenue is student tuition fees (Smith, 2019; Ward & Corral, 2023). Adjustments to institutional financial aid offerings and other student support changes typically accompany tuition resets. As a result, a tuition reset aims to address sticker shock and the corresponding confusion created by the high-tuition, high-aid model that has characterized higher education pricing in recent decades (Turner, 2018). While some institutions have reported increased enrollment immediately following a tuition reset, the long-term institutional and student effects of these policies remain unclear (Corral & Ward, 2024; Lapovsky, 2015; Ward & Corral, 2023).

One of the critical, yet underexplored aspects of tuition resets is how institutions communicate these decisions to the public. Institutional messaging is crucial in shaping perceptions among students, families, and other stakeholders, when colleges introduce new policies or clarify their goals, particularly during periods of heightened public scrutiny (Davis et al., 2019; Hartley & Morphew, 2008; Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Perna et al., 2021). Colleges may frame tuition reset initiatives through press releases and engagement with local media to highlight pricing transparency, mission alignment, financial resilience, and competitiveness, among other factors. These narratives ostensibly influence how the public understands tuition resets and whether they perceive them to be proactive strategies for increasing access, or reactive measures in response to financial distress, both of which have vastly different implications for postsecondary enrollment. Despite growing interest in tuition resets, much of the existing research has focused on their financial and enrollment *effects* rather than their *public framing* (Corral & Ward, 2024; Ward & Corral, 2023; Ward et al., 2026). Little is known about the ways institutions strategically construct and disseminate messages regarding these pricing changes. It is critical to fill this knowledge gap because institutional messaging and communications often impact stakeholders' sensemaking of institutional actions (McNaughtan et al., 2018), which is particularly important in the context of affordability given students' and families' high level of confusion regarding college pricing (Ward et al., 2025). We do this by analyzing institutional press releases and media coverage featuring college leaders discussing tuition resets. Accordingly, we seek to answer the following research question: *How do private four-year colleges and universities frame the purposes, processes, and anticipated outcomes of tuition resets in institutional press releases and media coverage featuring institutional leaders*?

Using a content analysis approach and an embedded conceptual framework, the study explores the strategies institutions use to present tuition resets to key stakeholders. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of how higher education institutions leverage strategic communication to influence public perception and maintain institutional positioning in an increasingly competitive higher education sector.

We organize the paper as follows. First, we review the relevant literature on tuition resets, focusing on their emergence as a pricing strategy and the role of strategic institutional messaging in communicating these changes. Next, we outline the conceptual framework guiding this study, drawing on framing theory in combination with institutional and stakeholder theory to examine how institutional behaviors reflect broader dynamics within the higher education ecosystem. We then describe the methods used in this study, followed by a presentation of the results. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and their implications.

Literature Review

To ground our study, we begin by reviewing research on the effects of tuition resets on student enrollment and institutional finances. This body of work sheds light on how pricing strategies shape student and institutional behavior but offers little insight into how institutions publicly communicate these changes. To address this gap, we also draw on scholarship on institutional messaging to understand how colleges construct narratives around affordability, value, and identity in ways that may influence stakeholder perceptions.

Tuition Resets as a Pricing Strategy

The high-tuition, high-aid model has dominated the higher education pricing structure wherein institutions set high published tuition rates but offer significant discounts through need and merit-based grants and scholarships (Redd, 2000; Turner, 2018). This practice of offering institutional grants and scholarships is known as tuition discounting and allows institutions to meet certain enrollment management goals by making net prices more accessible (Hillman, 2012). Originally seen as a mechanism to redistribute wealth through need-based aid, discounting practices now include non-need-based aid and are used as a marketing tool. Scholars argue that this model sows confusion among families navigating the college-going process because the actual price students may pay is not discerned until after a student receives admission (Levine, 2022). Previous scholarship shows students tend to overestimate the cost of college, which stymies students from historically and persistently underrepresented groups in higher education, like Black, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged students, from making informed choices about where to apply and enroll (Grodsky & Jones, 2007; Nienhusser & Oshio, 2017). For example, using data from a nationally representative cohort of students entering high school in 2009, Nienhusser and Oshio (2017) found students overestimate tuition at both public and private four-year institutions by about $10,000 and $6,000, respectively. Tuition resets eliminate this opacity by simplifying pricing structures.

Tuition resets represent a strategic pricing approach where institutions significantly lower their published tuition rates for all students (Lapovsky, 2015, 2019). This model seeks to counteract the sticker shock effect of high tuition prices, which may deter prospective students from considering highly priced private colleges and universities (Levine et al., 2023). By resetting tuition to a lower and more transparent rate near the beginning of the college-going process, institutions aim to increase affordability perceptions and make their pricing more competitive (Perna, 2006). However, recent research using quasi-experimental methods found that while these policies do initially seem to increase enrollment, particularly among Pell Grant recipients, they do not substantially alter the racial and ethnic composition of the student body or lead to significant long-term increases in overall enrollment (Corral & Ward, 2024).

Although institutions may present tuition resets as a benefit for future matriculants, this approach also serves as a strategic financial measure to enhance stability, particularly for institutions struggling financially. By lowering tuition, colleges aim to make education more affordable, or at least appear more affordable, and thus attract a larger applicant pool, which is theorized to stabilize or even increase overall net tuition revenue. Yet, Ward and Corral (2023) found that while tuition resets might initially seem promising in attracting more students and potentially boosting enrollment in the short term, they do not, on average, significantly change overall net tuition revenue in the long run. Furthermore, the decrease in institutional aid expenditures roughly corresponded with reduced tuition income, maintaining a financial balance rather than providing an overall boost (Ward & Corral, 2023). These nuanced outcomes reveal that some colleges might not experience the expected enrollment surges or financial stabilization post-reset, questioning the efficacy of tuition resets as a viable long-term solution for financial distress.

