

Who is Higher Education For?
A Critical Policy Analysis of the California Master Plan for Higher Education

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Executive Summary

The combination of mounting costs (and accompanying increases in student loan debt) and a growing distrust of American institutions has led many people to question whether a higher education is the appropriate choice for them. In this context, a critical analysis of the structure of California's system of public higher education is more timely than ever. Enacted in 1960, the Master Plan for Higher Education in California was heralded at the time as a game-changing innovation, a stroke of policymaking genius that brought an end to decades of conflict between the state's two separate four-year university systems (the University of California and the California State University), and inspired similar models in many other states. Broadly speaking, the Master Plan was intended to spell out the specific responsibilities and functions of each of California's three public "segments" (the aforementioned UC and CSU as well as the newer, open-access system of community colleges), clarifying where each segment would specialize and what types of students each segment would admit. One of the most prominent features of the Master Plan was its commitment to educational "access" - although the UC and CSU would maintain competitive admissions standards, the community colleges were open to all, and in theory, any student who performed well enough at community college could transfer to a UC or CSU and complete their university education there.

This paper employs a Critical Policy Analysis to consider whether the Master Plan, for over 60 years California's guiding framework for its higher education system, is indeed furthering the goal of expanding access to a higher education - or whether it was ever intended to. Utilizing a specific three-part toolkit within Critical Policy Analysis developed by scholar Stephen J. Ball, this paper analyzes the Master Plan both as a *policy text* (what the written documents say), as *policy discourse* (how it is invoked and utilized by those in power -

policymakers and higher education leaders), and its *policy effects* over the years. The paper concludes that, despite decades of rhetoric to the contrary, the Master Plan's focus on "differentiation of functions" between the UC, CSU, and community colleges has actually *reduced* access to higher education, by funneling students from underrepresented backgrounds (especially low-income students) to the lesser-funded community college system, where transferring to a four-year university is often easier said than done. Furthermore, attempts to expand any of the segments' functions - such as the addition of doctoral degrees in the CSU system or baccalaureate degrees at community colleges - have been blocked by those higher up in the educational hierarchy, who invoke the Master Plan's structure as a way to deny educational opportunities to more students. The paper concludes with implications both for future researchers and for policymakers as California considers a new "master plan" around career and vocational education in the coming years.

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Section I: Introduction

In an age where distrust of long-established institutions reigns, it is worth reevaluating whether policies ostensibly enacted in the public interest are, in fact, serving the people they are supposed to serve. The common national mythos has long portrayed education as a tool of opportunity and social mobility, the “great equalizer” that provides anyone who performs well enough the ability to improve their financial circumstances through the acquisition of knowledge and/or skills (Edsall, 2021). Nowhere has this been truer in California, where politicians, business leaders, and historians alike have touted our comprehensive public education system – from kindergarten through university – as a representation of “the California Dream,” portraying the Golden State as a land of opportunity where anyone can succeed through hard work and study.

In particular, California’s unique, three-tiered system of public higher education and its promise of open access, low cost, and the ability of anyone to pursue a bachelor’s degree have been characterized as “the envy and exemplar of higher education not only in other states but in nations around the world” (UC Office of the President, 2007). Yet, a recent survey showed a majority of Californians earning under \$60,000 as being “very worried” about their ability to afford a college education for their child (Baldassare, 2022). Furthermore, over the last decade, two of California’s higher education systems have begun to face declines in student enrollment – first at the community colleges, more recently at the California State University system – leading some observers to wonder whether many prospective students simply do not see higher education as accessible or worth the effort (Johnson & Perez, 2024; Campaign for College Opportunity, 2024).

For these reasons, California’s system of organizing and delineating the functions of its higher education segments – the University of California, the California State University, and the California Community Colleges – is worthy of a critical analysis. Specifically, this paper will consider the Master Plan for Higher Education, enacted in 1960 and to this day the guiding framework for each segment’s guiding functions and admissions standards, through a *Critical Policy Analysis* lens. To do so, this paper will utilize a three-part framework developed by scholar Stephen J. Ball (1993) to consider the implications of the Master Plan as a piece of text, how it is used in common policy discourse, and how its actual effects have played out over the years, focusing on one of the core elements of the Plan – the “differentiation of functions” between the three higher education systems. Using this framework, I argue that, contrary to the general consensus, the Master Plan has effectively served to *limit* access to higher education, by artificially constricting the types of degrees that can be offered, and by tracking many low-income and otherwise underrepresented students into underfunded community colleges.

