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Constructing an Educational "Quality" Crisis: (E)quality Politics and Racialization Beyond Target Beneficiaries

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In this critical, political discourse analysis, we trace how two concepts, equity and quality, became discursively linked and contested in the administration of postsecondary education policy over time (1968–1994)—a developmental process we refer to as (e)quality politics. By engaging in a historical analysis, we investigate (a) the racialized political origins and discursive processes by which arguments over educational "quality" are advanced as part of an antiequity policy paradigm and (b) how this paradigm reinscribes racial inequity into administrative and organizational action over time. We illustrate how, once an (e)quality politics paradigm is established, racialized policy designs can persist, even in the absence of explicit references to racialized social constructions of target populations in later periods of policy development.

Keywords: *politics, race, policy, discourse processes, critical theory, discourse analysis, historical analysis, policy analysis*

Policies aimed at advancing equal educational opportunity in the United States are often met by resistance and sustained backlash (Seamster & Henricks, 2015; Weaver, 2007). This resistance can take many forms, but one common mode includes the articulation of claims that equalizing access to educational spaces will diminish their quality (e.g., Freidus & Ewing, 2022; McCambly & Mulroy, 2022). Examples of this pattern include claims that the excellence of White-serving[1] universities or schools will decline as a result of increased enrollments by minoritized or low-income students or that the incorporation of critical or ethnic-studies curricula will lower educational standards. Indeed, the current sociopolitical climate marks an urgent moment for the study of how "quality" concerns can subsume equity goals in education policy. Our nation currently faces daily reminders of the ongoing efforts to dismantle racial justice initiatives and policies in educational settings—many of them reforms instituted in response to the ascendance of social justice campaigns like the Movement for Black Lives (e.g., Christian et al., 2019; Patashnik, 2022). Importantly, backlash efforts have framed this dismantling work as a crusade against lowered educational standards and have sought to delegitimize and devalue antiracist pedagogies, expertise, training, programs, scholarship, and reforms.

But while education research has made important strides to identify and name the ways in which equity and quality goals are placed in tension with one another in policies like these (see e.g., Freidus, 2022; Freidus & Ewing, 2022), what receives less attention is how these quality-based arguments can come to form the backbone of a sustained backlash to equity goals and, in

particular, become institutionalized into race-evasive policy and politics. And moreover, how these institutionalized meanings shape the routine delivery of racialized policy benefits and burdens over time (Gándara et al., 2023; Ray et al., 2023).

In this article, we seek to provide a roadmap—one that identifies the racialized political origins and discursive processes by which arguments over educational "quality" can be constructed and deployed as part of an antiequity policy paradigm. To do so, we conduct a critical, historical analysis of the development of political discourse on postsecondary educational quality from 1968 to 1994. Through an analysis of archival documents tracing the federal government's efforts in this period to shape the landscape of postsecondary education, we provide a case study of the historical development of competing policy priorities at the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE). Following the college access reforms provided by the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965, FIPSE was founded to identify, fund, and disseminate projects to support equity-focused transformations in teaching, learning, and administrative structures within universities. But this founding mission drew opposition from those who argued that in the wake of college access expansion, what was needed was not postsecondary transformation but preservation, especially in the form of federal financial protection for the nation's most elite universities that now faced a quality crisis in the era of college "massification." As such, FIPSE became a lightning rod for contemporary debates about the future of newly integrated educational spaces, and for scholars, it offers an insightful analytic site for understanding the political work that defines what is considered legitimate federal engagement with questions of equitable institutional change beyond the point of admissions.

Using this historical case study, we trace how equity and quality became discursively linked in the administration of postsecondary education policies over time—a developmental process referred to as (e)quality politics (McCambly & Mulroy, 2022)—and examine three research questions:

Research Question 1: How do policy actors conceptualize educational quality over time?

Research Question 2: To what degree are these conceptualizations of educational quality explicitly linked to racialized social constructions of target populations?

Research Question 3: How do these different conceptions shape to whom policy benefits and burdens are conferred?

Throughout this article, we use the terms "egalitarian" and "inegalitarian" to refer to the positionality of policy actors as they advocate for or against equal educational opportunity policies. In some cases, these terms map onto ideological or partisan categories (e.g., liberals/conservatives), but importantly, our terminology allows for the fact that racially (in-)egalitarian arguments have been articulated by diverse sets of policy actors across American political history.

Our analysis of this case has implications for the study of the social constructions of deservingness, power, and race in education policy and how these social constructions shape the conferral of benefits and burdens to different target populations (Gándara & Jones, 2020; Jabbar et al., 2022; Schneider & Ingram, 1993; Schram et al., 2009). In doing so, we demonstrate how the metrics that drive educational measurement can also serve as significant drivers of racial hierarchy (Emirbayer & Desmond, 2015). These definitions, measures, and metrics can, through policy discourse, develop political meanings that strengthen racially contingent policy designs that have consequences for the allocation of public investment and the endurance of racial inequality. We illustrate how, once an (e)quality politics paradigm is established, racialized policy designs can persist, even in the absence of explicit references to racialized social constructions in later periods of policy development.

Quality and Equality in the Study of Education Policy

Studies of education policy frequently reference a taken-for-granted—but often undertheorized—relationship between the pursuits of educational *equity* or *equality*[2] and *quality* (e.g., O'Day & Smith, 2016). A search of research studies, journal articles, and government documents housed on the Education Resources Information Center database,

for instance, returned 1,095 results ranging from 1964 to 2022 containing both the words "quality" and "equality/equity" in their titles. The overarching sentiment across many of the articles reveals disagreement about what, precisely, this presumed relationship between educational equity and quality is and what it should be. Education scholarship has advanced a range of arguments, from reports that equal educational access poses considerable threats to educational quality (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1967) to claims that educational equity and quality are complementary policy goals, wedded in a mutually constitutive relationship in which the achievement of one is contingent on the achievement of the other (e.g., Schneider, 2011).

Much of the ambiguity surrounding this pairing of quality and equity is rooted in the complex development of racially segregative practices and policy in America. Generations of targeted and unequal public investment across segregated school systems led, over time, to a material contrast in "White" and "Black" schools that, in turn, shaped assessments of their relative quality and, importantly, of the students they served (Freidus, 2022; Massey & Denton, 1993; Trounstine, 2018). In its landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* (1957) decision mandating school desegregation, the Supreme Court zeroed in on this relationship, noting that "the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the negro group" (footnote 10). But even as some argued that integration was the only pathway for ensuring quality education for Black students, others warned about the presumably adverse effects it would have on the quality of White schools. In a 1967 report, psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner cited "the serious inadequacies experienced in school by disadvantaged children, especially Negro boys," and warned of the negative spillover effects that their introduction would pose to their "White companion" via "the contagion of disorganized and antisocial behavior" (p. 916). These types of manifestations of anti-Blackness fueled policy conversations that shifted discourse and policy solutions from a focus on the structural (e.g., desegregation efforts aimed at equalizing resource distribution) to the cultural aspects (e.g., locating educational problems in the qualities of students themselves) (Freidus, 2022; Freidus & Ewing, 2022). This remained even though, critically, empirical studies have repeatedly demonstrated that concerns about racial integration eroding educational quality (and implicit concerns about harm to White students) are unfounded (see, e.g., Jackson, 2009; Jencks & Brown, 1975; Reber, 2010; Tuttle, 2019; Weinberg, 1975).

In education policy circles, quality measures, standards, and metrics have achieved a hegemonic status in the production of school and student evaluations, accountability mechanisms, resource allocation decisions, and more. Scholars range in their interpretation of the purpose and intention of quality metrics, from a benign means of measuring a public good to critiques that these metrics serve as tools for White credentialing (Billingham et al., 2020; Goyette et al., 2012; Hailey, 2022). But no matter the intention, in terms of their effects, scholars taking a critical race lens have demonstrated that quality measures routinely construct poor and racially minoritized students as less prepared for, or deserving of, elite educational opportunities, ultimately producing distinctly racialized outcomes (Corcoran & Baker-Smith, 2018; Jabbar et al., 2022; Thornhill, 2019). Studies of K–12 policy, for instance, document how school systems have come to rely on quality metrics associated with high-stakes testing and accountability policies to surveil and marginalize "low-performing" schools (Au, 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Diamond, 2018; McDermott, 2007; Rothstein, 2017). These performance and school-quality scores are then used to direct and justify White flight and resource hoarding via school choice policies, which scholars argue have contributed to worsening resegregation trends after *Brown v. Board* (Green et al., 2022; Hailey, 2022; Knoester & Au, 2017; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Orfield & Jarvie, 2020; Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2020). Recent efforts to push back against these trends—like incorporating social justice curriculum as a marker of school quality in Black and Brown schools—have been swiftly met by anti-critical race theory (CRT) policy campaigns challenging the legitimacy of social justice pedagogies (Hernández, 2022).

Policy discussions in postsecondary practice and scholarship are similarly characterized by conversations on the relationship between quality and equity. Universities and colleges rely on

measures of student quality (from GPAs to SATs) to select students for admissions—measures rife with racial bias that systematically disadvantage students of color (Poon et al., 2019; Posselt, 2014; Rossinger et al., 2021). Studies also indicate that university efforts to adjust processes and criteria to achieve greater diversity often evoke fears of dropping in ranks and admitting students who are of "low quality" (Poon et al., 2019; Posselt et al., 2017; Warikoo, 2016). Even in cases where racialized standards of quality undergo reform (e.g., the institution of race-conscious holistic admissions review processes), the financial demands of universities still limit the admission of low-income minoritized students—decisions that remain hidden under a mantle of meritocracy (Poon et al., 2023). Similar considerations also pervade faculty-hiring policies and processes (Liera, 2020; Liera & Ching, 2019; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Inequities in faculty hiring can occur via the racialized application of quality criteria (i.e., paper counts) and the discounting of scholars' equity-focused research (Liera & Hernandez, 2021)—processes that persist through tenure and promotion via *epistemic exclusion* that shapes standards of faculty productivity (Settles et al., 2022). Taken together, it is no surprise that, at the macro-level, members of the public often mobilize against the incorporation of equal-opportunity policies like affirmative action as antithetical to educational quality or excellence (Alon & Tienda, 2007; Augoustinos et al., 2005; Baker, 2019; Morrison, 1993; Sulé et al., 2017).

