The Policy Filtering Process: Understanding Distinctive State Responses to the National College Completion Agenda in the United States[1]

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Abstract: The United States has faced stagnant postsecondary education degree completion rates for over a decade. When coupled with improved educational outcomes in other nations, the one-time world leader in higher education attainment has precipitously declined in standing internationally. Coupling this reality with the need for a more educated workforce domestically led President Barack Obama to proclaim improving higher education completion rates a national imperative in 2009. Despite input from the federal government, due to the decentralized nature of American postsecondary education, individual states maintain primary responsibility for governance and policy decisions.

Consequently, there has been a range of state responses to improving college completion. Through a comparative case analysis, this study considers a putatively homogenous region to investigate state-level factors that "filtered" the national college completion agenda to distinct responses in Georgia, South Carolina, and Texas.
Keywords: United States; higher education; education policies; college completion; governance

El proceso de filtrado de políticas: Comprensión de las respuestas distintivas del estado a la National College Completion Agenda en los Estados Unidos
Resumen: Estados Unidos se ha enfrentado a tasas de finalización de estudios de educación postsecundaria estancadas durante más de una década. Cuando se combina con mejores resultados educativos en otras naciones, el líder mundial en el logro de la educación superior ha disminuido precipitadamente en su posición internacional. Al combinar esta realidad con la necesidad de una fuerza de trabajo más educada, el presidente Barack Obama proclamó que mejorar las tasas de finalización de la educación superior era un imperativo nacional en 2009. A pesar del aporte del gobierno federal, debido a la naturaleza descentralizada de la educación postsecundaria estadounidense, responsabilidad por la gobernanza y las decisiones de política. En consecuencia, ha habido una variedad de respuestas estatales para mejorar la finalización de la universidad. A través de un análisis comparativo de casos, este estudio considera una región putativamente homogénea para investigar los factores a nivel estatal que "filtraron" la agenda de finalización de la universidad nacional a respuestas distintas en Georgia, Carolina del Sur y Texas.
Palabras clave: Estados Unidos; educación superior; políticas educativas; finalización de la universidad; gobernancia

O processo de filtragem de políticas: Entendendo as respostas distintas do National College Completion Agenda en los Estados Unidos
Resumo: Os Estados Unidos foram submetidos a uma série de finalizações de estudos de educação pós-graduados durante mais de uma década. A combinação de todos os resultados educativos em outras nações, o mundo em curso no domínio da educação superior tem sido precipitadamente na sua posição internacional. Al preliminar this realidad to necesidad de una fuerza de trabajo más educada, el presidente Barack Obama proclamou que as melhores tarefas de finalização da educação superior era um imperativo nacional em 2009. A pesar delporte do governo federal, debito a naturaleza descentralizada de la educación postsecundaria estadounidense, responsabilidad por la gobernanza y las decisiones de political. En consecuencia, ha habito una variedad de respuestas estatales for mejorar la finalización de la universidad. A case to un analogis comparative case, this study is a region was applied in port homogénea for investigating the factors a level estatal that "filtraron" the agenda of finalisation of the universidad nationals and conditions in Georgia, Carolina del Sur and Texas.
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Introduction

The United States was once considered a world leader in higher education attainment, ranked among the top nations annually by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development's (OECD) "Education at a Glance" report. However, the United States has faced stagnant postsecondary degree completion rates throughout the 2000s, while other countries made notable improvements, resulting in a steady decline when compared internationally (OECD, 2008). For researchers and others closely involved in the United States higher education sector, concerns around postsecondary degree completion rates have long been discussed (Diprete & Buchmann, 2006; Dowd, 2004). Yet, only over the past decade has improving postsecondary completion become a national concern and focus for higher education policy. The recent surge in interest is due, in part, to reports by the Lumina Foundation (Matthews, 2009), the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010), and other organizations that suggested the United States would lack the educated population necessary to meet the economy's future workforce needs based on the nation's current educational trajectory. President Barack Obama also brought significant national attention to the importance of postsecondary degree attainment in an address to Congress on February 24, 2009, which has been considered a focusing event for the current national college completion movement.

President Obama's speech emphasized the importance of higher education in the United States, including its growing necessity for individuals seeking employment and its utility for improving the country's economy. Underscoring the importance of higher education, President Obama (2009) remarked "it is the responsibility of every citizen to participate in [education beyond high school]," and proclaimed, "by 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world." Although this speech did not single-handedly create a national college completion movement, it established a proposed deadline for the United States to improve its educational trajectory and brought this critical issue to the national stage. In fact, despite the election of President Donald Trump in 2016, Obama's speech is still considered a key moment that directed federal and state policymakers towards a unified postsecondary education objective. Nevertheless, as Obama's target year of 2020 approaches, the United States remains far from meeting his ambitious goal. Some researchers even suggest the country has dropped further in standing internationally irrespective of the national attention and various policy interventions (Shapiro et al., 2015; Vossensteyn et al., 2015).

A contributing factor to these limited improvements is the decentralized nature of public higher education in the United States. In particular, while the federal government maintains some levers of influence over the sector, including through the federal student aid program, financial support for research, intervention on issues related to social justice, and accreditation, most policy decisions are administered and overseen by individual states (McGuinness, 2005, 2016; Schmidtlein & Berdahl, 2005). Additionally, although colleges and universities will occasionally establish localized policies and programs, the development and execution of broader policy agendas and strategic plans, such as those connected to improving statewide college completion, are a responsibility of the state. As a result, there have been mixed approaches and levels of interest to improving postsecondary education completion across the United States.

While most states have heightened their emphasis on college completion, there have also been states that have put limited efforts towards this agenda. Even within a similar geographic region like the southern United States, which has trailed the nation in higher education completion historically (Carnevale & Smith, 2012), notable variation occurs. For example, consider the states of

interest for our analysis: Georgia, where policy efforts center on improving degree attainment statewide; South Carolina, where minimal statewide efforts focus on college completion; and Texas, where statewide plans emphasize completion efforts, but specific policies center on the state's postsecondary systems and regions. Through a qualitative comparative case analysis, this study investigates underlying state characteristics that "filter" how national priorities around college completion have resulted in distinctive state responses. We consider this broader subject by evaluating two research questions:
1. How have states responded to the national directive to improve college completion rates?
2. What distinct state-level characteristics shape statewide college completion policy agendas?