The rest of this paper unfolds as follows. Section II provides an overview of the Master Plan itself, including the institutional forces most responsible for its development and promotion. Section III is a literature review summarizing previous criticism and critical analysis of the Master Plan. Section IV provides background on Critical Policy Analysis as a tool for researchers, including the three-part framework referenced above. Section V applies this framework to the Master Plan’s differentiation of functions provisions. Finally, Section VI concludes with a discussion of the significance and implications of this analysis for both researchers and policymakers, circling back to the essential question that the title of this paper asks: *Who is higher education for?*

Section II: Background and Overview of the Master Plan

Public higher education in California traces its roots to the state's early years; California's original 1849 Constitution called for the establishment of a state-owned university using the proceeds from the sale of federal or private lands. The federal Morrill Act of 1861, which established the idea of land-grant universities, provided just such an opportunity, leading to the founding of the University of California (UC) – originally in Oakland but soon moved to nearby Berkeley. Around the same time, a loose network of teachers' colleges (then called *normal schools*) was growing, first in the San Francisco Bay Area and then in Southern and Central California as those regions grew further. Finally, in the early 20th century, California became one of the nationwide leaders in establishing and growing two-year junior colleges. This history is not the focus of this paper but has been amply documented elsewhere (see Brint & Karabel, 1989; Douglass, 2000; Gerth, 2010; Stadtman, 1970). By the 1950s, this three-legged system was at a breaking point. California was rapidly growing and was projected to surpass New York as the most populous U.S. state by the early 1960s (Starr, 2009, p. 413). The elite UC, anchored by its flagship Berkeley campus, was world renowned for its advances in scientific research encompassing everything from nuclear energy to the agricultural sciences; but it could not keep up with growing demand for higher education in a state that added more residents in the 1940s alone than it had in its first seven decades as a state (Rarick, 2005, p. 66).

Leaders of the UC saw the growth of the California State Colleges (CSC) as a threat. Growing out of the former “normal schools,” the Legislature expanded the authority of the State Colleges to award bachelor's degrees in non-teaching fields in the 1930s.¹ Many individual

¹ In response to the 1930 report that initially recommended this expansion, the University of California accused its sister system of “losing sight of their proper functions and aspiring to become regional colleges offering courses of study parallel to those of the University” (Gerth, 2010, p. 33). Variations of this argument would be repeated – and still are – throughout California higher education for decades.

legislators went even further and authored bills creating new CSC campuses in their districts – between 1947 and 1958, seven new State Colleges were established by ad hoc legislation (Douglass, 2000, p. 350-51). In 1955, the total enrollment of the State Colleges (54,618) exceeded that of the University (43,619) for the first time (Douglass, 2000, p. 358).

Meanwhile, another type of higher education institution – the relatively new junior college, soon to be renamed *community college* – was quickly expanding in California, in large part because it was championed by the state’s university leaders. Originally established as subdivisions of high schools, junior colleges were intended to provide the first two years of higher education to students who could theoretically, if they met the admissions standards, transfer to the University for their final two years; they also provided vocational education, similar to that offered by trade schools, teaching skills relevant to specific careers and industries. Few states encouraged the development of junior colleges more than California, thanks to favorable conditions such as a growing high school aged population and strong support from California higher education leaders such as those at the UC and Stanford. By the end of the 1920s, California had 35 public two-year colleges, enrolling one out of every three junior college students nationwide (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Dozens more were created in the next three decades, with the junior colleges educating 69 percent of all public postsecondary students in California by 1960 (Douglass, 2000, p. 358).

California policymakers, even as they expanded the degree-granting authority and campuses of the State Colleges system, grew concerned in the 1940s and 1950s about a lack of coordination (and a perception of competition) between the UC and CSC. The elections of 1958 restored the Democrats to power in both the governorship and the Legislature for the first time in decades, leading to increased calls from some legislators to unify the three systems of higher

education under a single “superboard” (Douglass, 2010, p. 6). At the same time, several State College presidents were pursuing legislation that would grant them their own board of trustees as well as the authority to offer doctoral degrees in specified fields (Douglass, 2000, p. 254). In response, the new University of California president Clark Kerr engineered a policy compromise that attained near-mythic status almost immediately – the California Master Plan for Higher Education, a formalization of the structure, function, and intent of the tripartite public system comprising the University, the State Colleges, and the junior colleges.

The University would open its doors to the top one-eighth (12.5 percent) of graduating California high school seniors, would retain its role as the state’s research university, and command the sole authority to offer doctoral degrees (except those offered jointly with the CSC). The State Colleges would admit students from the top one-third (33.3 percent) of high school graduates and continue to focus on baccalaureate education with some master’s programs. The junior colleges would admit all students and serve students seeking vocational education, a two-year associate’s degree, or transfer to a university. Combined with the stated commitment that all three systems should remain tuition-free, these admissions standards allowed the Master Plan’s architects to boast of their commitment to *educational access* for all Californians, regardless of background – in theory, any student could attend a junior college and, if they did well enough in their first two years, earn a spot at a four-year university or state college to finish their bachelor’s degree (Douglass, 2000; Johnson, 2010).

