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THE RHETORIC OF AUSTERITY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL
DISCOURSE AND HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING (1980-1989)

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ABSTRACT

Public higher education in the United States has undergone a structural transformation: a massive transfer of costs from the state to the student. While the economic dimensions of this “cost-shift” are well documented, the political communication techniques utilized to legitimize this withdrawal remain under-analyzed. This capstone project tests the hypothesis that austerity policies were aligned with a measurable shift in executive rhetoric. Using a mixed-methods design, this study introduces the Negative Metaphor Density Index (NMDI), a quantitative metric developed to measure the saturation of “market-based” and “burden” framing in gubernatorial discourse. A comparative analysis of eight U.S. states ($N = 8$) reveals a strong, statistically significant inverse relationship between negative rhetorical density and per-capita funding levels (Spearman $r = -0.714$, $p < .05$). Robustness checks using Correlates of State Policy Project (CSPP) unemployment data ($p = 0.547$) and a Wilcoxon rank-sum test for political party ($p = 0.685$) suggest that this association is not explained by economic conditions or partisan affiliation alone. Linear regression patterns are consistent with the idea that rhetoric can function as an early signal of retrenchment: states like Florida that adopted a “Taxpayer Burden” narrative experienced sharper funding declines than states like California, which maintained a “Public Good” framing. These findings challenge the assumption that budget cuts were purely economic inevitabilities, pointing instead to an agenda-setting strategy that recast the public university as a private commodity. Ultimately, this project provides a critical historical baseline, suggesting that contemporary debates over tuition and student debt continue to echo this earlier rhetorical shift.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education funding remains one of the most contentious issues facing state legislators in the U.S. The dominant narrative suggests that rising tuition and falling state support are unavoidable economic constraints, the inevitable consequences of a phenomenon widely referred to in policy literature as the “Cost-Shift” (Mortenson, 2012). However, this economic determinism overlooks the key role of political agency. Budgets are not simply mathematical documents; they are moral documents that reflect the values and priorities of the governing coalition. Before a policy of divestment can be enacted, it must first be legitimized through public discourse.

1.1 The Neoliberal Turn and the Crisis of Confidence

To understand the rhetorical shift of the 1980s, you have to understand the historical background. Before the 1980s, higher education was in its golden era. However, with a nationwide sweeping presidential election win came a shift in political ideology. The decade began with a powerful sense of institutional failure. The 1981-1982 recession, the deepest economic contraction since the Great Depression, left state governments facing a dual crisis: a collapse in tax revenue and a simultaneous surge in demand for social services. In this vacuum of instability, the typical, traditional Keynesian consensus, which viewed state spending as a stabilizer, collapsed. It was replaced by the emerging doctrine of “Supply-Side” economics, which viewed the state itself as the main obstacle to recovery.

This economic anxiety was codified in April 1983 with the publication of the landmark federal report, *A Nation at Risk*. The report did more than criticize test scores; it attempted to reframe education as a matter of national security and geopolitical warfare. Its famous preamble warned, “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre

educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

For States and their governors, this report was a rhetorical tipping point, as it effectively militarized education policy. Schools were no longer simply civic institutions built to nurture democracy; they were industrial sectors that were “failing” to produce a competitive workforce amid Japanese and German dominance in manufacturing. This notable shift in federal tone granted governors a license to intervene in the academy with a new, aggressive arsenal of words and metaphors. Consequently, the rhetoric of the 1980s shifted from “Expansion,” the dominant theme of the 1960s and 70s, to “Retrenchment” and “Accountability.” As this study shows, this was not solely a change in mood; it was a fundamental redefinition of the relationship between the citizen and the state.