While this is only a sampling of the policy literature investigating educational quality and equity, it nonetheless demonstrates empirical grounds for two assertions: (a) Equity and quality have been politically constructed as inherently related in education policy settings, and (b) while "quality" can have multiple meanings, efforts to maximize it often culminate in policy instruments that neutralize equitable processes and policies (Clarke, 2014). These existing investigations, in other words, have uncovered a contingent and contentious relationship between educational equity and quality but have not yet answered *how we have arrived at this shared understanding*. It is a worthy puzzle to consider how a concept as seemingly benign as "educational quality" has become such a powerful tool for racial exclusion and disinvestment.

Perhaps most critically, the power of arguments aimed at maintaining educational quality in schools has precluded us from asking collectively what is "possible or desirable" across schooling contexts (Syeed, 2022, p. 769). Getting underneath this problem—one entrenched in the racial politics underlying legitimated policy discourses—requires more than investigating whether there is an association between educational equity and quality. Indeed, to echo the claims of quantitative criticalists, the quantification of concepts like educational quality can be seen as an inherently political act with both political and ethical ramifications across systems (Espeland & Yung, 2019; Garcia et al., 2018; Gillborn et al., 2018). We require methods that help us understand the ways that race, as an ever-shifting social construction, shapes policy development. In this article, we point to the need for historical engagement at the intersection of measurement and educational policy to pave the way for justice-centered analytic practice.

Conceptual Framework

This project is centrally concerned with investigating how policy arguments on educational quality become associated with contesting the conferral of resources and power to minoritized communities. In doing so, we conceptually join the conversation in education policy about the mechanisms underlying the inequitable distribution of policy benefits and burdens. In particular, we describe and apply an (e)quality politics lens as a tool for bridging analytic gaps in the field's current conceptualization of how policy that may appear race-neutral on its face still consistently produces the inequitable outcomes predicted by identity-forward political theories, especially those rooted in the Social Construction of Target Populations (SCTP). In the sections that follow, we provide a brief overview of SCTP and its intersection with theories of race-evasive racism to situate this article's theoretical and empirical contributions.

The Social Construction of Target Populations in a Race-Evasive Policy

Many scholars in education policy have taken up questions about how the racialized identities or constructions of target beneficiaries are linked

to relative policy benefits and burdens. Schneider and Ingram's (1993) theory of SCTP has been deployed frequently by such scholars as a conceptual foundation for understanding how political actors define and discuss target populations of educational quality policy over time (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, 2019). The SCTP theory defines "target populations" as the communities or individuals who are on the receiving end of a policy's benefits (e.g., resources, rights) and burdens (e.g., administrative constraints, means-testing). SCTP theory suggests that we can predict and understand the assignment of policy benefits and burdens as a political process-a claim backed by extensive empirical policy research (see, e.g., Garrow, 2014; Pierce et al., 2014; Sidney, 2005). According to SCTP theory, both high political power and positive social constructions of a target population are associated with the conferral of more policy benefits, while the inverse is associated with the imposition of more policy burdens (Schram et al., 2009; Soss, 1999; Steensland, 2008).

Empirically, the social construction of target beneficiaries has been deeply entangled with group identity, including race (Pierce et al., 2014; Shaw, 2009). Racially minoritized groups are frequently assigned negative social constructions that result in fewer policy benefits and more burdens than Whites (e.g., Beaton & Tougas, 2001; E. Bell, 2019; Hilal, 2014; Hirshberg, 2002). Education studies using SCTP have demonstrated the framework's predictive power, uncovering associations between group construction and policy outcomes like state funding formulas and student aid application requirements (e.g., E. Bell, 2019, 2020; Copeland & Mamiseishvili, 2017; Guzman-Alvarez & Page, 2021; Gándara, 2019, 2020; Reich & Barth, 2010). Their findings extend to the social construction of institutions and organizations. While White-serving educational institutions are more likely to be on the receiving end of policy benefits like grants, funding, and representation in the policy process, low-resourced minority-serving institutions are more likely to be assigned policy burdens (Cucchiara, 2013; Gándara, 2019; Hagood, 2019; McCambly & Colyvas, 2022; Posey-Maddox et al., 2014; Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2020). Taken together, existing research offers compelling evidence that minoritized groups are assigned a disproportionate share of policy burdens in education.

However, in education settings, policy actors often avoid explicit discussions of race, which can present a thorny challenge for the application of the SCTP theory. Even when race is salient, policy actors in education often obfuscate the social construction of populations, particularly in the more public settings from which many researchers gather data (e.g., interviews, legislative debates, speeches). For example, in their study of congressional testimony on the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in 2017, Gándara and Jones (2020) found that Republican members of the Congress refrained from crafting overtly positive constructions of groups like for-profit higher education providers that were slated to receive policy benefits and overtly negative constructions of low-income students who were assigned increased burdens. In a separate study, Gándara (2020) found that state legislators debating educational funding policy likewise avoided publicly constructing minoritized groups, "fearing their constituents might not view racial/ethnic minorities as deserving," and ultimately denied benefits to the groups (p. 212).

Race-Evasion as an Empirical Problem for Studying the Effects of Social Construction

We argue that this tension in the study of public policy between (a) the apparent effects of the negative social constructions of minoritized communities in policy design and (b) the insistent obfuscation of race talk in many policy contexts deserves careful analytic attention. This attention is made more urgent as anti-CRT/anti-"woke" advocates leverage race-evasive policy to make escalating claims that critical scholarship merely "cries wolf" over racism. Indeed, when target populations of a policy are vaguely defined in data sources, it can force researchers to infer the influence of implicit racialized social constructions in the development of policy options. Gándara (2020), for instance, has noted that education policy research often relies on assumptions of "an implicit negative social construction for racial/ethnic minority students," even when such constructions are not overtly present in the observable discourse (p. 215; see also Haney-López, 2014).

Such inferences are soundly grounded in theoretical approaches that recognize and identify how negative racial biases can operate silently in the creation of policy ideas and ultimately contribute to the production of policies that appear facially divorced from race (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Jabbar et al., 2022; King & Smith, 2011; Ray & Purifoy, 2019; Schram et al., 2009; Soss et al., 2008, 2009). As the predictions invoked by CRT suggest, the use of race-evasive strategies in policymaking is purposeful, strategic, and well-rewarded (D. A. Bell, 1991, 1980; Delgado et al., 2012; Feagin, 2006). Such approaches not only enable policymakers and their constituents to avoid recognizing patterns of racial dominance in policy that benefits Whites but also allow for the reproduction of racial hierarchies by explaining away the root of racial disparities as anything other than racism—often shifting responsibility for negative outcomes to individuals in minoritized groups (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Feagin, 2006).

The use of race-evasive strategies in policy contexts, in other words, transfers the blame for adverse effects experienced by negatively constructed target populations, especially when these negative constructions are buried—and thus erased—from the production of race-evasive policy. But the use of race-evasive approaches also provides an empirical challenge to researchers who want to examine how the constructions of target populations shape policy choices. It is a fairly regular practice for education policy actors and researchers who argue that race-evasive policy designs are implicitly based in racist considerations to be met with pushback and demands for more direct evidence that race was a material factor. Indeed, such burdens of proof are a core function of race-evasive racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Harper, 2012). The SCTP theory offers limited analytic leverage to this end, and race-evasiveness in policy development is difficult to conclusively capture.

A Way Forward: Applying a Theory of (E)quality Politics

Neither SCTP theory nor theorizing on race-evasive racism offers specific tools for predicting which race-neutral policies are likely to reinscribe inequitable outcomes. Perhaps most importantly, neither model sheds light on how implicit rhetorical references to the negative social constructions of target populations are cultivated, instantiated, and eventually widely accepted within policy settings. Typically, lines of inquiry in education research reside in this last, culminating stage, when unspoken negative social constructions are assumed to have shaped the creation of race-evasive policies. But this final stage is not generated *de novo*. Rather, it is a product of the long developmental arc of backlash politics (e.g., Klinkner & Smith, 2002; Weaver, 2007), whereby open acts of resistance to equity give way to new, race-evasive tactics.

To bridge this divide, we apply a developmental approach to examine the much-referenced, but little-understood, politicization of educational quality as a race-evasive mechanism for achieving racist ends. Despite the considerable body of research that has explored the often-negative association between equity and quality as policy goals, we still do not know how this tension develops, what ideas shape this relationship, and how policy actors can instantiate a status quo in which implicit negative social constructions are embedded in race-evasive policy discourse on educational quality. To begin this work, we leverage an examination of the discursive development of what McCambly and Mulroy (2022) refer to as a theory of (e)quality politics. The operation of (e)quality politics is characterized by "the introduction of a policy paradigm that reframes equity policy goals and objectives around the professed need to preserve and protect the extant 'quality' of institutions, spaces, or sectors of the economy targeted by civil rights policy" (McCambly & Mulroy, 2022, p. 52).

According to this theory, the development of a regime of (e)quality politics on a civil rights policy issue is governed by a sequential, four-stage process. In the first stage, segregated access to a public good or institution is disrupted by, second, the introduction of equal-access policy that delegitimizes segregation and racial exclusion. The introduction of the equal-access policy, however, can trigger a negative backlash grounded in loss aversion: Dominant groups that previously benefited from exclusive access to a public good engage in what racial threat theory characterizes as a zero-sum calculation, grounded in the fear that opening up access will inevitably threaten the desirability or *quality* of that good or institution

(see, e.g., Enos, 2016; Welch & Payne, 2010; Wilkins & Kaiser, 2014). In response, the next stages of backlash politics are defined by, third, the development and, fourth, the eventual dominance of "quality-centered" goals in the organizations tasked with administering the equal-access policies in the first place. A regime of (e)quality politics shifts the terms of debate to be nearly universally centered around concerns about the preservation of quality, a race-evasive shorthand for race-based stratification.