The Master Plan, adopted by the California Legislature and signed into law by Governor Pat Brown in 1960, earned instantaneous national acclaim for balancing a commitment to opportunity for all with its cost constraints – with the three systems now able to specialize in their mandated roles resulting in savings to taxpayers and policymakers alike. National

publications hailed the success of the Master Plan’s architects, most notably UC President Kerr; California’s successful effort would be replicated in nearly two dozen states by the end of the decade (Douglass, 2000; Higgins, 2023; Rarick, 2005).

In the years since, the Master Plan has been institutionalized as a type of shorthand for exemplary higher education planning, noting its success at constraining costs while maintaining a commitment to access. This is best exemplified in the wave of publications that came out surrounding the Master Plan’s 50th anniversary in 2010, many of which are discussed in the next section. At that time, one of its most prominent scholars referred to the Master Plan as having attained “nearly mythic status... [like] some sort of biblical event” (Douglass, 2010, p. 3). It has also been the subject of considerable analysis and criticism, much of it focused on the inconsistency between the Master Plan’s stated goals and its real-world effects.

Section III: Criticism and Critical Analyses of the Master Plan

Despite its national acclaim and institutionalization within the policy landscape, the Master Plan has not been without its share of criticism. For example, in *Higher Education For All*, Andrew Stone Higgins (2023) recounts student protests against the structures created by the Master Plan through the 1960s. First, he chronicles student activism against the Master Plan’s technocratic vision of building what students called a “knowledge factory” for producing “bombs...and other war machines” (p. 37) to support the scientific and military superiority of the United States during the Cold War. Second, he chronicles student protest against the Master Plan’s reduction (from 10 percent to 2 percent) in the amount of students that the UC could admit in exception to its admissions standards. This policy, effectively an early form of affirmative action, was in theory race- and class-neutral, but in practice had been used to admit more students from underrepresented backgrounds. Reducing the exemption from 10 to 2 percent, student activists

argued, was thus a form of “de facto racial exclusion” (Higgins, 2023, p. 98). In this way, the Master Plan’s earliest critics were the very students it was supposed to serve.

Policymakers were critical of the Master Plan and its implementing institutions, the higher education systems, as well. The Plan’s full title had been *A Master Plan for Higher Education in California: 1960-1975*, and in anticipation of its forthcoming 15th anniversary, a joint committee of the Legislature undertook a years-long study that concluded in September 1973. The report emerging from that study was largely concerned with coordination (or, in its view, a lack thereof) between the higher education systems; one of its findings resulted in successful legislation to rename and overhaul the statewide higher education coordinating council that then existed. It also criticized both institutional leaders and policymakers for failing to uphold promises of equal access since the Master Plan, calling for the adoption of race-conscious admission policies and targeted financial supports for low-income students (California Legislature, 1973).

Critics of the Master Plan have largely focused on three issue areas: *governance* (coordination, planning, and goal-setting); *outcomes* (production of sufficient college graduates to fuel California’s workforce); and *power* (the ways in which the Master Plan reinforced the hierarchical status quo). Two nonpartisan advisory groups to the Legislature in have focused in their critiques on governance, with both the Legislative Analyst’s Office (LAO) and Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) suggesting that the Master Plan system does not allow the state to set clear, enforceable goals or to mandate cooperation between the three public higher education systems (Heiman, 2010; Johnson, 2010).² Both argue that a lack of clear goals – what

² Although their substantive criticisms are very similar, LAO and PPIC diverge on their policy recommendations for the Governor and Legislature. Johnson (PPIC) calls on the state to set enforceable goals for access, transfer, and completion; Heiman (LAO) argues for a reinvigorated or overhauled coordinating council, asserting that the then-

the state wants to get out of its higher education systems – and an inability to compel the systems to coordinate their efforts with one another have held California back from meeting the increasing workforce need for more baccalaureate degrees.

In that same vein, many Master Plan critics have focused largely on *outcomes* – the ability of California’s higher education systems under the Master Plan structure to produce a sufficient number of educated workers. Burdman (2009), for example, blames the policy itself: “the Master Plan focuses on the divisions among the systems but not on the educational needs of the state” (p. 31). Others blame those charged with implementing and overseeing it – the leaders of the higher education systems and the Governor and Legislature, respectively, highlighting the role of budget cuts and corresponding tuition increases over the years in reducing the output of graduates (Callan, 2009; Finney et al., 2014). Lastly, some scholars focus on the fact that the Master Plan’s admissions standards, by design, funnel many thousands of capable students into the lowest-funded system, the community colleges, where in theory they can navigate the (famously cumbersome) transfer process to seek a baccalaureate degree. In practice, however, research has consistently found major barriers within the transfer process itself, including, among others, insufficient counseling staff at community colleges, confusing and sometimes changing course requirements from four-year universities, and a misalignment between transfer expectations by both the UC and CSU systems (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2021; RP Group, 2017). This inequitable access to a four-year education inhibits the state’s ability to meet its need for educated workers (Boland et al., 2018; Geiser & Atkinson, 2010).