This project investigates the roots of this legitimization strategy by returning to the 1980s, the decade scholars identify as the source of neoliberal public management (Harvey, 2005). During this period, the philosophy of fiscal federalism began to devolve financial responsibility from the federal government to the states and, subsequently, from the states to individuals (Apple, 2006). This structural adjustment required a new rhetorical framework. Politicians could no longer sell education purely as a “civic right” or “public good” while simultaneously cutting its funding. Instead, new rhetoric emerged, reframing the university as a “taxpayer burden,” a site of “inefficiency,” and a private-market commodity (Brown, 2015). Drawing on Agenda Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and Strategic Framing Analysis (Entman, 1993), this research argues that the shift in language was neither incidental nor accidental but instrumental. The principal thesis of this study is that the adoption of austerity rhetoric was a prerequisite for implementing austerity policy.

1.2 Theoretical Framework: Metaphor and Political Economy

This study relies on two intersecting theoretical frameworks for metaphorical analysis and quantification: Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Critical Political Economy.

First, drawing on the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), this project poses that metaphors are not exclusively poetic embellishment, but the primary cognitive mechanism through which humans conceptualize abstract domains. Lakoff identifies two competing archetypes in American political discourse that contribute to this shift: the “Nurturing Parent” model, which views the state as a caretaker responsible for cultivating citizens, and the “Strict Father” model, which views the state as a disciplinarian responsible for enforcing moral and fiscal order. In the context of higher education, the “Strict Father” model is evident in the “Household Metaphor.”

Governors frequently argue that “the state must tighten its belt just like a family.” This metaphor is deceptively disproportionate; unlike a household, a sovereign state can generate revenue and invest. However, by invoking the “Household” frame, leaders trigger an ethical framework in which debt is “sin,” and spending is “vice,” thereby making austerity appear not a policy choice but a moral duty.

Second, this rhetorical analysis is grounded in the political economy of Neoliberalism, specifically the work of Wendy Brown (2015). Brown defines neoliberalism not exclusively as a set of economic policies, labeled by deregulation and privatization, but as a “governing rationality” that economizes every sphere of human life, including education. Under this rationality, the student is redefined as “human capital,” the professor as a “service provider,” and the university as a “firm.” Brown argues that this “homo economicus” worldview erodes the democratic function of education, replacing the goal of “citizenship” with the goal of “return on investment.” This study tests Brown’s theory empirically by measuring the density of this

market-based language, ex. “efficiency, marketplace, product,” in gubernatorial speech. My project hypothesizes that as this market rationality saturates the discourse, “High NMDI,” the state withdraws its funding support, effectively “pricing” the university as a private commodity rather than a public good.

In recent years, American public education has once again become a central battleground in a volatile political landscape. A resurgence of populist and austerity-based rhetoric has targeted public institutions, framing them as sites of ideological waste rather than opportunity (Giroux, 2014). This political language has been accompanied by budget cuts, grant limitations, and challenges to the very existence of educational departments. For researchers, this presents an important methodological challenge: how can one statistically measure the fiscal impact of a rhetorical shift while it is still happening? The data is often volatile, incomplete, and lacks the temporal distance needed for sound, empirical analysis.

Therefore, to understand the present, this project turns to the past. This research claims that the current rhetorical climate is not new, but rather a powerful echo, a perpetuation and intensification of a political framework created decades ago. The 1980s represent a near-perfect historical parallel: a decade defined by a pivot to market-based policies, a new language of “taxpayer burden,” and the rise of neoliberal logic in public governance (Harvey, 2005). This was coupled with a measurable shift in state-level funding for higher education, which began to stagnate and decline in real terms when adjusted for enrollment (Mortenson, 2012). This decade provides a stable, data-rich environment to test the relationship between political language and policy outcomes.

2. METHODS

To investigate the relationship between political rhetoric and state-level higher education funding, this project attempts a Mixed Methods Design (Creswell, 2014). This approach enabled simultaneous collection and analysis of qualitative rhetorical and quantitative financial data, which were then merged for statistical testing. The study focused on the decade of 1980–1989. The qualitative corpus includes nine U.S. states (California, Florida, Indiana, Louisiana, Michigan, New York, Oregon, Tennessee, and Texas), while the primary quantitative analysis uses a rigorously controlled subset of eight states ($N = 8$), excluding California as described below.