Literature Review

Previous research examining the state higher education policy process has noted the influential role of several broad groups of state-level characteristics that may play a role in a state's college completion agenda (Hearn, McLendon, & Linthicum, 2017; Perna & Finney, 2014). Demographics of the state citizenry (e.g., population size, average age, racial diversity, educational attainment) can influence whether policymakers consider a policy for adoption based on the potential outcomes and value-added to their state (Doyle, 2006; Heller, 2002; Tandberg & Ness, 2011). The organization of the public postsecondary education sector and structure of the statewide higher education agency (coordinating board versus consolidated governing board) can shape a state's policy decision process (Hearn & McLendon, 2012; McLendon, Hearn, & Deaton, 2006). For example, McLendon et al. (2006) suggested states maintaining coordinating boards are more likely to make decisions and adopt policies that align with the preferences of elected officials because they serve as "extensions of elected officials' capacity to supervise" (p. 19), due to their close association with the state government. In comparison, consolidated governing boards are more autonomous agencies and are more likely to consider policies that align with the administration and faculty, effectively representing an "academic cartels" (p. 19). A final group of characteristics are political factors (e.g., governor's power, political party control, appointment mechanisms) that may guide state decision-makers' consideration of specific policies. For instance, in Pusser's (2003) analysis of the University of California's (UC) decision to disallow affirmative action policies, he noted the governor's role in appointing UC Regents as leading to a policy decision that was opposed by many groups across UC's campuses.

A complementary perspective on the policy process has developed through the examination of "negative" cases, where an entity opts against adopting a specific policy that often opposes current trends (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962, 1963; Goss, 2006; Ness & Mistretta, 2010). Specifically, many of these studies highlight the importance of context-specific factors that can lead to these distinctive decisions. For instance, Ness and Mistretta (2010) conducted one of the few higher education negative case studies and examined North Carolina's decision against adopting a statewide merit scholarship following the establishment of a state lottery, which contrasted with the trends at that time. These researchers concluded North Carolina's inaction was connected to several internal determinants, including lower tuition costs and a strong college going culture, that were perceived as fulfilling the primary potential benefits of adopting a merit scholarship program. Therefore, it was ultimately specific state-level contextual factors that determined North Carolina's policy process rather than the broader themes discussed previously.

        While the extant research has contributed to the understanding of various state-level characteristics influencing levels of policy action, the current national college completion agenda provides a unique context to expand on this body of literature. In particular, due to the involvement of President Obama and the federal government in promoting college completion, improving postsecondary degree attainment received heightened attention by all 50 states at approximately the same time. College completion as a policy goal has also drawn widespread support from policymakers, regardless of political partisanship and geographic regionalism (Perna & Finney, 2014), which differs from more controversial and politicized policies considered in previous studies (e.g., college access, financing models, admissions policies). Nevertheless, limited research has considered the development of state agendas around college completion instead focusing on specific policy solutions, such as performance-based funding (Gándara, Rippner, & Ness, 2017; Tandberg & Hillman, 2014) or improving developmental education (Long & Boatman, 2013; Rutschow & Schneider, 2011).

        Perna and Finney (2014) conducted the most comparable study by investigating the relationship between state public policy and higher education performance. In their analysis, Perna and Finney (2014) underscore the importance of "state-specific context" (p. 204) as centrally involved in determining state policy agendas. However, while they included degree attainment as an outcome of interest, their study was also framed around policies concerned with improving college access and equity, complicating the understanding of state college completion agendas specifically. Our study seeks to build upon this previous literature by purposefully considering states' different approaches towards the national completion agenda. The current study also provides an opportunity to examine how state-level characteristics influenced how broader national goals translate to state policy agendas and actions.

Conceptual Framework

        Introduced by Olsen (1988), state steering seeks to examine the linkages between political authorities (often at the national level) and public agencies. Olsen's early typology focused on two components: *explanations of decision-making*, whether they are voluntary and reflect the opinions of rational actors or serve as a response to environmental/external forces, and *perception of solutions to conflict*, whether done in accordance with shared goals of the greater society or assumed to be primarily a function of self-interested behavior. Olsen argued that combinations of these features could explain how public agencies interact with a political government and can offer insight into how decisions are made and defined four distinct models: 1) the sovereign, rationality-bounded state model; 2) the institutional state model; 3) the corporate-pluralist state model; and 4) the supermarket state model.

        Olsen's first model, the *sovereign, rationality-bounded state model*, proposed state leaders are the head of society and agencies are governmental instruments to help reach specific goals. The *institutional state model* occurred when agencies are viewed as being more autonomous than in the previous model and are tasked with responsibility for specific functions, with state support when necessary. The *corporate-pluralist state model* assumed state leaders have less power than in the sovereign state model and the public are viewed as members of various self-interested formal organizations, requiring agencies to navigate among these potentially competing interests to assert any form of decision-making. Finally, the *supermarket state model* suggested the state acts as a service provider and agencies are tasked with working efficiently with the ability to adapt and change, based on the needs of the public. While Olsen's typology broadly suggests a close connection between the role of state government and public sectors, he argued that each model could influence how decisions are made.

He also emphasized that the association between government and a public agency are situational and the associated model reflected can change depending on the policy or agenda considered.

Other researchers considered the state steering relationship specifically in the postsecondary education context. For example, van Vught (1989) and Neave and van Vught (1991, 1993) discussed a two-mode framework of strategies undertaken by national governments towards postsecondary education. The *rational planning and control model* (or "state control model"), where the government is closely involved in the operation of postsecondary education through detailed planning, oversight, and other control mechanisms. In discussing various systems of higher education in Europe, they suggest governments are increasingly taking a more strategic style regarding control and adopting a *self-regulation model* (or "state supervisory model"). As its name suggests, this strategy centers on providing the postsecondary sector more autonomy and the government focuses on supervising and offering feedback mechanisms as their primary means of influencing direction and operation. While more straightforward than Olsen's four-factor typology, the underlying characteristics considered remain the same, with a focus on the relationship between government and the postsecondary education sector.