A third strand of criticism questions the role of *power* in developing and reinforcing the Plan’s structure, and the ways in which power dynamics effectively restrict the Plan’s promise of

current California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC) is not up to the task. In the end, neither recommendation was adopted, and policymakers defunded CPEC in 2011 as a cost-cutting measure (Warren, 2019).

access. Oxedine (2017) echoes a common theme of these analyses in claiming that “rather than being used to promote access and opportunity... the Master Plan [is] now being used to limit and avert access” to higher education (p. 7). Other critics, less focused on access but nonetheless aware of inherent power dynamics, show that the Master Plan’s primary effect was to reinforce the status quo hierarchy that was in place at the time; “the elite sought an ordered hierarchy of institutions, and the intent of their proposals was usually to protect the doctoral programs of the university; *the effect was to perpetuate the status quo*” (Wilson, 1974, p. 163). Douglass (2010) would expand at length upon this theory, arguing that the Master Plan “in the end... essentially strengthened the state’s existing higher education system” (p. 3). This focus on the role of power dynamics in crafting and enforcing policy is a central tenet of the type of analysis this paper applies to the Master Plan – Critical Policy Analysis.

While this scholarship has capably problematized California’s higher education governance structure and student outcomes, by and large most critics have not questioned the Master Plan itself. The underlying assumption of most criticism is that the Master Plan is a fundamentally sound structure, that its architects were acting in good faith to uphold both educational quality and educational access in California, and that its failures have mostly come as a result of poor implementation or oversight. Even Oxendine takes care to note that the Master Plan is “*now* being used to limit and avert access.” My contribution with this paper is to demonstrate that any criticism of the Master Plan’s impact must examine the Plan itself as the object of analysis. The question is not whether higher education has deviated from the Master Plan’s commitment to access, but whether that was ever really the goal in the first place.

Section IV: Critical Policy Analysis and Ball's Three-Part Framework

The field of Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) provides a useful lens through which to evaluate the policy effects of the California Master Plan. Emerging out of sociological studies of education in the 1970s, CPA examines the difference between the stated goals of education policy and their actual outcomes by focusing on power structures and the relations between dominance and subordination within society (Apple, 2019; Rata, 2014). It is the study not just of “whose values are represented in policy, but also how these values have become institutionalized” (Prunty, 1985, p. 136). Of course, any consideration of “whose values are represented in policy” must also include consideration of whose values are *not* represented - that is, who is excluded from the policy process – and this is a core concern of Critical Policy Analysis. It seeks to analyze not just how policies create “winners and losers” but the larger social effects of policy, often through an intersectional lens (Diem et al., 2014; Hanvinsky & Cormier, 2011).

CPA has been used to analyze a wide variety of educational policies and proposals across multiple levels of education and government. Reflecting its alignment with Critical Race Theory, many of these analyses have focused on race-based inequities either created or exacerbated by education policy, including in areas such as bilingual education, school integration, and community college transfer (Subtirelu et al., 2019; Diem et al., 2022; Chase et al., 2014).

Unsurprisingly, given the link between public funding priorities and educational outcomes, CPA often focuses on school funding, including the use of public funds to subsidize private schools that are not accountable to public policymakers (Diem & Brooks, 2022). CPA is not limited to American policy; critical analyses in recent years have addressed curriculum change in New Zealand (Rata, 2014), school funding policies in both Canada and Australia (Diem & Brooks,

2022), “inclusive education” in Wales (Knight & Crick, 2022), and vocational education reform in China (Liu & Hardy, 2021).

Ball (1993) proposes a three-part framework critically analyzing *policy as text* (the literal documents, such as the Master Plan itself, emerging from policy change); *policy as discourse* (the way in which policy is framed and invoked by those in power); and *policy effects* (the actual real-world impacts of policy change). When analyzing policy effects, Ball argues that critical analysts should not just consider “first order effects” of policy – direct outcomes such as changes to organizational structure or fee increases – but also what he calls “second order effects... the impact of these changes on patterns of social access and opportunity and social justice” (p. 51).

Cahill (2015) uses Ball’s framework to analyze the effects of education policy in Ireland, noting the glaring inconsistencies between *policy as text* – the Irish Constitution and subsequent government policy documents proclaiming a goal of equitable educational access for all – and its real-world *policy effects*. He asserts that policies such as Ireland’s 2005 Delivering Equality in Schools (DEIS) policy, focused on delivering targeted interventions to students from low-income backgrounds, in practice “serve to preserve the stable centre of middle class advantage and perpetuate the projection of cultural and social deficits onto the working class” (p. 308). Cahill situates Ireland’s educational reforms in the context of who was in power at the time and who they were crafted to benefit, concluding that targeted, small-scale interventions cannot overcome structural forces such as systemic poverty. Elnagar (2021) employs Ball’s framework to analyze the shift in international education policy in Canada over a period of several decades, concluding that the *effects* of neoliberalism (in this case, free-trade agreements, deregulation and privatization of public goods) caused Canadian education policy to drift away from a focus on education as a public good and more towards preparing students to enter the workforce.

