

Hear Us Out: When Colleges Talk About Tuition Increases

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ABSTRACT

In the decades that followed World War II, tuition at American colleges was well within the financial reach of most families. Since 1980, however, it has grown more expensive to attend both public and private colleges, as tuition has surged at a rate that has far outpaced inflation. At the same time, the economic and lifestyle disparities between those who earn four-year degrees and those who do not have reached record levels. As a result, students have to go to college in order to have a realistic shot at prosperity, but must borrow significantly in order to afford the cost of attendance. Colleges are aware that whenever the subject of increased tuition comes up, be it a proposed increase or an official one, it is a threat to their image and is likely to be viewed as offensive by students, who are already straining from the high cost of college. Thus, colleges employ a range of image restoration theory strategies at all phases of the conflict management life cycle, in order to restore, repair, and protect their images. While the rhetorical strategies taken by colleges may be given a great deal of thought by college spokespersons, they are not always strategically appropriate. This thesis uses mental accounting to extend image restoration theory, and offers rhetorical strategies that colleges may consider in order to minimize the threat to their images posed by increased tuition.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

For American families, sending their children to college is a far greater financial strain than it was a generation or two ago. Across the United States, college tuition has surged in recent decades, a trend that shows few signs of abating in the future. As a result, current and future college students and their families view the news of a tuition increase, or a potential increase, unfavorably. Colleges are aware of the threat that they face when the subject of tuition increases comes up, so they employ a range of rhetorical strategies to reduce the threat. This master's thesis classifies the rhetoric used by college spokespersons at the top-20 ranked American public universities when they talked about planned or potential tuition increases for three academic years. It then evaluates the appropriateness of these rhetorical choices, evaluating them based upon established marketing scholarship in order to determine if they are likely to make students view the news of a planned or proposed tuition increase news seem more fair.

Acknowledgements

From kindergarten through college, I was often disinterested in school.

I earned a bachelor's in 2001, and for a long time I was certain that was as far as I would ever go. When I took a job at Virginia Tech, I gave little thought to the idea of taking advantage of the university's tuition-waiver program.

In the summer of 2014, my wife Heather strongly suggested I test out this amazing benefit and take one graduate course. Although I was deeply skeptical, I grudgingly signed up for Communication Theory in the fall. That encouragement, and that decision, changed my life.

I am a better man today than I was four years ago, because of what was required of me to earn a master's degree. I was unaware that I was capable of such a thing, and it is only because of Heather that I was able to summon the level of discipline necessary to make it happen. I owe her more thanks than can possibly fit in a few sentences.

Entering a classroom for the first time in more than 13 years was a scary thing, and I was extremely fortunate that Dr. John Tedesco taught Communication Theory in fall 2014. Without having such a positive experience in that class, there is no guarantee that I would have continued in the master's program. His kindness played a big role in my decision to take Crisis Communication and Issue Management in spring 2017, which was where I wrote the paper that served as the genesis for this thesis.

From that initial class paper through today, Dr. Tedesco has never wavered in his support of me or this topic. I have never written anything approaching the scope of this thesis before, and it was a constant sense of assurance to know that he was in my corner and committed to my success. He continually pushed me to make this thesis better, because he truly believed in the value of this project. He's a great teacher, faculty member, host, and friend.

Dr. Beth Waggenpack has been a true ally since day one. She understood the challenges that faced someone with a full-time job who was a father of two – who became a father of three a year into the program – and helped me make use of summers to complete the program in four years. She's also the person who heard me gush about my interest in image restoration theory and tuition increases and said “Why don't you make that your thesis?”

I am proud that this thesis adds to the theory and offers a guide for college communicators. For this, I must credit Drs. Nneka Logan and Stephanie Smith, whose questions and feedback at my prospectus defense significantly honed my focus. They were the ones who made me realize what this project is really about – an offensive act that regularly takes place at colleges around the country, and which represents a significant threat to their image.

I'm not a Pamplin College of Business student, and Dr. Rajesh Bagchi had no reason to teach me about mental accounting and the work of Richard Thaler. But he did so anyway, providing me with essential resources, answering my questions, and teaching me about his fascinating field. His generosity of time and patience played an important role in this.

To my daughters, Carly, Zora, and Marlo, thank you for understanding all those times I needed to be left alone to work at the dining room table. The three of you and your mom always inspired me to keep going whenever I felt overwhelmed.

To my parents, Alyne Polikoff, George Kortlandt, and Pat Kortlandt, thank you for your support. To my brother Morgan, thank you for finding me dozens of articles that I was having trouble accessing.

And to Albert Raboteau, thank you for being flexible with my schedule and covering for me all those times something came up at work while I was in class. I'm excited to read your thesis in a year.

Rich Polikoff

April 2018

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Heather. That I wrote a master's thesis is a testament to her unending faith in me. That I worked so hard on it reflects my desire to be the kind of husband she deserves to have.

She's the best.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	8
Method.....	33
Results.....	42
Discussion.....	54
Limitations.....	73
Future Research.....	75
Conclusion.....	77
References.....	78

List of Figures

Figure 1: College tuition as a share of median family income	2
Figure 2: College tuition described as a crisis	4
Figure 3: Results of exploratory research	8

List of Tables

Table 1: 2018 U.S. News and World Report top 20 public colleges in the United States	35
Table 2: Number of stories about tuition increases or proposed increases	42
Table 3: Use of image restoration strategies in all stories (N = 107) about tuition increases or proposals	43
Table 4: Use of image restoration strategies in stories about tuition increases and stories about proposed tuition increases in college websites, student newspapers, and state capital newspapers	46
Table 5: Use of image restoration strategies in official university stories (n = 22) about tuition increases or proposals	47
Table 6: Use of image restoration strategies in student newspaper stories (n = 60) about tuition increases or proposals	48
Table 7: Use of image restoration strategies in state capital newspaper stories (n = 25) about tuition increases or proposals	49
Table 8: Use of rhetorical strategies that attempted to alter the reference price of the audience in stories about tuition increases or proposed increases (N = 107)	51
Table 9: Use of rhetorical strategies that attempted to alter the reference price of the audience in stories about tuition increases (n = 46)	52
Table 10: Use of rhetorical strategies that attempted to alter the reference price of the audience in stories about proposed tuition increases (n = 61)	52
Table 11: Use of appropriate image restoration strategies in stories about tuition increases in college websites, student newspapers, and state capital newspapers	67
Table 12: Use of appropriate image restoration strategies in stories about proposed tuition increases in college websites, student newspapers, and state capital newspapers	68

Introduction

Once upon a time, college education was affordable.

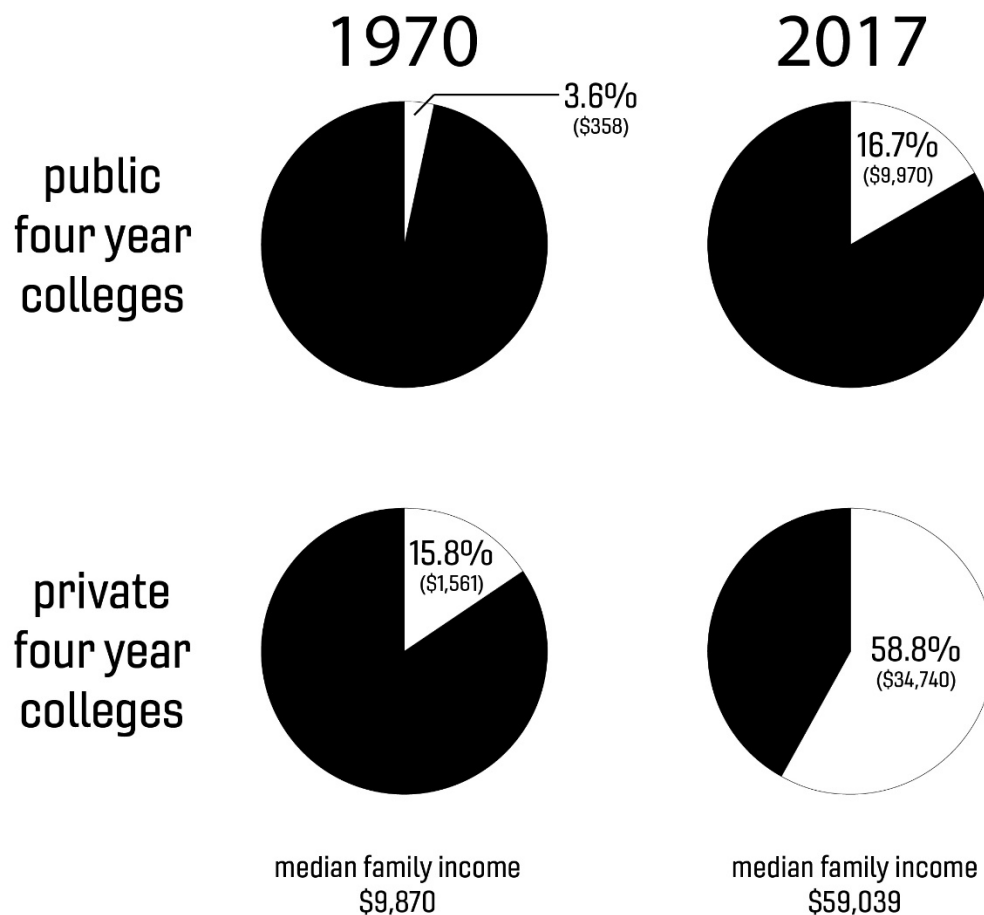
Over the past half-century, but in particular since the early 1980s, the cost of public and private college tuition has risen at a rate that has far outpaced inflation. In 1970, the average yearly tuition and required fees for private four-year colleges was \$1,561, and was \$358 for public, four-year colleges (Kirshstein, 2012). Had tuition kept pace strictly with inflation, those figures would be \$9,827 and \$2,254, respectively, in the fall in 2017 (U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.).

Most American families would savor those inflation-tied prices, because in reality, college tuition has not stayed remotely close to inflation. In the fall of 2017, the average published tuition and fees for private four-year colleges was \$34,740, while the average published in-state tuition and fees at public four-year colleges was \$9,970 (Trends in Higher Education, 2017).

Yet while these figures are substantial, they fail to illustrate the true transformation that has taken place. For this, it is necessary to compare college tuition to the median family household income in the United States. In 1970, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that the median family income in America was \$9,870; by 2017, the median family income was \$59,039. This means it is more than three times the burden for the median-earning American family to send their child to a private college today than it was in 1970, and more than four times the burden to send their child to a state college than it was in 1970.

As the charts below demonstrate (see Figure 1), for the median-earning American family, a private education has gone from a stretch to a near-impossibility, while an in-state education has gone from a small percentage of its income to a substantial hardship.

Figure 1: College tuition as a share of median family income



Adapted from “Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator,” by United States Census Bureau, n.d., and “Highlights: Trends in college pricing,” by Trends in Higher Education, n.d.

The higher cost of college tuition has resulted in substantial growth in the number of students who must borrow money in order to attend, and has significantly increased the size of their student loans. In turn, this has caused a nationwide explosion in student loan debt, which since 2003 has grown more than auto loan, credit card, and home equity loan debt combined (Rieder, 2017). The average Class of 2016 student had \$37,172 in student-loan debt, and nationwide, more than 44 million borrowers possess \$1.3 trillion in student loan debt (Friedman, 2017). This total is surging; in the first quarter of 1999, total student loan debt stood at just \$90

billion, which means that in just over 17 years, total student debt grew more than 14-fold (Indiviglio, 2011).

For students and their families, the irony of high college tuition is that a college degree has never been more necessary. For a large percentage of young people, it's simply no longer realistic to attain financial prosperity without at least a bachelor's degree—a change from the decades that followed the end of World War II, when the United States was flush with well-paying manufacturing jobs that did not require a college education (Selingo, 2017).

As manufacturing jobs continue to go away, so too do the economic and lifestyle possibilities available to those without a college degree. The earnings gap between college and high-school graduates is at a record level. College graduates earned 56 percent more than high-school graduates in 2015, which the Economic Policy Institute identified as the largest difference since it began collecting data in 1973 (Rugaber, 2017). College graduates are significantly more likely to have jobs, be married, own homes, and contribute to retirement plans than their counterparts with only high-school degrees. Simply put, a college degree is more important than ever—and at the same time, it becomes more financially challenging to attain a degree with each passing year.

The increasing cost of college tuition was not unreported in the past; the *New York Times* ran an article on February 19, 1981 titled “The \$10,000-a-year college education has arrived” (Johnston, 1981). The subject has become increasingly prominent in recent years, however, and the tone of stories has reflected a growing sense that high tuition, and its effects, are a crisis (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: College tuition described as a crisis.



Not Your Mother's College Affordability Crisis



GLOBE MAGAZINE

The college debt crisis is even worse than you think

We tell students they need a bachelor's degree to get ahead. But for too many, the numbers no longer add up.

FAMILY FINANCE • COLLEGE

Why the Student Loan Crisis Is Even Worse Than People Think

Adapted from “The Tuition Limit and the Coming Crisis of Higher Education,” by D. Nessmer and B. Whitener, 2018, *The New Inquiry*; “Is a Student Loan Crisis on the Horizon?” by B. Akers and M. Chingo, 2014, *The Brookings Institute*; “The College Debt Crisis is Even Worse Than You Think,” by N. Swidey, 2016, *Boston Globe Magazine*; “Why the Student Loan Crisis is Even Worse Than People Think,” by N. Kantrowitz, 2016, *Money*; and “Not Your Mother’s College Affordability Crisis,” by R. Kirshstein, 2012, *Delta Cost Project at American Institutes for Research*.

The high cost of college tuition has been a significant national issue for more than a decade. In 2005, under President George W. Bush, Education Secretary Margaret Spellings created a national commission that looked at college prices (Lederman, 2005). President Barack Obama proposed making community college free to most Americans (Davidson, 2015). Both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump raised the subject of college tuition during the 2016 Presidential campaign (Clinton, n.d.; Wasik, 2016).

Schools that have experienced the greatest fundraising success have been criticized for the management of their endowments—letting tuition continue to rise instead of using the endowment to either keep it low or increase scholarship aid (Matthews, 2015; Phillips 2015). As President, Trump signed the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017, which imposed an excise tax on colleges with large per-student endowments (Klein & Reeves, 2018).