2.1 Sampling Strategy

To empirically examine the relationship between executive rhetoric and policy outcomes, the study focuses on the decade from 1980 to 1989. The primary qualitative data were obtained from gubernatorial State of the State and Budget Addresses, with transcripts compiled from state historical archives, university digital collections, and official gubernatorial libraries (see References for full archival locations). These historical documents were selected as they serve as principal agenda-setting instruments for state executives, providing the most explicit public articulation of a governor's fiscal priorities and ideological framing. For quantitative analysis, a rigorously controlled sample of eight states ($N=8$) was used. Although speeches from nine states were initially collected, California was intentionally excluded from the final statistical baseline to control for macroeconomic outliers. California's distinctive 1960 Master Plan subsidized a large two-year community college system (Douglass, 2000), and direct comparison of its funding data with states primarily supporting four-year institutions would compromise baseline integrity. Consequently, California is retained as a qualitative control case, while the quantitative model is

limited to the N=8 cohort. After establishing this sampling framework, the gubernatorial texts were systematically analyzed to identify the ideological language used to justify state budget decisions.

2.2 Lexicon Construction and Coding Protocol

A standardized lexicon of austerity-based metaphors was developed based on the theoretical frameworks of Newfield (2008) and Lakoff and Johnson (1980). The lexicon categorized metaphors into three distinct policy domains:

1. Fiscal Burden: Terms framing the university as a liability, ex. “drain, taxpayer expense, subsidy, belt-tightening.”
2. Market Efficiency: Terms applying corporate logic to public governance, ex. “waste, streamline, return on investment, marketplace.”
3. Crisis Management: Terms involving immediate cuts, ex. “shortfall, emergency, freeze, battle.”

2.3 Automated Coding vs Human (NMDI)

A representative sampling method, utilizing the “Keynote Artifact” approach, was used to quantify the rhetorical climate of each state. Rhetorical text was transformed into data through a multi-stage coding protocol. Automated tools functioned solely as auxiliary “sanity checks” rather than as primary decision engines. Agreement statistics indicate that manual coding of “fiscal burden” metaphors aligns with established markers of negative valence and analytical tone.

For each of the nine states, the Governor’s State of the State Address, or equivalent Budget Message, was selected as the primary unit of analysis. The transformation of rhetorical

text into the quantitative NMDI variable followed the principles of Content Analysis (Krippendorff, 2018) and used a “Dictionary-Based” coding approach to ensure replicability. Metaphor units were identified using the Metaphor Identification Procedure, MIP/MIPVU (Pragglejaz Group, 2007; Steen et al., 2010), a systematic four-step method that distinguishes between a word’s contextual meaning and its basic dictionary meaning in spoken or written discourse.

To ensure the validity of these counts, a strict contextual polarity protocol was applied. Simply identifying a word like “cut” was insufficient; the analysis required distinguishing between a “budget cut” (negative) and a “ribbon cutting” (ceremonial). Following the framework created by Wilson, Wiebe, and Hoffmann (2005), then establishing the metaphor token was coded for contextual polarity (-1 Negative). This protocol accounted for negation, ex. “not a drain,” the scope, a distinction between the “system” and the “individual,” and ambiguity. To further reduce coder drift, human-coded labels were triangulated against external sentiment lexicons using the R packages “sentimentr” (Rinker, 2019) and “syuzhet” (Jockers, 2015). Sentence-level polarity was compared with the “NRC Word-Emotion Association Lexicon” (Mohammad & Turney, 2013), which is integrated into the “syuzhet” package. This analysis confirmed the necessity of human coding: while “Austerity” metaphors consistently scored as negative (-1), “Market” metaphors typically did not register as negative due to expressions such as “efficiency” and “investment.” This difference demonstrates that automated sentiment analysis alone fails to capture the nuances and ideological weight of neoliberal discourse, thereby validating the decision to employ a manual “Contextual Polarity” protocol.

2.4 Methods and Rigor

A manual “Contextual Polarity Protocol” was used because automated sentiment tools have limited capacity to detect context-dependent meaning in political speech. For example, the presence of a negative term, ex. “burden,” does not necessarily imply a negative claim if the speaker is rejecting that frame, ex. “We must avoid a burden.” To reduce miscoding, metaphor tokens were coded at the sentence level with attention to scope and valence shifters, ex. negation, rather than relying on raw keyword counts.

