Power and Politics in the "Quest for Meaning"

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Abstract

Sensemaking is a popular framework for studying the meaning-making dimensions of policy implementation, change initiatives, and practitioner action in education. While generative, it has traditionally offered less guidance on how certain organizational actors have formal and/or informal power to advance their version of events and how certain narratives gain legitimacy over others. A power and politics approach addresses these lacunae. Yet, to date, this approach is little used in education research, despite the fact that contests over meaning and meaning-making are routine in educational institutions. Using an empirical case of meaning-making about "equity" at a community college, this study demonstrates how a power and politics analysis identifies and interrogates the forces—implicit and explicit, within and outside an organization—that make meaning(s) (il)legitimate.

Keywords: *equity, community colleges, higher education, sensemaking, power and politics, qualitative research*

Introduction

Meaning and meaning-making are foundational to organizational life, shaping how people make decisions, respond to new reforms, and enact routine practices (Zilber, 2002, 2008). In education research, "sensemaking," particularly as theorized by Karl Weick (1995; Weick et al., 2005), is a popular approach for examining the ideational aspects of organizations (e.g., Coburn, 2001; Duncheon & Muñoz 2019; Kezar, 2013). Framed as a "quest for meaning" (Weick et al. 2005, p. 409), organizational sensemaking occurs when a "shock"—typically in the form of new leadership, reforms, and/or ongoing crises—usher in situations that people find "novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some other way violate expectations" (Maitlis & Christianson 2014, p. 57). Grounded in a constructivist epistemology, sensemaking treats reality as an "ongoing accomplishment" in which people generate frames and narratives to articulate ambiguous situations, rationalize past behavior, and determine next moves (Weick, 1995, p. 15).

As a framework, sensemaking has advanced analyses of policy implementation (e.g., Coburn, 200l), change initiatives (e.g., Kezar, 2013), and practitioner thinking and action (e.g., Duncheon & Muñoz, 2019) in K-12 and higher education. It has provided concepts to dissect the sensemaking process, including "equivocality," which is the co-existence of different interpretations of the same thing (Weick, 1979), and "labeling," which is the act of differentiating what is and is not the thing being made sense of (Weick et al., 2005). It has drawn attention to elements such as "cues" that are extracted from the environment and that focus sensemaking; the influence of identity, belief structures, past experience, and social interactions on meaning-making; the construction of plausible, rather than accurate, narratives; and the idea that through sensemaking, people enact their social world (Weick, 1995). These elements are featured in Coburn's (2001) policy implementation study—one of the most cited education studies of the last two decades—which shows that implementation fidelity was challenged by the cues teachers extracted from the policy environment, their world views and practices, and the direction and tenor of collective discussions. But while generative for investigating meaning-making, Weick's (1995) framework offers less guidance on how some individuals are able to advance their version of events and how certain narratives gain legitimacy over others (Helms Mills et al., 2010). Research suggests that contests over meaning and meaning-making in organizations are routine, thus beckoning questions about power and politics (Zilber, 2008).

Accounting for Power and Politics in Organizational Sensemaking

To address these lacunae, organization scholars have investigated how forces outside and inside organizations shape sensemaking, troubling Weick's (1995) foundational assumptions (e.g., Helms Mills et al., 2010; Ibarra & Andrews, 1993; Mikkelsen & Wåhlin, 2020; O'Leary & Chia, 2007; Schildt et al., 2020; Vallas & Hill 2012; Zilber, 2002; 2008). Their work counters the idea that sensemaking "unfold[s] in an improbably hyper-agentic environment" (Maitlis & Christianson 2014, p. 98). To Weick (1995), the environment is more-or-less an open source of shocks to trigger, and cues to direct, sensemaking; however, for these scholars, environmental elements constrain how people make meaning, what organizational shocks trigger sensemaking, and which cues are perceived as consequential (Helms Mills et al., 2010; Mikkelsen & Wåhlin, 2020). They take seriously the sociological insight that certain ideologies and logics—called "knowledge structures" (Schildt et al., 2020), "epistemes" (O'Leary & Chia, 2007), "formative contexts" (Helms Mills et al., 2010), or "worldviews" (Zilber, 2002)—govern what is deemed (un)imaginable, (il)legitimate, (ir)rational, and (un)acceptable in a society. For example, egalitarianism (i.e., desire for more equal distribution of resources) and libertarianism (i.e., desire for maximal freedom and autonomy from the state) are two ideologies that have shaped how Americans make meaning of and enact economic, political, and social equality (e.g., should equality be about group or individual opportunity?) (Verba & Orren, 1985). These scholars acknowledge New Institutionalism's central idea that organizations are nested in "fields" that bound what organizational actors deem legitimate (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Thus, not only is the environment regulated by societal-level ideologies but also by field-level norms and "rules of the game" (Scott, 2008). For example, the "foundational ideology" of community colleges as open-access institutions (Baber et al., 2019) likely impacts how community college actors interpret ideas like equality, opportunity, and equity.

Besides occurring in a "hyper-agentic environment," Weick (1995) suggests that organizational sensemaking is a mostly democratic affair where people are equally able to voice their perspective, and that the movement from equivocality to labeling to meaning proceeds organically and smoothly (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). As a social process, Weick (1995) underscores how sensemaking proceeds through interaction and language but underplays how an organization's power structure impacts who has opportunities and influence to make and give sense. Since organizations are often hierarchical, certain actors hold authority based on their formal positions, for example, leaders like school principals and college presidents (Coburn, 2005), and/or based on their informal influence, such as a colleague from whom many seek advice (Ibarra & Andrews, 1993; Vallas & Hill, 2012). Seen as legitimate sources of knowledge and expertise, they typically have more opportunity to give sense (Ibarra & Andrews, 1993; Schildt et al., 2020); control the boundaries of social interactions, especially in formal gatherings like meetings; and advance what counts as (il)legitimate input (Mikkelsen & Wåhlin, 2020; Vallas & Hill, 2012). Coburn (2005) shows, for example, that school principals mitigated teachers' access to sensemaking cues and drew on their own understanding to establish an overarching frame for teacher interpretation.