High tuition is an issue that is starting to result in action by state governments. Florida Governor Rick Scott vetoed a three percent tuition increase that had already been approved for the state's colleges and universities in 2013 (Gabriel, 2013). Public colleges in Michigan have forfeited millions in bonus funding from the State of Michigan because their tuition increases were higher than those permitted in a 2012 law that sought to limit tuition increases (Barrett & Palmer, 2015).

For all colleges, tuition increases are an unpleasant fact of life, which open academic institutions to public criticism and serve as a source of pain for existing and future students. For public universities—which derive a significant source of their funding from state governments and thus are held accountable in ways that their private counterparts are not—the news of a tuition increase, and the continued shrinking of their affordability advantage, can be extremely painful. As a high-ranking university communicator once remarked to the author, “You can be announcing new buildings and new programs, but if tuition is going up, that’s the only thing anyone will talk about the next day.”

Price increases on products and services are viewed negatively by consumers (Ferguson & Ellen, 2013; Homburg, Hoyer, & Koschate, 2005; Muehlbacher, Kirchler, & Kunz, 2011; Thaler, 1985; Woisetschlager, Evanschitzky, & Holzmuller, 2008). Because of this, and because colleges recognize that high tuition is considered to be a crisis for students, they are aware that the news it may rise, or is rising, again is considered an offensive act, and represents a threat to their image. At all phases of the conflict management life cycle – the proactive phase, strategic phase, reactive phase, and recovery phase (Wilcox, Cameron, Reber, & Shin, 2013) – colleges use rhetoric that seeks to diminish this threat.

In the proactive phase, organizations scan the environment, plan for issues that may emerge, and attempt to inoculate audiences. Large public colleges have departments of enrollment management, which pay close attention to what other universities are doing in relation to affordability; departments of development, which raise funds for scholarships that defray the cost of attendance; departments of government relations, which lobby legislators for funding that can reduce the need for tuition increases; and departments of university relations, which anticipate the different audiences that may take offense to a tuition increase, and plan communication strategies accordingly.

In the strategic phase, which takes place when a proposal to raise tuition has been made, the college recognizes that the issue has now emerged and needs action by public relations professionals. Colleges employ communicators who are tasked with either offering comment to the public about proposed increases, or with providing talking points to high-ranking officials who are speaking on behalf of the university, such as the college's president. At this stage, colleges assess the risk to their image and attempt to position themselves favorably before the tuition increase is made official, and they are mindful of the audiences that may be offended.

In the reactive phase, which comes when news breaks that the tuition increase is official, college communicators implement the crisis communication plans they made during previous phases of the public relations spectrum. The goal of the college during the reactive phase is to make the tuition increase seem less offensive to different audiences and diminish the threat to their image, so that it can move on to other stories in which the college is able to portray itself in a more-positive light.

Finally, in the recovery phase, the college focuses on its reputation management and assesses its performance during the previous phases of the crisis. Individuals throughout the

college, in all the departments previously listed, observe the success or failure of their efforts to minimize tuition increases, their ability to position the college as an affordable option for existing and prospective students, and their management of the threat to their image that resulted from the recent tuition increase. These observations inform their actions during the following year, when the college's tuition is likely to increase again.

One of the most prominent public relations theories that is concerned with how organizations communicate during crises is image restoration theory. During all phases of the public relations spectrum, but in particular during the strategic and reactive phases, colleges employ a range of image restoration theory strategies when announcing that tuition is increasing, or that it may go up in the near future. They use these strategies in order to repair, restore, or protect their image.

This master's thesis applies image restoration theory to look at the rhetorical choices made by top-ranked public universities as they managed the bad news of a proposed or impending tuition increase for the 2015-2016, 2016-2017, and 2017-2018 academic years. It merges this theory with the marketing concepts of mental accounting and reference prices, in order to examine the appropriateness of colleges' rhetorical decisions. This is a new application of the theory, as no previous scholarship could be found that examines statements related to tuition increases in this manner.

The next section introduces mental accounting and image restoration theory, and concludes with research questions.

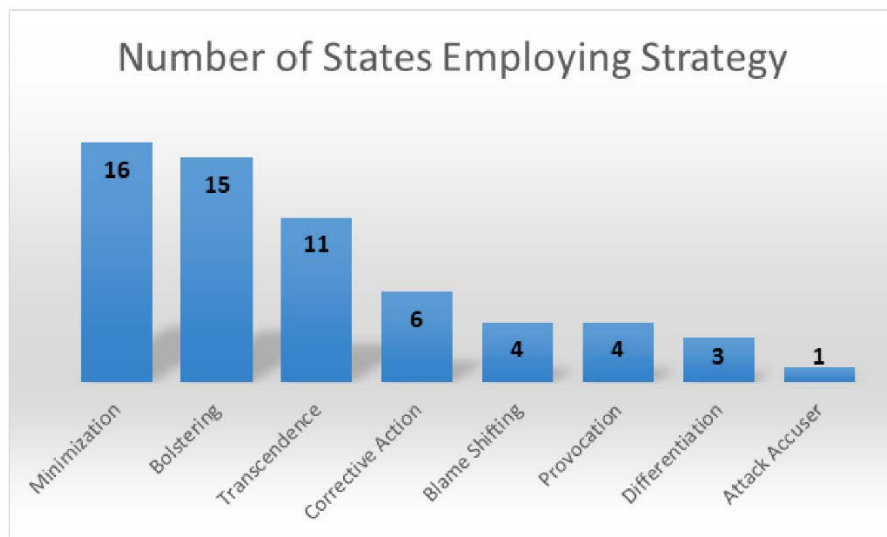
Literature Review

This thesis grew out of a class paper the author wrote for Crisis Communication and Issue Management, a master's level course at Virginia Tech, in the spring 2017 semester.

In that paper, the author sought to identify the image restoration strategies used by the largest public university in all 50 states when they announced tuition increases for the following years (Polikoff, 2017). Breaking news was defined as taking place in a university press release or story in a newspaper or television affiliate, and required a quote attributed to a high-ranking official with that university about the tuition change.

After eliminating states in which tuition remained the same or was reduced, as well as one state in which no statements could be found, 43 states were included in the analysis. The 43 colleges in these states employed a total of 60 strategies (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Results of exploratory research



Adapted from "Use of Image Restoration Theory by Colleges in Announcing Tuition Increases," by R. Polikoff, 2017, *Crisis Communication and Issues Management*, Virginia Tech.

The findings for this class paper serve as exploratory research for this thesis. Prior research on this subject was not as systematic as the research that took place in this thesis.

View of College as a Consumer Product

For Americans, the importance of a college degree has never been greater, transforming a bachelor's degree into a desirable consumer product (National Poll Report, 2015).

The earnings gap between college and high-school graduates has never been larger (Rugaber, 2017). Colleges are engaging in communicative strategies to emphasize their value to prospective students, promoting the job placement rates for their graduates (Rogers, 2013; Thomassen, 2015). This decision is in line with a 2015 report from the Robert Morris University Polling Institute, which included 1,003 online surveys of Americans over the age of 18, and found that 46.6% of respondents agreed with the statement "Job placement is the responsibility of colleges and universities" (National Poll Report, 2015, p. 9). Furthermore, 76.2% of respondents agreed with the statement "I would choose a college or recommend a college based on their ability to help secure a job rather than a 'brand name' college or university" (National Poll Report, 2015, p. 24).

Colleges are feeling pressure from state governments to focus on job placement. In a 2015 budget proposal, Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker attempted to alter the mission of the University of Wisconsin System, by inserting words that commanded the university to "meet the state's workforce needs," while removing words about the university's need to "search for truth" and "improve the human condition" (Rivard, 2015). Later that year, Florida governor Rick Scott announced a "Ready, Set, Work" challenge in which he tasked state-funded universities with achieving 100 percent job-placement rates for graduates not going on to graduate student within a year of receiving each university's two most-popular degrees (Postal, 2016).

Mental Accounting

People do not like paying more for things.

Price increases for consumer products and services elicit negative responses toward businesses by their customers (Homburg et al., 2005; Woisetschlager et al., 2008). This is true when the product is something that consumers have purchased in the past and are considering repurchasing, as well as with products that consumers have never purchased before but plan to buy for the first time (Ferguson & Ellen, 2013; Muehlbacher, et al., 2011; Thaler, 1985). Both of these conditions are relevant to tuition increases, as they represent a potential burden for students—whether the students are already attending a university and must pay more for the upcoming year in order to continue attending, or whether the students are thinking about enrolling in a college and now have to pay more than the price they observed during their search process.

The unpleasantness of price increases can be explained by the economic concept of mental accounting (Thaler, 1985). Introduced by American economist and behavior finance theorist Richard Thaler, mental accounting is a model of consumer behavior that explains how people make financial decisions and evaluate economic outcomes. Consumers get two forms of utility from a purchase: acquisition utility and transaction utility.

Acquisition utility.

Acquisition utility is based upon the value for the money—the value a consumer places on a good that is received, minus the financial outlay (Thaler, 1985; Urbany, Bearden, Kaicker, & Smith-de Borrero, 1997). It explains a common aspect of gift-giving, the practice of giving someone a luxury product or an unneeded good rather than a more-practical item of the same price. People are far more likely to give a \$40 box of chocolates than they are to buy the same

\$40 box for themselves; similarly, the person who receives the \$40 box of chocolates is likely to value it more than if they had received a bag of Hershey Kisses (or another low-priced chocolate) with a \$40 price tag on it. This is because it is nice to get nice things.

Another way to conceptualize this is the normally-frugal person who wants to buy clothing and acquires \$200 in one of two ways: either by earning it through a side job, or by receiving a \$200 gift card from their parents. The person who receives the gift card is more likely to go to a designer clothing store, is less likely to check that store's sales racks, and more likely to buy a single, high-priced article of clothing. The person who earns the \$200 is more likely to do the opposite—go to a less-expensive store, peruse the sales racks, and wind up with several items.

Consumers constantly factor in their perceived acquisition utility when making purchase decisions about goods and services, including college tuition. From this perspective, those who must pay, or are considering paying, higher college tuition, are considering what they are getting for that additional money. Students must perceive that the college has improved in identifiable ways, in order to make the higher tuition seem more acceptable.

Transaction utility.

Transaction utility evaluates a good based solely on the quality of the deal (Muehlbacher et al., 2011; Thaler, 1985). It is a powerful motivator on Black Friday, when consumers purchase big-screen TVs even though they already have working TVs at home, because the prices for the TVs are slashed far below their normal amounts.

But the deal does not mean the good is less expensive than usual; it just feels like a good buy. Consider the pricing for soft drinks at movie theaters, where a 32-ounce drink costs \$8, and a 44-ounce drink goes for \$8.50. Many consumers buy the larger drink based on the accurate

assessment that it is cheaper by the ounce, even though they do not need—or even want—that much Sprite. (The fact that a consumer would consider spending so much on a single soft drink also demonstrates transaction utility; a 24-pack of Sprite cans be purchased for less than \$8 at a grocery store, but consumers expect to pay high prices at movie theaters).

Consumers constantly factor in their perceived transaction utility when making purchase decisions about goods and services, including college tuition. From this perspective, those who must pay, or are considering paying, higher college tuition, are considering the new rate within the context of higher education. Students must know how the increase in tuition compares to previous increases at the college, or how the new, higher tuition compares with the tuition at other, comparable colleges.

The role of the reference price.

Transaction utility and acquisition utility often both factor in financial decisions (Muehlbacher et al., 2011; Thaler, 1985; Urbany et al., 1997). The weight of each in a decision can vary by the circumstances and the individual decision-maker, but what transaction utility and acquisition utility share in common is that they are based upon a reference price.

A reference price is what consumers think is an acceptable price for a product, and is what consumers compare against the actual price (Muehlbacher et al., 2011). The reference price can be internally formulated (based on a consumer's expectation of what a product should cost), externally given (based on a price tag that lists a manufacturer's suggested retail price), or a combination of the two.

To fully understand the concept of reference prices, it is necessary to understand the idea of fairness (Ferguson & Ellen, 2013). In Thaler's original work on mental accounting (1985), he posed a questionnaire that asked one group of people to list the maximum price they would be

willing to pay for a bottle of their favorite beer on a hot day if it was being purchased from a run-down grocery store, and another group of people to list their maximum price they would be willing to pay for a bottle of their favorite beer on a hot day if it was being purchased from a luxury hotel bar. The median price in the run-down grocery store version was \$1.50, while the median price in the luxury hotel version was \$2.65 – a 70 percent difference for the same brand of beer.

This means that just as people believe they should pay more for higher-quality goods, they also believe they should pay more for the same product in higher-quality circumstances. It is generally accepted that it should cost more to earn a bachelor's degree at Harvard University than the University of North Dakota – but there may be two reasons for this belief. Some people may believe that the education Harvard provides is superior, making it a product that is worth paying more for. Others may believe that the end result of both colleges, a bachelor's degree, is the same, but Harvard's superior status (to the degree-holder, potential employers, and potential spouses) is worth the higher price. Such people are paying for the name on the diploma.

Increasing reference prices.

In order to make tuition increases more palatable, colleges need to increase the reference price of existing and potential students and their families (Thaler, 1985). Customers react less negatively to price increases when they perceive them as being done for fair reasons (Homburg et al., 2005).

The first route to making the reasons for a price increase seem fair is to use a strategy that focuses on how the product—in this case, the college—has improved. This appeals to the perceived acquisition utility of those who must pay the higher tuition; it costs more, but the student is getting more (Urbany et al., 1997). The improvements that are spotlighted can be ones

that have taken place in the past year or recent years, but they can also be promises of future improvements, so long as those improvements are to take place in the near future, while the existing or prospective students are still attending the university; a promise to have a new engineering lab in 10 years is unmoving for students who are attending in the fall. Attributing responsibility for a price increase to a new service or a modification of the existing product has been shown to have a positive effect on customers' perceived utility of a product (Woisetchlager et al., 2008). Appeals of this nature would primarily employ a strategy of bolstering, which is explained later.