Given the complex outcomes of tuition resets, there is a pressing need to study the institutional messaging behind these policies. While institutions reset tuition to simplify pricing, the research reveals that the impacts, particularly regarding long-term enrollment and tuition revenue, appear to be mixed and often fall short of the optimistic expectations embedded in the theory of change guiding these policies. This disconnect underscores the importance of examining how institutions communicate the purposes, processes, and anticipated outcomes of tuition resets. Institutional narratives play an important role in shaping prospective students' and families' perceptions and decisions (Buddel, 2018; Hallmark & Ardoin, 2021). Thus, researchers and policymakers may better understand the influence of institutional messaging on public expectations and actions.

Strategic Institutional Messaging

Colleges and universities carefully craft strategic institutional messages, like mission statements, presidential communications, and press releases, to define who they are and shape how the public perceives them. In this section, we discuss each of these approaches and how they relate to how institutions may convey information regarding a tuition reset.

Mission Statements

A mission statement of a college or university serves as a declaration of an institution's core purpose and vision (Meacham, 2008). It signals identity and intent using language that is often deliberately vague (B. J. Taylor & Morphew, 2010). As a result, this form of communication is indirect by design, relying on symbolic representations of who the institution wants to be, but also how it perceives itself (Morphew & Hartley, 2006). In a content analysis of a randomly selected sample of 299 postsecondary mission statements, Morphew and Hartley (2006) found that while mission statements deploy vague language about their purposes, the precise language defining their institution varied by Carnegie classification. For example, primarily baccalaureate-granting institutions emphasized serving the local area, a liberal arts education, and a commitment to diversity, while doctoral-level institutions emphasized research and promoting civic duty among students. As Morphew and Hartley (2006) note, "mission statements are not used to provide direction or vision, but rather as icons to signal key external constituencies that the institution in question shares these groups' values and goals" (p. 466). Thus, colleges may echo sentiments to meet external expectations that the broader field of similar institutions shape (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

This finding suggests that university messaging, in general but also in the case of tuition resets, is an opportunity for institutions to signal specific values and goals to students and families. While institutions may uniformly frame tuition resets around increasing access and affordability, the specific narratives and justifications they employ likely vary based on institutional type (e.g., whether the college is religiously affiliated or a selective liberal arts institution), just as mission statements vary across institutional types. Similarly, institutions rely on internal stakeholders and mechanisms such as their presidents and communications teams to convey these messages.

Presidential Messaging

Presidential messaging also plays a pivotal role in (re)defining institutional identity and shaping public perception. A college and university president acts as a prominent institutional voice by communicating through speeches, campus-wide emails, and media statements to articulate the institutional mission and respond to current issues (Eddy, 2005). Research indicates that this is a strategic and deliberate process that does not always fall squarely on the shoulders of a single decisionmaker (McNaughtan & Pal, 2019). McNaughtan and Pal (2019) interviewed university leaders and found that presidents perceive themselves as instigators of communication who carefully craft messages in collaboration with senior staff, like communications officers and legal counselors, particularly when they perceive the stakes of a situation to be high. In critical moments, presidents work to frame narratives that align the university's response with its mission, helping stakeholders make sense of the action as a natural extension of the institution's core values (McNaughtan et al., 2018). For instance, in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, many college and university presidents issued public statements that explicitly drew on their mission statements and strategic plans to frame commitments to racial justice and institutional accountability (Meikle & Morris, 2022; Wang et al., 2024). This example underscores the notion that during social unrest, reasserting core values may bolster legitimacy by helping stakeholders make meaning of the event and maintain (or refigure) trust in an institution. When considering this literature in the context of tuition resets, institutional messaging might ostensibly come from presidents, but other key members of senior leadership likely inform their approach. Further, the institutions may often position the messaging around tuition reductions as a recalibration aligned with institutional mission and values.

The Growing Trend of Postsecondary Press Releases

Finally, another common approach to institutional messaging is through university-sanctioned press releases (Autzen, 2014; Entradas et al., 2024). There is a growing scholarly literature in the interdisciplinary field of science communication studying trends among universities in having an external relations team that sends out press releases, along with examining what the intended and unintended outcomes are of this approach (Entradas et al., 2024). Institutions are increasingly distributing press releases to highlight new scientific advances and contributions to society. This shift in focusing on press releases could be attributed to the evolving media landscape, where media is becoming hypercritical of universities (B. Taylor, 2011), changing working conditions among journalists (Autzen, 2014), and a growing reliance on social media as a source for information (Capriotti et al., 2023), among many other considerations. Perhaps one of the biggest drivers encouraging university investments in external relations offices is the ability to control their narrative concerning research and other organizational matters. For instance, in examining press releases posted on their social media accounts among universities located in Europe, the United States, and Latin America, Capriotti et al. (2023) found that universities highlighted their own institutional positioning (i.e., rankings) more so than their daily activities like teaching or research. This scholarship reinforces the importance of analyzing press releases as key vehicles of institutional messaging, especially on topics that help market institutions to potential students. In the context of tuition resets, press releases are strategic instruments shaped by institutional priorities, a growing reluctance to engage with the media, and reputational concerns. Examining the frequency and content of press releases can provide insight into how colleges attempt to shape public narratives around affordability, institutional legitimacy, and financial sustainability.