While existing analytic approaches in policy research typically beg the question "Is colorblind policy *really* about race?," a developmental model of (e)quality politics provides a means for analyzing how and if race-evasive quality appeals function as tools for racial maintenance and stratification. Key to this endeavor is to perform an analysis of the discursive tactics by which actors contend, however successfully, for control over the ideas and meanings that define the policy domain. By attending to the discursive processes within the developmental framework of the theory of (e)quality politics, we deepen the empirical tools available for the study of education policy in three ways. First, we bridge the gap between the roles of racialized social constructions of target populations in determining policy benefits and the paradoxical empirical phenomenon of race-evasive policymaking. Second, we emphasize the need to move beyond snapshot-in-time approaches to education policy analysis. And third, we open up new possibilities for challenging policy tactics that treat "quality" as a neutral good, especially when its discursive development suggests it is anything but that.

The Case Context: Equity and Quality at FIPSE

We take up these analytic puzzles in the context of the political development (1968–1994) of a federal agency situated in the crosshairs of debates about postsecondary transformation in the wake of the civil rights movement. Founded as one of the final pieces of the federal civil rights policy agenda, FIPSE was charged with improving college outcomes for the newly diverse student body entering colleges and universities. Just 8 years prior, the HEA of 1965 launched a number of programs aimed at increasing the representation of underrepresented groups in postsecondary institutions across the country: Title IV contained a multi-billion-dollar student aid program to underwrite educational access beyond high school, and Titles III and V provided federal funding to help shore up Black- and Hispanic-serving colleges. The massive federal undertaking codified by the HEA of 1965 weakened one mode of educational inequity: that of postsecondary access. But what happened after these new populations of students entered college—the daily opportunities to engage with and succeed within postsecondary education—received much less policy attention. Civil rights advocates argued that this was the next frontier of postsecondary reform: to equalize opportunities for a newly diverse student body within the walls of postsecondary institutions.

The political battle over FIPSE began in what we identify as a first period of contestation spanning from 1968 to 1972. Throughout 1968 to 1969, the Nixon Administration submitted multiple proposals to Congress to create a National Foundation for Higher Education. The idea for a foundation came from a 1968 commissioned report from the Carnegie Foundation which argued for the creation of a philanthropically inspired government fund charged with subsidizing postsecondary programs aimed at protecting educational opportunity for new generations of racially minoritized students entering university life (McCambly & Mulroy, 2022). Officials within the Nixon Administration quickly seized on the idea and refashioned it toward a different end: to provide financial support to the nation's most elite and White-serving institutions to protect and preserve their "excellence" in the face of college massification. This proposal for what detractors called a system of "ivy-league welfare" was repeatedly rejected by Congress.

A new proposal adopting the Commission's original vision for the fund, however, soon gained support among Democrats in Congress, culminating in a period of political settlement (1973–1983) in which the agency was focused squarely on equity grantmaking. This alternative vision, endorsed by the Ford Foundation–funded "Newman Report," came to form the basis of the 1973 legislation establishing FIPSE as a means of financially supporting institutions of higher education undergoing major structural transformation. Throughout the 1970s, FIPSE enjoyed a high degree of political autonomy

and was able to successfully pursue its mission of developing and distributing innovation grants to support projects that were rethinking and reforming the learning experiences of minoritized students and the capacities of minority-serving institutions from tribal colleges to community colleges to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), as well as some new institutional types (Edgerton, 1973; McCambly & Mulroy, 2022). Despite its miniscule budget compared to the access-focused federal programs of the day, this agency became an ideological battleground over the future of higher education, tightly entangled with the broader discourse on educational quality (see Supplementary Appendix 1 in the online version of the journal for FIPSE's historical funding levels).

By the early-1980s, however, FIPSE came under attack, beginning with what we identify as the second major period of contention (1983/4–1986). New Reagan appointees in the Department of Education (ED) launched a full assault, calling first for FIPSE's disbandment and then a complete overhaul of its priorities. With the help of key allies, FIPSE fought back, and Congress attempted to enshrine the agency's autonomy from the Administration. But this win lasted mere months. The Reagan administration swiftly replaced FIPSE's leadership and co-opted the use of its newly reinforced autonomy to push a new "quality" agenda in higher education—effectively eclipsing the agency's original mission. In this new era, FIPSE buried its public priorities related to equity and focused on codifying "quality" into higher education using mechanisms ranging from heightened accreditation standards and assessments to renewing classical "western" curriculums, and even the War on Drugs in the late 1980s. By the 1990s, a second era of settlement had commenced, and FIPSE's output told the story: It was disproportionately providing grants and resources to predominantly White, prestigious institutions of higher education, rather than the diverse, broad-access institutions its founding leadership targeted in the 1970s (McCambly & Colyvas, 2022).

Data and Methodology

In the sections that follow, we describe, first, our approach to archival data collection and the initial coding that we used to (a) establish a timeline of political development and a cast of key political actors in this domain and (b) purposively sample our larger corpus for a deeper discursive analysis. We then detail a multistep analytic process used to surface both the nature of the policy proposals over the selected time period and the underlying politics of discursive development relevant to racialized policy benefits and burdens.

Data Collection and Initial Coding

Data collection began with a comprehensive search of the ProQuest Congressional Database for all documents containing references to the FIPSE. We expanded the search terms to also include "Foundation for Higher Education," to capture references to the first iteration of the agency as proposed in 1969. This search yielded 1,267 documents ranging in length from 5 pages to over 500. During the initial analysis, we coded all documents for the speaker, the nature of the text (e.g., government report, congressional testimony), and how the various speakers described the mission of the agency and the target populations to be served by the agency's programs.

We expanded our congressional data set using an approach we refer to as *archival snowball sampling*. In interview snowball sampling (Creswell, 2018; Maxwell, 2012), researchers expand their sample by asking participants for the names of additional important informants. In archival snowball sampling, we follow a similar process. While coding the original set of congressional documents, we kept a record of "pivotal" political actors, reports, and events, defined as either those that are repeatedly referenced in congressional debates or testimony or those described as consequential to the development of policy proposals multiple times in the formal record. We then sought additional documents on the referenced texts, actors, and events. This expanded our data set to include additional public reports, administrative records, op-eds, and contemporary news articles.

Using these archival data, we created a timeline of the development of political contestation on FIPSE's mission and funding. While conducting our first round of coding, we noticed that discussions of "educational quality"—sometimes

discussed on its own and sometimes in direct relation to equity—emerged as a recurrent theme. We found that references to "quality" were deployed in subtly different ways over time, as political actors battled over a dominant meaning. We kept in mind that as words, concepts, and ideas are imbued with layered meanings, they can start to index a larger set of taken-for-granted political positions and preferences that are not always represented, or visible, in a single text or document (Clemens & Cook, 1999; Colyvas & Powell, 2006; Ventresca & Mohr, 2017). From a discourse analysis perspective, we found that employing archival snowball sampling helped us assemble deeper context necessary to unpack the underlying meaning of a contested concept, like "quality."

Critical Political Discourse Analysis

To uncover shifting patterns in the use of "quality" as a political construct—and their long-term implications for equity-based policies—we combined features of critical discourse, policy, and institutional analysis. In the tradition of critical discourse analysis, we treat discourse as a process and output of the social and political construction of meanings (Gee, 1999; Howarth et al., 2000). Discourses confer politicized identities onto things (e.g., student loans) and people (e.g., student debtors) by giving each a meaning. These meanings are not organically emergent but rather are a product of purposive political actions conducted via discursive activities, with implications for the distribution of social goods (Gee, 1999). These discursive activities—and the tools they create—shape knowledge systems and existing power structures and positionalities (Fairclough, 2013). Of particular importance to the creation of ongoing sources of power (and therefore inequity) is the process of naturalization (Fairclough, 1989), in which language is used to condition members of society to accept particular conventions or practices, even those that are not in their best interest.

By applying critical discourse techniques to policy, we examine how the language used in policy development contributes to the "discursive construction of power relations" (Hyatt, 2013a), providing valuable insights into policymaking as an arena concerned with struggles over meaning (Fulcher, 1989). To this end, we utilized Hyatt's analytical framework to conduct a critical policy discourse analysis for this study. First, we coded the documents in this study to capture the established "warrants" or the justifications actors provided for advocating for a particular policy or meaning (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2011; Hyatt, 2013a, 2013b). Hyatt (2013b) proposes three potential discursive resources from which actors can draw in their effort to establish warrants: evidentiary warrants (i.e., based on empirical evidence/facts), accountability warrants (i.e., based on desired outcomes), and political warrants (i.e., based on ideological appeals to national interest or a good society).

How actors establish a warrant goes hand-in-hand with how they legitimize it. Broadly, these legitimizations are grounded in discursive efforts to frame the warrant as aligned with the mainstream norms and values. Hyatt outlines four types of legitimation: authorization (i.e., references to authority based on tradition and unquestioned law), rationalization (i.e., appeals to the value or usefulness of an action), moral evaluation (i.e., appeals to a value system around what is ideologically good and desirable), and mythopoesis (i.e., moral or cautionary tales informing us of the outcomes of particular courses of action). We deductively analyzed and coded our data for warrant and legitimation techniques, creating 160 unique excerpts. We bounded these excerpts to capture a "complete argument," which could range from a single paragraph to multiple paragraphs of text to keep individual talking points in the context of larger meanings.

At each step of the coding process, we conducted multiple, iterative in-person calibration meetings, in which we discussed discrepancies in code applications and refined our respective interpretations of the codes for the first 20% of the 160 excerpts. The authors then split up the first pass of each coding step and then reviewed in real time the codes applied to every excerpt in the corpus to reach consensus. This process led to multiple, generative refinements in our coding scheme. For example, in the course of our calibration sessions, we surfaced multiple discrepancies, which resulted in our choice to inductively split Hyatt's "political warrant" into two discrete categories: political warrants that warned of impending threats or losses to some social good

and political warrants that elevated the potential to advance a social good. We also inductively added a code for legitimations that we categorized as providing a "false exclusionary disjunct." This type of legitimation captures instances when a speaker acknowledges that they agree with a need proposed by their opponent but claims that acting on that agreement would risk other more important values (see Supplementary Appendix 2 in the online version of the journal for our qualitative coding scheme).

Aligned with RQ1 and RQ3, we conducted a second round of coding in which we inductively identified, for each warrant/legitimation excerpt, the policy intervention proposed by the speaker, the target beneficiary of the proposed policy, and the threat driving the need for the policy proposal. For RQ2, we then completed a round of focused coding in which we grouped policy goals, threats, and beneficiaries into emergent groupings and indicated whether references in the document to threats or beneficiary groups were race-explicit or evasive.