1. Negation Check: The analysis identified words such as “not” or “without” that reverse the intended meaning.

2. Triangulation: Human coding was compared against standard sentiment lexicons using the R packages “sentimentr” (Rinker, 2019) and “syuzhet” (Jockers, 2015).

3. The Ideological Gap: The triangulation revealed a significant divergence in sentiment. While “Austerity” metaphors, ex. “cut, freeze,” consistently scored as negative in the automated analysis, Avg: -0.040, “Market” metaphors, ex. “efficiency, investment,” registered as positive, Avg: +0.076.

4. The Result: The computer found that “Market” metaphors, like efficiency, often sound positive (+1), while “Austerity” metaphors, like cuts, sound negative (-1). This supports the decision to code them manually to catch the underlying “Neoliberal” ideology that a computer would miss.

5. Contextual Necessity: The negation check identified 15 instances, representing 17.2% of the corpus, where valence shifters such as “not” and “without” altered the polarity of the metaphor. A purely automated count would have miscoded these tokens, confirming the necessity of the manual protocol.

This difference confirms that automated sentiment analysis alone does not capture the ideological weight of neoliberal discourse. Politicians frequently employ “positive” corporate language to justify “negative” fiscal retrenchment. By relying on the NMDI rather than raw sentiment scores, this study more accurately captures the political function of language rather than merely its emotional tone.

2.5 Further Explanation, Criteria, and Validity

A simple automated count would have been insufficient; for example, due to the previously stated inflections, the word “cut” could refer to “cutting a ribbon” rather than “cutting a budget.” Therefore, to be thorough, the study added an additional layer of checks and implemented a manual exclusion protocol.

1. Positive Metaphor Qualitative Exclusion: Metaphors found in ceremonial sections, such as “the education of our children is a precious jewel,” were excluded because they did not relate to fiscal policy.
2. Exclusive Source Use and Exclusion: Third-party reports, such as UPI wire summaries or political party platforms, ex. The 1985 LA GOP Resolution was reviewed for context but excluded from the final NMDI count to ensure the data strictly reflected each state governor's speeches, such as the State of the State address.

To operationalize this qualitative data into a measurable variable, by using the Negative Metaphor Density Index (NMDI). Adapted from standard trinary qualitative coding models (Krippendorff, 2018), the NMDI intentionally departs from traditional political sentiment analysis. While standard sentiment models plot text on a balanced continuum, where positive (+1) and negative (-1) terms cancel each other out around a neutral baseline (0), the NMDI is

designed to measure pure negative saturation. Specifically, it isolates and aggregates neoliberal metaphors of “discipline, constraint, crisis,” and “taxpayer burden,” assigning a strict weight of -1 to each occurrence.

For example, a gubernatorial statement arguing, “We must bring efficiency (-1) to the university marketplace (-1) to stop the drain (-1) on the taxpayer (-1),” yields a raw internal score of -4. By deliberately ignoring positive linguistic buffers and focusing exclusively on the aggregate sum of these specific frames, ex. [Burden] + [Discipline] + [Crisis] = Total Negative Density, the NMDI framework successfully quantifies the sheer intensity with which a governor rhetorically reconstructed the university as a financial liability.

Each speech was digitized and scanned for these verified tokens. The raw count of negative metaphors (M neg) was normalized by the total word count of the speech using the formula $NMDI = M \text{ neg} / \text{Total Words} \times 10,000$. This normalization was essential to control for varying speech lengths, such as New York’s 12,800-word address compared to Michigan’s 850-word inaugural, thereby yielding a comparable density score for each state.

After identification, each metaphor unit’s contextual polarity was coded as -1 (negative). The sum of these negative metaphors constituted the state’s negative representation value, or the NMDI score for that state. Through quantifying the “Negative Metaphor Density” of gubernatorial speeches across several political environments, this project measures the statistical relationship between the words leaders spoke and the checks they wrote.