Two recent analyses of U.S. educational policy apply a similar lens to inequities based not just in class but in race. Chase et al (2014), analyzing community college transfer policies in seven states (including California), find that even policies that claim to be “color blind” and seek to lift all boats, so to speak, in practice leave existing racial equity gaps in place. Specifically, they note that each of the seven states covered by the study has an official state goal of expanding educational access through the community college transfer function (a *policy text*). Although they do not address *policy discourse* specifically, they do note that the way the transfer function is characterized (as an equity-enhancing tool that provides access to four-year degrees) is often inconsistent with the actual *policy effects* of the community college transfer function, which serve to reduce opportunities and access for students of color and low-income students.

Similarly, Mansfield and Thachik (2016) look at the effects of *Closing the Gaps 2015*, a Texas initiative adopted in 2000 focused on outcomes and accountability from pre-K through university education, part of a growing policy movement known as “P-16” that aims for vertical integration of educational access from preschool through university education. They note that the *policy text* behind *Closing the Gaps* aims to narrow achievement gaps across student racial and class categories, and the *policy discourse* has focused on the future economic needs of the State of Texas, grounded in rhetoric about individual opportunity and “the American Dream” (p. 11). The *policy effects*, however, are limited due to *de facto* racial segregation and insufficient funding provided by the Legislature; the authors conclude that the *Closing the Gaps* initiative has failed to address “larger systemic inequities, such as the racial and economic segregation of students” (p. 3).

Despite the progress that has been made in employing CPA to better understand education policy, to date a framework as specific as Ball’s has not been used to study California

higher education policy. A careful review of the literature shows how frequently CPA has been used on international policies, such as those referenced above in Ireland and Canada; or on more recent educational initiatives such as *Closing the Gaps* in Texas. The remainder of this paper employs a Ball's three-part CPA approach to critically analyze California Master Plan. Focusing on one of the Master Plan's central elements – the differentiation of functions amongst the higher segments – this paper will demonstrate how the Master Plan is invoked by policymakers and education leaders to limit or restrict access to higher education, in contrast to the general (and, in my opinion, incorrect) consensus.

Section V: Critical Analysis of the Master Plan's "Differentiation of Functions"

As discussed in Section II, one of the driving forces behind the Master Plan was the perception that the two four-year university systems were inefficiently duplicating one another's functions, and/or competing for students. As early as 1930, University of California leaders insisted that the UC "needed protection from direct competition by other state-funded institutions," referring to the State Colleges system that they saw as a threat to the UC's enrollment and state funding (Douglass, 2000, p. 140). By the late 1950s, this tension had reached a breaking point, with the State Colleges seeking not only to offer doctoral degrees but to perform original research of their own, a function historically reserved for the UC alone. Citing the expenses associated with offering doctorates and performing research, UC President Kerr and others worried that the competition for state funds would drag down the quality of both universities (Stadtman, 1970, p. 393). Hence the Master Plan and its central "differentiation of functions" provision, which will be analyzed here through a CPA lens employing Ball's three-part framework.

“Differentiation of Functions”

As discussed in Section II, the Master Plan created an organizing framework for California’s three segments of public higher education, based around what the Master Plan’s architects saw as each segment’s core functions. The University of California, as the state’s elite public institution, would focus on research, graduate, and postgraduate (doctoral) degrees, as well as offering baccalaureate (undergraduate) education. The State Colleges, soon to be renamed the California State University, was to focus on teacher education and the baccalaureate; they could offer master’s degrees but any doctoral programs would have to be jointly offered with the UC. Lastly, the junior (soon to be *community*) colleges would maintain their focus on the first two years of undergraduate education, leading to an associate’s degree or transfer to a four-year university, as well as providing adult education and vocational/career training (Douglass, 2000; Starr, 2009). In theory, this division of responsibilities was to allow each segment to perform its “differentiated functions” as efficiently as possible (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 86). It is to this organizing principle of the Master Plan that the rest of this paper applies Ball’s three-part framework.

Policy as Text

Ball asserts that policy texts allow “different people [to]... *make claims to be able to do different things*” (p. 47). It is important to note that “the Master Plan” exists not as a single document but as several component parts. In addition to the report and recommendations prepared by the Master Plan Survey team and jointly approved by the State Board of Education and the UC Regents, many (though not all) of the Plan’s features and recommendations were embedded in California state law as the Donahoe Higher Education Act of 1960. Furthermore, the provision removing the State Colleges from the purview of the Board of Education and

granting them their own board of trustees was adopted as a constitutional amendment by voters in 1960 (Douglass, 2000, p. 308). Although the most common characterization of the Master Plan's differentiation of functions provision, summarized above, is that it required each segment to focus on a few specific academic areas and degree types, a close examination of the text itself indicates this is an oversimplification and arguably a mischaracterization: Appendix II of the Master Plan Report, for instance, explicitly authorizes the UC to offer teacher preparation programs, thus duplicating a key function of the State Colleges; it also allows UC to provide a vaguely defined "instruction in professional fields" as well as "broadly based instruction leading to the baccalaureate degrees" (Master Plan Survey Team, 1960, p. 209). Thus, the Master Plan does not so much provide for a "differentiation" of functions as it does for a hierarchy-based *limitation* of functions, in which the system with the most power and prestige (the UC) can effectively duplicate the functions of the two systems below it (the State Colleges and the junior colleges), but that those two systems are prohibited from duplicating many of the core functions of the UC.