A Developmental Approach to Analyzing the Policy and the Politics

We centered a developmental approach to selecting texts from the larger corpus to be used in this discursive analysis. While we know from prior work that by the late 1980s, the early equity-oriented purposes of FIPSE had given way to an institutionalized, quality-centered set of priorities guiding grant distribution, we do not yet know *how* this political progression occurred, nor the discursive mechanisms by which this transition occurred. We, therefore, focus our analytical examination in this study on identifying the mechanisms by which different conceptions of equity and quality prevailed in this policy setting over time. Typically, the institutionalization of discursive meanings occurs as a longitudinal process during which some meanings, but not others, come to be taken for granted in a field over time (Clemens & Cook, 1999; Jepperson, 1991). Prior to reaching a state of taken-for-grantedness, actors engage in extensive discursive labor to control and argue for the codification of definitions that serve their own interests (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Colyvas, 2007; Ventresca & Mohr, 2017). As they do so, the range of meanings narrows, with a particular meaning attaining legitimacy through cultural-cognitive compression (Colyvas & Powell, 2006). To this end, taken-for-grantedness is the outcome of preceding purposive action that, once established, can carry institutional material like metrics, practices, and norms that then return benefits to the victors (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994).

We can therefore differentiate between periods before and after the institutionalization of a set of meanings in a field according to the robustness of debate, and use this differentiation to guide purposive sampling. When legitimacy is still in question, actors argue and advocate for variegated meanings through active contestation—which in turn produces more discourse (Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Colyvas, 2007). However, once meanings are institutionalized as "discursive constructions that incorporate cultural models" (Schneiberg & Clemens, 2006, p. 211), debates cease and conflicts wither (Schneiberg, 1999). We can therefore use discourse density to periodize development of an institutionalized meaning and to track measures of taken-for-grantedness. We thus applied a periodization of contestation to select pivotal texts for close, critical, discursive analysis (see also Suspitsyna, 2012). To establish these periods, we relied on two sources of information. First, during our initial round of coding, we created a comprehensive timeline of FIPSE's political development.

Second, we then checked this timeline gleaned from our first round of coding against a more macro, bird's-eye perspective provided in Figure 1. Figure 1 displays annual counts of congressional discussion on FIPSE occurring each year, from 1968 to 1994. These data allow us to confirm two bursts of political contention (1968–1973 and 1983/4–1986) characterized by more discursive activities and two periods of settlement (1973–1983 and 1986–1994 and beyond) characterized by relatively less discursive activities.[3] Using this periodization scheme, we employed purposive sampling to select texts mapping onto the pivotal actors, reports, and events that represent each era. As a set, the selected texts represented in Table 1 provide evidence for how meaning structures are constructed in a policy area and how settled terms can be dispatched to achieve policy ends. As

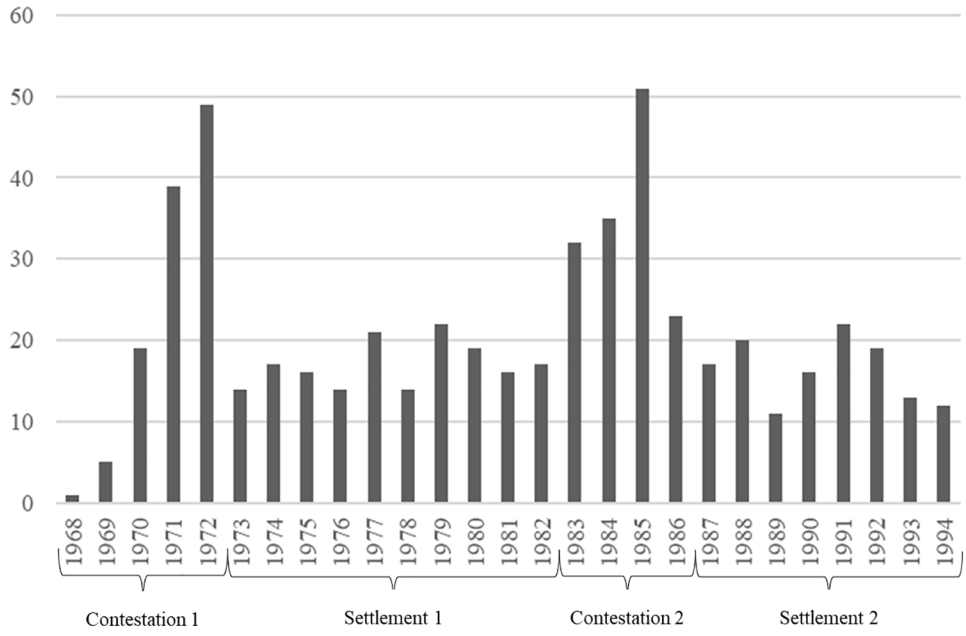

FIGURE 1. *Congressional document counts by year. Documents were collected using the ProQuest Congressional database.*

such, the majority of our texts were selected to offer an in-depth view on the underlying meaning structures that were mobilized by policymakers and bureaucrats in positions of power to shape the future of FIPSE. Of course, the voices of those in power do not represent the entirety of discourse on a topic, especially one concerned with racial equity. To introduce potentially disconfirming evidence in the form of dissenting voices, we searched our archival corpus for instances of testimony from Black educators or other Black leaders speaking in the same congressional hearings on the topic of educational equity and quality. We included two such testimonies in our analyses; one for each period of contention. These texts provide generative alternative possibilities as discussed in our findings.

Findings

In the three sections that follow, we demonstrate how policy actors engaged in active contestation over the centrality of equity to educational policymaking. As we will demonstrate, this was a contest that, under the direction of inegalitarian policy actors, shifted over time to focus on a battle over the meaning of a "quality" education. This discourse created a racialized beneficiary-threat dyadic pairing that put critical constraints around the development of an equity-centered political agenda.

A Quality-Crisis Discourse: Reconstructing Target Beneficiaries as Threats

For RQ1, we began with an analysis of the discursive strategies used by supporters and detractors of equal educational opportunity policy to advance contentious political meanings of "quality" in higher education over time. In the wake of transformative expansions of access to higher education swept in by the HEA of 1965, we find that inegalitarian policy actors were the first to introduce the notion of a "quality threat" into political debates over the future role of the federal government in higher education. But what form did this threat to educational quality take? And how, precisely, was this threat conveyed?

Starting in the late 1960s, we find that inegalitarians' arguments were built around a clear political warrant that warned of an imminent loss of educational excellence in the face of a

TABLE 1

Selected Texts for Analysis

Era	Year	Author/Speaker	Document description
Contestation 1	1970	Spiro Agnew (Vice President)	Address on "The Threat to Educational Standards"
	1970	Paul Smith (Teachers' College/ERIC)	Congressional testimony on the Higher Education Amendments of 1969
	1971	Frank Newman (Chairman, task force)	"Report on Higher Education" (aka "the Newman Report")
	1972	Chester E. Finn (Nixon staff assistant)	"The National Foundation for Higher Education: The Death of an Idea," publication in *Change*
	1973	Ian McNett (Editor of *Change*)	"The Federals as Reformers," publication in *Change*
	1973	Russell Edgerton (HEW)	"Washington's New Reform Fund," publication in *Change*
	1974	Sidney P. Marland, Jr. (HEW)	Congressional testimony on Appropriations for the Depts of Labor and HEW
	1975	Daniel Patrick Moynihan (Nixon advisor)	"The Politics of Higher Education," publication in *Daedalus*
Settlement 1 (Egal)	1975	FIPSE publication	"Alternatives to the Revolving Door: Effective Learning for Low Achieving Students"
	1979	Multiple: Frank Newman; Sol Pelavin (NTS Research Corp); Mattie Cook (Malcolm King: Harlem College Ext)	Congressional testimony on the Reauthorization of the HEA
Contestation 2	1982	Albert Manley (United Negro College Fund)	Congressional testimony on Appropriations for Depts of Labor, HHS, and Education
	1984	William Bennett (Chairman, study group)	"To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education"
	1985	John Fuller (Great Lakes Col. Assoc); Peter Smith (Lt. Gov VT); Rep. Ford	Congressional testimony on the Reauthorization of the HEA
	1985	Congressional Research Service	"Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act: Program Descriptions, Issues, and Options"
	1988	William Bennett (Secretary of Education)	Address delivered before the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities
Settlement 2 (Inegal)	1986	Multiple: William Bennett; Senators Robert Stafford, Edward Kennedy, Claiborne Pell, Paul Simon	Congressional testimony on Quality in Higher Education Programs
	1990	FIPSE publication	FIPSE Budget Proposal
	1992	FIPSE publication	"Comprehensive Program Information and Application Procedures"

Note. FIPSE = Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education; HEW = Department of Health and Human Services; HEA = Higher Education Act; HHS = Department of Health and Human Services.

diversifying college student body. As seen in Figure 2, inegalitarian arguments on educational quality were almost singularly focused on defining, describing, and emphasizing this threat—a threat that inegalitarian actors in the late 1960s and early 1970s suggested posed a particular danger to the most elite universities and colleges in the country. In one example, Chester Finn (1972), a staff assistant to President Nixon and later a key figure in directing the course of quality-focused initiatives in the Reagan-era ED, explained that the Nixon White House supported the creation of a National Foundation to address what it considered to be the most pressing

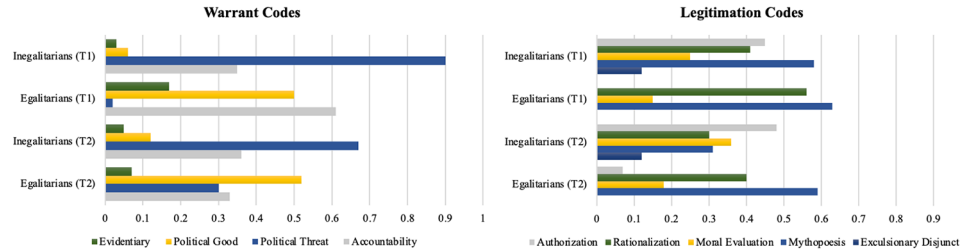

FIGURE 2. *Warrant and legitimation code densities across eras for egalitarians and inegalitarians. T1 refers to the first period of political contestation (1968–1973) and settlement (1973–1983) and T2 to the second period of political contestation (1983/4–1986) and settlement (1986+).*

problem facing higher education in the wake of expanded access:

> [T]he central problem facing higher education was its possible loss of excellence. [We believed] that the pyramid of quality in colleges and universities was flattening, and that it was doing so not only by lifting the standards of the 1,500 institutions at the bottom, but also by lowering those of the few dozen at the top. (p. 24)

The core building blocks of this argument—that the influx of new students threatened to level the playing field of the country's most elite universities—were reflected and repeated in discourse by inegalitarian policy actors during this period. Referencing the status of institutions like "Yale, Harvard, Princeton, and Stanford," inegalitarians routinely utilized a rhetorical appeal to authorization to emphasize the inherent value of the "top" institutions (and their standards) to American society (Finn, 1972, p. 24). In doing so, inegalitarians built an early conceptualization of what quality is (i.e., reputational and resource-based), who has it (i.e., elite, White-serving institutions), and what can diminish it (i.e., the diversification of student bodies and curriculum).