A second route to making price increases appear fair is to use a strategy that focuses on how the higher tuition is relatively inexpensive within the context of higher education generally, or in relation to comparable universities (Muehlbacher et al., 2011; Thaler, 1985; Woisetchlager et al., 2008). This appeals to the perceived transaction utility of those who must pay the higher tuition; the actual price is not so bad, and represents a deal in comparison to other universities. College can also spotlight scholarships or financial aid that includes specific numbers, in order to make the argument that the actual price paid by students and their families is less than the sticker price. This is akin to a retail store highlighting coupons that are available for its shoppers. Appeals of these natures would primarily employ strategies of minimization, differentiation, or compensation, which is explained later.

The mere use of one or all of these strategies does not mean that a college is seeking to affect a perceived reference price, as is detailed in the discussion. But, the rhetorical message strategies universities make regarding proposed tuition increases or actual increases influence the success and failure of their ability to manage the stages of the conflict life cycle.

Theoretical Lens

Image restoration theory outlines the range of rhetorical strategies available to those who seek to restore, repair, or protect their reputation (Benoit, 1995a). The theory focuses on the range of message options individuals and organizations employ when seeking to proactively protect or reactively repair their image as they respond to threats (Zhang & Benoit, 2004). Although there are obviously differences in the nature of crises and the resources available at the disposal of the accused, “the basic options are the same for both individual and corporate repair efforts” (Benoit, 1997b, p. 177).

In his 1995 book *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*, Benoit identified 14 image restoration strategies, which he classified into five broad categories:

Category 1: Denial (two strategies: simple denial, blame shifting)

Category 2: Evasion of responsibility (four strategies: provocation, defeasibility, accident, good intentions)

Category 3: Reducing the offensiveness of the act (six strategies: transcendence, minimization, bolstering, differentiation, attacking the accuser, compensation)

Category 4: Corrective action

Category 5: Mortification

Image restoration theory builds on Benoit’s earlier work in restorative discourse as well as several previous theories, most notably Ware and Linkugel’s theory of apologia (Benoit, 1995a). Ware and Linkugel (1973) identified four rhetorical self-defense strategies: denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence.

Image repair comes in anticipation of or response to blame—a matter of perception that may or may not be related to actual guilt. It does not matter if the accused actually committed

the offensive act, or whether it caused the act through inaction that was either deliberate or unintentional; what matters is that the accused is perceived to be at fault, and that the act is considered to be offensive by relevant audiences (Benoit, 1997b).

Image¹ is extremely important for individuals and organizations (Benoit, 1995a). Thus, when a crisis occurs, crisis communicators are tasked with trying to protect the current positive aspects of an image from the negative aspects that are associated with a crisis (Coombs, 1995).

The majority of study on image restoration has focused on responses by individuals or organizations, but previous scholarship has also identified rhetorical strategies taken by nations. Saudi Arabia employed a series of image restoration strategies after 15 of the 19 terrorists who perpetrated the 9/11 attack were identified as Saudis (Zhang & Benoit, 2004), and China engaged in international image restoration after a series of product recalls and bans created international perception that Chinese exports were unsafe (Peijuan, Ting, & Pang, 2009).

Appropriateness, Not Effectiveness

This thesis evaluates image restoration theory strategies in line with Benoit's recommendation that those who study image restoration theory should focus on appropriateness, rather than effectiveness (Benoit, 2000). Appropriateness answers the question, "Were the strategies correctly chosen, given the circumstances?" Effectiveness seeks to know "Did the rhetoric improve the image of the threatened party?"

Appropriateness and effectiveness are far from mutually exclusive; they are often connected. Over the past 20-plus years, communication scholars have provided many examples of appropriately chosen strategies resulting in a reduction of a crisis and improvement of a rhetor's image. However, appropriateness and effectiveness are not the same thing, because

¹ also referred to as "face" or "reputation"

image restoration “does not exist in a theoretical vacuum” (Browning, 2011). Just because the strategies employed are well chosen for the specific threat does not mean they are going to improve one’s image (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994). An image restoration plan may be appropriately chosen and the rhetorical strategies deployed with great skill, yet it might still fail to persuade the public. Although there may be some exceptions, such as Queen Elizabeth II’s address after the death of Princess Diana (Benoit & Brinson, 1999) and Hugh Grant’s appearance on *The Tonight Show* after his arrest for lewd behavior with a prostitute (Benoit, 1997a), it is difficult—perhaps even unwise—to attribute audience effects solely to rhetorical discourse.²

After all, great rhetoric is not a magic bullet. As Martin Medhurst explained in the introduction to *Beyond the Rhetorical Presidency* (1996, p. XVI), “What distinguishes the skilled rhetorician from others who attempt to persuade is not the tools or even the outcomes of such attempts, but rather the judgment and powers of interpretation that the speaker displays in assessing the situation and in selecting the appropriate language, arguments, timing, occasion, and audience.”

In this thesis, a determination of what is appropriate is based upon a new application of image restoration theory that incorporates literature from marketing communication regarding the concepts of mental accounting and reference prices as discussed previously.

Image Restoration Theory Strategies

There are five categories of image restoration strategies, with a total of 14 strategy variations. All 14 strategies are defined in the following section. After each strategy variation is

² Even those famed restorative speeches come with caveats; the effect of the Queen’s speech may have been magnified by the fact that such an address represented a sharp break with Royal protocol (Benoit & Brinson, 1999), and publics may be more easily willing to forgive celebrities and athletes than other public figures (Holdener & Kauffman, 2014).

defined, at least one example of appropriate or inappropriate strategic application is provided to demonstrate how the strategy has been used.

The examples provided demonstrate organizational usage, in order to make them more relevant to colleges than usage by individuals such as celebrities. The lone exception to this rule was the inclusion of rhetorical acts by U.S. Presidents in connection with prominent scandals. These rhetorical acts were included because their notoriety should make them recognizable to readers, and because Presidential speeches are often well-coordinated acts that involve a team of White House staffers—similar to the ways in which remarks by college presidents and chancellors are informed by the work of college communicators and aides. Thus, the knowledge derived from these acts of Presidential rhetoric may be beneficial to organizations such as colleges.

Denial.

There are two types of denial: simple denial and blame shifting.

Simple denial.

In a simple denial, the organization claims it did not perform the offensive act or denies that the offensive act actually took place. A denial is an “absolute” stance that makes no attempt to change the audience’s perception of the offensive act itself, instead seeking a full acquittal of the charges for the accused (Ware & Linkugel, 1973; Glantz, 2010).

Denial is appropriate if the event did not actually take place (Benoit, 2014). For example, denial was an appropriate strategy for General Motors in response to a *Dateline NBC* episode in November 1992 that said the company’s trucks were prone to explosion (Hearit, 1996). General Motors denied that its trucks were unsafe, and claimed that NBC had used incendiary devices to

blow up the trucks, in order to get dramatic footage for television, but had not made viewers aware of their use of explosives.

A denial is inappropriate if it is not sufficiently forceful, or if it does not directly address the charges (Benoit & Brinson, 1999). In USAir's public response to a 1994 crash, its fifth fatal crash in five years, and a subsequent damaging *New York Times* article, USAir did not directly address the charges raised in the article (Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997). The airline also did not appropriately respond to criticisms from the Federal Aviation Administration and National Transportation Safety Board in the *New York Times* article; USAir said that its safety was "validated each and every day by federal regulators who fly with us," but did not quote a specific regulator or regulatory agency (Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997, p. 48).

A denial is inappropriate if there is evidence to the contrary (Brinson & Benoit, 1996). Should evidence exist, such as the documents that showed Corning was aware of the health problems its silicone breast implants posed long before the public became aware in the early 1990s, a denial may leave the organization with less credibility. Similarly, denial is not appropriate if the offensive act actually occurred. Should the accusation be subsequently proven, the organization risks additional damage to its reputation and credibility; "We expect people (and presumably, corporations) to be honest enough to confess their transgressions. We deplore those who, after committing an error, lie about it" (Benoit, 1995a, p. 130). When questions arose in 2004 surrounding the accuracy of a *60 Minutes* story about President George W. Bush's service in the Texas Air National Guard, CBS News quickly issued a strong denial, and said that "no internal investigation is underway at CBS News nor is one planned" (Mazer, 2013, p. 176). CBS News eventually was forced to back down from the denial, and longtime *CBS Evening News* anchor Dan Rather resigned in 2005 before being dismissed by the network in 2006.

Blame shifting.

When the organization claims that the offensive act was performed by someone else, it is engaging in blame shifting. Blame shifting represents the second form of denial.

Shifting the blame is an appropriate strategy if the organization bore no responsibility. “If another person (or group, or organization) really committed the offensive act, the accused should not be blamed” (Benoit & Brinson, 1999, p. 149). For example, Johnson & Johnson shifted the blame for the Tylenol killings to a madman, which was consistent with their insistence that the company had done nothing wrong (Benoit & Lindsey, 1987).

However, blame shifting is not an appropriate strategy unless the blame is fully placed on “someone or something clearly disassociated from the rhetor” (Benoit, 1995a, p. 162). It is not an appropriate strategy if the blame is shifted to someone who was a subordinate to the accused at the time of the offensive act (Benoit, 1982), as President Richard Nixon’s blame shifting attempted to do in response to the Watergate scandal. Blame shifting is not an appropriate strategy if the offensive act was done by someone who was hired, or put into position to engage in that act, by the accused—like Exxon’s attempt to blame Captain Joseph Hazelwood for the 1989 Valdez oil spill (Benoit, 1995a). Shifting the blame to such parties means that, even in the best-case scenarios, the accused organization still winds up shouldering some of the public’s blame.

Blame shifting is also not an appropriate strategy when the blame is being placed on the person or persons whom the public views as the victim of the offensive act. When Firestone faced accusations that its tires were exploding and resulting in fatal car crashes, part of Firestone’s response was to run ads that implied at least part of the fault was due to car owners’

failure to properly inflate their tires—blaming people for their own deaths (Blaney, Benoit, & Brazeal, 2002).

Evasion of responsibility.

Evasion can be used by organizations to acknowledge an offensive act has taken place in an attempt to “lessen the amount of blame assigned to the accused” (Len-Rios & Benoit, 2004, p. 97). There are four evasion strategies:

Provocation.

Organizations that claim the offensive act was a reasonable response to another wrongful act are engaging in provocation, or scapegoating (Benoit, 1995a; Scott & Lyman, 1968). Corporations that move a production plant from one location to another and claim that they were motivated by a favorable law in the new location, or an unfavorable law in the old location, are employing a provocation strategy (Benoit, 1995a). Provocation provides context for the decision (Hambrick, Frederick, & Sanderson, 2015).

The use of blame shifting and provocation are similar in that the accused seeks to have the fault for the offensive act placed on another person or organization. Where they differ is that in blame shifting, the accused states that the other person or organization actually committed the offensive act, whereas in provocation, the accused acknowledges that it committed the act, but frames it as a responsible decision to the actions of another party (Brinson & Benoit, 1996).

Because of this, provocation is appropriate in circumstances where fault can be blamed on the other party, and that party is able to be presented as separate from the accused. During the Christmas holiday season of 1990, American Airlines was forced to cancel about 800 flights after an unusually high percentage of its pilots called in sick daily (Hearit, 1995; Levander, 1991). In response, American took out nationwide newspaper ads in which it blamed the

cancellations on “an illegal sick-out” by the Allied Pilots Association. American stressed that the striking pilots were not representative of the airlines, and that the pilots union was a separate organization altogether.

Defeasibility.

Image restoration strategies that include defeasibility claim the act took place because the accused lacked the ability to take a less-offensive course of action. “Defeasibility can be useful if one can effectively convince the audience that factors are beyond one’s control, as it provides a plausible excuse for the accused party” (Benoit & Brinson, 1999).

Defeasibility is an appropriate strategy to use when the accused can reasonably claim they were not in control of the act. In Compton and Compton’s rhetorical analysis of open letters sent from college athletics coaches and administrators to fans following losing seasons (2014), they found defeasibility to be a common strategy. These open letters emphasized injuries that had been suffered by players, which offered an excuse for the losses of the previous season, as well as the college’s insistence on scheduling tough opponents in the future.³

Defeasibility is inappropriate if it offers excuses that are implausible (Glantz, 2010). It is best used subtly, because “blatant attempt to suggest a lack of control could threaten perceptions of (the rhetor’s) leadership” (Compton & Compton, 2014, p. 356). For this reason, defeasibility is an inappropriate strategy for organizations and individuals who are in positions of significant power, because it portrays them as unable to solve a problem and may leave them in a weakened position (Benoit & Henson, 2009; Compton & Compton, 2014). As Benoit (2006, p. 299)

³ Unlike their professional counterparts, whose schedule is set by their league, college sports teams have wide discretion in who they face in nonconference games. In a sport like football, they often face a choice between scheduling a weak opponent that is likely to result in a lopsided victory, or a tough opponent that excites fans and increase ticket sales and result in a better TV position, but carries a much-greater risk of loss.

explains, “Defeasibility, if accepted by the audience, exonerates the accused, but it does not portray him or her as in charge of the situation.”

President George W. Bush used defeasibility in attempts to restore his image at several crisis points during his Presidency, such as the federal government’s much-criticized response to Hurricane Katrina (Benoit & Henson, 2009) and the discovery that the CIA intelligence used as justification for the Iraq War had been incorrect (Benoit, 2006). These strategies never improved his flagging approval ratings.

Accident.

When the accused claims the offensive act was not done intentionally, they are choosing an accident strategy. As Benoit (1995a, p. 76) explains, “When people are late to a meeting, we may not hold them completely responsible if unforeseeable traffic congestions caused their tardiness.”

Faulting an accident is an appropriate strategy if it is used without qualification on the way to mortification. When the USS *Greenville* and Japanese trawler, the *Ehime Maru*, collided in 2001 and resulted in nine deaths, the United States Navy repeatedly referred to the incident as a “mishap” and an “accident” (Drumheller & Benoit, 2004). Claims of accident pair well with apologies, as publics are more likely to forgive in such circumstances (Struthers, Eaton, Santelli, Uchiyama, & Shirvani, 2008).

Good intentions.

The organization that claims it meant well in performing the offensive act is using a strategy of good intentions. “People who do bad while trying to do good are usually not blamed as much as those who intend to do bad” (Benoit, 1995a, p. 77).