The use of state steering as an explanatory framework for postsecondary education has focused primarily on cross-national comparisons (Goedegebuure et al., 1994; Gornitzka & Maassen, 2000; Neave & van Vught, 1991, 1993). Neave and van Vught (1991, 1993) considered variation in the postsecondary education sector across multiple continents and argued that there is an increasing movement towards the self-regulation model in many countries. From their perspective, this signals a government's "loss in confidence to be able to plan and control higher education from the centre" (Neave & van Vught, 1991, p. 250). They also noted increasing pressure to reform legal homogeneity in the sector because of increased growth and diversity across postsecondary education, as well as a growing market that furthers institutional differentiation (Neave & van Vught, 1993). Gornitzka and Maassen (2000) made a similar conclusion regarding the convergence of state steering models across nations, but also suggested countries are including aspects of their historic operating models and thus developing hybrid/country-specific structures. Ultimately, these studies emphasize fundamental national characteristics guide how postsecondary education is directed in a given country, which can influence their respective approaches to reforms and change.

The United States remains widely absent among the postsecondary education research considering state steering as a conceptual framework. In fact, among the volumes mentioning the United States higher education system (Berdahl & Millett, 1991; Dill, 2001; Neave & van Vught, 1993), it is primarily to highlight the United States' unique decentralized system. In turn, many researchers noted the difficulties in direct comparisons between the United States postsecondary education system and other countries' national systems. Consequently, by considering state steering as the framework in the current study, we can extend the use of these models in a newer direction and assess their potential utility for comparing state-level postsecondary education systems within the United States.

Research Design

We employ a qualitative comparative case study to examine college completion initiatives in Georgia, South Carolina, and Texas. We chose these cases following an "embedded case study" design (Yin, 2014) in which the overarching setting is bounded by membership in the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB). SREB serves 16 states representing the Southern United States, thus holding the regional and consortial context constant. We then selected our specific cases through purposive sampling by considering differences across other state-level characteristics

highlighted in previous research (Hearn et al., 2017), including: statewide higher education agency structure (consolidated vs. coordinating board), higher education degree attainment rate, formal powers of the governor, appointment mechanism of state higher education agency board and state higher education executive officer (SHEEO), and membership in Complete College America (CCA), which serves as a leading single-issue higher education policy organization advocating solutions to improve college completion and degree attainment. We specifically considered involvement in CCA as it has been discussed previously as an influential actor in the spread of policy solutions to improve college completion (Gándara et al., 2017; Tandberg & Hillman, 2014). Further, to join CCA's Alliance of States, a state's governor must pledge to make completion a statewide priority in partnership with the state's public postsecondary sector, which for the current study underscores a statewide commitment to improve postsecondary degree attainment. Table 1 provides an overview of the three states across these dimensions.

Our data includes 63 transcribed interviews conducted between September 2013 and January 2017. Appendix A provides a breakdown of interview respondents by state and sector, which included elected officials and their staff, representatives from state higher education agencies, campus officials, and other interested parties, such as reporters and representatives from intermediary organizations (CCA and SREB). Interview participants were identified through a review of online and print sources pertinent to statewide college completion efforts including governor's office websites, state governing agency strategic plans, and media coverage. In order to qualify for interview consideration individuals needed to serve a central role in the development and adoption of statewide college completion policies or serve in a position to be knowledgeable about the state higher education policy process. This identification process was supplemented by a snowball procedure (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which identifies individuals that may not have emerged initially by asking already-identified informants to recommend other potential participants.

Table 1
Key Characteristics of States Considered

	Georgia	South Carolina	Texas
Population Rank[1]	8	23	2
2015 Postsecondary Degree Attainment (National Rank)[1]	39.11% (31)	37.83% (35)	36.44% (39)
State Higher Education Agency	University System of Georgia	South Carolina Commission on Higher Education	Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board
Governance Structure	Consolidated Governing Board	Coordinating Board	Coordinating Board
Number of Public Postsecondary Institutions (2-year and 4-year)[2]	56[3]	33	110[4]
Political Partisanship	Republican (Governor) Republican (Legislative)	Republican (Governor) Republican (Legislative)	Republican (Governor) Republican (Legislative)
Governor's Power[5]	3.0	2.7	2.8
State Higher Education Agency Board Appointment	Governor Appointed (19)	Governor Appointed (11); Institutional Trustees (3, non-voting); Institutional President from Independent Institution (1, non-voting)	Governor Appointed (9); Student Representative (1, non-voting)
SHEEO Appointment	Agency Board Appointed	Agency Board Appointed	Agency Board Appointed
CCA Alliance Member	Yes	No	Yes

[1] Values for population and degree attainment (percentage of adults 25 to 64 with an Associates Degree or higher) were drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2015 American Community Survey.
[2] Number of public postsecondary institutions was drawn from the 2017-2018 Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac.
[3] The University System of Georgia oversees the state's 30 four-year institutions, with the 26 two-year institutions reporting to the Technical College System of Georgia. More recently, Georgia's four-year sector has enacted several campus consolidations reducing the number of institutions to 28.
[4] Texas's public four-year institutions are organized under six state systems with four independent public universities. The 64 two-year institutions are structurally responsive to the Texas Association of Community Colleges.
[5] Ferguson (2013) constructed an "institutional powers" measurement for governors based on the powers provided by the state constitution, state statutes, and the voting public. For purposes of comparison, she measured the national average across the 50 states to be 3.3.

Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol with relevant probes (Rubin & Rubin, 2011), including questions about the evolution of statewide completion policy activity and state characteristics that might influence completion efforts. Interview questions focused on state policy action between 2009-2015 (aligning with President Obama's call to action and when interviews were conducted), though respondents often discussed state action outside of this time frame to provide further detail. To assist in verifying the data from transcribed interviews, we analyzed documents including statewide higher education strategic plans, higher education agency presentations, and policy reports related to college completion. Documents reviewed were determined based on interview responses and media coverage, as well as served as the archival information considered to select potential informants.

Data analysis included both inductive and deductive approaches to align our analysis with our conceptual framework and consider additional emergent themes. The qualitative data analysis program Dedoose aided in the coding of data with an *a priori* coding structure based on an analytical framework that included: organizational characteristics (e.g., higher education governance, organization of state government), political characteristics (e.g., evidence of partisanship, governor's power, key actors involved in college completion policymaking), and educational characteristics (e.g., K-12 education attainment, higher education attainment, fiscal situation of state, state funding for higher education). We also induced emergent themes from the data collected by capturing *in vivo,* local language consistent with grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Lastly, we employed several techniques to maximize validity and trustworthiness throughout the analysis. We triangulated interview and archival data, paying close attention for converging themes across sources (Yin, 2014). We used member checking to discuss findings with respondents, through the use of follow-up interviews and personal communication. Finally, we used peer-debriefing and rival explanation analysis to establish internal validity among the individuals involved in the data analysis (Yin, 2014).