In developing an argument that minoritized students posed a threat to educational excellence, the discourse constructed by inegalitarians overtly shifted minoritized communities from a position of target beneficiary—as constructed under the 1965 HEA—to a position of "threat" to vital institutions. And yet, inegalitarians crafted these threat-based arguments almost entirely absent of evidentiary legitimation or the use of data and statistics, a rationalization strategy that egalitarians used to a much greater degree. Instead, as seen in Figure 2, inegalitarians wove a compelling narrative of moral panic, using mythopoesis and moral evaluation strategies, to establish the superiority, and now precarity, of the traditional order. In the excerpt mentioned previously, for instance, Chester Finn subtly deployed moral evaluation in his emphasis on the "loss of excellence" and the "lowering" of the standards at top institutions of higher education. However, far more obvious and urgent calls for moral panic occurred throughout the data set. For example, in a 1970 speech, Vice President Spiro Agnew (1971) declared,

> The American system of colleges and universities is the envy of mankind. . . . When decisions begin to represent a definite trend that may drastically depreciate those national assets, then all of us have an interest at stake; all of us have . . . a duty to speak . . . I feel as much as anyone that there should be expanded educational opportunities for deprived, but able, young people in our society. The difference is that I favor better preparing them . . . in some form of prep school rather than tossing them into a four-year college . . . they are not equipped to handle. And I do not feel that our traditional four-year institutions should lower their sights or their standards for the sole purpose of opening their doors wider. (pp. 319–320)

In this excerpt, Agnew deployed similar discursive strategies to those used by Finn. First, Agnew emphasized the exceptional quality of American higher education as the "envy of mankind." In doing so, he assigned authority to the structures, norms, and operations of traditional systems of higher education. Second, Agnew provided a moral warning about the harm and "drastic . . . depreciat[ion]" if efforts to "expand educational opportunities" persist. This moral warning is presented as a zero-sum choice that

policy actors must make: pursue equity or preserve excellence. By conceptualizing educational quality as a condition tied to traditional educational models now in danger of extinction, this rhetoric positioned White-serving institutions as the target population most in need of federal protection. Right from the beginning of this policy discussion, therefore, inegalitarians constructed two potential target populations: White institutions and minoritized students. As we will demonstrate, this racialized beneficiary-threat dyad would serve as a recurring framework for organizing policy discussions over the next several decades, presenting a zero-sum choice that set up one population as the "winner" (beneficiary) and the other as the party that must pay the price (threat).

The excerpt likewise positions the enrollment of minoritized students as a threat to all Americans and the "national assets" they value: those elite institutions of higher education in which "all of us have an interest at stake" and "a duty to speak." Agnew described "unqualified students [who] are being swept into college on the wave of the new socialism," accusing policy actors of moral culpability for "tossing them [into institutions] they are not equipped to handle." But the expression of sympathy ended there. Agnew did not propose a policy to help "prepare" minoritized students nor position them as potential target beneficiaries of national efforts to help make college equitable. Instead, the only instances in which inegalitarian policy actors like Agnew constructed minoritized students as potential beneficiaries, as opposed to threats, was when the speaker engaged in zero-sum reasoning that quickly precluded minoritized students from filling that role. For instance, Agnew proclaimed that "I feel as much as anyone that there should be expanded educational opportunities" but set conditional boundaries on this expansion, noting that it should not "lower standards" and is strictly intended "for deprived, but *able*, young people in our society" (italics ours). Having already established that minoritized students were largely unqualified, this tactic precluded any possible pathways for the systemic coexistence of equitable access policies and the maintenance of educational quality. By doing so, inegalitarian actors like Agnew effectively baked a social construction of minoritized students as a "quality threat" into their conceptualizations of educational quality, building an effective base from which, as we will discuss in the next section, inegalitarians were able to invoke largely race-neutral "quality" arguments in later time periods that still had exclusionary effects.

While inegalitarians were the first to introduce "quality" terminology into policy discussions on the future of higher education, egalitarians soon entered the debate, presenting a competing idea of what educational quality is and looks like. Egalitarians offered a vision of educational quality free from the moral panic proffered by inegalitarians, adopting and presenting an aspirational conceptualization of educational excellence based on the promise of structural transformation in postsecondary institutions. To do so, egalitarians relied on a different set of rhetorical strategies, engaging in rationalization-based argumentation (Figure 2) that centered the imperative of identifying rational, evidence-based policy solutions for achieving equal educational opportunity. Egalitarians presented equal opportunity as not only a crucial component of a just and thriving society (political warrant) but also as a way for the federal government to exercise accountability and "make good" on its student aid programs. For example, Russell Edgerton (1973), the first Deputy Director of FIPSE, countered Finn and Agnew's conceptualizations and offered his own proposed "routes" for ensuring "excellence":

> "[T]he real issue for educators and for the fund is not the loss of excellence in American higher education but the need to develop multiple standards of excellence in an increasingly egalitarian society. We need to find answers to the question . . .: Can we be equal and excellent too? [W]ith the extension of postsecondary education to ever larger segments of the population, [current] versions of what college is all about are simply not adequate. A second route lies in renewed efforts to provide services . . . genuinely responsive to new learners—those who in the past have been underrepresented in or excluded from higher education. By genuinely responsive, we mean going beyond efforts to change student attitudes and behavior so they can "fit" the system—the goal of Upward Bound, Talent Search and Special Services for the Disadvantaged—to efforts to accommodate the system to the students." (p. 14)

In contrast to the excerpts from Finn and Agnew, Edgerton flipped the terms of the

racialized beneficiary-threat dyad and constructed minoritized students as the target population in need of policy attention and resources and postsecondary institutions' refusal to undergo structural change as the real threat to educational excellence that was in need of policy attention. Indeed, rather than emphasizing the impending threat posed by equitable access policies, Edgerton and other egalitarians across our data set legitimated their claims through the use of political warrants based in "good society" arguments that sought to inspire elite- and White-serving postsecondary institutions to transform to meet the learning and curricular demands of minoritized students. In the excerpt, Edgerton pushes back on federal initiatives focused on remediating individual students to "fit the system" and emphasized the need to remediate institutions to meet and serve minoritized students. In doing so, egalitarians adopted the language of educational "excellence" or "quality" first deployed by inegalitarians but sought to subvert its meaning and reframe educational quality in terms of "multiple standards of excellence" that can serve to advance the long-term achievement of educational equity.

When articulating this conceptualization of educational quality, which centers the importance of equitable access in the name of institutional excellence, egalitarians rarely called out the racialized conception of declining quality proffered by inegalitarians. Egalitarian proposals, particularly those expressed by predominantly White policy actors in government, show that institutions must change to meet the demands of "today's students" and tactically avoided directly questioning or confronting inegalitarians' racialized claims about lowered standards in higher education. Ultimately, more direct challenges to these claims were voiced by others outside of government. In testimony before the House Special Subcommittee on Education in 1970, for instance, Dr. Paul Smith, a Black educator and researcher from Columbia University, provided a foil to the mainstream egalitarian conceptualization of quality:

> Almost all administrators, researchers and students . . . are people with white skins. This . . . did not occur by chance. Tests and other exclusion devices . . . are used to keep most minority people from entering these sacred circles. A frequent rationalization given is fear of blacks contaminating so-called standards. Imagine, abstract standards being more important to save than a "soul." . . . [Instead institutions continue initiatives based] on the theory of either inherited inability or cultural deficit. And they have created a group of instant white experts who claim to know what is best for the lives of so-called disadvantaged blacks. If these schools were to be held accountable for such behavior, their Federal-funded accounts would be bare. (pp. 543–544)

Smith offers a discursive alternative to the mainstream racial egalitarian stance. Rather than relying on the use of aspirational "good society" legitimations extolling the benefits of a more equal society to all citizens, Smith identifies the immediate threat posed by the misleading quality narratives offered by inegalitarian actors and the exclusionary structures that have been erected in institutions of higher education under its name. Using moral language, Smith frames quality narratives as racist tropes that villainize and dehumanize minoritized communities, while imbuing institutions with a humanity and culture in need of protection. But in the absence of such direct challenges by mainstream egalitarians, the inegalitarian construction of a zero-sum policy paradigm dominated education policy discussions for decades to come. As we explain in the next section, by the 1980s, egalitarians would be forced to trade their race-conscious targeting of institutional aid for more covert and tangential equity aims.

From Racialized to Race-Evasive Quality Discourse in SCTP

Throughout this early formative period, inegalitarian and egalitarian policy actors offered competing conceptualizations of educational quality that constructed threats and target populations quite differently. When discussing and presenting each of these competing conceptualizations, both groups were explicit about the role those racial considerations played in shaping their ideas about what educational quality is, with whom it resides, and what threatens it. But these explicit references to race would quietly recede by the 1980s.