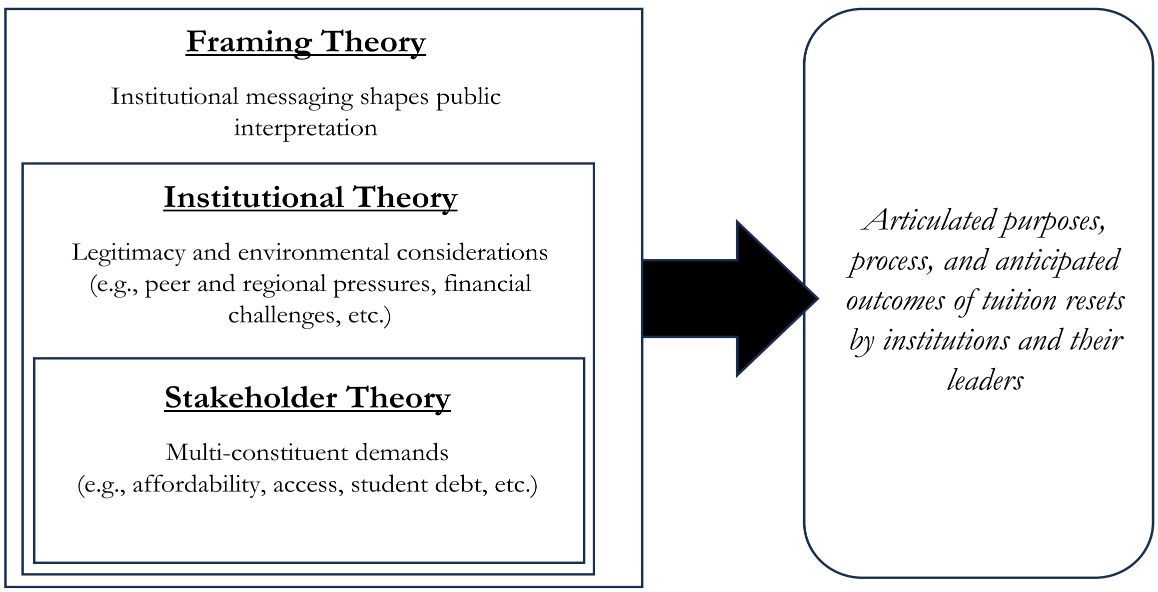
Conceptual Framework

To conceptually ground our study, we employ framing theory as the overarching analytic lens for understanding how private, not-for-profit colleges use strategic communications to shape perceptions of tuition resets (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Entman, 1993; Lam, 2020). Within that lens, we embed institutional theory, which explains why colleges adopt resets under external pressure, along with stakeholder theory, which identifies whose perceptions the frames seek to influence (Austin & Jones, 2016; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Freeman, 2010; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2006; Savage et al., 1991). Figure 1 visually depicts our integrated framework.

Institutional theory helps explain why institutions behave as they do in response to environmental pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In this framework, institutions operate within a field, or a group of similar organizations navigating shared constraints. To survive and maintain legitimacy, colleges often respond to uncertainty by mimicking peers (mimetic isomorphism) (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). For example, as private colleges face declining enrollment and increasing financial strain, some may have implemented tuition resets to signal responsiveness to affordability concerns and to remain competitive within their specific higher education market shaped by their peers (Lapovsky, 2015, 2019). These actions, while perhaps described as student-centered, are shaped significantly by external demands and resource dependencies (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2006). Thus, institutional theory suggests tuition resets are economic decisions as well as symbolic acts to reaffirm legitimacy in a changing environment shaped by the broader field.

Stakeholder theory (Austin & Jones, 2016; Freeman, 2010; Savage et al., 1991) complements this view by identifying whom institutions aim to influence through strategic communication. Colleges are situated in a network of diverse stakeholders, like students, families, trustees, faculty, and government agencies, each with competing interests. According to stakeholder theory, organizational survival depends on maintaining legitimacy in the eyes of these various groups (Austin & Jones, 2016). In the context of tuition resets, internal stakeholders such as presidents and communications teams develop messages aimed at external audiences, primarily prospective students and families, to signal affordability, transparency, trust, and alignment with institutional values. Understanding how institutions target stakeholders is important because strategic messaging is a tool used to legitimize the institution by shifting the perception of those stakeholders (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). If successful, the threat colleges face procuring external resources, for instance, will be assuaged to the extent that student enrollment rises, while also highlighting their legitimacy within the field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2006).

Figure 1
Visual Depiction of Conceptual Framework



Finally, framing theory (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Entman, 1993; Lam, 2020) provides the overarching analytic lens for understanding how institutions construct and deliver these messages. Framing is not a specific theory that explains institutional or individual behavior; rather, it is a tool for examining how institutions present issues in ways that highlight certain aspects while downplaying others. In this study, we focus on the framing outputs of strategic communication, specifically how institutions frame tuition resets in press releases and media coverage. Framing allows us to categorize the narratives institutions use, like highlighting affordability or mission alignment, and examine how these narratives vary across institutional types and reset magnitudes. As Lam (2020) notes, framing draws on empirical research and theory to provide structure and meaning to complex organizational decisions. In this study, framing theory allows us to analyze both the intended message and its broader implications.