Power within an organization is also vested in how an organization sees itself and does its work (Helms Mills et al., 2010; Schildt et al., 2020). According to Weick (1995), sensemaking is filtered through who an individual or organization believes they are, and through sensemaking, identities are (re)constructed. Identity and identity construction, however, are tethered to power, with some identities dominating the sensemaking process. Preserving dominant identities and guarding against identity threats can determine what becomes meaningful and course meaning-making towards identity-affirming conceptions (Schildt et al., 2020). Relatedly, organizational rules, which define what actors think and do, help maintain organizational identity, culture, structure, and routines (Mills & Murgatroyd, 1991). Organizational rules bound sensemaking by dictating and socializing people towards meanings and actions that are (in)appropriate and (il)legitimate (Helms Mills et al., 2010). For example, an organization whose identity and rules are oriented towards advancing student opportunity can render suspect issues not deemed student-related such as faculty work conditions.

Finally, sensemaking outcomes in Weick's (1995) formulation are shared, plausible (i.e., not necessarily accurate) meanings that are functional enough to guide action. Mikkelsen and Wåhlin (2020), however, not only found that sensemaking may not result in a single meaning, but that what appeared to be shared was in fact the "dominant" meaning that was advanced by those in authority and that aligned with the organization's identity and rules. Alongside the dominant meaning were "hidden" and "forbidden" meanings unknown to leaders. While hidden meanings were shared relatively freely, forbidden meanings were wrapped in secrecy and taboo.

In sum, scholars who center power and politics in sensemaking have made issues of (il)legitimacy, conflict, contradiction, and control crucial for studies on "the quest for meaning" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). To date, their insights have been largely confined to the management scholarship with few extensions to education. This is not to say that education scholars have ignored power; rather, power is implicit in analyses (e.g., Coburn, 2001; 2005). My aim in this article is to demonstrate how and why focusing on power and politics in educational research matters, using meaning-making about "equity" as a case study. While a longstanding concern, in recent years, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers have become more explicit in their use of the word "equity" often without clear definition (Anderson, 2012). Equity, however, can mean different things (Stone, 2012), making it high in "interpretive viability": on the one hand, it is easily recognizable; on the other hand, it is ambiguous enough that people can "eclectically select those elements that appeal to them, or that they interpret as [its] core idea, or that they opportunistically select as suitable for their own purposes" (Benders & Van Veen 2001, p. 37).

This inquiry stems from a larger case study of Los Robles College (pseudonym), a community college, in which I used Weick's (1995) framework to examine how the meaning of equity was constructed (Ching, under review). Consistent with Weick's assertions, equity moved from a word to which multiple meanings were attached, to a shared idea that felt and sounded right to many at Los Robles. This finding is the point of departure for my analysis here, where I "re-read" the data through a power and politics lens. To situate this analysis, I first discuss equity's varied conceptions to showcase its interpretive viability. I then describe the original study's data collection, which was guided by Weick's framework, and this paper's analytic methods, which is informed by power and politics insights. (See Table 1 for a summary.) My findings highlight how college leaders enabled and constrained meaning-making, how hidden meanings cut against the dominant construction, and how the institutional environment bounded the arena of possible meanings. Together, they showcase how layering on a power and politics analysis complicates the story of meaning-making, offering an arguably fuller narrative of "the quest for meaning."

Table 1: *Traditional Sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and Power in Sensemaking Insights with Empirical Applications*

Traditional Sensemaking Insights, Data Collection Application	Power in Sensemaking Insights, Data Analysis Application
People's interaction with their environment shapes how sensemaking proceeds. The environment is a source of "organizational shocks" that trigger, and cues that focus, sensemaking. Interview Questions • What informs your thinking about "equity"? Observation Prompts • What do people attribute the focus on equity to? • What do people refer to when they speak about equity?	Organizations are nested in environments where dominant logics direct what people understand as acceptable. Sensemaking does not take place in a "hyper-agentic environment"; rather, people find some environmental elements legitimate, and others illegitimate, for sensemaking. Analytic Questions • What world views underlie the meanings of equity people express? • How do particular world views constrain and enable sensemaking? • What is the legitimate universe of cues? What in the environment shapes which cues are recognized?
Organizations enter a state of equivocality when sensemaking is triggered. Equivocality creates ambiguity and reducing it is a key purpose of sensemaking. This occurs socially, through interaction and words and metaphors used to label and categorize what something is or is not. Interview Questions • How is equity discussed? • Where is equity discussed? • Who is involved in these discussions? • How does your understanding of "equity" influence interactions with colleagues? Observation Prompts • Observe meetings, events, etc. where equity is likely discussed. • Who attends meetings? • How do actors interact? • What words/language do they use to talk about equity?	Sensemaking is not a democratic affair because of organizational hierarchies. Those in positions of formal or informal power have more opportunities to make and give sense, more authority to control the boundaries of social interactions, and are more likely to be seen as legitimate knowledge sources. Analytic Questions • Who are central actors vis-à-vis equity? Based on formal, informal position? • Who is a legitimate source of equity knowledge and expertise? • Who has close, peripheral proximity to central actors? • Who has authority, opportunity to give sense? • Who is (not) allowed into dedicated sensemaking opportunities about equity?