Under the threat-based construction of educational quality advanced in the 1960s–1970s, inegalitarians

used a racialized beneficiary-threat dyad to position the excellence of traditional, high-status institutions as endangered by a wave of minoritized students entering college campuses. As evidenced in the previous section, inegalitarians were unambiguous about the source of this threat, using explicit, racialized language to identify the "new learners" ushered in by the 1965 HEA. Vice President Agnew (1971), for example, was candid about who these "unqualified students" were, specifically calling out "this special Black admission business" of enrolling Black students who are "too far below the admissions standards" (pp. 320–321). Throughout his speech, Agnew variously referred to these new enrollees as "minority or disadvantaged students," "Negro or 'culturally underprivileged' youngsters," and clearly articulated the threat that Black students supposedly posed to institutions of higher education. Using a language of moral crisis, Agnew not only pointed to the disruption caused by introducing "unqualified" students to these learning spaces but also blamed "Black militants" and "destroyers" for bringing racialized violence and disorder to campuses. While Agnew's use of moral legitimation tactics was particularly dramatic, his claims were aligned with other racially explicit warnings across documents about the threats posed by minoritized students to institutions of higher education.

In this early time period following the introduction of the 1965 HEA, egalitarians were likewise explicit about how the race of new learners was factored into policy discussions on higher education admissions. While inegalitarians were especially unequivocal in articulating the racialized nature of threats to the system of higher education in America, egalitarians incorporated explicit references to race in their construction of who the target beneficiaries of government aid should be. As we discussed in the previous section, in the debates and discussions preceding the creation of FIPSE, egalitarians were clear about the intended beneficiaries of their proposed construction of educational quality: racially minoritized students. For example, in the 1971 Newman Report, which acted as the blueprint for the mission and activities of the early years at FIPSE, meeting the learning needs of Black and other minoritized students was at the center of discussions over how to promote educational quality:

> 1966 marked the beginning of a major undertaking to incorporate members of ethnic minorities into the mainstream institutions of American higher education. Prior to the 1960's, the higher education of many minorities was ignored . . . Today, prodded by the civil rights revolution and concern for the disadvantaged, colleges and universities, from the most to the least selective . . . profess a responsibility to meet the educational needs of minorities. We as a nation are thus engaged in . . . far-reaching reform . . . that tests the capacity of our institutions to transform . . . to serve all students (p. 44).

Egalitarian policy actors across our data set explicitly framed the learning needs of minoritized students, and especially Black students, as the primary intended beneficiaries of quality reforms. According to egalitarians, it was the "responsibility to meet the educational needs of minorities"—not fear or threat—that provided motivation to postsecondary institutions to focus reform efforts on improving equitable educational outcomes.

The Newman Report, however, went beyond framing the success of racially minoritized students as purely instrumental to the achievement of quality. Noting that "the pressure to succeed in college for many minority students is also a pressure to give up not only community ties but also community dialects, habits, and values," the report emphasized the need for institutions of education to undergo reforms that allow them to "appreciate . . . what a hostile and threatening environment the campus can be for a minority student" (Newman et al., 1971, p. 49). To egalitarian policy actors, it was impossible to separate race from the target population being served by equitable access policies. Indeed, as the Newman Report warned, because "Black students . . . tend to be the recipients of the strongest feelings toward minority students–both of good will and hostility . . . how the experiment in minority education is judged will largely be the question of how well Black students do, how they are seen, and how they see themselves" (p. 44).

This formative period in higher education was marked by the use of racialized terms and rhetoric by both sets of policy actors. But just a decade later, these explicit racial references when discussing educational quality were conspicuously absent. Figure 3 shows plots on the use of explicit references to race made across the periods of discursive contention and settlement in our

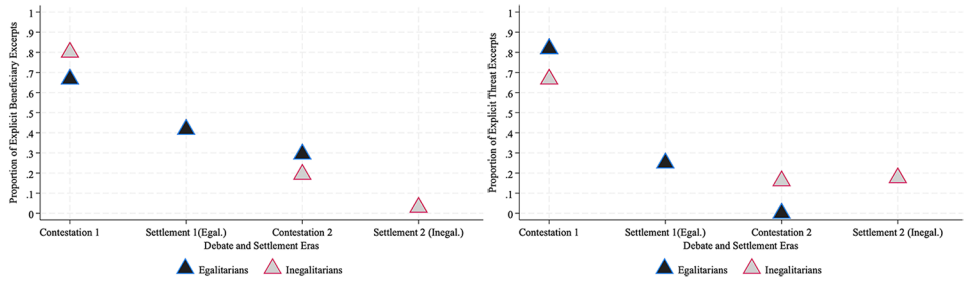

FIGURE 3. *Proportion of racially explicit threat and beneficiary constructions by era. Each point represents the proportion of excerpts in each era containing explicit references to race. The periods of political contestation, when debate over educational quality is most robust, offer values for inegalitarian and egalitarian policy actors separately.*

document sample when discussing threats and target beneficiaries of educational quality, respectively. Points in the graph represent the proportion of excerpts from each era in which explicit references to race are made. As the graphs indicate, both inegalitarian and egalitarian policy actors went from making more explicit references in the 1960s and 1970s to either remaining silent or making implicit references to the racialized construction of threats and beneficiaries in the 1980s (also see Supplementary Appendix 3 in the online version of the journal for qualitative exemplars).

Drilling into this trend further, we find inegalitarians and egalitarians shifted their discursive strategies when it came to explicit discussions of race, while still invoking the racialized notions of educational quality built by both camps during the early, formative moments of idea conceptualization and construction in the 1960s and 1970s. By the 1980s, inegalitarian actors were still sounding the alarm about a quality crisis in higher education but were more elusive about pinpointing the precise source of this threat. William Bennett, an ivy-league-educated former humanities professor who served as the Secretary of Education under President Reagan, would lead this charge, developing a new language for discussing the crisis of educational quality in a system of higher education now characterized, in some cases, by greater racial diversity. Rather than explicitly constructing minoritized students as the source of institutional quality decline, Bennett articulated clear warnings about a quality crisis but cushioned it in language about the need to preserve the study of "Western civilization" across educational settings. This new strategy replaced overt expressions about the culpability of minoritized students with that of misguided institutions that were no longer prioritizing the study of "the accumulated wisdom of our civilization." Bennett rearticulated this vision throughout his tenure as the Secretary of Education, first setting the groundwork in his capacity as the Chairman of the Task Force on the State of Learning in the Humanities in Higher Education. In a 1984 report entitled "To Reclaim a Legacy," Bennett and his collaborators argued,

> [O]ur eagerness to assert the virtues of pluralism should not allow us to sacrifice the principle that formerly lent substance and continuity to the curriculum, namely that each college and university should recognize and accept its vital role as conveyor of the accumulated wisdom of our civilization. We are a part and a product of Western civilization. That our society was founded upon such principles as justice, liberty, government with the consent of the governed, and equality under the law is the result of ideas descended directly from great epochs of Western civilization. (p. 38)

Under the conception of educational quality offered in the report, the quality crisis could be addressed by subsuming the pluralist interests of a diverse nation under the study of a common and shared tradition. While these discussions avoided explicit references to race, the report still carefully included responses to detractors who may

(and did, as we will demonstrate in the next section) argue that these calls for the study of Western civilization were, in effect, mandates for the study of Whiteness. But the report disputed this idea, insisting that this shared culture ultimately supersedes racial divides:

> These ideas, so revolutionary in their times yet so taken for granted now, are the glue that binds together our pluralistic nation. The fact that we as Americans—whether black or white, Asian or Hispanic . . . share these beliefs aligns us with other cultures of the Western tradition. It is not ethnocentric or chauvinistic to acknowledge this. (p. 38)

As such, the report rejected any racially explicit calls for more diverse curricula as the interest-based demands of a particularized politics, insisting instead on the creation of a race-neutral college curriculum that elevates the study of western civilization for all students:

> The college curriculum must take the non-Western world into account, not out of political expediency or to appease interest groups, but out of respect for its importance in human history . . . American college curriculum—its heart and soul—should be the civilization of the West, source of the most powerful and pervasive influences on America and all of its people. It is simply not possible for students to understand their society without studying its intellectual legacy. If their past is hidden from them, they will become aliens in their own culture, strangers in their own land. (p. 39)

This discourse of universalism likewise characterized the discussions of educational quality offered by egalitarians in the 1980s. As seen in Figure 3, egalitarians all but eliminated the use of explicit references to race in our document sample by the 1980s. In a clear shift away from explicitly identifying and naming the minoritized student target populations that stood to benefit from education reforms, egalitarians used oblique references to "today's students" and "nonconventional learners" without specifying the populations in question. Not only did explicit references to minoritized target populations become veiled but so too did rhetoric extolling the societal need and responsibility to achieve racialized equal opportunity. When discussing the merits and funding demands of FIPSE—an agency that was created to transform institutions to serve minoritized students—egalitarians abandoned explicit discourse on its equity-based mission, replacing it with arguments extolling FIPSE as a small-budget, high-impact agency. In one example, Jon Fuller, the President of the Great Lakes College Association and a former FIPSE board member, testified before Congress in 1985 in support of the agency, drawing from a script used by many of FIPSE's egalitarian champions in the early 1980s:

> The Fund represents a remarkable success story in Federal aid to higher education. Its importance and the broad results of its work so far are quite surprising in view of its . . . modest funding. It is, as the three former chairmen of its National Board [argue], "like Mighty Mouse—a miniscule item in the Federal budget but a powerful force for improvement in postsecondary education." Formal outside evaluations of the Fund's work have revealed that an astonishing 88% of projects initiated with Fund grants continue and usually grow, following the end of Federal funding. (p. 304)

By the 1980s, egalitarian policy actors—who once offered race-conscious accountability and good society arguments about the debts owed to minoritized students—moved toward watered-down, rationalization-based arguments emphasizing the noteworthy neoliberal management practices of the agency, often failing to mention FIPSE's equity goals. This strategic discursive shift also served to sever the explicit connection between FIPSE's transformative policy agenda and its service to minoritized students; in this new era, FIPSE, rather than minoritized students, was positioned as the primary target beneficiary.

Like in the 1970s, some egalitarian voices outside of government circles attempted to make more explicit arguments about the need to devote continued attention to issues of postsecondary racial inequality. For example, Albert Manley of Spelman College, who also served as the President of the United Negro College Fund, testified before Congress in 1982 with a warning about the new "quality" crisis faced by institutions of higher education:

> The United States today has an enviable reputation for the Quality of its postsecondary education and research, but this reputation is both more recent and

> more fragile than many realize, a substantial federal investment has been critical in the process, and it is imperative that it be continued . . . to assure that the country will continue to educate its most hopeful individuals. . . . (p. 576)

In contrast to many mainstream policy actors in the 1980s, Manley used his testimony to recenter the 1970s egalitarian conception of educational quality that was based in structural investment in racial inclusion and access. In doing so, he explicitly rang the alarm that attempts to walk back federal investments posed the real quality threat—a threat that would be felt by the "UNCF students" and "students who are from educationally and economically disadvantaged backgrounds" should federal disinvestment proceed (and it did).