Limitations

There are several limitations to consider regarding this study. First, the research design was intentionally narrow in scope and focused on some Southern states in the United States exclusively. Although this geographic region has trailed the rest of the nation in postsecondary degree attainment historically and warrants investigation, focusing on a putatively homogenous area of a single country constrains the applicability of findings to other areas of the country and internationally. A comparison of a more dissimilar set of states may underscore the importance of more nuanced factors, such as student-level characteristics and population demographics, which the current study's analysis did not capture. Further, the study focused on state-level factors influencing statewide policy decisions, so we did not consider more localized factors, such as characteristics of individual postsecondary institutions or the surrounding community in our analysis. We also did not examine college completion initiatives established at the institutional-level or broader national-level policies unless explicitly referenced by interview respondents. Lastly, as our primary data source was interviews about events that occurred in the past, our study is reliant on what respondents could recall. Although we utilized multiple techniques to increase validity and reliability outlined by qualitative methodologists (Yin, 2014), the accuracy and completeness of the study remain reliant on external parties.

Case Narratives

This section considers research question 1 and discusses the varied approaches taken by our three state cases in response to the national completion goal. We highlight some of the specific policies enacted and mention factors that have led to each state's decisions while providing perspectives from various interested parties to suggest the underlying state-level factors that have guided these actions.

Georgia: Focusing on Statewide Attainment Rates through Complete College Georgia

Although some efforts were made evaluating postsecondary attainment previously, Georgia's college completion platform began in earnest with the entrance of CCA. According to respondents from the governor's office, CCA representatives approached Governor Nathan Deal early in his administration and gained his support by emphasizing their previous experience advising governors, highlighting they "know what [governors] are looking for… [and] what they need to have." In particular, CCA appealed to Deal's political platform focusing on improving the state's economy. One legislator noted, "Governor Deal keeps score by jobs. That's his big score thing right now, I guess. You notice in the Atlanta papers – we're always talking about the number of new jobs [and] employers." Accordingly, as explained by a legislative staffer, "[Governor Deal] and policymakers are interested in the economic impact of having a qualified and skilled workforce, and so you want people to go to college."

In August 2011, Deal revealed the state was joining CCA's Alliance of States and had received a $1 million innovation award from CCA to fuel policy innovations aimed at increasing college completion. Deal also announced the commencement of the Complete College Georgia Initiative (CCG), which outlined policy priorities and action steps directed at improving attainment rates and meeting the workforce needs of the state. Ultimately, a respondent from the governor's office stated, "Complete College America was the start" to college completion entering Georgia's statewide policy agenda.

The introduction of CCG refocused higher education priorities in Georgia. In particular, CCG emphasizes five areas: 1) college readiness, 2) improving access and completion for underserved students, 3) shortening time to degree, 4) restructuring instructional delivery, and 5) transforming remediation. To best align these work areas to modes of implementation, CCG required significant coordination between the University System of Georgia (USG), the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG), and the Georgia Department of Education, as well as input from the state's business community to help identify workforce needs. These partnerships led to the development and implementation of multiple policies, including "Go Back, Move Ahead," which targets non-traditionally aged students to return to college, and redeveloping remediation in both USG and TCSG institutions to shorten the time to degree for students.

Another key component of the CCG initiative required campus completion plans by USG member institutions that outlined institutional-level goals, currently implemented policies, and various metrics to inform the statewide completion goal. These campus plans also served as a mechanism to share successes across the system and state, leading to the consideration and implementation of various policies, most notably, data-driven advising, known as predictive analytics, which emerged out of Georgia State University (GSU). This policy, and by association GSU, has gained considerable national attention for improving its graduation rate and closing the attainment gap for traditionally marginalized student populations. As noted by an official from GSU, "It's a rare week where we don't have one or more often two campuses visiting us, and what they want is time… with the advising staff and time with the data people and so forth." The respondent

continued by noting, GSU is "fortunate, in a sense, to be doing what we're doing at the right moment, and I think that's fortunate for Georgia by extension, because, you know, it's gotten the state a lot more attention, makes us look perhaps more progressive than we really are… countering a lot of negative perceptions about education in Georgia."

While these campus plans, and the greater CCG initiative, served as a means to share best practices across the system and align the state's postsecondary policy direction, some respondents voiced a more negative perspective on the entire completion agenda. For instance, a campus official explained, "CCG was an edict that came from the governor to the university system and the technical college system, and you know, there was no way [campuses] could opt out." In their view, college completion became the primary higher education initiative of the state because of the choices of a few. This view is evident in a comment from a USG official, who argued that Georgia's "fairly autonomous system of higher education" means "if the governor would like [a policy] to be a priority of the board members, who are appointed by the governor, then the board can ensure that happens… once we decide that we're going to do it, the board can make that a priority." Other respondents echoed a similar perspective that CCG was truly a governor-led initiative, but suggested USG's use of the campus plans and focus on "systematic issues around the entire system, and things like remedial education, developmental education" has made the entire initiative a worthwhile endeavor.

South Carolina: Regional Partnerships and Institutions Fill the Completion Policy Vacuum

South Carolina has enacted few statewide policies directed at higher education attainment. There has also been minimal effort by intermediary organizations to enter the Palmetto State and aid in the development and consideration of such policies, despite these groups' traditional role of aiding in the transfer, compilation, and dissemination of information and policies (Honig, 2004; Metcalfe, 2008). In discussing this reality with respondents, many highlighted an independent – occasionally referred to as "parochial" – spirit that transcends the state. For example, one respondent emphasized their in-state organization's effectiveness due to native clout. As they explained, "we're from South Carolina, we care about South Carolina, and we're not coming in from the national level or someplace out-of-state trying to impose some outsider agenda on South Carolina." From their perspective, this state-level characteristic impedes the entrance of college completion-focused intermediary organizations, such as CCA. Further, because in-state organizations have different foci, there have been limited unified efforts directed towards postsecondary attainment rates at the state's highest levels.