Organizational identity shapes sensemaking. Through sensemaking, this identity is (re)constructed. Interview Questions • Can you recall past work that attended to equity? • Are you aware that senior leaders are committed to making the college a leader in equity and excellence? Observation Prompts • Do people reference past experience when they talk about equity? Document Review • How is equity described? • Is / how is college history and identity associated?	With power vested in organizational identity and rules, sensemaking is constrained by the need to reaffirm dominant identities and the rules that control, constrain, and guide organizational functioning. Analytic Questions • What aspects of organizational identity constrain and enable sensemaking? • How is sensemaking tied to the preservation or change of organizational identity? • How do institutionalized beliefs about community colleges influence which equity meanings are taken up?
Sensemaking results in a plausible but not necessarily accurate meaning that is shared across an organization and is coherent and functional enough to guide action. Interview Questions • What do you think equity means for the college? • How do you think equity is realized?	Sensemaking can result in multiple meanings, which are dominant, hidden, and/or forbidden. Analytic Questions • What is the content of leaders' sense giving? • What alternative meanings are shared by organizational members? • What world views underlie the dominant, hidden, and forbidden meanings?

Equity's Interpretive Viability

Equity's interpretive viability stems from the multiple dimensions that characterize what it can be: who it targets, what it focuses on, and how it is pursued (Stone, 2012). Even as equity bears on many educational issues (Pasque et al., 2012), most scholarship—including that on community colleges, the empirical context for this paper—focuses on student experiences and outcomes (Baber et al., 2019; byrd, 2019). Within this scholarship, equity can be for all students, or students from specific racial / ethnic or socioeconomic (SES) groups (Guiton & Oakes, 1995). Access and participation (Dowd, 2007), achievement and completion (Lester, 2014), funding and resource allocation (Melguizo et al., 2017), within classroom and school experiences (Larnell, 2016), and policy and reform efforts (Ching et al., 2018) are routine equity foci.

How equity foci are addressed and whom equity is for depend on underlying logics that set equity "as a moral commitment" (Levin, 2010, p. 3). Most common are distributive approaches, which seek fairness in providing resources, goods, and opportunities (Stone, 2012) and typically turn on one of three logics: fair competition, utilitarianism, and egalitarianism (Guiton & Oakes, 1995; Howe, 1994). A fair competition logic aims to level the playing field for all students, with individual merit and ability the primary basis for distribution, and with attention to group characteristics such as race/ethnicity and SES minimized. Distribution grounded in utilitarianism is not concerned with individual benefit but with seeking the greatest good for the greatest number. The aphorism "rising tides lifts all boats" captures its essence: improving the environment (i.e., rising tides) improves the conditions for all (i.e., lifts all boats). A utilitarian logic is agnostic about whether resources go to the more or less advantaged as long as distribution maximizes benefits for all. Egalitarianism opposes meritocracy and maximum benefit as bases for fair distribution; while the former rewards natural talents for which individuals "deserve neither credit nor blame" (Howe, 1994, p. 29), the latter betrays individual rights in favor of societal benefit (DesJardins, 2002). An egalitarian logic demands intervention for those disadvantaged by factors beyond their control such as being racially minoritized in a white-dominant country or having a disability in an ableist society (Howe, 1994). Distribution is geared toward "the greatest benefit of the least advantaged" (Rawls, 1999, p. 266) such that they can achieve "some threshold level of performance" (Guiton & Oakes, 1995, p. 331).

Distributive approaches, regardless of logic, focus on achieving standard outcomes (e.g., completion) and raise few concerns about the education to which students have access. This is not the case with democratic and transformative equity logics, which are more justice-oriented and question who has the power to shape what education is for, which educational goods count, how it is practiced, and how differences between people are recognized and valued (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Education is value-laden in these two versions, the product of dominant race (white), gender (male, cis-gender, heteronormative), class (middle and upper), ability (ableism), religious (Christian), and epistemological (positivist) norms. Both work towards ensuring that minoritized students are "holders and creators of knowledge" (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 106). How they achieve this end, however, differs. Democratic equity seeks to create space for minoritized students to shape education in ways that matter for them. It asks faculty and staff to approach teaching and counseling as relational practices that nurture students' self-esteem and well-being, ideally resulting in a "willingness to reveal [their] essential self" (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 21). Transformative equity instead focuses on the system, seeking to change dominant norms and combat structural inequality, institutionalized discrimination, and "oppressive power relationships" (Bertrand et al., 2015, p. 5). Interrogating the foundations of organizational cultures and practices, examining the deleterious effects of the status quo on minoritized populations, and reconfiguring how things are done all fall under the umbrella of transformative equity (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015).

Equity is thus not one thing. Community colleges are one location where equity's varied meanings have long co-existed (Baber et al., 2019). As open access institutions that have widened opportunity and participation for anyone seeking higher education (Dowd, 2007), community colleges exemplify the fair competition logic of equity. At the same time, because community colleges are the main access point to higher education for most students of color and students from low SES backgrounds (Malcom-Piqueux, 2018), they also embody an egalitarian equity logic. And, in community colleges with especially diverse student populations, there could exist democratic and transformative equity logics that seek to honor the plurality of students' experience, embrace their ways of knowing, and create participatory and empowering educational environments (Rhoads & Valadez, 1996). How (dis)agreements around equity's meanings are negotiated at an organizational level are issues that educational scholars have not fully addressed to date. Such an inquiry is ripe for a sensemaking analysis that centers how a conception emerges as dominant, how factors within and outside an organization shape this outcome, and how underlying logics factor into meaning-making.

Methods

The data for this analysis come from a case study of meaning-making about equity at a community college in California, Los Robles College (pseudonym). I conducted fieldwork for the original study from August 2015 to August 2016. During this period, Los Robles was one of California's 113 community colleges, serving over 20,000 students annually. Located in a densely populated region, over half of the students were from racially minoritized backgrounds, over 40 percent received financial aid, and roughly a quarter were the first in their families to attend college. More than 1,000 full- and part-time faculty and roughly 150 staff members served these students. With a reputation as an academically rigorous, transfer-focused community college, Los Robles embraced an organizational identity of excellence and doing the best for itself and its students.