The Negative Metaphor Density Index (NMDI) is a metric intended to measure the saturation of austerity and market-based metaphors. It is based on the Metaphor Density Index (Krippendorff, 2018), which quantifies metaphors in official state political discourse from 1980

to 1989. The central thesis is that higher NMDI values, greater negative rhetorical saturation, are associated with lower state-level financial support for higher education.

2.6 Quantitative Analysis: Financial Variables

Data for the dependent variable, Support Per Capita, were obtained from the Grapevine database (Center for the Study of Education Policy, 2024) and U.S. Census Bureau population estimates (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990). The primary metric was calculated by dividing the Total State and Local Support Excluding Federal Stimulus by the state population. This approach enables direct comparison of fiscal effort across states of different sizes, yielding a per capita metric suitable for comparison with other variables.

2.7 R Statistical Analysis and Significance

Statistical testing was performed using R (Version 4.0; R Core Team, 2024). Data visualization was generated using the “ggplot2” package (Wickham, 2016). Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between the Negative Metaphor Density Index (NMDI) and funding. Additionally, linear regression models were generated to assess the predictive power of rhetoric on funding outcomes.

To ensure the validity of the comparative analysis, a Levene’s Test for Homogeneity of Variance was conducted. The result ($p = .39$) confirmed that the variance between the High Rhetoric and Low Rhetoric groups was equal, supporting the use of parametric statistical testing. This finding suggests that observed funding inequalities were structural rather than attributable to outliers or statistical noise. Additional analyses revealed both statistically significant and non-significant relationships.

Data for the dependent variable, Support Per Capita, were obtained from the Grapevine database. To capture the cumulative effects of policy, funding data were anchored to 1988 to

account for legislative lag, recognizing that agenda-setting rhetoric requires time to manifest in state budgets. To test the relationship between NMDI threat saturation and state funding, a Spearman's Rank Correlation was conducted in RStudio.

The Spearman test was chosen due to the small sample size ($N=8$) and its non-parametric nature, which does not assume a normal distribution but instead measures rank order. The analysis revealed a strong, statistically significant inverse relationship ($r = -0.714$, $p < .05$). This negative correlation supports the central thesis: as negative austerity rhetoric increased, state higher education funding decreased. The low p-value confirms that this relationship is statistically significant and not attributable to random variation.

3. RESULTS

The comparative analysis shows a significant divergence in both the fiscal support for higher education and the political rhetoric characterizing it during the 1980s. The data demonstrate that states with a higher density of austerity-based metaphors, as measured by the Negative Metaphor Density Index (NMDI), consistently allocated lower levels of financial support per capita.

3.1 The Fiscal Shift: Disparities in State Support

Quantitative analysis of state funding demonstrates that the “cost shift” was not uniform. The data uncovers a massive gap between the highest-investing and lowest-investing states. California, $Z=+2.18$, led the sample with \$200.72 per capita support, whereas Florida, $Z=-0.97$, provided only \$109.87 per capita, a funding gap of nearly double. New York, \$154.05, and Indiana, \$148.14, also maintained relatively high levels of support, while states like Michigan, \$110.51, and Louisiana, \$115.30, clustered near the bottom of the group.

To assess the linear association between NMDI and per-capita support, Pearson correlations were estimated under two specifications:

1. The full sample including California (N = 9)
2. The controlled sample excluding California (N = 8)

A Pearson correlation coefficient test was conducted to verify the strength of this relationship. The analysis identified a strong, statistically significant negative correlation between the Negative Metaphor Density Index (NMDI) and state funding levels. In the full sample (N = 9), before excluding California, the analysis identified a strong, statistically significant negative correlation between NMDI and state funding levels, $r = -0.81$, $p = .008$. The coefficient of determination, $R^2 = 0.66$, indicates that the saturation of negative rhetoric accounts for approximately 66% of the variance in funding levels across the sample.