Research Design

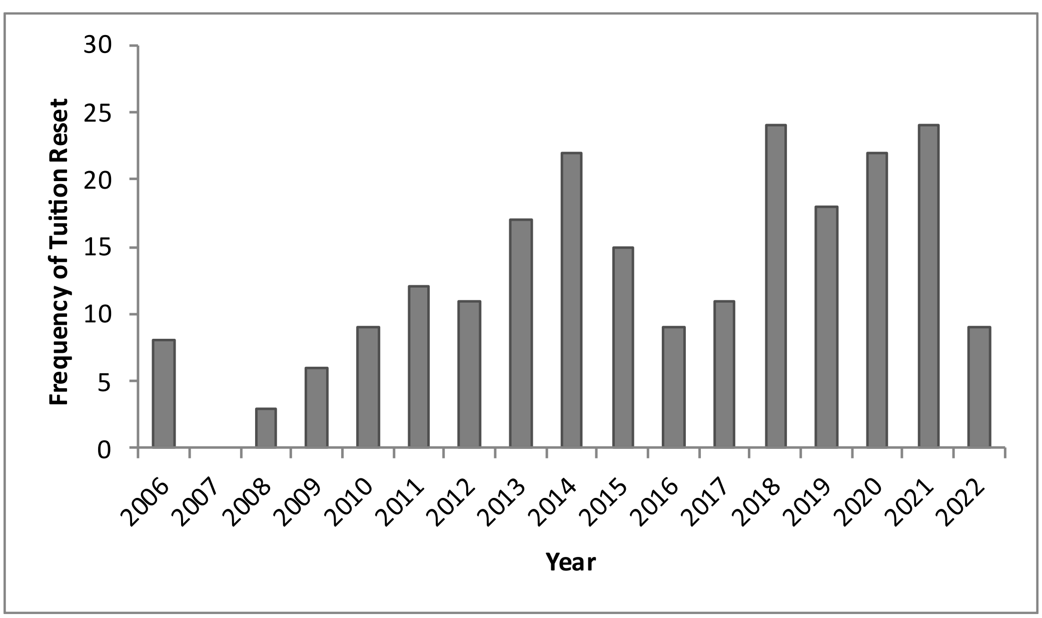
We conducted a content analysis of institutional press releases and local media featuring institutional leaders to answer our research question (Krippendorff, 2019; Mayring, 2022). According to Mayring (2022), content analysis is a systematic method for analyzing textual material to interpret meaning and patterns. It is also a common approach to analyzing institutional messages from colleges and universities (Hartley & Morphew, 2008; Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Nachman & Brown, 2020; Wang et al., 2024). While we relied primarily on qualitative content analysis to critically evaluate the messages from institutions, we also present basic descriptive statistics of our sample including what fraction of colleges and universities engage in tuition resets and corresponding messaging.

Data and Sample

Our data come from two sources. First, we draw on institutional press releases that explain and justify recent tuition price changes, providing institution-approved messaging. Second, we examine local media coverage that includes commentary from institutional leaders, such as presidents or enrollment managers, offering perspectives that complement or expand official narratives. To identify institutions that reset tuition, we created a panel dataset from 2005 to 2022 using the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System's (IPEDS) institutional characteristics and academic charges surveys. We started our panel in 2005, the first academic year in which the National Center for Education Statistics collected tuition and other institutional characteristics data through its fully implemented web-based IPEDS survey. This starting point also provides us with a few years preceding the post-Great-Recession surge in tuition resets. We end in 2022, the most recent IPEDS files available when the study began. IPEDS is a mandated data collection system that gathers institution-level information, such as enrollment, graduation rates, finances, faculty, and more. The federal government requires participation of all institutions that administer federal student financial aid programs under Title IV of the Higher Education Act. In total, we identified 217 instances of institutions that reduced tuition by at least 5%, with most cuts occurring after 2012 (see Figure 2) and 44 institutions resetting tuition more than once. Figure 2 suggests two periods of heightened adoption, with one period peaking around 2013–2014 and a second from approximately 2018–2021.