Following the case study tradition, I collected multiple sources of data (Stake, 1995) to develop a holistic picture of equity meaning-making at Los Robles: (a) interviews with practitioners (faculty, staff, administrators) to understand how equity was conceptualized and enacted; (b) observations of events to see how equity was framed and messaged to the campus community, and of other meetings (e.g., academic senate meetings) to see how equity was discussed collectively; and (c) documents to examine how equity was described in written form and to supplement my understanding of college context and history. I used Weick's (1995) sensemaking framework to guide data collection (see Table 1) and my original analysis.

The current analysis relied primarily on interviews, with observations and documents playing a supplemental role. I interviewed 62 practitioners (14 administrators, 39 instructors, 5 counselors, and 4 staff). In sampling practitioners, I aimed for variation in role type and involvement with equity work: those who were (a) involved in at least one college equity initiative; (b) not involved but expressed agreement with equity initiatives; and (c) not involved and expressed skepticism of efforts. Sampling on these dimensions increased the likelihood of capturing different perspectives about equity. My interview protocol included questions on roles, responsibilities, equity conceptions, and thoughts on equity efforts. Most interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. All participants agreed to be recorded and to have their interview transcribed. I wrote memos following interviews to record my impressions of, and ideas emerging from, the exchange.

To move from a traditional to a power and politics-centered analysis, I developed "analytic questions" based on the literature (see Table 1), which help parse out relevant data (Neumann & Pallas, 2015). I returned to the interview transcripts, looking for data that answered the questions. For example, in response to "Who is considered a legitimate source of equity knowledge and expertise?" I looked for people whom participants named as influential on their thinking about equity and why they thought these individuals were knowledgeable. The question, "What meanings of equity are discussed at the college and which are dominant, hidden, and forbidden?" allowed me to categorize equity conceptions that did not fully align with leaders' framing and to consider which logics underlie dominant, hidden, and forbidden meanings. I developed a case narrative that describes how power and politics shaped the construction of equity at Los Robles. I looked for data from observation field notes and documents that supported, nuanced, and/or pushed against main insights and themes. Finally, I compared this case narrative against the one I crafted using traditional sensemaking as a guide. This comparative analysis allowed me to surface interpretive tensions in the story of Los Robles' quest for equity's meaning, which manifested most clearly in (1) leaders' role, but also in (2) sensemaking outcomes and (3) the environment's influence.

Leaders: Necessary Triggers or Dominant Shapers of Meaning?

In 2014, state policymakers introduced a suite of student success and equity reforms in the California Community Colleges. One—the Student Equity Policy (SEP)—shifted the policy environment for equity and, in sensemaking language, was the "organizational shock" that interrupted normal activity and triggered people to ask, "what's going on" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 410). While many I spoke with said the SEP and the funding it provided were critical to equity becoming a focal point at Los Robles, they also acknowledged what senior leaders did to make equity part of campus life. According to one counselor, there "was a smaller group of voices having [the equity] conversation" before fall 2014; after, there was a noticeable increase in equity-related emails, workshops, and discussion. During my time at Los Robles, I too saw equity take center stage at large campus events. For example, at the fall 2015 convocation for full-time faculty and staff, the president made the case for an equity "imperative," the student services dean stated that "equity is truly everyone's business," and the equity dean called the over 300 people in attendance "equity practitioners." In the president's newsletters, I read blurbs on equity efforts like a workshop "to reflect and act on our equity work," a project on developing "change agents" who "examin[e] equity through the lens of students," and a staff equity retreat organized by the equity dean. And, in meetings, I heard the president and vice president for student services ask people to share experiences that reflect what equity is and is not to them.

Leaders instigating talk and action about equity was intentional, and for some, necessary. One administrator explained that Los Robles is a busy place and equity would not be a priority unless leaders demonstrate the value it holds for them, message its importance, and devote resources to advance student equity. Faculty and staff I interviewed noticed leaders' efforts to trigger attention to equity. To some, they were demonstrating "true leadership" (faculty) and asking the college to work on operationalizing equity and other core values (staff); to others, they were pushing equity because policymakers were investing considerable resources in, and holding institutions to account, for equity and student success (faculty). While opinions diverged, responses suggest that leaders created a campus environment where equity mattered.

Shaping Meaning through Talk and Interaction

Leaders did not formally establish one conception of equity to which all needed to align, and continually messaged that campus members can participate in equity efforts if they like and can define and enact equity on their own terms. However, a power and politics framing suggests that influence need not be direct nor heavy handed to impact sensemaking; rather, influence can manifest in who has opportunities to give sense, in what sensegivers communicate, and in how occasions for sensemaking are designed. Perhaps the clearest way Los Robles' leaders shaped meaning-making was through the multiple occasions and media—presentations, publications, correspondence, one-on-one and group interactions—they had to give sense about equity and to couple it with certain ideas. For example, during my fieldwork, I observed three annual events (two fall 2015 convocation events, president's cabinet retreat in spring 2016), two one-off events (staff equity retreat, planning and defining equity retreat), and one monthly meeting (equity and student success committee) that were entirely or partially dedicated to discussing equity. Senior administrators set the agenda for each event, organized the speakers, and facilitated these occasions for sensemaking and sensegiving about equity. Of these occasions, the convocation events were noteworthy because of the large number in attendance, and because they were the first major convenings where equity was on the agenda and leaders sketched their vision. It was during these events that leaders started to couple equity with a particular conception, despite assertions that people could develop their own understanding. Specifically, the president showed an image with two halves, both of which featured people of different heights standing on boxes behind a fence. On the left side, labeled "equality," each person was standing atop one box; on the right hand, labeled "equity," each person had the number of boxes they needed to see beyond the fence (field notes). The president remarked that equity is when the person who does not need a big to see over the fence gives their box to the person who needs it. This suggests an egalitarian conception premised on (re)distributing resources (represented by the box) so that all can achieve a shared goal (represented by each person's ability to see the other side of the fence).