Respondents suggested there are also more pressing issues statewide that further detracts consideration of postsecondary attainment as a policy priority. A senior official from the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education (CHE), which serves as the state's postsecondary coordinating board, explained, "Our state-wide efforts have really been based on getting students to think about going to college… [because] South Carolina's college-going rate is lower than the regional or national averages." Legislators and campus officials also highlighted issues in the K-12 sector, including a recent lawsuit against the state concerning unequal funding of public schools, as impacting the state's limited focus on postsecondary policy. Further, outside of the education sector, respondents noted infrastructure problems, such as a college president who explained, "half the bridges are falling in and… everybody agrees the roads are in terrible shape and that it's really become now a safety issue and an economic development issue." In fact, many respondents noted financial issues in the state, noting South Carolina has still not returned to pre-recession levels economically. As one state legislator explained, "funding is going to be a difficult thing to talk about this [legislative] session," suggesting additional barriers to considering non-priority policies.

A compounding issue voiced by many in South Carolina's postsecondary sector centers on a lack of statewide leadership and direction around higher education. As one respondent explained, "our governor is set up to be constitutionally weak… and so the role of the governor is largely a messaging role and trying to develop consensus behind ideas… it's really the legislature that's driving the bulk of the [policy] process." Consequently, as one state agency official noted, "we've got regional interests represented as well as the Governor's interest, and so that… limits efficiency in the sense that… because [the Governor] said college completion is a driver for her, would not necessarily make it so for [South Carolina]."

In addition to elected policymakers, CHE was also discussed as lacking power and oversight responsibility. Referred to by respondents as being a "communication clearing house" or having "no teeth," a legislator explained CHE was initially developed by the state's legislature with minimal authority and is now "underfunded and under-empowered." In particular, the existence of independent governing boards for public colleges and universities has created an additional level of oversight between the coordinating board and institutions that has prevented CHE from serving as a single and unified voice for the South Carolina higher education sector. As noted by a campus president, "[CHE] can have dialogue [with institutions], but none of the college presidents report to them directly." In their view, this has minimized interaction between institutions and inhibited crafting statewide postsecondary initiatives.

The inaction by statewide policymakers, though, has led to regional and institutional leadership entering this policy vacuum. The University of South Carolina (SC), for example, has become a primary actor in establishing policies directed at postsecondary completion. SC established Palmetto College in 2012, which, a senior administrator explained,

> … is South Carolina's first public online baccalaureate – it's a completion program… to better serve those individuals either who are currently graduating with a two-year degree but don't have quite the ability, the resources to transfer over to a four-year school, and also for many, many individuals who left school with about two years of college… again, usually not because they flunked out, but because they needed to work, or marry, or care for people, and we'd love to bring them back if they wish to come back.

SC also promoted the "On Your Time" initiative, which a senior official outlined aims to "open up the academic calendar… [by] offering more required courses" to ensure students do not need to wait for a specific semester to complete their degree. Lastly, the institution introduced the "Carolina Completion Initiative," which an SC official explained focuses on efforts to improve access and completion of Pell Grant recipients, with a goal of "increasing their completion rate by 5% over the next five years." They concluded, the "President and University have done a very good job of stepping into the vacuum and introducing things that, although spearheaded by the University of South Carolina, can really benefit the entire state."

Besides the flagship university, other colleges and universities have established regionally focused college completion programs. For instance, a legislator noted Clemson University and other institutions supporting bridge programs for local two-year institutions, which allow students who attend a technical college to "bring your SAT up, you get what remediation you needed… if they chose at that point not to [transfer], they get a good skill and a good basic technical education. And for those that are going on for four-year [degrees], they would not have to use their first couple of years for remediation." Similarly, a senior official from a liberal arts institution explained they moved "substantial portions of our curriculum online to make those online offering more accessible to non-traditional students… to try to give the students the opportunity… to come back into the process

with as much support from the institution as possible to complete [their] degree." Notably, though, these programs remain siloed regionally and between local institutions, which was attributed by respondents to the competitive nature between colleges and universities to attract and retain in-state students.

Texas: In-State Organizations Lead to Regional- and Sector-Focused Completion Policies

While the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) oversees all public postsecondary institutions in the state, the agency has little formal authority beyond approving degree programs, serving as liaison to the governor, and authorizing major construction projects. As explained by an official from an in-state organization, "[THECB] has a different role than [governing agencies] in some other states… there's always this push-pull between the fifty community colleges, six state university systems, and the Coordinating Board, and whereas… [in other states] the money goes from the state to the state agencies to the [institutions]… here it goes from the legislature to the colleges themselves." Beyond the limited authority of THECB, this respondent highlighted the unique, multi-system, organization operating in conjunction with the state agency, and the diverse institutional types that constitute the Texas public system of higher education. Ultimately, underlying the Texas response to college completion is this unique structure and range of institutional types that exist in their postsecondary sector.

Despite the complexity of the postsecondary sector, in October 2000, THECB adopted a comprehensive statewide strategic plan for improving higher education, known as "Closing the Gaps by 2015." Predating the national completion movement under Obama, this plan emphasized the disparity among racial groups in postsecondary enrollment and completion across Texas and argued it was an especially pressing considering the eventual majority of Hispanics in the population. Accordingly, this plan outlined four "gaps" hindering the future well-being of Texas, including improving postsecondary participation and completion, raising institutional notoriety by increasing the number of nationally recognized programs and services, and attracting more federal funding for science and engineering research. Regarding improving postsecondary success, THECB suggests the need for an additional 210,000 credentials (including degrees, certificates, and other "student successes") to be awarded by 2015 to meet the needs of the state.

By 2008, Texas made progress with many of these goals and THECB (2008) partnered with the Richard T. Ingram Center for Public Trusteeship and Governance of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges to release a report outlining some of these accomplishments. Although they highlight improvements across all four areas, for purposes of the current study, the improvements around postsecondary completion was notable. In particular, the authors noted an additional 18,126 bachelor's degrees and 37,869 associate's degrees were granted in 2007 than 2000 when the Closing the Gaps plan was first established. Although these findings equated to improvements of 24 and 48.5 percent, respectively, THECB mentioned this growth had slowed since 2004 and suggested additional innovations and policy considerations were needed to reach their ultimate goals.