Good intentions is an appropriate strategy if the offensive act is not perceived as a serious transgression (Grimmer, 2017). In 2015, Australian grocery store giant Woolworths Supermarket, having partnered with television fitness personality Michelle Bridges to develop a line of products, ran ads on its social media channels in which Bridges called people who grow their own food “freaks.” After a swift uproar, Woolworths removed the ads and stated that “our intention was never to upset anyone. As the fresh food people, we know how passionate our customers are about fresh food. We share their passion and want everyone to eat healthily whether they grow their own or choose healthy foods from our supermarkets.” Bridges said that “Our intentions with our ads for Delicious Nutritious were to poke fun at myself and what many see as ‘my (completely fictional) perfect life’” (Jabour, 2015). The controversy quickly died down.

Good intentions are not appropriate if the rationale for the offensive act runs contrary to a well-known position previously taken by the accused. When President Ronald Reagan was attempting to repair his image during the Iran-Contra Affair in 1986-1987, he used a good intentions strategy more frequently than any other strategy (Benoit, Gullifor, & Panici, 1991). Reagan’s recurring argument that there were several strategic benefits to selling arms to Iran in order to fund Nicaraguan Contras was significantly undercut by his longstanding stance against negotiating with terrorists.

Reducing the offensiveness of the event.

There are six strategies that seek to reduce the offensiveness of the event.

Transcendence.

Transcendence appeals attempt to lead audiences away from the specifics of crisis and to take into account more important considerations. When the Apollo I spacecraft exploded into

fire in 1967, killing all three American astronauts on board, NASA presented their deaths as a tragic consequence of the quest for space and knowledge (Coombs, 1995). This was an appropriate image restoration strategy, given the circumstances. In 1967, the United States was engaged in a “space race” against its Cold War rival, the Soviet Union, a race that many Americans believed we were losing due to the Soviets having been the first to successfully launch a satellite and a person into space. Transcendence—asking Americans to accept the death of three astronauts because of the importance of space exploration and victory over the Russians in the Space Race—was an appropriate strategy for the Apollo I disaster.

Transcendence appeals do not deny that the offending event took place or attempt to massage the facts, but rather appeal to more important considerations. Such appeals can promote shared values between publics and the organization, fostering identification (Allen & Caillouet, 1994). This strategy worked well when South Korea telecommunications giant Samsung was battling a corruption scandal; the company argued that the bad actions of a few employees should not threaten the national economy of South Korea. This was appropriate because of the importance of Samsung to the South Korean economy (Jung, Graeff, & Shim, 2011).

Where transcendence is not appropriate is in situations where there exists a misalignment between the values of the public and the professed values of those facing the crisis or when the values are unclear (Len-Rios & Benoit, 2004; Benoit, 2011). National Public Radio (NPR) fired analyst Juan Williams in 2010, two days after he stated that he got “worried” and “nervous” when he saw people wearing Muslim attire on airplanes. As part of NPR’s defense, CEO Vivian Schiller claimed that the firing “was a decision of principal, made to protect NPR’s integrity and values as a news organization.” (Benoit, 2011, p. 87). This was inappropriate and did little to repair NPR’s image, for two reasons: First, Schiller never clarified what those “values” were,

making it hard for audiences to determine that such values were ones they shared. Second, even if Schiller had elaborated on these “values,” it is far from certain that many in the public would have agreed that NPR’s values should transcend Williams’ right to free speech.

Bolstering.

When an organization or individual emphasizes its good traits or positive actions it has taken in the past, it is using a bolstering strategy (Blaney et al., 2002; Len-Rios & Benoit, 2004). Bolstering is most appropriate in situations where the public had a positive view of the organization before the offensive act (Ware & Linkugel, 1973), and is also appropriate if there exists the possibility of linking oneself with third-party individuals or organizations who are viewed positively (Benoit, 1995a).

Bolstering is inappropriate if the claims are irrelevant to the offensive act. When Arby’s was responding to backlash from an advertising campaign that was perceived by Iowa residents as attacking their state, Arby’s chief marketing officer tried to connect with Iowans by pointing out that he was from Cleveland, and thus was empathetic to their complaints because his hometown had been made fun of publicly (Compton, 2014).

If bolstering is done by using a third party as a reference, it is inappropriate if that party appears to have something substantial to gain from their support (Glantz, 2010; Len-Rios, Finneman, Han, Bhandari, & Perry, 2015). The use of a famous race car driver, Michael Andretti, did little to restore Firestone’s reputation, because the Andretti family had financial ties with Firestone (Blaney et al., 2002).

Minimization.

Minimization is a restorative strategy that acknowledges the offensive act took place and that the rhetor is at fault, but claims the act is not as offensive as it appears. “It the rhetor can

convince the audience that the negative act isn't as bad as it might first appear, the amount of ill feeling associated with that act is reduced," Benoit (1995a, p. 77) explained.

Minimization can be appropriate to use as a proactive strategy; consider the oft-stated principle, "Under promise, over deliver." Minimization is an appropriate strategy to use if the rhetor uses it to reduce expectations about future performance situation, as President Barack Obama did following the struggles of the federal government's healthcare.gov website (Benoit, 2014). "The higher the expectations for performance, the worse problems appear. Conversely, the lower the expectations, the less serious lapses appear" (Benoit, 2014).

A strategy that includes minimization must be done carefully, as it can create bigger problems. "Trying to make a serious problem seem trivial can create a backlash," Benoit (1997b, p. 184) wrote in his criticism of Exxon's response to the Valdez oil spill. Minimization should not be done in a way that runs contrary to facts. Exxon, for example, claimed the number of animals harmed by the oil spill was significantly lower than the numbers of animal corpses found by state officials (Benoit, 1997b). In response to claims by the California Department of Consumer Affairs that it was overcharging its customers, Sears claimed that just a small percentage of its auto-repair centers were engaged in the practice, when in fact overcharging was widespread at Sears and occurring far more often than at other auto repair shops (Benoit, 1995b).

Differentiation.

Differentiation is a "psychology transformative" strategy that seeks to result in "a splitting apart, a particularization, of cognitive elements in the minds of the listeners" (Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 281). The use of differentiation seeks to put the offensive act into context, and can involve claims that the act was less offensive than similar acts (Benoit, 2016). "In comparison, the act performed by the rhetor may not appear so bad" (Benoit, 2014).

Differentiation is appropriate if it clearly provides the accused with a genuine separation from the offensive act (Benoit, 1987), or offers a clear explanation of how the offensive act truly is different from similar acts (Glantz, 2010). As part of Johnson & Johnson's image restoration campaign following the seven Tylenol-related deaths, the organization stressed that the tainted product, Extra-Strength Tylenol capsules, were separate from all other Johnson & Johnson products, including other varieties of Tylenol (Benoit, 1987). In this way, Johnson & Johnson did not deny the danger of tainted Extra-Strength Tylenol capsules—for which it had already issued a nationwide recall—but it was able to disconnect its other products from the perceived risk.

When video surfaced of Presidential candidate Barack Obama's pastor making perceived anti-American remarks, Obama defended his pastor but differentiated his pastor's offensive speech by saying "many of you have heard remarks from your pastors, priests or rabbis with which you strongly disagreed" (Benoit, 2016, p. 846). In this way, Obama was able to repudiate his pastor's remarks without completely rejecting him. Differentiation can pair well with bolstering, as it did with Obama, who stressed his pastor's good traits, because the bolstering strengthens the contrast one attempts to make when using differentiation.

Attacking the accuser.

An organization that is under fire may seek to reduce the credibility of its accuser by attacking it, potentially calling into question the legitimacy of the party or parties who are levelling the accusations (Hearit, 1996).

Such a strategy is appropriate when the accused can claim the moral high ground—or can safely claim their opponents acted in an immoral way. This was exactly what General Motors did when it countered a *Dateline NBC* segment in November 1992 that showed dramatic video of

GM's trucks exploding as proof of their dangerousness (Hearit, 1996). GM fought back, and was able to get the program's parent company, NBC, to admit that it had rigged the GM trucks with incendiary devices, for which it apologized and announced it would make changes in its reporting.⁴ Attacking the accuser may also be an appropriate strategy if it is accompanied by behavior that falls within cultural norms (Moody, 2011).

Although it benefits the accused to diminish the credibility of their accuser, attacking the accuser is an aggressive strategy, and thus is rarely employed as a primary defense strategy (Glantz, 2010). It is inappropriate and likely to fail as a restorative strategy when there is little possibility of staking out the moral high ground, and is also inappropriate when the accused is engaging in the same action as their accuser (Sanderson, 2008).

Compensation.

When the accused offers something worthwhile to the perceived victim, it is choosing a strategy of compensation (Harlow & Harlow, 2013).

Compensation should be familiar to anyone who has ever complained while dining at a restaurant and subsequently been given a free dessert. This financial amend-making can take of the form of money, gifts, or payment for repairs, but may also include a credit for a future product. Compensation is an appropriate strategy if the product that is offered satisfies, or significantly reduces, the negative feelings felt by aggrieved parties as a result of the offensive act. During a 15-day Northwest Airlines pilot strike in 1998, Northwest ran a series of ads in which it included compensation (Cowden & Sellnow, 2002). In these ads, Northwest promised that it would, without charge, arrange flights on other carriers for passengers who were affected

⁴ NBC apologized for its "inappropriate" demonstrations and added that "unscientific demonstrations should have no place in hard news stories at NBC. That's our news policy." This combination of mortification and corrective action was evidently well conceived, as *Dateline NBC* is still on the air in 2018.

by the strike, and it would provide bonus frequent-flyer miles to its WorldPerks members. These were appropriate strategies to use, because for most airline travelers, their primary concern during a work stoppage is not the specifics of the contract negotiations between management and labor, but how the strike is likely to affect their travel plans.

Compensation can be undercut, however, if the organization positions such actions as being done not out of a sense of obligation to victims, but instead due to organizational benevolence (Benoit, 1995a). After an explosion at a Union Carbide plant in India injured upwards of 200,000 people, Union Carbide gave 10 million rupees (approximately \$830,000) to a relief fund for victims of the explosion. However, Union Carbide publicized that this amount was a “donation,” which was voluntary, rather than something it was doing out of a sense of obligation.

Corrective action.

Corrective action is when the organization offers a remedy that is perceived to prevent future problems from occurring. Corrective action can take the form of promising to return to the state of affairs that existed before the offensive act, or promising a method to prevent the offensive act from happening a second time (Benoit, 1997b).

Corrective action differs from compensation in that a corrective action strategy promises to remedy the existing problem or to prevent it from occurring again, while a compensation strategy seeks to pay for the problem (Benoit, 1995a).

Corrective action is an appropriate strategy when an organization is capable of, and willing to take, concrete steps that prevent the problem from occurring again—and these actions must be recognized by publics as a genuine remedy. When tampered Tylenol capsules led to the death of seven people in 1982, its parent company, Johnson & Johnson, recalled millions of

bottles of Tylenol nationwide (Benoit & Lindsey, 1987). It then introduced tamper-proof packaging on Tylenol bottles—and quickly recovered its share of the over-the-counter pain medicine market. Juice manufacturer Odwalla began pasteurizing its juices after an E.coli outbreak killed one of its drinkers and sickened dozens. It also played a significant role in the founding of the American Fresh Juice Council (Thomsen & Rawson, 1998), which promoted safe practices in the industry.⁵

Corrective actions are inappropriate if they do not offer specific remedies, such as President Bush's corrective actions after Hurricane Katrina, which consisted of proposals rather than specific actions and left many additional questions unanswered (Benoit & Henson, 2008). Corrective actions are inappropriate if they merely promise to return to a previous state or condition that was viewed poorly by publics. USAir's corrective actions were primarily geared toward convincing the public that the airline was already safe, rather than making it safer (Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997). This was an inappropriate strategy because the public was not inclined to believe that USAir's previous state was one that emphasized safety, given the airline's five fatal crashes between Sept. 1989 and Sept. 1994. Corrective action is also inappropriate if the scope of the promised changes is too large to achieve, as it sets the accused up for further problems (Benoit, 1997b).

Mortification.

An organization that apologizes for the offensive act is choosing a strategy of mortification. Although mortification is most appropriate when it is done promptly (Drumheller & Benoit, 2004), it is often done as a last resort, such as Dow Corning, which resisted apologizing for several months before doing so (Brinson & Benoit, 1996).

⁵ Founding the council also helped recast the focus from an Odwalla-specific problem to an industry-wide issue.

Mortification is an appropriate strategy if the apology is likely to be perceived as sincere and not conditional (Benoit, 2017; Drumheller & Benoit, 2004). The difference can be seen in the two ways Arby's said it was sorry. Its first statement to Iowans offered "sincere apologies if we offended any of the good people of Iowa," while its second, better-received statement offered "sincerest apologies over offending the good people of Iowa" (Compton, 2014).

Mortification is an inappropriate strategy if it is addressed to the incorrect audience, or the parties whom the public believes has been victimized by the offensive act. When Dan Rather apologized for his debunked *60 Minutes* story on President George W. Bush, he apologized to the American public, but did not apologize to Bush or the White House (Mazer, 2013).

Mortification is inappropriate strategy if it opens the accused to legal problems (Benoit, 1997a; Coombs & Schmidt, 2000). Mortification is also inappropriate if the offensive act was obviously done with the intent of harming the injured party, as publics are less likely to forgive, instead viewing the offensive actor as being untrustworthy or having an ulterior motive. (Struthers et al., 2008).

In light of the preceding literature review, this thesis poses the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the image restoration strategies used by top-ranked American public universities when they communicate about increases or proposed increases in the cost of undergraduate tuition?

RQ2: With regard to students, the primary audiences that colleges are attempting to influence, are the universities' observed rhetorical strategies crafted appropriately?

Method

This study uses descriptive analysis to measure the selection and usage frequency of observed rhetorical strategies by top-ranked public universities when they announce that tuition or fees are increasing, or when they reveal that a potential increase is under consideration. The study uses image restoration theory to classify these rhetorical choices, and then evaluates the appropriateness of the rhetoric by evaluating it based upon existing marketing literature on consumer reactions to price increases. This represents a new application of image restoration theory. Descriptive analysis is a valuable research method that can be particularly revealing when it is used to identify phenomena or patterns in data that have not been previously recognized (Loeb, Dynarski, Morris, Reardon, & Reber, 2017). It is “relevant to all types of research” and in an age of big datasets, descriptive analysis can comb these datasets to “uncover patterns and inform and improve decision-making” (Loeb, Dynarski, Morris, Reardon, & Reber, 2017, p. 2-3). Because of this, descriptive analysis has practical implications for both researchers and practitioners.