"The boxes" appeared frequently in campus communications and meetings, and over time, became a part of campus members' equity talk. For example, at the planning and defining equity retreat five months after convocation, one person asked, "Which box do we give students? Students need different boxes in different orders. The problem is that the institution is determining the boxes" (field notes). A consequential sensemaking cue, a third of participants interviewed referenced it in response to my questions about what equity means to them and what they believe equity means at the college. One instructor suggested that the image's evocative power stemmed from its clear representation of "one of the most nebulous words that you can come up with." Two instructors drew "the boxes" as they explained their understanding of equity. Another said she "never really knew the definition" until she worked on an "equity report" and presentation that included "the boxes."

Besides "the boxes," the notion of "outcome inequity"—or in the language of the SEP, "disproportionate impact"—continually featured in meetings and administrator emails and reports. For instance, nestled in the president's remarks on "building a collective imperative for equity" at the full-time faculty convocation was an "equity dashboard" that showed which student groups were at or below equity for access, retention, and completion outcomes (field notes). The institutional researcher presented a similar dashboard at the staff equity retreat several months later. Administrators expressed the importance of data and outcomes analyses for embedding equity at the college. One said in an interview that it was data showing that Black male students have a six percent chance of graduating "that was a huge hit on the head to the campus" and that "we need to change those figures." Another administrator whom many regarded as a legitimate source of equity knowledge—even by skeptics of the college's approach—noted that "equity in outcomes" was core to her understanding and to the shared meaning she believed the college was constructing. "Putting data out there" about students' experience and having "some type of data discussion" to identify how to better support students was what this administrator saw as "the flavor and the focus as we move forward."

As leaders shaped the construction of equity through public expressions and actions, their influence also manifested in one-on-one interactions. According to one instructor, senior adminisrators "really believe in" equity and "they're letting people with creative ideas have resources to bring them to fruition." Participants spoke of how leaders, particularly the president and former vice president for student services (VPSS), helped them understand equity. The latter, for example, showed a staff member "the boxes" image, which helped her see equity as: "meeting people where they're at, and giving them the things that they need in order to achieve…their goals here at the college." Whereas the staff member had "no interest" in initiatives championed by the administration beforehand, working with the former VPSS on "issues related to student success and equity, and the learning and thinking around that…reinvigorated [her] interest…and ignited something in [her]."

Shaping Meaning Through Resource Allocation

"The boxes" and "equity in outcomes" ultimately converged at Los Robles, with "equity in outcomes" the end towards which leaders wanted the college to move, and giving boxes to and/or building better boxes for students a means of getting there. As one administrator explained, "doing equity…affects all student success but…you're targeting the students that need the most support 'cause they haven't had it getting here. So if we really are gonna gauge our success, then we need to look at this target group and make sure that we are moving the needle."

To "move the needle," leaders invested considerable resources—financial and otherwise—(a) to reform areas that disaggregated data analysis identified as problematic (e.g., assessment and placement, developmental and first-year English and math curricula), and (b) to institute new initiatives that they believed would advance equity (e.g., professional development, tutoring, summer bridge program, new staffing).

By funding actions that align equity with building better boxes to achieve equity in outcomes, leaders reinforced the import of this meaning for the college. Their imprint was also apparent in which better boxes they championed, a notable example of which was "acceleration." Several years prior to the SEP, a group of English faculty created an "accelerated course" that prepared students placed in developmental education (DE) for college English in one semester. This course addressed a problem—well documented in research—plaguing many students in community college assessed as "unprepared" for college work: placed in DE courses one or more levels "below college," many have experienced a lower likelihood of reaching college courses (Valentine et al., 2017). The faculty received little support from the college to expand the accelerated course offering until the administrator who spearheaded the college's *Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions* (HSI) grant application made the overrepresentation of Latinx/a/o and Black students in DE an equity problem the college needed to address, and curricular and pedagogical reform an equity solution. A curricular reform, acceleration entered the realm of legitimate equity actions. Leaders further cemented its position at the fall 2015 convocation when they gave the English instructor most associated with acceleration the opportunity to showcase it as "a high impact response to equity." Thus, through funding and public presentation, leaders turned acceleration into the kind of better box welcomed at Los Robles, an exemplar equity enactment.

Sensemaking Outcome: Shared or Contested Meanings?

Despite talk about "the boxes" and outcome (in)equity, by the end of the 2015-2016 academic year, I had not seen a statement explicitly articulating what equity was for the college. When I asked whether the college had one, a counselor answered: "Not in the sense that you could cut it out and put it out." Nonetheless, using traditional sensemaking, I found that meaning construction occurred as administrators, faculty, and staff associated equity with certain ideas and efforts, and more confidently labeled some things as (not) equity (Ching, under review). From these sensemaking acts, an organizational meaning coalesced around equity (a) "for our students";

(b) entailing the use of disaggregated data; (c) requiring action, notably, the redistribution and improvement of existing, and creation of new, resources to meet student needs and achieve equitable outcomes; and (d) demanding a student-centered and asset-based mindset that makes practitioners responsible for eliminating barriers to student success.

As noted, a power and politics frame complicates the idea that the reduction of equivocal inputs into one plausible understanding is an ideal sensemaking outcome; rather, this single meaning is likely one of several—the "dominant" rather than only meaning (Mikkelsen & Wåhlin, 2020). Although no one I interviewed or observed outright disputed the dominant equity meaning under construction, I detected a few murmurs about aspects of this meaning. For the most part, the contests were muted, shared with specific people in certain rooms. Yet, from a power and politics perspective, their existence is noteworthy and prompts questions about which meaning gains legitimacy and which are kept "hidden" or "forbidden" (Mikkelsen & Wåhlin, 2020). I feature two contests below, one that pushed against the dominant idea by which student equity should be achieved and a second that countered the dominant idea that students should be the only equity targets. While more explicit in the second, both demonstrate a desire for employee needs and work conditions to be considered part of Los Robles' equity narrative—a "hidden" meaning rarely featured in meetings and events I observed.