One such catalyst for Texas education policy was the 2009 establishment and entrance of CCA. As explained by a senior THECB official, "California wasn't interested in participating, so [CCA President, Stan Jones] knew he needed Texas, and we agreed from the very beginning we would be part of CCA." The respondent continued, "I think Stan Jones has a strong reputation in Texas, particularly among members of the Higher Education Committees in both the State House and the State Senate… the fact that he was a state official carries weight." Multiple respondents echoed this perspective of the involvement of CCA, though a different official from THECB argued that CCA was not central in bringing postsecondary completion to the forefront of state-level policy

because "it was already there." They did note, though, CCA's role in "looking at certificates… to go through and actually try to estimate the percentage of Texans that have a… technical certificate" and consider its contribution towards reaching statewide completion goals.

    While they may not have played a central role in focusing the statewide higher education policy agenda on postsecondary completion, CCA did contribute to the escalation of the response of one of Texas's most vocal and influential constituencies, the business community. In particular, as a community college official explained:

> Complete College America had a conference… sponsored by the Texas Association of Business (TAB). TAB is the statewide group that represents all of the chambers of commerce in the state of Texas. [CCA] shared data on all of the… institutions in the state of Texas during this conference, and the graduation rate for Austin Community College (ACC) was pitiful… [TAB] took a look at ACC's graduation rate because they're right here in Austin, so they put up a billboard… on Interstate 35… that said 'ACC graduation rate is 4%. Is this a good use of taxpayer money?'

A few months later, TAB produced a similar billboard promoting the 8% graduation rate at the Dallas County Community College District. This extreme action aligns with previous literature (Malandra, 2012) that has pointed to this sector as historically leading higher education movements throughout Texas. In fact, as one state legislator emphasized, Texas higher education is "producing a product for [the business community] … they certainly think so." Consequently, although the billboards targeted institutions, it signaled a tipping point in college completion policy throughout the state.

    For example, starting Fall 2011, three advisory committees were formed and tasked with developing recommendations regarding the development of an outcomes-based funding formula for the entire higher education sector. After an additional year collaborating with members of the Texas Legislature and other interested parties, THECB announced a final list of recommendations for an outcomes-based funding model in January 2013. Notably, although there was initial consensus across the postsecondary sector, as a TAB official noted, among the "four-year [institutions], all five chancellors said yes, and then [the chancellors] killed it… They crawfished on us and killed the deal, and we weren't able to get it done." Consequently, only the community college sector in Texas is funded based on "student success" metrics, which, as outlined by a college president, includes, "completion of your developmental education sequence… completion of your first 15 college credit hours, completion of your first 30 college credit hours, transfer to a university, and completion of a certificate or an associate degree."

    Around the same time, CCA reemerged as an actor in Texas higher education postsecondary completion policy. First, they released a policy document entitled "Complete College Texas." Using data obtained from THECB, they commended the current efforts in Texas to raise postsecondary completion rates. However, CCA suggested five "Game Changers" – performance-based funding for the entire higher education sector; corequisite remediation for underprepared students; cap degree requirements to allow for timely degree completion; block scheduling to help working students balance their time; guided pathways to allow students to prepare for degree requirements (Complete College America, 2013) – as potential avenues to further their success. CCA also held a "Completion Academy 2.0" in August 2013, which drew participants from nine states, including seven individuals from Texas representing various institutional, system, and state agencies. Unlike other states, CCA's involvement in Texas has primarily focused on the system and regional-level, most notably at the University of Houston and surrounding institutions.

For instance, the University of Houston is leading an initiative similar to CCA's proposed guided pathways program, which they refer to as Houston GPS. Funded initially by a one-year grant from the Houston Endowment, the program centers on collaboration between four Houston-area community college systems and the University of Houston system. It aims to structure schedules in the two-year sector to make it easier for students to complete their credential and, should they desire, transfer to a four-year institution to complete their bachelor's degree. More recently, CCA announced the receipt of a $1million grant from USA Funds to fund the development of a career-focused student advising model in four systems, including the University of Houston and Houston Community Colleges.

Although CCA's efforts are most pronounced in the Houston-area, similar enclaves of postsecondary completion initiatives are under development across the state. While many of these programs focus on the system or regional-level, most are the result of actions and interventions by intermediary organizations, such as CCA, and other state-level associations, including TAB and the Houston Endowment. As highlighted by an official from CCA, Texas is "such a big state, it's really hard to get a handle on how to start or get a critical mass of people," which suggests that a regional or system-level approach may also provide the most comparable group to impact postsecondary attainment.

Thematic Findings

Turning to research question 2, our analysis of interview and archival data underscored several state factors that contributed to the distinctive approaches taken by Georgia, South Carolina, and Texas towards the national college completion agenda. First, in line with previous literature (Hearn et al., 2017), variation across three broad state-level features emerged as central in guiding policy decision-making: 1) organization of the public postsecondary sector, 2) state political structures, and 3) state economic context. Besides these underlying distinctions among the case study states, respondents across states also suggested differing associations between the public postsecondary education sector and the state government, which is highlighted by an application of Olsen's (1988) state steering framework. The following considers these various factors and their influence on the states' distinct policy responses, summarized in Table 2.

Organization of the Public Postsecondary Sector

A common point of discussion among respondents shaping states' policy agendas was the organization of the public postsecondary sector. First, although considered during the case selection process, the structure of the state's higher education agency emerged as a critical factor influencing policy decisions. In Georgia, the only case with a consolidated governing board, respondents noted the relative ease by which the University System of Georgia was able to implement the Complete College Georgia plan across the public postsecondary sector. Conversely, respondents from South Carolina and Texas, which maintain coordinating boards with comparatively less direct policy oversight, noted difficulties with statewide policy implementation. In particular, the existence of independent boards of trustees for institutions and systems in South Carolina and Texas limit the coordinating board's ability to outline the policy agenda for the sector unilaterally. While the influence of higher education statewide agency structure is supported by previous research (Hearn & McLendon, 2012), it is notable that Georgia's consolidated governing board more closely represented decisions by the state government than an "academic cartel" as noted by previous literature (McLendon et al., 2006). A potential explanation of this nuanced perspective will be discussed in the following section.