Figure 2

Distribution of the Number of Tuition Reset Schools, by year

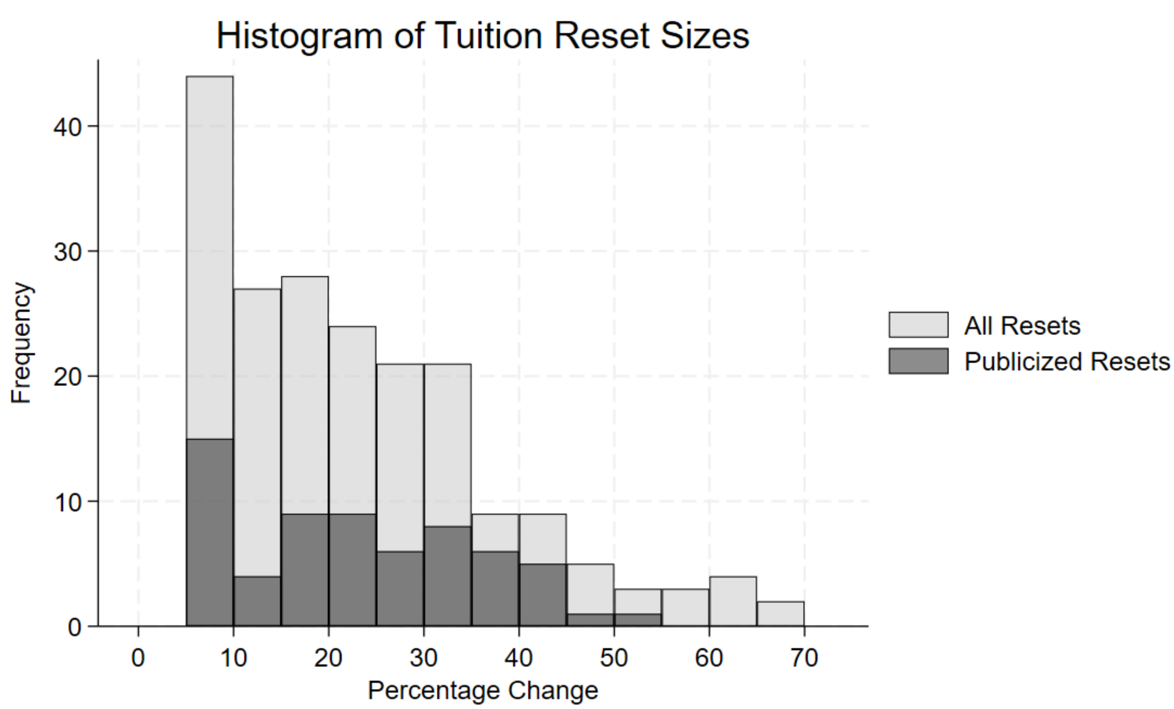


After identifying tuition reset colleges, we searched for institutional commentary using combinations of the institution's name, the year before, the year of, and the year after the reported reset (as indicated in IPEDS), and keywords such as "tuition reset," "tuition decrease," "tuition cut," or "sticker price" through Google. If no results appeared on Google, we searched the institution's website. We accumulated press releases and local media coverage from 59 institutions, suggesting that just over one-third of institutions (34%) in our sample engaged in some form of communication and framing of their tuition reset. Appendix Table A1 reflects a list of the institutions included in our content analysis along with the year and size of their reset.

To further explore differences between institutions that publicized their tuition reset and those that did not, Figure 3 presents a stacked histogram of tuition reset magnitudes, comparing all identified resets to those institutions publicized through institutional or media channels. The figure shows that publicized resets are most concentrated in the middle of the distribution (20–35% range), while smaller (<15%) and larger (>45%) resets are less frequently accompanied by press coverage. This pattern suggests that institutions may be more inclined to publicize resets that are substantial enough to signal a meaningful tuition reduction but not so extreme that they require additional justification.

Figure 3

Histogram of Tuition Reset Size, by Communication Presence



Analysis

The research team approached data analysis in several steps. First, two graduate assistants downloaded press releases and media coverage as PDFs and imported them into NVivo qualitative data software. Then, the lead author read five institutions' data and used an inductive approach via descriptive coding to create an initial codebook (Saldaña, 2016). According to Saldaña (2016), descriptive coding involves summarizing the basic topic of a passage in a word or short phrase. The research team then met to conduct a close reading of the same five institutions' communications. Throughout the coding process, research team members wrote memos highlighting recurring themes along with connections to scholarly literature and conceptual frameworks. We then applied the codebook to 10 additional institutions. After another team discussion, we refined and finalized the codebook. The graduate assistants subsequently double-coded the remaining files.

Next, the research team proceeded to second-cycle coding using pattern coding to identify broader themes across institutions. Pattern coding involves grouping similarly coded data segments into more abstract categories or explanations (Saldaña, 2016). This allowed us to move from individual codes to themes, specifically focusing on interpreting how institutional messages clustered around shared narratives. For example, we synthesized codes such as "student debt," "middle-class family struggles," and "family financial burden" into a higher-level theme called "response to economic pressure and student debt." During this stage, we also revisited our analytic memos and framework to assess how emergent themes aligned with the literature on institutional theory, stakeholder engagement, and framing. This process enabled us to develop the thematic structure that informs the findings presented below.

Positionality

The first author brought personal experience from attending a small liberal arts college, where they encountered the confusion created by the high-tuition, high-aid pricing model. This experience informs their critical lens on how such institutions communicate affordability in addition to the institution's role in serving diverse student populations through a liberal arts mission. The second and third authors are Canadian graduate students with limited connection to U.S. higher education, offering analytical distance that supported impartiality during coding and analysis. The final author contributes deep expertise in U.S. higher education finance and policy, helping situate our findings within broader affordability debates. Together, our diverse perspectives enhanced the study's rigor and reflexivity.

Limitations

Readers must consider two limitations when interpreting our findings. First, our analysis includes only institutions that released public communications or received media coverage, which also included an institutional leader, about their tuition resets that we were able to search, identify, and download. We do not capture institutions that implemented resets without formal messaging, limiting the generalizability of our findings to all tuition reset schools. Additionally, because we rely on IPEDS tuition reporting to identify institutions that reduced tuition, some institutions may reflect reporting anomalies or data corrections rather than deliberate tuition reset strategies. While we attempted to mitigate this by triangulating with press releases and media coverage, we cannot fully rule out this possibility. Second, an inherent limitation of content analysis is that our data reflect externally curated messages intended for public audiences. As a result, we are unable to observe internal deliberations, political tensions, and/or operational constraints that may have influenced the decision to reset tuition, but which internal stakeholders are unlikely to disclose. Nevertheless, examining public-facing narratives offers insight into how institutions strategically communicate affordability in an increasingly competitive higher education field.

Findings

Our systematic approach led to the following key themes: 1) transparency in postsecondary pricing, 2) responses to economic pressure and student debt, 3) mission-driven access, 4) regional and competitive pricing, and 5) bundled messaging and institutional context. While we identified these recurring themes, institutions often discussed them together (e.g., pricing transparency alongside addressing student debt and mission alignment). Moreover, out of the 59 institutions, we identified 32 news articles and 31 media releases (institutions could have more than one piece of content), a near even-split among institutional communications. Table A2 reports the primary sources directly referred to in this study rather than the full analytical corpus.