The Racialized Effects of Quality Policy

In the last two sections, we demonstrated how egalitarian and inegalitarian policy actors' discourse (a) constructed different conceptualizations of an educational quality "crisis" that foregrounded the needs and deservingness either of minoritized students or White-serving postsecondary institutions, as parties in a racialized beneficiary-threat dyad, and (b) underwent a developmental shift toward the use of more race-evasive language in discussions of educational quality over time. But what of the attendant policy ideas accompanying this discourse? To what degree did the policy ideas developed by egalitarians and inegalitarians on educational quality undergo similar transformations? And did the distribution of policy benefits and burdens change as discourse became more race-evasive? We find that even as the discourse shifted from race-explicit to race-evasive social constructions of target populations, the policy ideas proposed still consistently delivered racialized effects, eventually settling into the instantiation of a policy regime characterized by (e)quality politics.

Across the full-time period under examination (1960s–1980s), we find that even as inegalitarians shifted their framing on the source and the problem driving the quality crisis in higher education, the policies they proposed still adhered to a general framework: They increased benefits to White institutions and created new barriers to benefits for minoritized communities or institutions. For example, Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1975), who served as an advisor to President Nixon and helped to spearhead the original proposal for a quality-focused National Foundation for Higher Education in 1969, insisted on the need to use government resources to protect and preserve the excellence of elite institutions of higher education:

> One of the unique achievements of American higher education in the past century has been the standard of excellence that its leading institutions have set. The most serious [present] threat . . . is the possible loss of that excellence . . . If [higher education] were to become a mass function by fiat of the federal government ['s student financial aid programs], the government (I reasoned) also had some responsibility to attend to the need to maintain select standards in at least some parts of the system . . . To the degree the federal government could do anything about these difficulties . . . it was to provide the major institutions with money with as few strings attached as possible. (p. 138)

Laying blame on federal student aid policies for bringing about "a serious distortion" in "our centers of academic excellence," the Nixon administration proposed a program of no strings attached funding for the most elite, White-serving institutions to serve as a bulwark against the encroaching massification of higher education—an interpretation that, as explained in our last section, was built on a racialized understanding of the threat posed by minoritized students.

The National Foundation proposal, however, failed to gain traction in Congress and eventually lost out to an alternative, egalitarian model proposed in the Newman Report as a blueprint for the creation of FIPSE. But while the Nixon proposal singled out the enrollment of minoritized students as the primary threat to educational quality, and White-serving postsecondary institutions as deserving policy beneficiaries, the egalitarian model flipped this arrangement on its head. The 1971 Newman Report laid out the case for the creation of a federal foundation that would aid and encourage structural transformation within institutions of higher education (the absence of which posed the primary threat to educational quality) to better serve minoritized students (the primary policy beneficiaries):

> There has been reform, and its pace has been accelerated by the advent of student protest and the demands of minority groups . . . [But t]he system,

> with its massive inertia, resists fundamental change . . . ignores the differing needs of students . . . and almost never creates new and different types of institutions. The most prestigious colleges and universities have received most of the attention. The difficulties of the less selective institutions, which are more severe, have largely been ignored. [M]ost minority-student programs, through recruiting, tutoring . . . etc., attempt to adapt the minority student to conventional colleges. More . . . effort must go into experimenting with varying forms of education that adapt college to the minority student. (p. *x*)

These policy commitments were repeated throughout FIPSE's early years in congressional testimony and grant guidelines. One common refrain was that The FIPSE (1975) was "a catalyst for reform," poised to fulfill the federal promise of equitable postsecondary access (guidelines, p. 6). The policy designs resulting from these arguments comprised multiple mechanisms united around a call for institutional transformation, including supporting the development of less-selective institutions in service to minoritized students, preventing the segregation of such students to community colleges, and improving curricular and program responsiveness to minoritized students at the same elite institutions that inegalitarians sought to preserve.

By the 1980s, however, the conceptualization of educational quality embodied by FIPSE was under attack by new appointees in the Reagan-era ED. Under William Bennett's precedent-setting regime, inegalitarians reinstated the beneficiary-threat dyad they first presented in the late 1960s to make the case for a two-pronged response to declining educational quality. First, the administration succeeded in rolling back student aid programs at the federal level. In a rare moment of racially explicit framing during this time period, Bennett, in a 1988 speech before the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, defended his administration against criticisms that cutting federal student aid was driving minoritized students out of college. Instead, Bennett (1988) argued, "the most serious underlying barrier to greater Black college enrollment" is not only "the insufficient size of the pool of Black students who have had the right preparation" (p. 3) but also the misplaced priorities of students who, Bennett famously suggested in his first press conference as Secretary, needed to first divest themselves of "stereos, cars, and vacation trips" if they wished to afford a college education (Hearings on the Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, 1985, p. 12).

Second, ED under Bennett focused on reinstating the curricula, programming, and standards that had once made American higher education so great. As described across documents from the Reagan administration, the crux of the 1980s quality crisis lay within universities, as years of structural reforms aimed at accommodating new learners—many of which were funded and supported by FIPSE—resulted in an unequivocal decline in the quality of postsecondary education itself. According to Bennett, this "self-inflicted damage" took a number of forms: decline in the study of humanities and the "great" works of literature; decline in the excellence of American prosperity; decline in the democratic values transmitted via the study of "Western civilization"; and decline of principled vision among university presidents, deans, and academic faculty to resist the curricular demands of the hordes of new learners. In response, ED produced and distributed sample Western civilization curricula for higher education and K–12 institutions, with the goal of reclaiming "what has been lost" (Bennett, 1988, p. 9).

Some egalitarians were quick to demystify just who and what inegalitarians were trying to push out of higher education. With respect to student aid cuts, Representative Ford (D-MI) claimed that Reagan officials in testimony before the House Subcommittee on Postsecondary Education urged Congress to "leave me write it and I'll show you how to get rid of all those kids that shouldn't be getting loans in the first place" (Hearings on the Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, 1985, p. 310). "Those kids," who Ford argued were minoritized and blue-collar students, were also the target of Bennett's "Western civilization" campaign. Reminding the subcommittee that higher education in the post-civil rights era "was not supposed to operate [only] for those who are fortunate enough to have access to that limited number of traditional colleges that can indeed spend a good deal of time talking about the intellectual heritage of Western civilization," Ford hinted at the racialized meaning of Bennett's "western heritage" campaign, declaring "I have no doubt that he could define that term for me very precisely. He knows exactly what it is" (p. 309).

Egalitarians' attempts to name the racialized intentions of Bennett's quality reforms gave way to a taken-for-granted, threat-based quality rhetoric among both inegalitarian and egalitarian policy actors not only in FIPSE-focused debates but also in the broader post–Nation-at-Risk political world. For example, the 1986 congressional hearing on "quality in higher education" opened with a passing reference to the inequitable impacts of the recent decimation of federal student and institutional aid appropriations. This concern was swiftly treated as a foregone conclusion as inegalitarians and egalitarians alike—including policy actors like Senators Kennedy (D-MA) and Simon (D-IL)—shifted to threat-based quality discourse drawn directly from the inegalitarian playbook. Senator Simon, for example, decried the pressures on colleges to "lower their . . . admission standards," which would lead to lowered "graduation standards," a concern, he argued, that made it imperative for "the Department and Congress [to] make clear to all institutions that maintaining high standards is important"—a sentiment echoed across testimonies from actors on both sides of the aisle (p. 37).

In this way, policy discourse about FIPSE's policy goals in the late 1980s became driven by a threat-based conception of educational quality, directing benefits to programs like pedagogical and curricular efforts to prevent the "dilution" of classical subjects (Hearings on Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Appropriations for 1991, 1990), the creation of new structures to drive technology advancement to "maintain competitiveness" in the global economy (FIPSE, 1992), and investments in institutional assessment and accountability to reach these ends. Public-facing grant priorities specific to equity were immediately discarded following the confrontations between FIPSE and the Reagan administration in the mid-1980s and were replaced by an overwhelming emphasis on a White-supremacist vision of quality, assessment, accountability, and even the war against drugs.

This inegalitarian policy design served racialized ends by centering benefits to White institutions and creating new metrics that encouraged other institutional types to fall in line. To this end, Figure 4 illustrates how egalitarians and inegalitarians jointly participated in the construction of a beneficiary-threat dyad during both the first (1968–1973) and second (1983/4–1986) periods of political contention. Within this dyad, actors positioned White-serving institutions of higher education and minoritized students in adversarial relations. This figure shows how the strategic shifts in inegalitarians' dominant policy proposal from the early to the latter period of contention allowed for more race-evasive policy positioning. Despite becoming more race-evasive, inegalitarians doubled down on the function of their earliest policy proposals by retaining the commitment to outsized benefits to White institutions, while tacking on potential burdens to minoritized students and institutions. Conversely, egalitarians in the latter period took a step back from policy proposals that would use quality to center the needs of minoritized students and instead leaned into the rhetoric about the innovative benefits of the agency that would maintain FIPSE's autonomy, although autonomy to what end remained murky. While the 1960s policy set the expectation that White institutions should open (or at least crack) their doors to minoritized students, the inegalitarian policy settlement of the 1980s set another, ensuring that these same constituents did not have a say in what makes a "quality" institution.

By codifying practices and outcomes within FIPSE's grantmaking priorities associated with elite, White institutions, inegalitarians ensured the flow of resources and legitimacy to institutions most aligned with these standards. While in the 1970s, inegalitarians openly supported no-strings-attached funding to elite, White institutions, by the 1980s, inegalitarians traded out this vision for a new two-pronged policy approach that (a) relied on arguments about low-quality students wasting taxpayer dollars to rollback student aid benefits and (b) used educational quality arguments to invest in assessments, metrics, and projects that would codify the norms and epistemic hegemony of White institutions. This policy approach facilitated the flow of benefits that "maintained" quality standards, creating a political backdoor to achieve the original inegalitarian goal: using federal influence to protect the dominance of White institutions.