How did this situation come about, and what does Ball's critical lens evaluating *policy as text* tell us about the power structures that led to this limitation of functions? It has been well documented in this section and others that UC leaders viewed the expanding State Colleges as a threat to their enrollment, their funding, and their prestige. At the same time (starting in roughly the 1920s), leaders of not just the UC but other prestigious four-year universities such as Stanford were also vocal advocates for the establishment of the junior college; they were not subtle about their intent for junior colleges to serve a weeding-out function. One such leader, the dean of the UC School of Education, publicly urged junior colleges to "prevent the 'wrong students' from attempting to transfer to the universities," and a colleague from Stanford wrote of

the negative consequences if every junior college student attempted to transfer “and prepare for professions which in most cases are already overcrowded and for which their talents and abilities in many cases do not fit them” (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 36).

Thus did the institution with the most power and prestige, the University of California, effectively seek to preserve its status and exclusivity by enshrining it in the text of the Master Plan. Just as Cahill (2015) used this framework to assert that Irish education policy is “used to protect class positions” (p. 306), multiple critical analyses of the Master Plan – addressed in Section III – have alleged that it was more designed to protect the existing hierarchy and status quo than to radically change anything. Applying power to Ball’s “make claims to be able to do different things” concept, therefore, it must be noted that the Master Plan as a policy text is also used to make claims about what certain actors, in this case higher education segments, may *not* do. Most notably, during the decades-long effort by the California State University (CSU) system to independently establish its own doctorate program, opponents and critics of this expansion (including, but not limited to, the UC’s leaders) cited the text of the Master Plan and its differentiation of functions provision as a reason for opposing the bill, without any regard for whether UC’s own programs might be duplicating those at the CSU (Hamlett, 2005; Senate Rules Committee, 2005). This overlaps with the way in which the Master Plan has been invoked in *policy discourse* to reinforce its hierarchical power structure, which is addressed below.

Policy as Discourse

Defenders of the status quo have, over the years, begun to refer to the Master Plan as a policy good unto itself, pointing less to the actual text and more to the mythologized division of responsibilities it created as something that must *inherently* be preserved. The architects of the Master Plan, called upon to address the State Colleges’ desire to offer an independent doctorate,

landed on an awkward compromise - the State Colleges and the UC could offer “joint” doctorates, issued by both institutions. Periodically in the decades to come, leaders of the CSU continued to push for the authority to independently offer the doctorate in education. When CSU chancellor Ann Reynolds proposed doctorate legislation in 1985-86, critics invoked the Master Plan in attacking the proposal; an editorial in the *Lodi News-Sentinel* urged the Legislature to “Preserve the successful Master Plan” in rejecting it, and the head of the state’s Postsecondary Education Commission lamented it as “the most significant departure from the Master Plan... in the past 25 years” (Kumar, 2023, p. 272). Twenty years later, the CSU finally won legislative approval to independently offer the doctorate degree in education (Ed.D.); further authorization for applied doctorates, largely in health related fields, soon followed (Gerth, 2010). Again, critics of the bill led by the UC invoked the Master Plan to argue against it; this time they were joined by legislative committee staff, who stated bluntly that “This bill conflicts with the Master Plan,” as if that were a reason to oppose the bill rather than a simple statement of fact (Hamlett, 2005).³ This time, Reed and the CSU were prepared, and had laid the groundwork for successful passage of the bill early; another legislative committee analysis of SB 724 lists nearly 80 combined education, business, and philanthropic leaders in support of the bill, including the statewide Chamber of Commerce and a number of local school districts and community colleges; only the UC and the Association of Independent California Colleges and Universities, representing private nonprofit colleges, are listed in opposition (Senate Rules Committee, 2005).⁴

³ This argument, expressed in the Assembly Higher Education Committee’s staff analysis of the bill, also ignores the fact that the Master Plan is codified in state law and thus can be changed by the Legislature.

⁴ Successful 2023 legislation further expanded this authority, granting CSU blanket authority to establish new “professional or applied” doctoral programs in fields not duplicative of those offered at UC; notably, though, the bill allows UC to block the establishment of any new such program that they deem duplicative. Unlike SB 724 in 2005, the UC did not oppose this bill (Assembly Bill 656, 2023; Powers, 2023; Ramirez, 2023).