Contesting the Dominant Means of Pursuing Equity

"I'm sorry if I'm getting angry," an instructor said, voice raised. "But this, you touched a nerve here." This occurred about 50 minutes into the interview. For 15 minutes prior, he shared how achieving equity, defined as mitigating outcome inequity, was unrealistic given the conditions in which Los Robles specifically, and community colleges generally, operate. Questioning the idea of "the boxes" and the push to do more for students, he explained that his five-course workload each semester, each with a cap of 45, makes this untenable. "You wanna improve outcomes, you wanna improve equity? You want me to do whatever is necessary to outreach more to students who are traditionally not doing well? Reduce my workload." He recalled a time when he felt he was doing what is now being asked of the faculty. Then, he "demanded intense writing from students" and provided detailed feedback, which resulted in "significant improvement" in students' writing. He stopped, however, explaining, "I would never make it to a pension. I would've been exhausted. I would've burned out after five years. That's a workload issue."

Other instructors voiced similar concerns about workload. One said that the advice instructors received about equity was to have "more contact" with students, "more interpersonal interactions." If giving students more individualized attention was the strategy, she said that course caps need to be lowered. Yet, echoing others, she explained that faculty are simultaneously pressured to increase course caps and student enrollment. As an administrator from the district office said, "enrollment produces dollars" (field notes). This message was delivered at the 2015 faculty convocation event, prior to the president's remarks on equity. Indeed, the constant monitoring and push to grow the number of "full-time equivalent students" was a key concern since this is what determines the college's state funding. The instructor added, "I think that's when faculty get frustrated because you're getting pressured to do these things that are completely contradictory to each other, and then you're just like, 'Well, this is just, I don't know what to do.'"

In addition to workload reduction, the first instructor argued that student equity was impossible without more state monies given the economic circumstances from which many of Los Robles' students come.

> You wanna talk equity, you wanna help the types of students who are African American, Latino, come from disadvantaged backgrounds…They gotta work and attend school. They gotta raise their children while coming to school. Those are the people who come to community colleges, yet you're funding us at only 25% of which you fund the [University of California], and 50% of which you fund the [California State University]. Now, you tell me "where's the equity?" And you come to me in my classroom and say, "I gotta have greater equity?"

It was at this point that his anger reached its apex. A moment later, he added, "If you want to talk equity, go to Sacramento and demand that they fund us because we have the need here."

Contesting the Dominant Target of Equity

At Los Robles, equity's dominant meaning was associated with "our students." Even those who felt that the college's equity meaning was still "getting there" (counselor) were fairly certain that equity was about doing things to make the college better for students. There were, however, some instances where equity "for our students" was not the goal, but a means towards another. One instructor said, "We kinda use [student equity] as a weapon sometimes to get what we need" such as cleaner buildings. "This building is constantly dirty," she explained, "so how is that equitable to our students if the [district] chancellor sits in a clean office and they sit in filth?"

Equity was also a "weapon" for part-time faculty who make up 75 percent of Los Robles' faculty work force. Midway through the fall 2015 semester, posters advertising "campus equity week" appeared in buildings across the college. The posters stated: "Student Equity! ≠ Adjunctification and Poor Student Working Conditions!" and "Student Equity! = ***Fighting*** Adjunctification and Poor Student Working Conditions!" An adjunct instructor explained, "Equal pay for equal work is kind of a hard sell until it's connected to the student equity thing. Just on justice, people don't seem to be that interested in justice for the sake of justice." To expand who equity can and should be for, campus equity week organizers invoked a utilitarian logic for equity, arguing that since adjunct faculty are part of the environment for students, improving conditions for them should improve conditions for students. Taking a utilitarian approach underscores the politics of meaning construction and shows that even in community colleges where issues of opportunity and equity are longstanding concerns, "justice for the sake of justice" and equity for those who are not the dominant target population are not givens. To have a chance of being included in equity discussions, campus equity week organizers felt the need to attach adjunct faculty equity to student equity.

Despite these efforts, there was little traction. One administrator said the posters made "the hair on the back of my neck stand out because I feel like the implication is that we don't treat adjuncts with respect." One instructor found the posters "confusing" because they seemed to be about "doing something to improve student outcomes" but were in fact about "rais[ing] the incomes for adjuncts." He added, "I realized that when [adjunct instructors] say 'equity,' I have to say, 'Who are we talking about? The adjuncts or students?'" While I heard some support for better adjunct working conditions, and despite research suggesting a connection with student equity (Kezar & Maxey, 2013), adjunct faculty equity was not widely discussed, nor was it championed by those in positions of authority. In fact, leaders like the administrator quoted here seemed to dismiss the legitimacy of equity for adjunct faculty. This suggests that a dominant meaning is shaped not only by what is encouraged through talk, interaction, and resource allocation, but also by gatekeeping actions—by what is kept out of the conversation or delegitimized, especially by powerful actors.

Environment: Democratic Possibilities or Ideological Constraint?

While leaders were a major force in making equity about students, what made student equity the logical focus and an egalitarian approach the logical approach for Los Robles? Further, what made both not only cognizable, but appropriate and acceptable? Traditional and power and politics sensemaking frameworks both say the environment is consequential for sensemaking process and outcomes. In Weick's (1995) version, people's interaction with their environment constrains but also creates opportunities for sensemaking. For power and politics scholars, institutional forces in the environment bound what people can sense and ultimately judge as (il)legitimate (Helms Mills, 2003). The notion of institutional forces (i.e., ideologies, field-level norms, etc.) can help address why certain ideas about equity took hold and were deemed legitimate. At Los Robles, three were especially important: (1) the community college's institutional story and identity as the "gateway" to higher education for all (Dowd 2007); (2) the underlying egalitarian thrust of most current educational equity reforms (DesJardins, 2002); and (3) the neoliberal context in which community colleges operate (Baber et al., 2019).