Discussion

Most practitioners working toward racial equity in institutional, state, or federal educational policies are all too familiar with the claim that equity proposals—from open admissions to

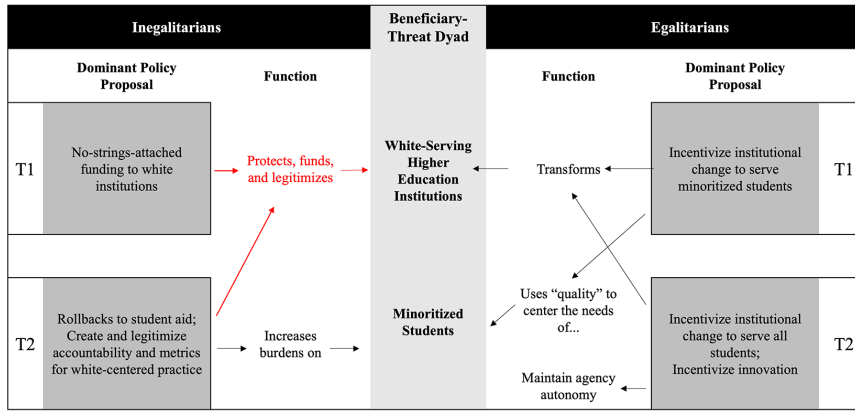

FIGURE 4. *Beneficiary-threat dyads and policy proposals in eras of contestation. T1 refers to the first period of political contestation (1968–1973) and settlement (1973–1983) and T2 to the second period of political contestation (1983/4–1986) and settlement (1986+).*

affirmative action or culturally responsive curriculum—pose a threat to educational quality or excellence. This tension between equity and quality—whether it is taken for granted as a material reality or challenged as an oppressive construct—is commonplace in educational policy literature. Skeptics may (and do) push back on assertions that quality arguments inherently serve inegalitarian ends. Indeed, it is easy to understand that most people want a quality education for themselves, their children, and the students they care about. It is thus urgent that we, as a field, come to better understand and resolve this vexing question: How do we differentiate between benign, quality-focused policy designs and those that pose racialized threats to equitable futures? When is educational quality about race (and not)? To that end, we used historical, longitudinal analysis to untangle how decades of contested discourse can result in a taken-for-granted policy regime wherein quality indexes equity-resistant priorities.

In our analysis, we found that inegalitarian policy actors used multiple discursive strategies to build political consensus around the existence of a "quality crisis" in higher education. This discourse created a threat-based racialized beneficiary-threat dyad between White-serving institutions as the custodians of excellence on one hand and minoritized student populations as the source of threat on the other. This dyadic pairing humanized educational institutions and imbued them with moral value, while it simultaneously dehumanized minoritized students and blamed them for corroding the fiber of these very same institutions. Moreover, the dyadic pairing placed egalitarians on the back foot by building on a false, zero-sum choice for policymakers between protecting institutional quality and achieving equitable access. Rather than striking down this zero-sum choice as a racialized political manifestation—as illustrated in the testimonies of Black educational leaders of the day—egalitarians at the center of this policy discussion argued cautiously for a balance between the poles. However, this compromise left the door open to renewed claims of imbalance. With this racialized beneficiary-threat dyad well established in political discourse by the mid-1980s, inegalitarians successfully renewed their attack on equity initiatives by reactivating warnings of a quality crisis, while detaching those warnings from explicit racialized markers. In this way, inegalitarians skirted unsavory accusations of elitism or racism while using the markers of these very institutions as the targets for government action on education quality. This shift successfully embedded the racialized beneficiary-threat dyad into the discourse of "quality," allowing inegalitarians to pitch a threat narrative without having to explicitly construct either population.

Our findings uncover the discursive tactics that, in accordance with the predictions of SCTP

theory, inegalitarians used to advance racialized policy designs. But in pushing the explanatory boundaries of these theories, we show how discourse was used to circumvent explicit constructions of racialized populations. In this case, inegalitarians stoked racial fears among White Americans and White-serving institutions to develop a racialized beneficiary-threat dyad as a political tool. These actors, over time, crystallized this dyad into the political construct of "quality" by indexing features of White institutions and norms as metrics for accountability and deservingness. Once these meanings were taken for granted, quality arguments created a policy backdoor that allowed inegalitarians to quietly direct policy benefits to high-power groups and racially exclusive institutions that might otherwise be constructed as undeserving. Inegalitarians thus instantiated consensus around a stable policy settlement characterized by the state advancement of racial exclusion without reference to race at all.

The Reagan-era political settlement on threat-based quality legitimized the delivery of benefits to White-serving institutions and rolled back direct benefits to minoritized students as undeserving borrowers. Because inegalitarian policy actors no longer explicitly lionized the Whiteness of high-status institutions, but instead the practices originating within them, the policy designs stemming from this era created new normative and regulatory pressures for assimilation to White metrics among less- or non-White institutions. Early unsuccessful inegalitarian proposals for "ivy-league welfare" would have certainly amounted to a racialized policy regime. But more insidiously, the second (and successful) iteration of inegalitarian discourse still provided favorable funding conditions to White institutions while also inviting less elite and minority-serving institutions to compete for funds but only if they complied with models based on White institutional practices. This second iteration became, we argue, more powerful at deploying racialized policy mechanisms by (a) facilitating race-evasive funding preferences that, in effect, favored White institutions and (b) using "quality" as an index for an epistemic hegemony in which students of color are granted (limited) admission into institutions that are systemically pressured not to change to meet their needs. This second mechanism is notable because it positions institutional responses to the interests of minoritized students as a sign of diminished quality, sending a clear message to students and institutions alike that "if we can't have segregation, we will require assimilation."

This study highlights the potential of (e)quality political analyses for challenging the neutral treatment of quality in policy research, particularly when quality is socio-politically mobilized for preservation rather than adaptation in the name of educational justice. By successfully embedding a zero-sum choice between quality and equality into political discourse, inegalitarian quality arguments created an impossible pathway for equity policy—a pathway that only confers legitimacy on proposals that are non-threatening to a White-serving status quo. In retrospect, egalitarian policy actors' strategic failure to undermine the racialized beneficiary-threat dyad was complicit in the institutionalization of an inegalitarian regime. This study is thus a call for education policy researchers to interrogate policy histories for the seeds of new political futures that refuse the preservation of White institutions as a "quality" baseline.

Conclusion and Implications

We opened this article with the assertion that quality-equality tensions pervade debates across almost every domain of U.S. education policy from university faculty hiring processes to anti-CRT legislation and to city-wide school closure decisions. Our key findings, while based on a single case of agency political development, nonetheless offer novel insights that bridge the empirical gaps left behind where racialized social constructions meet race-evasive racism in public policy: (a) Once overt racial exclusion is delegitimized by the enactment of civil rights policies, threat-based arguments about "quality" construct racialized beneficiary-threat dyads marshaled for the maintenance of the White-serving status quo in education; (b) these beneficiary-threat dyads become embedded in "quality" discourse such that inegalitarians can craft multi-pronged, race-evasive policy pressures that are

nonetheless racialized in effect; and (c) once a regime of (e)quality politics is taken for granted, even egalitarians in the field narrow their policy goals and arguments to match the rules of the zero-sum game. These findings push us, as education researchers, to question how and when compliance with quality measures derived from threat-based politics can be a mechanism for (re) producing racial inequity.

We demonstrate that the inegalitarian political strategy within an (e)quality politics paradigm is to focus both discourse and metrics not on issues related to the provision of equitable quality but on shoring up White institutions against the perceived dangers of minoritized students. This insight speaks methodologically to quantitative criticalism in education research by demonstrating the need for historicized analyses of "quality metrics"—a challenge to approaches to policy analysis that take metrics, and their origins, for granted. Indeed, had we only studied FIPSE during the 1990s, the racialized origins of the quality movement would have remained hidden behind pro-assessment language. We thus urge educational scholars, including those adopting tenets of quantitative criticalism, to take up historicized interrogations of racialization in educational quality measurement to sow transformation, rather than practices of more—more interactions or more disaggregation using the same measures.

The racism at the center of (e)quality politics is also an important reminder to educational researchers of the ripple effects of anti-Black politics. For example, many of the new opportunities funded by FIPSE in its early days—which ranged from remote learning to cohort-based pedagogy and competency-based credentialing—offered particular benefits to racially minoritized students but also to populations marginalized according to class, gender, and age. Yet, inegalitarians in their effort to protect White-serving institutions overlooked the benefits of FIPSE's reforms to a whole range of their constituents. This point is especially urgent as current politicians and pundits are actively fighting to delegitimize antiracist pedagogies, expertise, programs, and policies using language that echoes, sometimes verbatim, the racialized discourse of the 1970s and 1980s. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis's plan for higher education reform, for example, has slammed recent incorporations of critical, antiracist frameworks into college curricula, insisting that "the core curriculum must be grounded in actual history, the actual philosophy that has shaped Western civilization." Quality-based arguments like these, which insist on the need to recapture educational and workplace settings from the clutches of equity-based reforms, are not new and are the crux of an (e)quality politics framework for studying backlashes to antiracist advances. We hope that this work offers new tools for exposing, and pushing back against, the coded and embedded means by which today's backlash to equity policy develop and take root to become the educational quality metrics of tomorrow.

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Notes

1. In the context of racialized organizations, non-White organizations like HBCUs, tribal colleges, or even community colleges, which can be implicitly racialized, are typically named, thus differentiating them from typically unnamed White-serving institutions that serve as the nonstigmatized norm (Ray, 2019). In this article and our analysis, we break from the White-centered status quo by naming White-serving institutions as openly as their non-White counterparts.

2. In contemporary parlance, the term "equity" is widely regarded as the appropriate descriptor for projects that pursue racial parity in educational outcomes. However, in the decades covered in this study, the term "equality" was the more common term of art. We thus use these terms interchangeably in this article.

3. While prior work (McCambly & Mulroy, 2022) demonstrates this settlement lasted into the early

2000s, for the purposes of this article, we limit our data analysis to 8 years into the second settlement.

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