Transparency in Postsecondary Pricing

In nearly all the documents from institutions we analyzed (50/59), colleges framed tuition resets to make pricing more transparent for prospective students. Many explicitly contextualized the traditional high-tuition, high-aid model of higher education finance and identified it as a barrier, since most students never pay the full published price. For example, Canisius University (n.d.) sought to move toward less opaque costs by noting:

> More than ever before, the cost of a private education appears unaffordable. The process has become a maze of high tuition prices, high discounts and lack of transparency that turns away too many qualified students...Excellence Within Reach, our tuition reduction initiative…lowers our undergraduate tuition by 23% — resetting it to 2008 levels. It's a move designed to narrow the gap between our published price and what students actually pay after their financial aid is applied, making Canisius a more realistic possibility from the start. (Canisius University, n.d., paras. 1–2)

Rather than presenting the reset as a simple discount or marketing strategy, institutions emphasized systemic problems in the traditional high-tuition, high-aid model. Canisius, for instance, framed itself as removing barriers that deterred students before they even applied. Media coverage echoed these concerns. Elizabethtown College, which reduced tuition by 32% in 2019, drew attention to this dynamic through its president's comments in a local news article (Geli, 2018). Their president noted that middle-income families often fail to see past the high sticker price and do not fully understand the high-tuition, high-discount model, leading them to opt for public colleges that appear to be a better value (Geli, 2018). By framing the reset as a response to pricing confusion, Elizabethtown sought to signal to middle-income families that its sticker price now reflected a more accurate and transparent cost of attendance.

Relatedly, other colleges similarly stressed that resetting tuition was intended to provide clarity at the earliest stages of college consideration. Gordon College highlighted that a lack of clarity about costs directly drives students away. They wrote, "The top reason why students lose interest in a college or university is price…[b]etter price transparency will remind students that educational excellence can still be affordable" (Gordon College, 2020, para. 3). This statement suggests that transparency was framed not only as an affordability issue but also as a recruitment strategy, necessary to keep students engaged in the enrollment process.

The transparency frame also resonated with broader financial concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, the University of Lynchburg (2021) declared:

> The COVID-19 pandemic and its concurrent economic crisis have put many families in a tough spot. Still, tuition rates at private colleges continue to rise. We think it's time for a tuition refresh…the University of Lynchburg will lower the total cost of attendance. (paras. 2–4)

By positioning resets as a clarifying act rather than a simple discount, colleges sought to reassure families that the price of attendance was both realistic and reliable. Taken together, the examples from Canisius, Elizabethtown, Gordon, and University of Lynchburg illustrate how institutions layered the transparency frame: first diagnosing confusion in the high-tuition, high-aid model and then redefining tuition as a structural issue, and second, emphasizing transparency as essential for sustaining student interest and confidence in enrollment decisions, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Responses to Economic Pressure and Student Debt

Related to the previous theme, over half of the institutions (35/59) referenced the economic pressures faced by students and families. We noted a recurring pattern among institutions that also positioned their reset to combat economic challenges families are facing along with ballooning student debt concerns. Despite net-prices not being as high as sticker prices, institutional leaders still conveyed concern about the debt students carried once they graduated from their institutions. For example, Spring Hill College reduced tuition in Fall 2021 by 46%, or around $18,000. Their president, E. Joseph Lee, highlighted student debt as a reason for the cut as he said, "Spring Hill's decision was also made because [Lee] was 'too well aware that student loan debt is in crisis mode" (Crapps, 2025). This framing underscores that institutional leaders are acknowledging their role in the student debt "crisis," and hope a readjustment would lower that for students.

Other institutions similarly framed their resets as proactive measures to alleviate financial barriers for students and families. The predominant framing in this theme centered on the stagnating family incomes and struggles encountered by middle-class families, which are common in discussions around college affordability. Albright College's (2018) press release exemplifies this approach as they labeled their approach "right-sizing" tuition as they sought to move toward less opaque costs. The website noted,

> In line with traditional higher education practices, Albright College has historically raised tuition annually (by an average of 4% each of the last 10 years), significantly outpacing the growth of median family income…In an era in which family incomes have stagnated and higher education costs have outpaced incomes, Albright is taking important steps to close the gap and make education affordable. (Albright College, 2018, paras. 1–3)

By highlighting student loan debt and financial constraints that families face, leaders acknowledged the psychological and financial strain associated with the high costs of college attendance. This pattern suggests that many institutions sought to make tuition pricing more transparent and signal their commitment to reducing students' financial burdens at a time when national attention on college affordability and debt was intensifying.

Mission-Driven Access

Another prominent way colleges and universities framed their tuition reset was by recasting financial changes as extensions of their institutional mission, with over 80 percent of institutions connecting the resets to their institutional goals and objectives. For example, private universities and liberal arts colleges focused on their established, well-rounded approach to educating students and emphasizing access and affordability for local residents. For instance, Keystone College (2019) announced a tuition reset in the 2020-2021 school year that "continues the college's mission of making college more accessible to as many students as possible" (para. 1).

Religiously affiliated institutions in our sample (e.g., Catholic, Christian, Methodist, etc.) were particularly focused on reinvigorating their institutional mission connected to their faith and helping underserved students. For instance, President of Warner Pacific University, Andrea Cook, stated the following: "We are committed to providing educational access to students from diverse backgrounds, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds…for us, this is more than a justice issue, it's a Jesus issue" (Warner Pacific University, 2018, para. 3). College of Saint Mary extended this approach by noting specific student groups that the tuition reset would impact. In speaking with institutional leaders about the tuition reduction, a reporter noted,

> Reduced tuition is helping attract high-financial-need students – those who qualify for Pell grants or undocumented students who are ineligible for aid – a priority population for the college…[a]ligned with the mission of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet (the school's founders) to 'serve the dear neighbor.' (May, 2018)

Together, these examples suggest that mission language served not only to describe affordability but to signal alignment with long-standing institutional values. By anchoring resets in their core purpose, colleges sought to reassure students and families that the policy was an extension of their institutional mission.