Table 2
Summary of Thematic Findings

	Georgia	South Carolina	Texas
College Completion Agenda	Statewide plan through Complete College Georgia	Regional partnerships and institutions fill statewide policy vacuum	Regional- and sector- focused completion policies across state
Organization of Public Postsecondary Education Sector	Consolidated Governing Board (56 Institutions)	Coordinating Board (33 Institutions)	Coordinating Board (110 Institutions)
State Political Structures[1]	Highest Governor's Power (3.0) CCA Member	Lowest Governor's Power (2.7) Not CCA Member	Mid-Level Governor's Power (2.8) CCA Member
State Economic Context	Job growth key to Governor's agenda	Infrastructure and K-12 funding were priorities	Strong business sector and central role of industry leaders
State Government-Public Postsecondary Sector Association	Sovereign State	Supermarket State	Corporate-Pluralist State
State Steering Typology Characteristics	State leaders are head of society and government agencies are used to help reach goals	State is a service provider and government agencies must adapt to needs of public	Public are members of self-interested organizations and government agencies must navigate potentially competing interests

[1] Ferguson's (2013) measurement of governor's power is constructed based on powers provided by the state constitution, state statutes, and the voting public. The national average across the 50 states is 3.3.

In addition to statewide higher education agency structure, the size and complexity of each state's postsecondary sector influenced policy direction. For example, Texas public higher education is comprised of 110 institutions, including 46 four-year institutions split across six systems with four independent universities. On the other hand, Georgia and South Carolina maintain significantly smaller postsecondary sectors with 56 and 33 public institutions, respectively, with South Carolina institutions retaining independent boards as the primary difference from Georgia. Although all three states vary regarding how public two-year and technical institutions are governed, respondents noted that the additional levels of oversight through system and institutional boards impacted policymaking. Respondents in Texas suggested THECB's inability to institute comprehensive policy direction for all public higher education resulted in policy efforts focusing primarily at the sector,

regional, and system-levels. Similarly, independent institutional boards and limited policy leadership within the South Carolina CHE resulted in few college completion policies overall, with some attempts by institutions to fill this policy vacuum. On the other hand, Georgia's more direct oversight structure and smaller sector overall allowed for more wide-sweeping policy consideration and implementation.

State Political Structures

Although all three states are alike regarding political party control (Republican-led in both the governor's office and legislature), differences in state-level structures mediate the influence of politics and governmental perspectives on public higher education that, in turn, guided policy decisions. Consider state membership in Complete College America's Alliance of States. Member states join CCA's Alliance via a pledge by the state governor, in partnership with the state's public postsecondary sector, to make completion a statewide priority. As such, a strong state executive or one who considers postsecondary education a policy priority could determine a state's association with this influential organization. For example, Georgia's governor ranks highest in formal power among the three cases (Ferguson, 2013) suggesting the greatest and broadest capability to determine policy direction. Further, CCA's policy goals aligned closely with Governor Nathan Deal's platform, which ultimately made Georgia's membership in the Alliance of States an easy decision.

In comparison, South Carolina's state executive is the constitutionally weakest of the cases. As noted by respondents, the governor has a limited ability to directly influence the state's college completion agenda regardless of their interest on the platform. South Carolina's policy process is further complicated by an involved legislature that results in regionally focused priorities often taking priority. Consequently, in order to adopt broader statewide initiatives, South Carolina must consider a wider range of perspectives from a larger group of individuals than in Georgia, where the governor can more unilaterally decide policy goals. Ultimately, based on these preexisting structures, it is unlikely for South Carolina to be involved in national organizations and networks, like CCA, thus limiting their ability to garner the same level of information and policy solutions as other states.

A related consideration centers on how individuals are appointed to the statewide higher education agency board. In particular, previous research found that politically appointed individuals are more likely to align higher education policy decisions with the goals of state officials than those selected through other means (Longanecker, 2006; Tandberg, Fowles, & McLendon, 2017). Although all three state agencies operate under overseeing boards where the governor selects the majority of members, only in Georgia are no other perspectives represented (South Carolina includes the state legislative perspective, through institutional trustee members, and Texas provides a (non-voting) seat to a student representative). While Texas's inclusion of a non-voting student member may have a negligible influence on decision-making, Georgia's uniform board appointment further illustrates the governor's ability to unilaterally determine the policy agenda for the postsecondary sector due to the absence of other perspectives being represented. As the SHEEO in each state is selected through the state agency board, it is also likely that the governor's agenda will more easily translate to the broader goals of the state agency in Georgia than in South Carolina, where non-gubernatorial political appointments may align with differing goals.

State Economic Context

Factors related to the state economy also proved central in driving levels of policy action across our cases. However, rather than differences in median household income, state gross domestic product, and other traditionally considered measures, respondents underscored more fundamental economic features of each state with few common characteristics discussed across the

cases. For instance, Georgia respondents noted Governor Deal's longstanding policy platform on economic development and job growth as a catalyst for the state's focus on improving postsecondary degree attainment. Discussions around Complete College Georgia, in fact, were often framed and discussed as a means to develop a skilled workforce in accordance with Deal's broader goals. Although previously discussed organizational characteristics contribute to the Georgia governor and state higher education sector's goals aligning, the overall objective for both has remained similar and focused on economic benefits to the state.

Respondents from South Carolina discussed economic-related factors as limiting the state's capability to focus on college completion. For example, more pressing statewide concerns, such as deteriorating infrastructure and K-12 funding, were highlighted as taking priority over higher education on the policy agenda. South Carolina was also the only case where individuals discussed the lasting effects of the 2008 financial recession, stressing the main industries of the state (e.g., textiles and manufacturing) have yet to rebound. Relatedly, respondents suggested that because the main industries of the state traditionally did not require postsecondary education there were philosophical barriers within the state to consider the importance of higher education. Finally, an insular focus transcends many areas of South Carolina's economy and a desire to support and align with only South Carolina-borne groups. This mentality severely limited the involvement of national, regional, and other organizations that have aided in bringing college completion and other policy agenda items to the forefront in other states.

In line with previous research (Malandra, 2012), respondents from Texas emphasized the involvement of the business sector in guiding the state's college completion agenda. Initially, the Texas Association of Business served as a partner supporting Complete College America's entrance into the state by sponsoring a conference. TAB then brought significant attention to shortcomings at community colleges regarding degree completion by funding critical billboards located proximate to campus. Texas respondents noted this level of involvement by the business community is not unique, citing examples of state officials and other policymakers often considering the business community's perspectives and needs when determining policy action. The importance of industry leaders is only heighted when considering higher education, which produce a "product" (e.g., employees) for the business sector. Ultimately, respondents suggested it was the involvement of TAB and other business leaders that necessitated the statewide agenda to improve college completion.