A similar differentiation of function debate has played out more recently, this time with CSU in the position of invoking the Master Plan to oppose another system's expansion. By 2019, a total of 24 states had authorized their community college systems to offer baccalaureate degrees (Cuellar & Gándara, 2021; Skolnik, 2022, p. 738). Much like CSU's doctoral programs are limited to those of a "professional" nature, CCBs are often, but not always, required to be "applied" degrees in career and technical fields. CCB advocates have touted it as a way to provide equitable access and pathways into higher-paying careers for underrepresented students, much as CSU did when advocating for their doctoral degree authority (California Community College Baccalaureate Association, 2021; Weissman, 2021). In this case, it has been CSU resisting the lower segment's attempts to expand its mission, all the while invoking the Master Plan, with the CSU chancellor's office publicly opposing and resisting efforts by community college leaders to expand CCB programs both through regulations and through legislation (Echelmann, 2023; Powers, 2024).

In 2014, after multiple failed attempts in prior legislative sessions, Senator Marty Block was successful in passing Senate Bill 850, allowing a small number of California community colleges to offer the CCB on a pilot basis. As with SB 724 authorizing the independently awarded doctorate at CSU a decade earlier, a committee staff analysis of SB 850 urged legislators to proceed with caution, asking whether this "broad departure from... the Master Plan" was "too much too soon" (Chavira, 2014). Similar rhetoric, insisting upon the Master Plan as a policy good unto itself, was deployed against successful 2021 legislation that made the California CCB pilot program permanent, authorizing the establishment of up to 30 new community college bachelor's degrees per year statewide; the CSU invoked the Master Plan structure in a high-profile political conflict over a proposed bachelor's degree in applied fire

management at a rural Northern California community college (Assembly Bill 927, 2021; Echelman, 2023; Powers, 2021).

These examples – of higher education systems, legislators and staff, and the media all invoking the Master Plan’s structure and differentiation (or hierarchy-based limitation) of functions to argue against a system lower in the hierarchy being allowed to expand its degrees – illustrate Ball’s concept of *policy as discourse*. As Cahill summarizes it, “policy is... infused with the ideologies and grand narratives of both the constructors and consumers of policy” (2016, p. 306). Hence the notion of the Master Plan structure as sacrosanct, something that must be upheld at all costs, a good unto itself; it is what Ball calls the “dominant” discourse, one of the “regimes of truth” (p. 50).

Policy Effects

What has all this meant in the real world, particularly for underrepresented students (students of color, low-income students, the first in their family to attend college, etc.) attending California institutions of higher education? This is where the final element of Ball’s framework, analyzing real-world *policy effects* through a critical lens, comes into play. As previously noted, the Master Plan’s differentiation of functions among the three segments was exclusionary *by design*; university leaders starting in the early 1900s argued for the establishment of junior colleges in large part to weed out less qualified students and discourage them from continuing their education after the second year (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Many of these same leaders saw the growth of a second publicly funded four-year system, the State Colleges, as a threat to their enrollment, their funding, and their prestige (Gerth, 2010). And, although the issue likely would have been forced by the Legislature anyway, it was UC President Clark Kerr that formally initiated the process of creating the Master Plan Survey team in 1959, as he “hoped to formalize

and limit the role of the state colleges, possibly in the state constitution” (Douglass, 2000, p. 257). Understanding that power dynamic is essential to critically analyzing the effects of the Master Plan on the students California’s public institutions of higher education are ostensibly designed to serve. As to the Master Plan’s promise that, in theory, any qualified student can attend a community college than transfer to a four-year university, multiple studies and policy efforts over the years have identified barriers within the transfer process itself, including, among others, insufficient counseling staff at community colleges, confusing and sometimes changing course requirements from four-year universities, and a misalignment between transfer expectations by both the UC and CSU systems (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2021; RP Group, 2017).

Ball conceptualizes a critical analysis of policy effects in part by considering it through two lenses: first order effects (“changes in practice or structure”) and second order effects (“the impact of those changes on patterns of social access and opportunity and social justice”) (p. 51). As it relates to the Master Plan, the first order effects are immediately evident in not just its differentiation of functions between the three segments, but between the various admissions standards each segment was expected to follow – aka, *who each segment was intended to serve*. By limiting UC admissions to the top one-eighth of graduating high school seniors and CSC admissions to the top one-third, the Master Plan proposed to divert some 50,000 students otherwise bound for one of the two four-year systems to a junior college instead (Brint & Karabel, 1989, pp. 86-87). The Master Plan report explicitly endorsed this form of “tracking” students perceived as inferior into the lesser-funded, open-access junior colleges: the UC and CSC “have a heavy obligation to the state to restrict the privilege of entering and remaining to those who are well above average”; the junior colleges’ role was thus to “guarantee that

taxpayers' money is not wasted on individuals who lack capacity or the will to succeed in their studies" (Master Plan Survey Team, 1960, p. 66).