Regional and Competitive Pricing

Next, we observed 44 of the 59 tuition reset schools in our sample positioned their adjustments to affordability relative to others in the region. The specific comparisons differed as they would contrast their tuition decrease to 1) other private colleges within the state or region, 2) in-state public universities, 3) out-of-state or national tuition averages, or 4) specific institutional peers with similar missions or selectivity. These comparisons allowed institutions to strategically signal value and position themselves competitively in their creation of a "local" higher education market. To illustrate, the University of the Cumberlands (2018), which slashed tuition by 57% ($22,640 to $9,875) in 2018, appealed to students by saying, "under the new pricing model, Cumberlands will offer the lowest tuition of any private university in Kentucky and also offer tuition comparable to every public four-year institution in the state" (para. 2). Additionally, other institutions emphasized proximity-based affordability by highlighting that their new price point aligned with nearby publics, such as Sweet Briar College comparing themselves with selective public universities in Virginia (McManamay, 2017). Finally, some institutions would also recognize others resetting tuition and frame it as an innovative approach they sought to replicate, such as Belmont Abbey, Hiram College, and Gordon College, among others. Overall, these comparisons served to make the case that the new tuition was in line with or more affordable than a carefully constructed group of similar institutions.

Bundled Messaging and Institutional Context

Next, nearly all the institutional communications (55/59) framed the tuition reset as part of a broader package of affordability and student success initiatives, rather than as a singular policy shift. However, we noticed these bundled messages varied in emphasis depending on the type of document. On the one hand, press releases underscored continuity in existing support systems to assure families that lower sticker prices would not come at the expense of aid. For instance, Central College emphasized continued financial aid and scholarships, while Ave Maria University vowed to maintain classroom sizes and student-to-faculty ratios (Jones, 2013).

On the other hand, we also noticed a trend that local news coverage provided additional context about institutional motivations with a particular focus on the financial realities of the institution. In some cases, local news media described tuition resets as responses to declining enrollment, budget shortfalls, and/or staff layoffs that resulted in a broader framing of the tuition reset as a necessary measure. For example, Benedict College's tuition reset came after the institution did not fill 50 staff positions, closing daycare services, selling campus facilities, and other measures, but the college president emphasized affordability and retention concerns in their comments to the press (The Greenville News, 2018). Thus, the local newspaper coverage provided added context concerning whether the tuition reset was a reactive measure due to financial distress.

Relatedly and finally, a notable absence we identified among the press releases was discussions of financial strain. No institutional press release discussed financial challenges as a contributing factor to adopting a tuition reset. For instance, Birmingham-Southern College President said about the reset, "It's going to create more opportunities for more students" (Thomas, 2017, para. 4). However, Birmingham-Southern was one of a handful of institutions in our sample whose doors shuttered permanently years later. In summary, these varying framings illustrate how tuition resets were situated within larger institutional strategies, shaped by both internal and external financial pressures and opportunities.

Discussion and Implications

As concerns over college affordability increase, U.S. colleges and universities are seeking innovative strategies to address it. Tuition resets appear to be one viable option, but one that comes with mixed student enrollment and institutional finance outcomes (Corral & Ward, 2024; Ward & Corral, 2023; Ward et al., 2026). As a result, focusing on the way institutions message and communicate this important financial policy decision is paramount to gathering a more holistic view of this approach. We interpret our findings through our integrated conceptual framework, examining the frames institutions construct, the external pressures motivating those frames, and the stakeholders they target.

We discovered that just over one in three institutions that slashed tuition by at least five percent since 2005 made a press release or had local media coverage of the change. This is surprising given the increasing popularity over time in the approach (173 private colleges and universities) along with potential impacts this change can have on perceptions of quality. A perceived decline in quality by key external stakeholders, such as students and their families, threatens the institution's integrity, as concerns about quality could lead to further decreases in enrollment (Austin & Jones, 2016; Cheslock & Riggs, 2020). Literature on the psychology of postsecondary pricing offers unique perspectives on how students and families may interpret such a change (Cheslock & Riggs, 2020). For instance, students may consider the price of an institution as an indicator of quality, often referred to as the "Chivas Regal effect," which could have deleterious impacts if students interpret a price reduction as also a cut in quality (Cheslock & Riggs, 2020). Thus, it is striking that only a third of institutions in our sample actively discussed and/or marketed their price change via the internet. Figure 3 shows that institutions most often publicize tuition resets in the mid-range of the distribution. Colleges that implemented very large or very small cuts rarely marketed the change. This pattern suggests that institutions may avoid publicizing very large cuts to sidestep concerns about quality signaling, while they may view small cuts as not worth advertising. By contrast, mid-range resets may strike a balance; they are large enough to be meaningful, but not so dramatic as to invite skepticism.

This selective approach to messaging might also be a potential explanation as to why previous studies found insignificant impacts of tuition resets on overall enrollment (Corral & Ward, 2024; Ward & Corral, 2023; Ward et al., 2026). However, as noted in our limitations, our content analysis approach relies on internet searches to compile the data for our study, which may overlook communications not indexed or archived online. Consequently, our findings potentially underrepresent institutions' messaging strategies and disregard less publicly available communications. Future studies could employ alternative methods, such as interviews with institutional leaders, to build on the present study surrounding tuition reset framing.

Nevertheless, among those institutions for which we found a press release or local media coverage, we noted a strong focus promoting college affordability. Institutions conveyed to relevant stakeholders, most often prospective and currently enrolled students and their families, how they would accomplish this through several approaches (Austin & Jones, 2016; Freeman, 2010; Savage et al., 1991). In one approach, there was a strong emphasis on making pricing more transparent and easier to understand, particularly for individuals who are unfamiliar with navigating higher education. Previous literature underscores the extent to which postsecondary pricing can be confusing, particularly for students who have been historically and persistently underrepresented in college (Grodsky & Jones, 2007; Levine, 2022; Nienhusser & Oshio, 2017). Thus, consistent with framing theory (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Entman, 1993; Lam, 2020), institutions explicitly framed their new tuition setting strategies as a response to these concerns by emphasizing that the revised pricing would offer a more accurate and transparent reflection of what students and families could expect to pay. Rather than universally shifting from a high tuition, high aid model to a low-tuition, low-aid model, many presidents and senior leaders described their approach as tailored to their institutional context (McNaughtan et al., 2018). They often clarified that the reset did not implicitly lead to lower aid; instead, they pledged to preserve scholarships and grants while enhancing clarity around advertised costs.