Of all higher education institutions in the United States, community colleges provide access to higher education for the largest number and most diverse range of students (Malcom-Piqueux, 2018). This fact has been core to their institutional story, especially after World War II when President Truman's Commission on Higher Education positioned community colleges as the solution to expanding the country's college-educated population (Gilbert & Heller, 2013). Since then, scholars have called community colleges "democracy's college" (Griffith & Connor 1994) and the "great equalizer" (Weis, 1985). Their identity as opportunity-producing, democratic institutions drew many practitioners to work at Los Robles. In interviews, they explained that community colleges do not limit enrollment based on a narrow set of criteria like universities; rather, they serve students who need to attend part-time, who are older, or who need a second chance at higher education. As such, those working at community colleges are "always intensely concerned with giving everyone a chance at whatever it is this college can give them" (instructor). Echoing what policymakers and researchers have said, interviewees called community colleges "the revolution," the "only viable pathway to the middle class for students who were underserved in K-12" (instructor), and a means of realizing "the democratic vision for America" (instructor).

While they may have other motivations for working at Los Robles, that practitioners reflected the taken-for-granted institutional story and identity of community colleges suggests a direct connection between themselves and the normative view of what community colleges are supposed to be. They are, in Zilber's (2002) words, "carriers of institutional meaning" (p. 236). Hence, as they confront ideas like equity and seek to make sense of them, institutional meanings creep into their meaning-making and shape their interpretations. The step from student opportunity and diversity to student equity at Los Robles could thus be seen as logical. Indeed, following the remark that community colleges are "Ellis Island," the president said the question is "how to make Los Robles an equitable place for our students." In an institutional story where students are central and their opportunity is the pre-eminent goal, practitioners—especially faculty—are expected to put student needs above their own and to "organize their work around an ethic of care and vocation" (Gonzalez & Ayers 2018, p. 471). This expectation narrows equity so that it is applied primarily, even exclusively, to students. In turn, equity for non-students like adjunct faculty is delegitimized even when a utilitarian equity case can be made that ties their fate with students'. Moreover, broadening the equity conversation to include faculty, administrators, and staff not only cuts against the "organizational rules" (Mills & Murgatroyd, 1991) of community colleges, but threatens their identity as students-first organizations.

Although access, opportunity, and democracy remain foundational to community college's institutional story and identity, in the mid-2000s, policymakers and reformers began making student outcomes, mitigating outcome inequity, and coupling equity with student success and completion central to their agendas (Lester, 2014). It was in 2009 at Macomb Community College that President Obama announced the American Graduation Initiative and the goal of significantly increasing the number of graduates by 2020. National organizations like Achieving the Dream pushed community colleges to create a culture of evidence to improve student success, notably by using data to identify gaps in student progress and performance, and to develop action plans to address those gaps (Bragg & Durham, 2012). In California, the Student Success Act of 2012 reframed the direction of community colleges from "get[ting] more students" to "increase[ing] the percentage of success with those students" (counselor). And, by the late 2000s and early 2010s at Los Robles, some practitioners started to connect student outcomes with practice changes. Thus, when the SEP arrived in 2014, the field of community colleges was already moving towards a form of equity focused on students, data, eliminating barriers, and taking action to achieve equitable outcomes. This form more-or-less aligns with a distributive, and specifically egalitarian approach to distributive, equity: disaggregated data analysis to identify who is not experiencing success and to determine who should receive resources and supports so they can achieve a "level of performance" (Guiton & Oakes, 1995, p. 331). Furthermore, at a societal level, even though egalitarianism is not the sole basis for social, political, and economic equality in the United States, it is embraced by enough people to be part of the conversation (Verba & Orren, 1985).

Even as the policy push for using data and achieving greater student success, completion, and outcome equity points to an egalitarian equity logic, it also reflects the influence of neoliberalism on community colleges (Baber et al., 2019). Under neoliberalism, education is shaped by competition logics and market forces, designed to maximize economic return, and guided by efficiency and productivity goals. Funding for community colleges flows less from taxes and state appropriations and more from student tuition and fees, business, and industry. Individual / private benefits trump public good arguments for education and sideline efforts that strive for equity and justice on exclusively moral grounds. As the adjunct instructor said of adjunct faculty equity, "people don't seem to be that interested in justice for the sake of justice."

Taking the neoliberal context into account helps explain why lowering course caps, calling for more state funding, and improving working conditions for adjunct and full-time faculty were not seriously considered in equity discussions at Los Robles. These means of pursuing equity, even when a utilitarian argument can be made, are not palatable in a policy and funding environment where maximizing output (e.g., credentialed students) and outcomes (e.g., completion) on a shoestring budget is standard operating procedure. Adjunct faculty are desirable to colleges because they cost less, thus when they ask for better working conditions, it is "confusing" and can make "the hair on the back of [an administrator's] neck stand out." High course caps are equally appealing even at the expense of faculty burnout since "enrollment produces dollars"; reducing course caps would reduce tuition revenue that is much needed with less money coming from state appropriations. Ultimately, the realities of the neoliberal environment have rendered unacceptable equity approaches that dampen the economic returns to education and that veer away from students—a college's main commodity and consumer.

Community colleges exist in a complex institutional environment. According to Baber et al. (2019), this environment directly impacts their mission, goals, and outcomes. As such, it is not hard to imagine why many Los Robles practitioners saw cues related to egalitarian equity like "the boxes" as a logical equity expression and why they considered equity for non-students illegitimate. "The boxes" made sense not only because the image simplified equity's complexity but because egalitarian logics in the institutional environment legitimized this version. Adjunct faculty equity did not make sense because neoliberal pressures have rendered working conditions an illicit concern. Thus, even though the president invited faculty and staff to "decide what equity means," the possibilities for self-definition were limited. Of the 62 people I interviewed, only 6 expressed a view that aligned with transformative equity; in contrast, 49 asserted an egalitarian conception, which included 11 of the 12 administrators in my sample. The circulation of and leaders' emphasis on "the boxes" are plausible explanations for this outcome. Yet, zooming out to include the institutional environment, which those who center power and politics in sensemaking propose, I found that ideologies and logics operating in the field of community colleges legitimized egalitarian equity for students at Los Robles.