Sample

This thesis focuses its analysis on the top 20 public, four-year colleges, as ranked by the 2018 edition of *U.S. News and World Report* in its annual “Best Colleges” rankings. *U.S. News and World Report* first published college rankings in 1983, and has done so every year since 1985.

The U.S. News rankings are so powerful that “some schools are targeting their academic policies toward improving in the rankings,” said Robert Morse, director of data research at *U.S. News* (Fitzpatrick, 2009). Improving in the U.S. News rankings was such an important marker of excellence to the Arizona Board of Regents that in 2007 it included a bonus of up to \$60,000

for Arizona State University President Michael Crow if Arizona State University rose in the rankings (Gabrielson, 2007).

Below is a list of the 20 top public colleges in the 2018 *U.S. News* rankings, along with their published in-state and out-of-state tuition and fees (Table 1). There is a four-way tie for 18th place in the 2018 *U.S. News* rankings, meaning that 21 colleges can claim to be in the top 20 nationally.

Table 1
2018 U.S. News and World Report top 20 public colleges in the United States

2018 rank	College	In-state tuition	Out-of-state tuition
T-1	University of California-Berkley	\$14,098	\$42,110
T-1	University of California-Los Angeles	\$13,256	\$41,270
3	University of Virginia	\$16,146	\$46,975
4	University of Michigan-Ann Arbor	\$14,826	\$47,476
5	University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill	\$9,005	\$34,588
6	College of William and Mary	\$20,287	\$43,099
7	Georgia Institute of Technology	\$12,418	\$33,014
8	University of California-Santa Barbara	\$14,409	\$42,423
T-9	University of California-Irvine	\$15,516	\$43,530
T-9	University of California-San Diego	\$16,183	\$44,197
T-9	University of Florida	\$6,381	\$28,658
T-12	University of California-Davis	\$14,382	\$42,396
T-12	University of Wisconsin-Madison	\$10,533	\$34,782
T-14	Pennsylvania State University-University Park	\$18,426	\$33,664
T-14	University of Illinois-Urbana/Champaign	\$15,868	\$31,988
T-16	Ohio State University-Columbus	\$10,591	\$29,659
T-16	University of Georgia	\$11,818	\$30,392
T-18	Purdue University-West Lafayette	\$10,002	\$28,804
T-18	University of Connecticut	\$14,880	\$36,946
T-18	University of Texas-Austin	\$10,136	\$35,766
T-18	University of Washington	\$10,974	\$35,538

Publicly issued statements made by high-ranking employees are considered for the colleges listed above, in which the subject was an increase in tuition and fees at their respective college for the 2015-2016, 2016-2017, or 2017-2018 academic years. These attributed statements must have taken place within one week of the news that tuition would be increasing for the 2015-2016, 2016-2017, or 2017-2018 academic years. Statements that took place during this time period but were about academic years either before or after 2015-2016, 2016-2017, and 2017-2018 are not included.

All statements must speak specifically to an increase in college tuition and fees at the university's flagship campus, not satellite or affiliated campuses. Statements about college tuition freezes or tuition decreases are not included in the analysis, because such news does not constitute a comparable threat to a college's image. Any other news involving the cost of college, such as the creation of scholarship initiatives appearing in stories that do not deal with an increase in tuition, are not included.

Employees included are presidents, chancellors, provosts, budget directors, deans, and university vice presidents. University presidents and chancellors who are serving in their position on an interim basis at the time of their statement are included in the analysis. So too are individuals who sit on boards that establish tuition rates for universities, such as regents and trustees.

It is common practice for high-ranking administrators to have the word "professor" included in their title. Such a designation does not exclude them from the analysis. However, statements from individuals who are solely identified as professors, assistant professors, associate professors, and so forth are not considered for analysis, as they are not considered to be in a sufficiently ranking position to speak for the entire university. Professors who sit on or head

faculty senates or university councils are also not considered for analysis, as such positions are voluntary.

Individuals commenting on tuition increases who are not affiliated with the college, such as state legislators, governors, and other publicly elected officials are excluded from this study, as it cannot be assumed they are concerned with the university's image. Comments from students are excluded. Comments from regents or college administrators who voted against or spoke against tuition increases are also excluded, as it cannot be assumed they have an interest in framing the tuition increase in a more-positive light.

Using identical criteria as above, this research also looks at public statements by the same eligible individuals about proposed increases in tuition and fees at their respective colleges. Statements about proposed freezes, decreases, or any other changes to tuition are not considered.

Variables

Using definitions first identified by Benoit (1995), statements by institutional officials are classified for the presence of 14 image restoration theory strategies. These strategies are:

Simple denial: The college claimed it did not raise tuition on all or some of the students, or stated that a proposed tuition increase may not actually take place.⁶

Blame shifting: The tuition increase⁷ was directly the fault of another party.

Provocation: The tuition increase took place in response to the actions of an external party. This is less explicit than blame shifting; instead of saying the tuition increase was the fault of another party, the college provided information about the actions of another party, but left the

⁶ Denials must have been in relation to proposed or actual increases. Denials in stories about tuition freezes or decreases were not included in the analysis.

⁷ All variables should be read to include proposed tuition increases. So "The tuition increase was the fault of another party" should be considered as "The tuition increase or proposal was the fault of another party." In the text, they are defined in reference only to actual tuition increases for the sake of reader clarity.

readers to make the connection. In other words, provocation is suggested blame by inference, while blame shifting is directly made. Provocation could also be in response to other external circumstances, such as higher electricity costs or increased demand for top faculty members.

Defeasibility: The tuition increase occurred because the college lacked the ability to do otherwise. It was inevitable, due to matters such as higher costs related to inflation or the passage of time—the kind of circumstances that cannot be easily blamed upon an external party.

Accident: Tuition was not intentionally increased.

Good intentions: The college meant well in raising tuition, with regard to students and their families. The increased tuition was done for reasons such as predictability (the college made the announcement publicly, in order to make it easier for families to budget) or stability (the college increased tuition so that future tuition hikes would be smaller).

Transcendence: The college increased tuition because there were considerations that are more important than the increase price of tuition. These considerations were about the college, and usually matters such as its reputation, quality, or importance to the state—vague considerations that are not always easy to quantify.

Bolstering: The college stressed the ways in which it had improved in recent years, or the ways in which it planned to improve in the near future.

Minimization: The college emphasized that the tuition increase was not as substantial as it may have been perceived, or that it was smaller than tuition increases that had taken place at the college in previous years.

Differentiation: The tuition increase was cast in a comparatively favorable light, by being described as smaller than tuition increases that had occurred at other colleges, or by resulting in a tuition that was still lower than at peer universities.

Attacking accuser: The college attacked the reputation of its critics, or attacked its critics' arguments.

Compensation: The college claimed it was taking measureable steps to eliminate or ease the financial burden that the increase in tuition would be causing students and families, through scholarships and financial aid. The college argued that, as a result, the net cost for most students to attend would be lower than the sticker price.

Corrective action: The college offered potential remedies for tuition increases, aimed at either preventing future increases or at keeping them low.

Mortification: The college apologized for increasing tuition, or expressed regret that it needed to do so again.

Procedure

Attributed statements are considered if they were published in one of three sources: on a college's website, in that college's student newspaper, or in the newspaper of record in that college's state capital. For example, the state capital of Texas is Austin, so the newspaper included in this analysis is the *Austin American-Statesman*.

The search feature in all sources is used to identify qualifying stories, and an identical sequence of 14 search terms was used. That sequence is as follows: "tuition," "tuition 2017," "tuition 2017-18," "tuition 2016," "tuition 2016-17," "tuition 2015," "tuition 2015-16," "tuition increase," "tuition increase 2017," "tuition increase 2017-18," "tuition increase 2016," "tuition increase 2016-17," "tuition increase 2015," and "tuition increase 2015-16."

Stories in any of these three sources must include a quotation attributed to an individual with the authority to speak as a voice of the college, based upon the conditions previously stated.

Stories that announce forthcoming changes in tuition but do not include attributed statements are not included in the analysis.

The image restoration strategies that are used in these attributed statements reveal the answer to RQ1. It is possible for a college to simultaneously employ more than one strategy in a single story; the aforementioned spring 2017 pilot project identified 15 colleges that used more than one strategy (Polikoff, 2017).

More than one individual can be considered as a voice of the university. For example, if the president and provost are quoted in the same story about an increase in tuition, they are both counted, regardless of whether or not they choose to use the same image restoration strategies.

A single representative of the college can use different image restoration strategies in different stories. If a chancellor says one thing about a tuition increase in one story, and then says something else in a different story, both quotes are classified for the presence of image restoration strategies.

However, if a representative is quoted as making an identical statement in multiple stories—because it took place at a press conference, is part of a syndicated story, or any other reason—it is only be counted one time toward RQ1. Statements are not counted two or more times if they are taken in part or verbatim from college websites for use in student newspapers or state capital newspapers. Thus, if the provost used differentiation in the story about a tuition increase that appeared in the college's website, and both the student newspaper and state capital newspaper ran an excerpt of it in their stories, this counts as only one instance of differentiation, not three.

If in the course of one story the president uses the same rhetorical strategy in different ways, it is not counted more than once. And if both the president and provost used the same

strategy within the same story, it is counted only one time. So if there are 10 stories in the student newspaper about tuition increases, the maximum number of times a college could be counted as using bolstering, minimization, etc., is 10.

In order to determine an answer to RQ2, which concerns appropriateness, it is necessary to use the information on mental accounting and consumers' reactions to price increases that was detailed in the literature review. A college is deemed as communicating appropriately if it attempts to affect the perceived reference price of its audience, through highlighting specific ways in which it has added or is adding value to its education (speaking to their acquisition utility), comparing the new tuition favorably to the tuition at other universities, emphasizing the relative smallness of the tuition increase compared to those that took place in previous years at the university, or pointing out specific ways by which many students should pay less than the full, increased tuition (speaking to their transaction utility).

Results

There were 107 total stories that were included in the analysis, all of which included a quotation attributed to a college spokesperson about a proposal to increase tuition or a forthcoming tuition increase.⁸ The subject was a potential tuition increase in 61 of these stories, and an actual tuition increase in the other 46 stories.

In all 107 stories, there was at least one attributed comment from a college spokesperson that sought to defend the tuition increase or proposal. These rhetorical acts were the only parts of the stories analyzed. If quotes were attributed to regents or other college spokespersons who voted against or spoke against a tuition increase or proposal, their statements were not analyzed; stories in which the only attributed statements were against the increase or proposed increase were not included among the 107.

Table 2

Number of stories about tuition increases or proposed increases

Source	Stories About Increases	Stories About Proposed Increases	Total Stories
University website	13	9	22
Student newspaper	23	37	60
State capital newspaper	10	15	25
Total	46	61	107

⁸ Six of the top 20 public universities are part of the University of California System: UC-Berkley, UCLA, UC-Santa Barbara, UC-Irvine, UC-San Diego, and UC-Davis. Decisions about their tuition are made collectively by the UC System. The newspaper in California's capital is *The Sacramento Bee*. A total of seven qualifying stories about tuition increases or tuition increase proposals ran in *The Sacramento Bee*, the newspaper in California's capital. For these total figures, *The Bee* was counted once for all six UC colleges, rather than six times.

A similar treatment was done in Georgia, where two of the 20 public universities are part of the University System of Georgia: Georgia Tech and the University of Georgia. Stories in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the newspaper in Georgia's capital, were counted once instead of twice.

With regard to RQ1, which asked about the frequency of image restoration strategies used in stories about tuition increases, the results for all 107 stories are as presented in Table 3:

Table 3

Use of image restoration strategies in all stories (N = 107) about tuition increases or proposals

Strategy	Frequency of Use	Usage Rate
Transcendence	40	37.4%
Good intentions	38	35.5%
Provocation	32	29.9%
Minimization	27	25.2%
Compensation	17	15.9%
Bolstering	16	15.0%
Corrective action	15	14.0%
Differentiation	10	9.3%
Attack the accuser	10	9.3%
Defeasibility	10	9.3%
Denial	8	7.5%
Blame shifting	7	6.5%
Accident	0	0%
Mortification	0	0%

Table 3 shows that 12 of the 14 image restoration strategies were observed in all sources. Transcendence (37.4%) was the most frequently used rhetorical strategy, followed by good intentions (35.5%), provocation (29.9%) and minimization (25.2%). None of the other eight observed rhetorical strategies were employed more than 20 percent of the time, with compensation (15.9%), bolstering (15.0%), corrective action (14.0%), differentiation (9.3%), attacking the accuser (9.3%), defeasibility (9.3%), denial (7.5%), and blame shifting (6.5%) each appearing fewer than 20 times in the sample. An example of each strategy:

Transcendence: When announcing higher in-state tuition for the upcoming year on the William and Mary website, President Taylor Reveley said it was essential to maintain the university's quality. *"It's vital that the William and Mary undergraduate experience remain among the very best in the world"* (Whitson, 2016).

Good intentions: In announcing a multi-year tuition increase in 2017, Ohio State President Michael Drake said that providing rates for several years would be helpful to families. *"We think the predictability is great for families. They know what it is now, and they know what it will be in the next four years"* (Huson, 2017).

Provocation: John Brown, the University System of Georgia's finance director, told *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* that Georgia Tech, the University of Georgia, and other USG schools needed to increase tuition in order to generate revenue for reasons that including improving salaries for underpaid faculty members. *"We're doing it because there has been demonstrated need from institutions"* (Davis, 2015).

Minimization: Ohio State President Michael Drake told *The Columbus Dispatch* that tuition increases at Ohio State were quite small. *"There are modest increases, but they are at the level of inflation, roughly."* (Huson, 2017).

Compensation: In a story that ran in *The Bottom Line*, the student newspaper at UC Santa Barbara, UC President Janet Napolitano stressed that many of the 175,000 UC students receiving financial aid would not be additionally burdened by a tuition increase. *"The financial aid awards for most of these students will rise by more than the amount of the increases, providing additional aid for expenses such as student housing, food, and books"* (Viola, 2017).