State Government-Public Postsecondary Sector Association

A final factor that arose from the analysis of the three states is variation in how higher education is viewed and positioned with respect to the state government. Considering Olsen's (1988) typology for state steering contextualizes this association and contributes to our understanding of their varied responses to the national college completion movement. For instance, Georgia represents a "sovereign state," where the postsecondary sector is maintained under centralized authority and is closely tied to the political authority of the state. In this context Governor Deal's focus on the economy and workforce development, decision to join CCA, and introduction of Complete College Georgia, directed Georgia's postsecondary sector to focus on college completion as a priority. Further, as the Governor elects the members of the University System of Georgia's Board of Regents, institutions had minimal capacity to oppose these goals without being held accountable. Ultimately, in line with Olsen's model, higher education in this environment can be viewed as a mechanism used by the government to achieve its goals.

South Carolina represents a "supermarket state," where the governor and overseeing agency are weak and policymaking is decentralized. The limited power of the South Carolina Commission

on Higher Education, coupled with a constitutionally weak governor, has resulted in a regionally focused legislature to be primarily responsible for determining the postsecondary policy agenda. However, in line with this model, environmental factors, such as the state's infrastructure and issues in the K-12 sector, have taken priority over the postsecondary sector and resulted in institutions working independently to achieve their goals, such as enacting policies and programs to meet the needs of the public.

Lastly, with the significant involvement of the business sector and other regional stakeholders, Texas represents a "corporate-pluralist state." This model, which emphasizes the involvement of multiple interested and powerful constituencies, highlights how postsecondary institutions and systems in Texas must navigate various perspectives in the policymaking process. Consequently, because of the diversity and size of the sector and state, Texas higher education policy naturally became more regionally focused since the most influential stakeholders to a given institution or system is focused at that level. Ultimately, the utility of the organizational steering framework centers on gaining an understanding of how state governments interact with public agencies, such as public postsecondary education, and seek to impact their role through policy.

Discussion and Implications

Despite bipartisan support and calls to action by the federal government, states are taking markedly different approaches to the national initiative to increase college completion rates. In examining the policy responses in Georgia, South Carolina, and Texas, this study found four state-level features that filtered the national completion goal into each state's distinct policy platforms: organization of the postsecondary sector, state political structures, factors of each state's economy, and the association between the state government and public postsecondary sector. Although some of these state characteristics have been discussed in previous research (Hearn et al., 2017; Perna & Finney, 2014), our study's focus on each state's broader college completion policy agenda, rather than a specific policy solution, provides added insights to the state higher education policy process.

In particular, while college completion was a known issue across the United States, it has been a particularly important focus for the American South, given its standing historically as below the national average. Nevertheless, certain states remain disinterested in focusing on higher education as a policy imperative, which was represented by South Carolina in our study. Although our findings suggest factors influencing South Carolina's indifference, considering the decentralized nature of public higher education in the United States, researchers and policymakers must recognize the varied perspectives and priority placed on higher education across the country. To this end, considering our emergent themes in conjunction with the state steering framework contributes to our understanding of how the positioning and association between the government and postsecondary sector may transcend the policy process and be indicative of how a state prioritizes higher education. Furthermore, variation across these themes can help explain varied policy decisions and platforms within an otherwise homogenous region.

This study's findings also suggest some recommendations for policymakers. Because public higher education policy decisions occur primarily at the state-level, future national initiatives must recognize the nuance within this context if they expect change across all 50 states. For example, across the three regionally-linked states in the current study (which classic policy adoption literature would suggest will act similarly), we found substantial variation. Therefore, federal policymakers and national organizations must consider characteristics of states when predicting higher education policy outcomes and, in particular, reflect on differences across the four themes emphasized in this study as potential barriers to the successful implementation of policies across multiple states.

State policymakers must also acknowledge the unique circumstances within their higher education sector and think independently from traditional patterns of policy adoption by considering solutions that are appropriate for their state's context. One possible mechanism is to elevate institutional-level policies to the state-level, as evidenced by Georgia's Complete College Georgia plan and Georgia State University's successful predictive analytics program. GSU's achievements provided an in-state case study for what might occur across Georgia campuses, allowing USG to have less reservations regarding state-level contextual differences that might prevent replicated success. Similar innovative solutions are likely being developed at higher education institutions across the country, and states should consider looking internally before seeking policies advocated by intermediary organizations and other external groups.

On the other hand, states that do not have institutions with GSU's level of innovation should value the opportunities that national partnerships and intermediary organizations can provide. While some intermediaries are best known for advocating specific policy solutions for policymakers to consider, such as CCA (2013), these organizations also provide an opportunity for networking across state lines beyond traditional regional and neighboring borders. Therefore, membership in national organizations may be an important avenue for states to become better acquainted with higher education policy solutions that are being considered nationwide. Nevertheless, states policymakers must remain judicious when adopting policies promoted by policy organizations and other states without first considering how the advocated policy will translate into their unique setting.

One mechanism to highlight fundamental characteristics of individual states and how they interact around higher education is through the use of the state steering framework (Olsen, 1988). Given that the postsecondary sector has long been strongly differentiated by state, this framework helps reveal nuance that more established theories might miss. Although we have doubts that there are persistent cultures around higher education in these states, state steering provides flexibility and policy specific explanations. Ultimately, as long as postsecondary completion remains an important priority in the United States, it will be critical for policymakers to take into account distinctive state contexts that powerfully shape and translate national initiatives into local terms. Avoiding that hard work will ensure continued limitations on federal policy initiatives and, ultimately, on college students' opportunities to succeed.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A

Summary Chart of Interview Respondents by State and Sector

State	Governor's Office	Legislature	Campus System	Campus	SHEEO Agency	Other	Total
Georgia	2	2	N/A	4	6	1	15
South Carolina	1	5	N/A	6	2	2	16
Texas	1	6	4	3	3	8	25
Intermediary Organizations	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	7	7
	4	13	4	13	11	18	63

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