Next, institutions also focused on improving college affordability by aiming to reduce their contributing role in the student debt crisis through slashing sticker prices. With undergraduate student debt levels increasing significantly over the past two decades (Pyne & Grodsky, 2018) and students and parents indicating strong aversion to debt (Blanchard & Ward, 2026), institutional press releases and media coverage frequently framed tuition resets as a response to mounting concerns about debt burdens, particularly among low- and middle-class families. By emphasizing socioeconomic status, the message likely resonates with Pell Grant recipients, helping to explain the sizeable gains in their private-college enrollment found in prior studies (Corral & Ward, 2024). However, that same class-focused framing may overlook the distinct experiences of Black and Hispanic students, which could account for the null effects of tuition resets and other access policies experienced by those groups (Bennett et al., 2020; Corral & Ward, 2024). Nevertheless, messaging emphasized that by lowering the advertised price of attendance, colleges could offer a more manageable path to degree completion without excessive borrowing. This framing positions a tuition reset as a timely intervention aimed at ostensibly reducing reliance on and levels of student loans. As a frame, this narrative selectively emphasizes affordability while downplaying the limited evidence that resets actually reduce debt (Entman, 1993; Lam, 2020). To our knowledge, no evidence exists on how tuition resets influence student debt levels; however, previous work does point to relatively stable levels of net tuition (Ward & Corral, 2023). Noted decreases in cost of attendance appear to be driven by reductions in non-tuition components of total cost, a factor which institutions have significant leeway in determining (Ward & Corral, 2023; Kelchen et al., 2017). While it is possible that debt decreases, in part due to reduced non-tuition expenses, messaging regarding debt may also simply be a marketing technique or an opportunity for the institution to use strategic communications to signal values alignment with students and families. Overall, institutional leaders sought to address broader economic pressures families face, such as rising living costs, stagnant wages, and limited savings for education, while also portraying the reset to restore confidence in the values of the institutions.

Accordingly, another way institutions shouldered their responsibility in making college more affordable was by grounding the financial change firmly in their institutional mission. In line with the work of Morphew and Hartley (2006), and consistent with framing theory's emphasis on how organizations construct meaning around decisions (Lam, 2020), we found that colleges and universities consistently tailored their messaging around the unique values and purposes central to their identities. In our clearest example, religiously affiliated institutions highlighted how their tuition resets embodied core religious commitments, such as equity, access, and social justice. Institutions emphasizing liberal arts education framed resets as enhancing access to a well-rounded education and a smaller student-to-instructor ratio. Colleges communicated that their actions were principled decisions closely intertwined with their foundational values, and that instituting a tuition reset would allow them to more effectively achieve their mission.

Institutions also framed their tuition resets relative to peer colleges, strategically positioning themselves within distinct comparison groups in press releases and media coverage. Through these deliberate juxtapositions, such as comparing themselves to in-state public and private colleges along with institutions in neighboring states, colleges actively shaped perceptions of their educational value to attract enrollment. These comparisons served different purposes. On the one hand, public college references reflected comparisons derived from regional market competition. On the other hand, institutional efforts to mirror the actions of other private colleges, especially those that had already reset tuition, align with mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). It appears colleges borrowed legitimacy from perceived peers by imitating their strategies under conditions of uncertainty and simultaneously reinforcing the broader tuition-reset strategy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This pattern also reflects resource dependence (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2006), as institutions facing enrollment and financial pressures position themselves relative to competitors to secure students as critical external resources. In so doing, similar institutions shape external stakeholders' perceptions by mimicking each other's behaviors while simultaneously drawing comparisons that suggest their services are of higher value than other institutions in their ecosystem.

Finally, just as important as what institutions chose to emphasize is what they chose to omit. Notably absent from institutional press releases was any discussion of financial strain or declining enrollment even though many resets coincided with severe financial issues, which local newspapers highlighted. This omission is analytically important; framing theory suggests that the construction of a public message is as much about what institutions include as well as what they exclude (Entman, 1993; Lam, 2020). Viewed through institutional theory and resource dependence, this omission is strategic: institutions experiencing financial precarity avoid naming those pressures to protect their legitimacy within the field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2006). Nevertheless, local media coverage sometimes filled these gaps, providing context about budget challenges, staff reductions, and facility closures. These differences suggest that while institutions crafted press releases for prospective students and families, media coverage offered a more complex view of institutional motivations.

Conclusion

The higher education landscape has shifted significantly over the past two decades, prompting colleges and universities to adopt innovative strategies to fulfill their educational missions amid growing financial pressures. This study demonstrates that tuition resets are not simple tuition adjustments but also serve as carefully constructed narratives through which institutions respond to public concerns about college affordability, re(assert) their legitimacy, and (re)position themselves within an increasingly competitive and resource-dependent environment. As tuition pricing models continue to evolve, stakeholders should pay close attention to how institutions frame and communicate these changes to better understand how students receive and interpret these messages, and what aspects institutions strategically emphasize to influence perceptions of affordability, value, and institutional trust. Additionally, while it is important to understand the messaging, it is equally important to understand how stakeholders perceive these messages. We encourage future research to examine how students and families make sense of resets to better understand the efficacy of this strategy.

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