Bolstering: Claire Doan, media relations officer at the UC Office of the President, told *The Guardian*, the student newspaper at UC San Diego, that a tuition increase would result in a

better educational experience. *“The modest increase will allow the university of maintain the quality of education by increasing financial aid support, lowering the student-faculty ratio, increasing course offerings and enhancing student support services”* (Zamudio, 2016).

Corrective action: On the University of Virginia website, President Teresa A. Sullivan talked about an idea for keeping future tuition increases small. *“We have also asked the board to consider raising the payout from our endowment as an additional resource instead of relying solely on tuition”* (Staff, 2015).

Differentiation: On the University of Texas’ website, President Gregory L. Fenves stated that higher tuition for 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 still left Texas far less expensive than its peers. *“UT is still a tremendous value with tuition less than many other public research universities in Texas—and we have one of the lowest tuition rates for public flagship research universities in the nation”* (Fenves, 2016).

Attack the accuser: UC Berkley spokesperson Dan Mogulof told *The Daily Californian* in 2014 that protesting students might not actually feel the effects of a proposed tuition increase, and thus they should not be protesting. *“Are all of the people (protesting) from families making more than \$150,000, and, if not, what are they protesting? There’s a lot of irresponsible rhetoric and demagoguery around this issue”* (Barreira, 2014).

Defeasibility: As part of a statement on the University of Wisconsin website, Chancellor Rebecca Blank noted that as time passes, the expenses related to running a college increase, just as they do elsewhere. *“Like all organizations and institutions our costs of operation – in this case providing a first-class education – continue to rise”* (Blank, 2015).

Denial: UC spokeswoman Brook Converse told *The Daily Bruin* that a proposed tuition increase was not guaranteed to take place. *“What happened today is an approval of a plan, it*

doesn't mean we're going to raise tuition tomorrow. It means we're going into a process of negotiation with the state" (Truong, 2014).

Blame shifting: University of California System Chief Financial Officer Nathan Brostrom was quoted in UCLA's student newspaper, *The Daily Bruin*, as saying that students were going to pay more for tuition at UC colleges because the State of California was spending less on them. *"Since 1990, the state's expenditure has declined.... We have made it up some in student fees and tuition, but overall spending has gone down. Who pays has changed quite a bit"* (Hafner, 2014).

The usage rate of strategies was similar in stories about increases and proposed increases (Table 4), with a handful of notable differences. This is explained in the discussion.

Table 4

Use of image restoration strategies in stories about tuition increases and stories about proposed tuition increases in college websites, student newspapers, and state capital newspapers

Strategy	Appearances in Increase Stories (n = 46)	Usage Rate	Appearances in Proposal Stories (n = 61)	Usage Rate
Transcendence	16	34.8%	24	39.3%
Good intentions	15	32.6%	23	37.7%
Provocation	15	32.6%	17	27.9%
Minimization	15	32.6%	12	19.7%
Compensation	8	17.4%	9	14.8%
Differentiation	7	15.2%	3	4.9%
Attack accuser	5	10.9%	5	8.2%
Bolstering	5	10.9%	11	18.0%
Corrective action	5	10.9%	10	16.4%
Defeasibility	4	8.7%	6	9.8%
Denial	3	6.5%	5	8.2%
Blame shifting	0	0%	7	11.4%
Accident	0	0%	0	0%
Mortification	0	0%	0	0%

Rates of usage for the 12 observed image restoration strategies varied greatly depending on the source (Tables 5-7). This is addressed in the discussion.

Table 5

Use of image restoration strategies in official university stories (n = 22) about tuition increases or proposals

Strategy	Frequency of Use	Usage Rate
Good intentions	15	68.2%
Transcendence	15	68.2%
Minimization	10	45.5%
Blame shifting	6	27.3%
Compensation	6	27.3%
Corrective action	6	27.3%
Bolstering	4	18.2%
Differentiation	4	18.2%
Defeasibility	3	13.6%
Provocation	3	13.6%
Denial	1	4.5%
Attack the accuser	1	4.5%
Accident	0	0%
Mortification	0	0%

Table 5 shows that 12 of the 14 image restoration strategies were observed in college website stories. Transcendence and good intentions (68.2%) were the most frequently used rhetorical strategies, followed by minimization (45.5%), blame shifting (27.3%), compensation (27.3%), and corrective action (27.3%). None of the other six observed rhetorical strategies were employed more than 20 percent of the time, with bolstering (18.2%), differentiation (18.2%), defeasibility (13.6%), provocation (13.6%), denial (4.5%), and attacking the accuser (4.5%) each appearing fewer than five times in the subsample.

Table 6

Use of image restoration strategies in student newspaper stories (n = 60) about tuition increases or proposals

Strategy	Frequency of Use	Usage Rate
Provocation	19	31.7%
Transcendence	18	30.0%
Good intentions	14	23.3%
Minimization	11	18.3%
Bolstering	10	16.7%
Compensation	8	13.3%
Attack the accuser	7	11.7%
Differentiation	6	10.0%
Denial	6	10.0%
Blame shifting	5	8.3%
Corrective action	5	8.3%
Defeasibility	5	8.3%
Accident	0	0%
Mortification	0	0%

Table 6 shows that 12 of the 14 image restoration strategies were observed in student newspaper stories. Provocation (31.7%) and transcendence (30%) were the most frequently used rhetorical strategies, followed by good intentions (23.3%). None of the other nine observed rhetorical strategies were observed more than 20 percent of the time, with minimization (18.3%), bolstering (16.7%), compensation (13.3%), attacking the accuser (11.7%), differentiation (10%), denial (10%), blame shifting (8.3%), corrective action (8.3%), and defeasibility (8.3%) each appearing fewer than 12 times in the subsample. Denial was observed in 10% of all stories (n = 6), more than twice the rate observed on college websites and in state capital newspapers.

Table 7

Use of image restoration strategies in state capital newspaper stories (n = 25) about tuition increases or proposals

Strategy	Frequency of Use	Usage Rate
Good intentions	9	36.0%
Provocation	8	32.0%
Transcendence	7	28.0%
Minimization	6	24.0%
Corrective action	4	16.0%
Compensation	3	12.0%
Blame shifting	2	8.0%
Bolstering	2	8.0%
Defeasibility	2	8.0%
Attack the accuser	2	8.0%
Denial	1	4.0%
Accident	0	0%
Differentiation	0	0%
Mortification	0	0%

Table 7 shows that 11 of the 14 image restoration strategies were observed in state capital newspaper stories. Good intentions (36%), provocation (32%) and transcendence (28%) were the most frequently used rhetorical strategies, followed by minimization (24%). None of the other seven observed rhetorical strategies were employed more than 20 percent of the time, with corrective action (16%), compensation (12%), blame shifting (8%), bolstering (8%), defeasibility (8%), attacking the accuser (8%), and denial (4%) each appearing fewer than four times in the subsample. Differentiation was not observed in any stories.

Results for RQ2

With regard to RQ2, which asked about the use of rhetorical strategies that could affect students' reference prices, there were 37 observed instances in which a college spokesperson communicated in an appropriate manner (Table 8). Of these 37 instances, 19 were in stories about tuition increases (Table 9), and 18 were in stories about potential increases (Table 10). An example of each strategy:

Minimization: When talking about a proposed tuition increase in 2014 on the UC Berkley website, Chancellor Nicholas Dirks stressed that Berkley students were less burdened by tuition than they had been in the past. *“We practice fiscal discipline, enabling us to minimize the cost to those who pay to produce our excellence — students and their families, sponsors of research and taxpayers. ... Students are graduating with less debt; they’re actually paying less than they were ten years ago in real terms, actually in nominal terms, for all students who are below \$100,000 in income in-state, and below about \$80,000 out-of-state”* (Dirks, 2014).

Bolstering: In a story that ran on April 24, 2015 in *The Red and Black*, the student newspaper at the University of Georgia, Sonja Roberts, marketing and communications coordinator in the Office of Communications at the University System of Georgia, highlighted specific areas at the University of Georgia that would be improved as a result of a tuition increase. *“To continue to provide a nationally ranked public higher education offering, the USG has an obligation to invest responsibly in its research universities. Increased tuition funding will allow UGA to invest in its academics, programs and services to better support students. The funding will also help retain and hire additional faculty and help reduce class size”* (Umholtz, 2015).

Differentiation: In a detailed 2016 explanation of proposals to increase tuition that ran on the University of Wisconsin’s website, Chancellor Rebecca Blank compared the university’s tuition favorably to other schools in the Big Ten Conference. *“The increase we are requesting for nonresident undergraduate tuition, \$2,000 per year for the next two years, would bring that tuition to \$35,523 in two years. This is almost \$10,000 less than the current University of Michigan nonresident tuition and fees and about \$2,300 less than Michigan State”* (Blank, 2016).

Compensation: In a 2014 story on Berkley’s website, Chancellor Dirks pointed to students from specific financial backgrounds who would not feel the full weight of a potential tuition increase, because Berkley had measures to reduce the amount owed. *“Californian students from families with annual incomes under \$80,000 will continue to have tuition and fees fully covered by financial aid, and the vast majority of California students from families earning less than \$150,000 a year will see no increase”* (UC Berkley, 2014).

Table 8

Use of rhetorical strategies that attempted to alter the reference price of the audience in stories about tuition increases or proposed increases (N = 107)

Strategy	Total uses of strategy	Appropriate uses of strategy	Appropriateness rate
Minimization	27	9	33.3%
Bolstering	16	9	56.2%
Differentiation	10	8	80.0%
Compensation	17	11	64.7%

In the majority of instances across all sources, colleges appropriately used bolstering, differentiation, and compensation to potentially affect the perceived reference price of publics (Table 8).

Table 9

Use of rhetorical strategies that attempted to alter the reference price of the audience in stories about tuition increases (n = 46)

Strategy	Total uses of strategy	Appropriate uses of strategy	Appropriateness rate
Minimization	15	5	33.3%
Bolstering	5	3	60.0%
Differentiation	7	6	85.7%
Compensation	8	5	62.5%

In nearly all stories about tuition increases, colleges used differentiation appropriately (Table 9).

Table 10

Use of rhetorical strategies that attempted to alter the reference price of the audience in stories about proposed tuition increases (n = 61)

Strategy	Total uses of strategy	Appropriate uses of strategy	Appropriateness rate
Minimization	12	4	33.3%
Bolstering	11	6	54.5%
Differentiation	3	2	66.7%
Compensation	9	6	66.7%

Colleges officials used more appropriate bolstering strategies (n = 6) and more appropriate compensation stories (n = 6) in stories about potential increases than stories about actual increases (Table 10).

Colleges with Limited Comment

The University of Washington had a tuition decrease in 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 (Office of Budget and Planning, n.d.). Tuition went up for the 2017-2018 academic year, but there was no comment about this on the UW website, nor was there comment in the student newspaper, *The Daily of the University of Washington*. The state capital newspaper, *The Olympian*, had one story on the tuition increases (Orenstein, 2017), in which the University of Washington's director of state relations used provocation and minimization. This story was included among the 107 in the analysis.

The University of Illinois has had a series of in-state tuition freezes. In no stories did an official from the university address out-of-state tuition increases. For the 2016-2017 academic year, what external sources referred to as an in-state tuition freeze by Illinois was actually an increase of less than 0.1 percent. The only source that referred to this as an "increase" rather than a "freeze" appeared on the University of Illinois' website, in which Illinois used a strategy of transcendence (Illinois News Bureau, 2016). This story was also included among the 107 in the analysis.

Colleges with No Comment

As a result of multi-year tuition freezes, two colleges, the University of Florida and Purdue University, did not have qualifying stories about tuition for the designated period (Scott, 2017; Purdue, 2017).

Colleges with Two Student Newspapers

A pair of the top-20 colleges have two student newspapers: UC-Santa Barbara (*The Bottom Line* and *The Daily Nexus*) and the University of Wisconsin (*The Badger Herald* and *The Daily Cardinal*). All four of these student newspapers were included in the results.

Discussion

The websites of top-ranked colleges, student newspapers, and newspapers in state capitals can be accessed by anyone. There are no significant barriers that prevent the governor of a state from reading a college's website or its student newspaper, nor are there any that prevent a prospective student from reading the state capital newspaper, other than a possible small paywall.

However, the three sources in this study have different readerships, which may have informed colleges' strategic use of rhetorical strategies. Current students are likely to pay closest attention to the student newspaper (Krueger, 2010), prospective students primarily get information about a college from its official website and social media accounts (Tate, 2017), and tax-paying citizens outside of the college are most likely to read the newspaper in the state capital—in particular state legislators, who spend significant time in the capital. Newspaper readers are highly educated; Nielsen Scarborough reported in 2016 that 72 percent of college graduates with four-year degrees regularly read print, Web, or mobile newspapers, and the readership rate among those with postgraduate degrees is 80 percent (Who Reads Newspapers, 2016).

Judging from the results, the individuals who demonstrate the most concern for tuition increases, be they established or proposed, are existing students of a college. More than half of the stories in the analysis ($n = 60$) appeared in student newspapers. This number does not include dozens of stories in student newspapers in which only students were quoted about their thoughts regarding a tuition increase or proposal—comments that were overwhelmingly negative.

A college's current students have the most reason to be concerned about a tuition increase, because they and their families are the ones most likely to bear it. While both a prospective and existing student can choose to attend a different college in the fall, it stands to reason that it may be emotionally easier for a prospective student to do so. Someone who has already attended a college for one or more years may have established a strong social or academic network, and may be loath to leave either their friends, their professors, or both. Fewer than 40 percent of college students transfer colleges during their education (Shapiro, Dunder, Wakhungu, Yuan, & Harrell, 2015). A current student may feel like he or she has to return in the fall, regardless of what the new tuition is, whereas a prospective student has not established those sorts of relationships yet and may feel more empowered to go elsewhere.

This notion, that current students will have to pay higher tuition – compared to other people, who may pay it – explains the frequency of stories that appeared about potential tuition increases in student newspaper (n = 37). There were more of these stories than the total number of tuition increase and potential tuition increase in either college websites (n = 22) or in state capital newspapers (n = 25). Exactly half of the 46 qualifying stories about tuition increases (n = 23, 50%) appeared in student newspapers, while 60.7% of the qualifying stories about proposed tuition increases (n = 37) were in student newspapers.