Thus, the first order effect of the Master Plan structure was to track thousands of students who might otherwise have applied to attend UC or CSC as freshmen into the lesser-funded, open-access junior colleges. The second order effect was, in practice, to reinforce the class-based structure of the public four-year systems, particularly the UC. According to data summarized by Brint & Karabel (1989), about 44 percent of junior college students in 1964 came from families earning less than the median income; the comparable figures for the State Colleges and UC were 31 percent and 23 percent, respectively (p. 89). Despite the Master Plan's stated intent (*policy text*) that, in theory, any student should be able to access a four-year university if they start at a junior college and do well enough, the Plan in reality "tightened and further institutionalized the three-tiered tracking structure already in place" (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 87). Arguably, thus, the *policy effect* of the Master Plan was to create a "separate but equal" system of access to higher education, where white students and students from higher-income families were more likely to have direct access to the prestigious UC than students of color and low-income students; six decades on, Latino and African-American students remain significantly underrepresented at the UC compared to community colleges (Johnson et al., 2023).

This consideration of first order and second order policy effects extends to the differentiation of functions provision, which is at the center of this paper's analysis. As to the first order policy effects – limiting the scope and types of degrees that the CSU and community colleges can offer – are self-evident, the second order effects have profound equity implications for higher education. It has been found for many years, for example, that workers with at least a baccalaureate degree, on average, earn more per year than those with a high school diploma or

less – about \$21,300 more as of 2014. Baccalaureate degree holders are also about 5 points more likely to be employed full-time (Baum, 2014). It stands to reason, then, that denying community colleges the authority to award baccalaureate degrees denies this future earnings potential to students most likely to attend community colleges – namely, students of color, students from an immigrant background, first-generation college students, English language learners, and others typically considered underrepresented. This income disparity, combined with the well-documented structural barriers inhibiting students from taking advantage of the transfer function (discussed earlier), make it clear that the actual, real-world policy effect of the Master Plan’s “differentiation of functions” has been to deny access to educational opportunities and additional income to students already in the most vulnerable and underrepresented demographics.

Section VI: Discussion and Conclusion

In summary, despite decades of accolades and acclaim praising it for allegedly expanding access to higher education, a critical analysis of the California Master Plan for Higher Education indicates that there are underlying issues of power and inequity that have been overlooked for many years – and that, indeed, were baked into the Plan’s very foundations. Critical Policy Analysis allows us to examine these questions of power and hierarchy to consider who “wins” and who “loses” from a given policy. Ball’s three-part CPA framework is useful here, allowing us to critically examine the Master Plan as a policy text, as policy discourse, and as its cumulative policy effects. This paper has shown that the *policy text* of the Master Plan, drafted largely by those who wanted to preserve the status quo hierarchy, was not really about “differentiating” functions among the three public higher education systems, but about limiting the functions that those segments below the University of California could perform. The way in which this argument has been invoked as *policy discourse* over the years has been to deny both

the California State University and the California Community Colleges the ability to offer degrees to a population of students that might not otherwise be able to access them, allowing defenders of the status quo to essentially claim the Master Plan as sacrosanct and an automatic good unto itself. Lastly, the *policy effects* lens has shown that these exclusionary limitations have limited access to certain types of degrees, and with them additional income and economic security, for students more likely to come from underrepresented and underserved backgrounds.

These findings are significant, not only because they dispel the common myth that the Master Plan was a tool of access and opportunity, but because they show how actors in power are able to craft policies that preserve the status quo, while portraying said policies as somehow being transformative or creating more opportunities. Furthermore, they demonstrate the staying power of such policies through discourse; the invocation of the Master Plan to block the ability of CSU to offer doctorate degrees and community colleges to offer baccalaureate degrees shows that it has become a form of “rationalized myth,” in which the differentiation/limitation of functions has become institutionalized to the point where this structure is viewed as the *only* legal, effective, or rational function for California higher education (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

There are clear implications of these findings, both for researchers and for policymakers. Researchers should employ a critical lens more often when retroactively considering the impact of major policy changes such as the Master Plan, rather than simply taking the architects of such policies at their word; it is noteworthy that most of the analyses of the Master Plan on and around its 50th anniversary in 2010 evaluated aspects such as the coordination of higher education policy amongst the segments and the state’s need for more bachelor’s degrees in its workforce, but very few addressed issues of equity or access. Researchers should question institutionalized practice and discourse; as Young et al (2024) put it, critical policy analysis allows us to challenge

“notions like ‘it should be this way,’ ‘it has always been this way,’ or ‘there is no other way’” (p. 398). Policymakers, too, should think critically about power dynamics and who benefits from a given policy change before simply embracing it. As of the time of this writing, California Governor Gavin Newsom is preparing to release a new “Master Plan for Career Education,” focused on ensuring a properly educated and trained workforce for California’s changing economy. The governor and the Legislature should think about who will benefit from this plan, who is providing input into it, and whether it may – intentionally or not – create new inequities instead of addressing current ones. Once again, policymakers will have to grapple with the question of *Who is higher education in California really for?*

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