At Play in the Field of Sensemaking

In this paper, I sought to bring traditional and power and politics approaches to sensemaking into conversation to demonstrate the limitations of relying on the former for studying the ideational aspects of organizational life. My purpose stems from an observation that education researchers' tendency to use Weick's (1995) sensemaking framework has meant fewer explorations of power, politics, and struggles over meaning and meaning-making in K-12 schools, colleges, and universities. I argue that especially when it comes to ideas with high "interpretive viability" (Benders & Van Veen, 2001) like "equity," which elicit different meanings that point to different foci, targets, and enactments (Stone, 2012), questions about who and what shape meaning-making and how certain meanings gain legitimacy over others warrant serious analysis. Borrowing insights from organizational scholars who have troubled several of Weick's core assumptions—notably, sensemakers' hyper-agency to extract environmental cues, the democratic nature of the sensemaking process, and the formation of one versus multiple meanings (Helms Mills et al., 2010; Ibarra & Andrews, 1993; Mikkelsen & Wåhlin, 2020; O'Leary & Chia, 2007; Schildt et al. 2020; Vallas & Hill 2012; Zilber, 2002; 2008)—I identified three interpretive tensions in one community college's quest for equity's meaning.

In both traditional (e.g., Coburn, 2005) and power and politics (e.g., Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2015) approaches to sensemaking, organizational leaders are critical to meaning construction. But, while the former highlights their pragmatic role in drawing attention to and making "equity" a serious endeavor in a big, busy place like Los Robles, the latter shows how they acted as dominant shapers of meaning. Despite public assertions that Los Robles practitioners were free to define equity on their own terms, leaders played a big sensegiving role and for some practitioners, leaders like the president, vice president for student services, and equity dean were credible sources of equity knowledge. They used "the boxes" image, which was widely accepted, and which grounded the dominant equity meaning in an egalitarian logic. Thus, the target of equity was students who are "disproportionately impacted," the legitimate enactment was the (re)distribution and/or creation of resources and supports, and the goal was the elimination of outcome inequity. By championing and devoting resources toward efforts that fit this mold, leaders set the table for what is considered exemplar equity enactments. In sum, leaders bounded the arena for meaning-making and tied equity to a conception that made sense to them.

Yet, even as egalitarian equity dominated at Los Robles and was core to the plausible meaning guiding organizational action (Weick, 1995), a power and politics view notes that equivocal inputs can remain as groups within an organization adhere to alternative understandings (Mikkelsen & Wåhlin, 2020). At Los Robles, there were a few "hidden" meanings shared during interviews. Contests over the dominant means of pursuing student equity and whether students should be the only target highlight the dividing lines between those who more-or-less subscribe to the dominant meaning and those who do not, as well as point to how organizational rules and identity constrain meaning construction (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2015). Specifically, organizational rules related to student enrollment, course caps, faculty workload, and college funding were points of tension. Pressures to grow enrollment, have high course caps, teach five courses a semester, alongside the inequitable funding of community colleges relative to the four-year public systems of higher education, made the idea of giving students "boxes" seem unreasonable to some practitioners, even among those who in principle agreed with student equity.

Finally, whereas traditional sensemaking treats cues and other influences from the environment as equals within a universe of possibility, a power and politics analysis introduces the idea that dominant world views and field-specific norms and values shape the direction and outcomes of meaning-making (Scott, 2008; Zilber, 2002). Thus, as much as elements within Los Robles (e.g., leaders, rules) constrained meaning-making, also active were elements operating beyond the campus. Notably, community colleges' institutional story as higher education's "gateway" (Dowd, 2007), the distributive thrust of most educational equity policy and reform work (DesJardins, 2002), and neoliberal pressures (Baber et al., 2019) created an institutional environment in which an egalitarian logic towards equitable student outcomes was the legitimate expression of equity. As such, messages like "the boxes" and equity being for students were readily accepted, not only because leaders equated them with equity but because the institutional environment did too. Constraints from the institutional environment can also help explain why democratic and transformative equity logics did not garner the kind of attention and legitimacy at Los Robles as the egalitarian logic. Even though egalitarian equity requires choices about who and on what to focus, it does not have as a starting position the exclusion of any student on the basis of some group characteristic (e.g., race/ethnicity). This starting position is in line with community colleges' open access mission and identity as a "gateway" institution. Democratic and transformative equity, in contrast, seek to remake education for students who do not hold dominant identities or social positions. Focusing equity exclusively on minoritized students could feel unfair to those who occupy dominant identities and positions (e.g., white, cis-gender men), and antithetical to who community colleges are and what they are supposed to accomplish.

Understanding how power and politics impacts meaning-making is critical, particularly in complex organizations such as schools and colleges with constituent groups and stakeholders who have different agendas, hold different positions, harbor different beliefs, and work under different conditions—all of which impacts what they think and do. Even as leaders attempt to corral organizational members towards a unified, dominant vision, fissures in the form of hidden and perhaps forbidden meanings likely remain. A power and politics approach not only helps locate these fissures but helps unpack why they exist. Further, as researchers, policymakers, and practitioners continue to strive for "equity," it is important to recognize that what it is and how it is pursued are products of organizational (e.g., leaders with positional authority), field-level (e.g., institutional identity), and societal-level (e.g., egalitarianism) forces. Going beyond a traditional sensemaking approach to answer questions about power and politics—such as those that guided the analyses presented in this paper—sharpens focus on what enables, shapes, and constrains the quest for meaning, what is allowed to become meaningful and legitimate, and which meanings are deemed illegitimate and unacceptable.

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