Significant Differences by Source

College spokespersons used 70 total strategies in their 22 qualifying stories, an average of 3.18 per story. The most strategies used in a single story was in a 2017 statement by University of Wisconsin Chancellor Rebecca Blank, in which she employed eight strategies in her statement (listed in order of appearance): good intentions, transcendence, differentiation, minimization, defeasibility, provocation, corrective action, and bolstering (Blank, 2017). This statement, which

appeared on the University of Wisconsin's website, appeared to be thoughtfully crafted with multiple audiences in mind, and to persuade these audiences in different ways. Blank's statement used differentiation and bolstering appropriately, in ways that could affect students' reference prices.

Comparatively, college spokespersons were observed using 114 strategies in the 60 stories that appeared in student newspapers, an average of 1.90 per story, and 46 strategies in the 25 stories that ran in state capital newspapers, 1.84 per story. This may be because student newspapers and state capital newspapers are more selective in the quotes they choose to run, picking and choosing the ones that work best with the remainder of the story, whereas colleges have full control over the stories on their websites. The difference in strategies-per-story suggests that it can be harder for colleges to get out their preferred messaging in external publications.

Four strategies appeared at far greater rates in college websites than in student newspapers or state capital newspapers.

Good intentions.

College spokespersons included an argument of good intentions more than two-thirds of the time on their websites ($n = 15$, 68.2%). It was one of just two strategies, along with corrective action ($n = 6$), that appeared more times in college websites than in the other two sources, despite the fact that colleges had the fewest number of qualifying stories.

The rate with which college spokespersons used a good-intentions strategy was much higher than in state capital newspapers ($n = 9$, 36.0%) and nearly three times the frequency with which a good-intentions strategy appeared in student newspapers ($n = 14$, 23.3%). In a 2014 story on the UC-San Diego website, Chancellor Pradeep Khosla suggested a potential tuition

increase would provide price stability for students and their families. *“This morning, University of California President Janet Napolitano announced a Long-term Stability Plan for Tuition and Financial Aid that she will present to the Board of Regents on November 19. The plan – the first of its kind at the university – is a new five-year roadmap for low, predictable tuition that allows students and their families at all income levels, and at all levels of study, to budget for the total cost of their UC education. The Stability Plan will end the volatility in UC’s tuition-setting process”* (Khosla, 2015).

In appeals that included good intentions, the college spokespersons framed the college’s actions as a good thing. It was a good thing that the college was increasing tuition for multiple years, because it provided predictability for families—or it was a good thing that the college was announcing these proposals or increases early, because this action gave students and families additional time to budget for the upcoming school year.

It is understandable that colleges and their spokespersons would use this tactic on their own platforms, as “people who do bad while trying to do good are usually not blamed as much as those who intend to do bad.” (Benoit, 1995a, p. 77). However, it’s equally understandable that external sources would be dubious of such claims of benevolence. While good intentions is an appropriate strategy if the offensive act is not perceived as a serious transgression (Grimmer, 2017), there are many students who view tuition increases as deeply offensive—such as thousands of students who protested proposed tuition increases at campuses across the UC System in 2009 (Duke, 2009; Wollan & Lewin, 2009).

Transcendence.

Transcendence was tied with good intentions for the most-commonly used strategy by college spokespersons in all stories on college websites (n = 15). Across all sources, no single

strategy was observed more frequently than transcendence and good intentions on college websites.

Like good intentions, transcendence appeared in 68.2% of college website stories, which was a much-higher rate than in student newspapers ($n = 18$, 30.0%) or state capital newspapers ($n = 7$, 28.0%). In a 2014 college website story, Wisconsin Chancellor Rebecca Blank spoke of the importance of maintaining the university's quality through a proposed tuition increase. "*We are also the flagship university in the UW System and our educational quality is highly rated in national and international rankings; we have a responsibility to maintain this quality*" (Blank, 2014).

To understand why the use of transcendence in college news stories may be appropriate, it is worth considering another group of people who regularly visit college websites for information about that college: alumni (Jaschik, 2010). Many alumni have fondness for their alma mater and its values—a fondness that can result in financial giving to the college.

"Educational quality," to use an oft-repeated phrase, may be an important consideration for alumni, as they may truly care about it or believe that it increases the value of the name on their diploma. Thus, using a lofty but abstract concept can promote shared values between alumni and the college (Allen & Caillouet, 1994). Engaged alumni do not have to pay the higher cost of tuition, unless they have children attending, but they are an audience for whom "*meeting our commitment to maintain UConn as a top-ranked, national caliber university*" (Megan, 2015) may factor significantly in their future giving. However, transcendence may not be as appropriate for college spokespersons to use when communicating with students, because there may be a misalignment of values (Benoit, 2004; Benoit, 2011). Students might not think abstract concepts are as important as their ability to graduate holding less debt.

Minimization.

College spokespersons used minimization in almost half the stories on colleges websites (n = 10, 45.5%), more than twice the rate at which they did in student newspapers (n = 11, 18.3%) or state capital newspapers (n = 6, 24.0%). In a 2016 story on the University of Virginia website, Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer Patrick Hogan compared a tuition increase favorably to previous increases at Virginia. *“The approved rates are among the lowest increases in tuition at the University of Virginia in recent history”* (McNally, 2016).

In using minimization, college spokespersons are acknowledging that tuition is increasing or may be increasing, and that the college is not trivializing what this means for payers. What the spokespersons are doing is claiming the increase is not as offensive as it appears (Benoit, 1995a; Benoit, 1997b). Because of this, audiences should find the increase to be less upsetting and view the college more favorably, particularly in the instances in which the college spokesperson made a clear attempt to affect reference prices.

However, in the majority of instances where college spokespersons used minimization, they were observed doing it a vague way, claiming the tuition increases were not that large but offering no real way to place them in context. By doing this, the spokespersons ran the risk of the public believing that the college was not taking the issue seriously enough, which can create backlash (Benoit, 1997b).

Compensation.

In more than a quarter of all qualifying stories on college websites, spokespersons included a compensation strategy (n = 6, 27.3%). This was more than double the frequency that appeared in student newspapers (n = 8, 13.3%) or state capital newspapers (n = 3, 12.0%). On the UC-San Diego website, Chancellor Pradeep Khosla pointed to an initiative at her college that

kept students from paying the full price of tuition. *“The plan will ensure the continuation of the nation’s most robust financial aid program under which 55 percent of all California undergraduates have all their tuition and fees fully covered”* (Khosla, 2014).

College spokespersons use compensation strategies like this, pointing to scholarships and financial aid, to make it seem like the tuition increase will not affect all students in the full amount; if tuition is going up five percent, not everyone will be paying five percent more. This compensation strategy is appropriate because it offers something worthwhile to the victims of higher tuition (Benoit, 2011), and what it offers may satisfy or significantly reduce the negative feelings felt by those who are offended by higher tuition (Cowden & Sellnow, 2002). But while colleges have a definite interest in playing these measures up on their websites—particularly if, like the statement above, the measures may affect the audience’s perceived reference price—other sources may be more focused on the fact that there are, in fact, still some students who will have to pay five percent more in the following year.

Corrective action.

College spokespersons employed corrective-action strategies on college websites with the same frequency as compensation ($n = 6$, 27.3%). This was nearly double the frequency of state capital newspapers ($n = 4$, 16.0%), and more than three times with rate with which it appeared in student newspapers ($n = 5$, 8.3%). In a 2015 college website story, Penn State President Eric Barron spoke of moves the college had undertaken to keep a proposed tuition increase to a minimum. *“Internal reallocations, targeted budget reductions, strong enrollments, and delaying planned additional budget support for investing in Commonwealth and Penn State priorities have allowed us to propose these modest increases”* (Penn State News, 2015).

College spokespersons that included corrective actions strategies used tactics such as these, which highlighted specific measures the college had already taken to keep the increase or proposed increase low, or talked of measures the college would be engaging in to keep future tuition increases low. From the colleges' perspective, it may seem appropriate to publicize the concrete steps it has taken, but the problem is that audiences may not view them as genuine remedies (Benoit & Henson, 2008; Holdener & Kauffman, 2013). They may either believe that colleges still have too much fat on them, or they may not consider the problem remedied, as they know that tuition will ultimately rise again. Unlike introducing tamper-proof packaging for over-the-counter medicines, tuition increases are not a problem that can be permanently fixed through the introduction of safety measures.⁹

Other Differences Between Sources

Use of denial in student newspapers.

Denial was observed one time on a college website and in a state capital newspaper, at a rate of 4.5 and 4.0% of all stories. In student newspapers, however, college spokespersons used a denial strategy 10.0% of the time (n = 6). Within these six instances, denial was more prevalent in stories about proposed tuition increases (n = 4), appearing in more than one out of every 10 stories. In *The Daily Collegian*, Penn State's student newspaper, Penn State spokeswoman Lisa Powers said that a proposed increase was not set in stone. "*In relation to tuition, we are looking at various scenarios and they will be a point of discussion among [board members] and administrators at the upcoming meeting. Right now, there's nothing solid*" (Sweeney, 2015).

⁹ No college said it was taking or had taken corrective actions to prevent tuition from increasing at all in the future, just that it was taking them to keep the increases low.

This is likely because, as previously discussed, current students are the ones most offended by tuition increases. Knowing that tuition increases are so offensive to current students, it is in colleges' interests to emphasize that a tuition increase has not actually happened, and is not guaranteed to take place (Benoit, 2014; Hearit, 1996). Proposals to increase tuition do not always result in official tuition changes. Tuition was proposed to rise at the UC System for the 2015-2016 academic year, but after widespread protests, the increase was postponed until the 2017-2018 academic year (UC to Freeze, 2015).

Differences Between Increase Stories and Proposal Stories

Alone among the three sources, colleges chose to run fewer stories with image restoration strategies about proposed tuition increases ($n = 9$) than stories about actual increases ($n = 13$).¹⁰

This stood in sharp contrast to the other two sources. State capital newspapers had 50% more stories about proposed increases ($n = 15$) than actual increases ($n = 10$), while student newspapers ran 60.9% more stories about proposed increases ($n = 37$) than actual increases ($n = 23$).¹¹

Across all sources, there were 98 strategies that were used in the 46 stories about tuition increases ($M=2.13$) and 133 strategies that were used in the 61 stories about proposed increases ($M=2.18$).

As Table 4 reveals, most strategies were employed at a similar rate in stories about increases and proposed increases. However, as detailed below, there were three strategies whose usage rate varied by greater than 10 percent.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that colleges used 41 total strategies in these nine tuition proposal stories ($M=4.56$) versus 29 strategies in the 13 tuition increase stories ($M=2.23$), suggesting that when colleges did communicate about potential tuition increases, they used many rhetorical strategies in their arsenal.

¹¹ A total of 68 strategies were observed in the 37 student newspaper proposals, stories ($M=1.84$), and just 24 strategies were observed in the 15 state capital newspaper stories ($M=1.60$). This suggests that external sources are not giving colleges much space to get their messaging out.

Differentiation usage.

Among the 12 strategies that were used by college spokespersons in all sources, differentiation appeared with the least frequency in stories about proposed tuition increases (n = 3, 4.9%). When the tuition increase became official, however, differentiation was used at more than three times that rate (n = 7, 15.2%). University System of Georgia Chancellor Steve Wrigley compared Georgia's new tuition favorably to regional peers in *The Red and Black*, Georgia's student newspaper. "*Out of the 16 states that make up the Southern Regional Education Board, the USG has now become the sixth lowest state in tuition and fees for four-year institutions*" (Norsworthy, 2017).

It may be simply be easier for spokespersons to use differentiation in increase stories, compared to proposal stories, because in proposal stories the college has not yet made a decision. Differentiation is appropriate when it is possible to separate the accused and the offensive act (Benoit, 1987; Ware & Linkugel, 1973), but it is challenging to demonstrate separation when the offensive act has not yet taken place. Between the time when a proposal to increase tuition is announced and when it becomes official, the college may be viewed as having the power to stop the increase from actually taking place.

Also, college spokespersons can more easily place a tuition increase in context and draw favorable comparisons once there is a locked-in rate, as opposed to a proposed figure or range of figures that may be subject to change. It would be unwise to compare a potential increase favorably to other more-offensive tuition increases, only to have that number go up in the end (Benoit, 2014; Benoit, 2016).

Differentiation was often used in an attempt to alter the perceived reference price, which also may be easier for spokespersons to do when dealing with a specific, established number. This appropriate usage is addressed later in this section.

Minimization usage.

Although minimization was the fourth-most frequently used strategy in both tuition increase stories (n = 15, 32.6%) and proposal stories (n = 12, 19.7%), it appeared a significantly higher percentage of the time in increase stories. Again, this may have taken place because increase stories are dealing with actual figures, whereas proposal stories are dealing with hypothetical figures, which are subject to change. It's easier for a spokesperson to put a number in perspective when one definitively knows what the number is—and thus claim it is not as offensive as it appears (Benoit, 1995a; Benoit, 1997b).

Consider the following two quotes. The first, by University of Virginia Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer Patrick Hogan, offers a specific comparison, and is representative of what was said in increase stories. *“In the University’s multi-year financial model approved in March 2015, the Board of Visitors pledged to keep tuition down. Keeping in line with this commitment made two years ago, the 2.2 percent in-state undergraduate increase is lower than estimated in the forecast plan”* (de Bruyn, 2017).

The second quote, by Penn State President Eric Barron, is nonspecific, and does not offer audiences much perspective on the scope of the proposed increase. *“In building the proposed 2017-18 operating budget, Penn State has placed the highest priority on keeping tuition increases as low as possible. ... The proposed budget, tuition and fees package reflects the University’s comprehensive and ongoing efforts to control the cost of a Penn State degree”* (Penn State News, 2017).

Absence of blame shifting in increase stories.

Blame shifting was used more frequently than six other strategies in proposal stories (n = 7, 11.4%), but it was not used at all in increase stories. In a story in the *Sacramento Bee*, University of California System Chief Financial Officer Nathan Brostrom laid the blame for a proposed tuition increase squarely on the State of California. “*Frankly, if the state were to pay (to the UC System pension fund), we would not be proposing a tuition increase*” (Koseff, 2014).

Blame shifting may be more appropriate to use when discussing a proposed tuition increase than an actual increase. In a proposal, a college spokesperson can make it seem like a potential tuition increase is entirely the fault of a party other than the college, and so it may be appropriate to audiences for a college to claim that it bears no responsibility for the potential increase (Benoit & Brinson, 1999). Once the decision has actually been made to increase tuition, however, a college spokesperson may find it difficult to reasonably claim that the college bears no responsibility for the increase—since it was the college or its governing board that ultimately made the decision to raise tuition (Benoit, 1995a).

The absent strategies

Two rhetorical strategies were not observed as used by any universities in any of the three sources: accident and mortification.

The lack of arguments including an accident strategy is understandable. The establishment of college tuition rates at public universities is a deliberative process. A proposal is made to raise, freeze, or lower tuition, and at a later date, the deciding body officially settles on a rate. Proposals are newsworthy, often leading to significant public comment or protest – as evidenced by the fact that there were more stories about proposals than official tuition decisions in the sample. Between the tuition proposal and the final decision, there is opportunity for

deciding bodies to carefully weigh all the evidence that is available in support of, or against, the proposed rate. On more than one instance among the colleges in this research, the final rate that was adopted, or not adopted, was a different amount than the proposal. Because of this, there would be no reason for a college spokesperson to claim that a tuition increase occurred unintentionally, which is a necessary condition of using an accident strategy (Benoit, 1995a; Drumheller & Benoit, 2004). Given the amount of thought that goes into tuition rates, such an argument would run the risk of making the college appear dishonest or sloppy.

The other strategy that was not chosen was mortification. Not one college spokesperson used the word “sorry,” “apologize,” or even the milder “regret.” This initially came as a surprise to the author, given that the primary risk of mortification, potential legal action against the organization by the victim of the offensive act (Benoit, 1995a; Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997) would not seem to be in play with colleges that raise tuition. However, mortification carries with it an admission of guilt (Benoit, 1995a; Thomsen & Rawson, 1998). While college spokespersons are clearly aware of the strain higher tuition places on students, and that the news of another increase is likely to be viewed as an offensive act, they may genuinely believe that colleges are not guilty of doing anything wrong when they raise tuition.

Speaking Appropriately to Affect Reference Prices

It was observed that nearly all of the top-20 ranked public college spokespersons used appropriate rhetorical strategies aimed at affecting the reference price of audiences. Setting aside the four colleges that had zero or one qualifying story,¹² Georgia Tech was the only college that did not employ a single rhetorical strategy aimed at affecting reference prices.¹³

¹² the University of Washington, University of Illinois, Purdue University, and University of Florida

¹³ The University of Georgia, who shares a state capital with Georgia Tech, used two appropriate strategies, both of which appeared in its student newspaper.

Most college spokespersons used rhetorical strategies appropriately in one of the two categories of stories—either in stories about tuition or proposed tuition increases, but not in both. UC-Santa Barbara, the University of Connecticut, and the University of Texas were the only colleges whose spokespersons appropriately used a strategy when commenting on both a tuition increase and a proposed tuition increase. All three of these colleges had spokespersons who used these appropriate strategies in reference to the same increases; the spokesperson used an appropriate strategy when discussing a proposed increase, and did it again when the tuition increase became official.

As stated in the results section, college spokespersons used appropriate strategies more often in stories about tuition increases ($n = 19$) than proposed tuition increases ($n = 18$). The distribution of these 37 total strategies was far from equal, with 18 coming in student newspapers, 15 appearing on college websites, and just four in state capital newspapers. Comparing these appearances to the total number of qualifying stories on college websites ($n = 22$), in student newspapers ($n = 60$), and state capital newspapers ($n = 25$), it is hard to avoid the conclusion that college spokespersons are engaging in their most strategic communication on their own websites.

Table 11

Use of appropriate image restoration strategies in stories about tuition increases in college websites, student newspapers, and state capital newspapers

Strategy	Appearances on college websites	Appearances in student newspapers	Appearances in state capital newspapers
Minimization	3	2	0
Bolstering	1	2	0
Differentiation	2	4	0
Compensation	1	3	1

Table 11 shows that college spokespersons were observed using an appropriate rhetorical strategy when commenting on tuition increase in state capital newspapers only one time.

Table 12

Use of appropriate image restoration strategies in stories about proposed tuition increases in college websites, student newspapers, and state capital newspapers

Strategy	Appearances on college websites	Appearances in student newspapers	Appearances in state capital newspapers
Minimization	1	1	2
Bolstering	2	3	1
Differentiation	2	0	0
Compensation	3	3	0

Table 12 shows that college spokespersons used appropriate rhetorical strategies more frequently in state capital newspapers when commenting on proposals than they did when commenting on increases (Table 10). However, in both proposal stories and increase stories, the fewest instances of appropriate rhetoric was observed in state capital newspapers.

The low number of appropriate strategies in state capital newspapers may be partially explained by the low strategy-per-story rate of state capital newspapers ($n = 46$, $M=1.84$). It may be hard for spokespersons to use the right message when their opportunity to do so is limited.

It also may be explained by the audiences of the three sources. As previously discussed, the individuals who read newspapers in the state capital are the least likely to consist of a college's current or potential students. Compared to the individuals who read college websites and student newspapers, the readers of state capital newspapers are more likely tax-paying citizens with little immediate connection to the college, and are more likely to be state legislators. As a result, some rhetorical choices that were observed on college websites and in

student newspapers may not be as useful for colleges that are hoping to influence future state budget decisions.

Consider the following passage from a 2015 statement from University of Wisconsin Chancellor Rebecca Blank, which appeared on the UW website and used differentiation to cast an out-of-state tuition increase in a favorable light:

“Our proposal is to increase nonresident tuition by \$3,000 per year for the next two years, followed by increases of \$2,000 for the following two years. By the end of the four-year period, our nonresident tuition rate would be \$35,523 per year, more than \$6,000 less than the University of Michigan’s current nonresident rate” (Blank, 2015).

To the non-Wisconsin/non-Michigan student who is either attending or considering attending the University of Wisconsin, the tuition increase may not seem so bad. After all, there’s another top-20 public college in a nearby state that’s charging a lot more. This is an appropriate statement for a college to make on its website or in the student newspaper.

The average reader of the newspaper in the state capital, however, might draw a different conclusion. They might wonder if Wisconsin’s out-of-state tuition is actually too low, since there’s another top-20 public college in a nearby state that’s charging a lot more and seems to be doing just fine. Worse, they might wonder if the taxes they pay to the State of Wisconsin are being used to subsidize a comparatively low-cost, higher-quality education for students from other states, and thus view the University of Wisconsin more negatively. Highlighting your relative cheapness to out-of-state students in a state newspaper might be ineffective at best, and potentially counterproductive.

Minimization choices.

Across all stories (n = 107), there were 37 instances in which a college was found to have appropriately used a rhetorical strategy in such a way that it could affect the perceived reference price of its audience (Table 6). All of these instances involved minimization, bolstering, differentiation, or compensation.

However, this does not mean that every time a college spokesperson used minimization, bolstering, differentiation, or compensation, they were speaking to the perceived reference price. While spokespersons primarily chose appropriate language when using differentiation (n = 8, 80% of all observed differentiation uses), compensation (n = 11, 64.7%), and bolstering (n = 9, 56.3%), they were far less-often appropriate in their use of minimization. Across all sources, college spokespersons used a minimization strategy 27 times, but appropriate language was observed just one-third of the time (n = 9). Consider these statements:

“If we’re going to have tuition increases, they need to be as low as possible, and they need to be predictable and they need to be accompanied by a lot of financial aid” (Shyamsundar, 2017).

“Keeping tuition increases to a minimum allows the University System to provide a quality education balanced with the critical need to keep higher education affordable” (Norsworthy, 2017).

The former, by University of California System President Janet Napolitano, is about a proposed tuition increase and the latter, by University System of Georgia Chancellor Steve Wrigley, is about an approved tuition increase. What these statements share in common is vagueness. Audiences’ perceived reference prices are unlikely to be affected, because they do not have any means of comparison. “As low as possible” or “to a minimum” can mean anything.

It can mean an increase of 0.1%, or 10%; it can be a fraction of competitors' increases, or it can be twice their rate of increases.

Now consider these statements, by Penn State President Eric Barron and University of Virginia Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer Patrick Hogan, respectively:

"It's the lowest increase we've seen in the past 40 years" (Bunn, 2015).

"2.2 percent will put U.Va. well below the average increases [in Virginia]" (Davies, 2017).

These statements provide clear comparisons. The former tuition increase is the lowest in decades; the latter is smaller than the increases that have taken place at other schools within the state. These two statements are far more likely to affect the perceived reference price—specifically, the perceived transaction utility—because it makes the tuition increases seem more fair than the two vague statements.

Right Strategy, Right Time

In examining the timing and appropriateness of different rhetorical strategies, it is clear that for public relations practitioners, the use of certain rhetorical strategies is more advisable during specific phases of the conflict management life cycle.

Minimization and differentiation are most appropriate during the reactive and recovery phases, in particular during the reactive phase, once there is officially a rate of tuition increase with which communicators can make favorable comparisons. When tuition is certain to increase, high-ranking college officials have advance knowledge of this fact, and therefore have time to research tuition increases that have taken place at other colleges, as well as those that have occurred at their own college in previous years. They would be wise to use the proactive and

strategic phases to explore the landscape, and determine ways to communicate that the increase should be perceived by publics as smaller than it appears, and thus less offensive.

Blame shifting is more appropriate to use during the proactive and strategic phases, because a college spokesperson can claim that tuition may go up if another party does not take action. This may inoculate publics, so that when a tuition increase becomes official, they believe it is the fault of the blamed other party, not the college. Blame shifting may also deflect the college's perceived responsibility for taking steps to prevent the increase, and may spur the blamed other parties to take actions that prevent or reduce the tuition increase. If state legislators perceive that their constituents are upset, there is nothing that prevents these officials from appropriating additional funds to a college; similarly, concerned alumni may learn that tuition is set to increase substantially and make large donations to offset the increase. Once tuition is officially increasing, however, blame shifting is less appropriate, because students are likely to perceive that the college, or its governing body, was the one who ultimately made the decision to increase tuition.

Limitations

This research looks at the top 20 ranked public colleges in the United States. Lower-ranked four-year colleges, two-year colleges, and private colleges of all calibers may have different target audiences, and may be attempting to appeal to students with different academic track records and from different socioeconomic backgrounds. They may adjust their messaging accordingly.

This research makes a presumption that college spokespersons are acting strategically whenever they speak about tuition increases or proposed tuition increases. There may be instances in which commenting individuals go off-message, whether because they become flustered in the face of a question or criticism, or because they are the sort of people who are prone to speaking candidly.

Although the search process was thorough, consisting of 14 search terms for each source, it is possible that a qualifying story was missed.

This thesis does not differentiate between the announcement of several years' worth of tuition increases versus the announcement an increase for only the next year. A multi-year announcement may be a strategic decision by a college, in order to avoid the threat that is posed by news of a tuition increase.

Finally, colleges and their spokespersons only have control over their own messaging. They can carefully tailor the stories that appear on college websites, but they do not have similar levels of control over what appears in student newspapers and state capital newspapers. Reporters, editors, and copy editors may elect to run just part of a college spokesperson's statements, rather than their full statements. Judging by the fact that colleges were able to utilize

far more image restoration strategies on their websites than in other sources, they may have strategic remarks that never see the light of day.

Future Research

There are many ways this research could be expanded upon in the future. It could be done with more than 20 public colleges, to see if the findings from this research hold true at lower-ranked public colleges across the United States. It could be done using elite private universities, whose tuition remains far higher than their top public counterparts, despite the trends of recent years.

It also be done more narrowly and more in-depth. Research could focus on every public four-year institution within a single state, and instead of looking at the newspaper in the state capital, it could include local and regional newspapers, and coverage that appears in other media outlets, such as television stations.

Future researchers could also go in-depth in a different direction, by exploring the marketing knowledge of college spokespersons. While top-20 colleges possess marketing expertise within their schools of business, there is no guarantee that the wisdom of professors is being successfully conveyed to those whose job is either to communicate on behalf of the university, or those who are tasked with providing advice to president, chancellors, and other administrators who are speaking on behalf of their college. Given the previous lack of connection between the work of Benoit and Thaler, helping to ensure college spokespersons have a better understanding of how to affect reference prices may render future tuition increases a less painful subject to address.

In the evaluation of college rhetoric, only Benoit's 14 image restoration strategies were classified. However, some scholars have suggested additional strategies for inclusion in image restoration theory. These additions include pseudo-apologies (Bentley, 2012; Einsinger, 2011), self-deprecation (Dewberry & Fox, 2012), stonewalling (Frederick, Burch, Sanderson, &

Hambrick, 2014; Hambrick et al, 2013; Smithson & Venette, 2013), and suffering (Frederick et al, 2014; Sanderson, 2008). Future research could consider include these strategies.

Future research could also approach the subject of tuition increases through the lens of inoculation theory, which is focused on how to prevent persuasion—how to inoculate attitudes from change—through the strengthening of pre-existing attitudes (Compton, Jackson, & Dimmock, 2016; Compton & Pfau, 2005). Inoculation theory states that weak arguments against pre-existing attitudes can be easily refuted by the people who hold them, which has the effect of strengthening these attitudes.

There are two major components in inoculation messages: a threat (a forewarning of a possible attack on a person's beliefs), and refutational preemption (content that receivers can use to strengthen their attitudes against change). To make tuition increases more palatable, colleges need to offer strong reasons why it is not as offensive as it may be perceived, and must consider likely rhetorical counterarguments for those who are not easily persuaded.

Conclusion

Like many large organizations, colleges put a great deal of thought into their communication, particularly when the subject of that communication is something that is likely to be viewed by their publics as unpleasant.

Colleges could simply post that tuition is increasing without comment on the websites, or they could just change their published rates. Instead, they choose to comment extensively on tuition increases and proposed tuition increases—not because they have a legal obligation to do so, but because they realize that higher tuition represents a threat to their image, and is part of a national crisis for college students and their families.

This thesis answered two central questions, namely “What are colleges saying?” and “What should they be saying?” By extending image restoration theory through the incorporation of well-established marketing literature, and introducing the concepts of mental accounting and reference prices into the theory, this offers colleges strategic paths the next time colleges announce that tuition is, or may be, going up.

The cost of college tuition has been surging for decades, and there is little reason to believe that this trend will cease in the near future. But by making appropriate rhetorical choices, colleges have the ability to make the subject less offensive.

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