3.2 Linear Regression: The “Cost of Rhetoric”

The Linear Regression model offers a specific quantification of the “cost of rhetoric.” The model returned a slope coefficient of -0.49. In plain economic terms, this suggests that for every single-unit increase in the Negative Metaphor Density Index (NMDI), state support for higher education is associated with an estimated decrease of \$0.49 (49 cents) per capita, where NMDI is measured as negative metaphor tokens per 10,000 words. This allows us to move beyond vague assertions of “neoliberal influence” and place a specific dollar value on the adoption of austerity discourse.

3.3 T-Test and Analysis

An independent-samples t-test confirmed a structural divergence: $t = -3.35$, $p = .02$. States categorized as “Low Negative Rhetoric” provided an average of \$156.16 per capita,

whereas “High Negative Rhetoric” states provided only \$115.27, a structural funding gap of over \$40 per citizen.

The data reveal a stark relationship between funding and output. In 1988, New York, a high-funding state, with \$154.05 per capita, led the cohort in productivity, awarding 524.13 Bachelor’s degrees per 100,000 residents. Conversely, Florida, the lowest-funded state, \$109.87 per capita in 1988, produced only 280.39 degrees per 100,000 residents. This suggests that New York’s higher investment was associated with a degree production rate nearly twice that of Florida.

The rhetorical analysis shows a parallel stratification. Florida exhibited the highest density of negative metaphors, with an NMDI score of 150.7. Governor Bob Graham’s 1985 address was defined by frequent references to “waste, burden,” and “limits.” Contrast that with California’s Governor George Deukmejian, who utilized a significantly more positive rhetoric, resulting in the lowest NMDI score of 46.8.

3.4 Sensitivity Check: Excluding California (Controlled Sample)

As a sensitivity check, Pearson’s correlation was re-estimated in the controlled specification excluding California ($N = 8$). The analysis identified a statistically significant negative correlation between NMDI and state funding levels, $r = -0.65$, $p = .04$. The coefficient of determination, $R^2 = 0.42$, indicates that the saturation of negative rhetoric accounts for approximately 42% of the variance in funding levels across the sample.

3.5 Robustness Checks and Alternative Hypotheses

To ensure that the primary finding, a strong inverse correlation between negative rhetoric and state funding, was not just an artifact of external variables, this study preemptively challenged its own model by testing three common counterarguments. Specifically, the data were

subjected to reliability tests to determine whether the budget cuts were driven by economic determinism, partisan affiliation, or performance-based accountability.

3.6 Ruling Out Economic Determinism

A common assumption in higher education policy is that governors reduce budgets solely due to macroeconomic conditions. To test this economic determinism, state unemployment rates from the Correlates of State Policy Project (CSPP) were compared with governors' NMDI scores. The correlation yielded a non-significant p-value of 0.547, indicating that the state of the economy did not dictate austerity rhetoric. Qualitative data reinforce this finding: for example, Florida experienced relatively low unemployment during the sample period, yet its governor employed highly negative austerity language. These results demonstrate that severe economic distress was not a prerequisite for rhetorical divestment; rather, the rhetoric reflected an ideological choice.

3.7 The Bipartisan Shield of Neoliberalism

A second potential confounder is partisan affiliation, based on the assumption that conservative Republicans are more likely to cut public spending while liberal Democrats protect it. To test whether the cost-shift was party-affiliated, a Wilcoxon rank-sum test was conducted, returning a p-value of 0.685 and indicating no statistically significant difference in funding outcomes across party lines. This ideological convergence is illustrated by comparing Florida and California.

In Florida, Democratic Governor Bob Graham justified significant divestment by framing students as commodities, arguing they needed only the “skills you need to compete in the marketplace.” This market-based framing resulted in the lowest per-capita funding in the cohort. In contrast, California’s conservative Republican Governor George Deukmejian rejected

austerity and used protective rhetoric to declare a “fiscal rescue plan” that brought “America's frontier” back to the state. Deukmejian's narrative shielded the university system, enabling it to maintain high per-capita investment.

3.8 Disproving the Performance and Accountability Myth

Finally, this study tested the “performance” narrative, the neoliberal claim that budget cuts serve as punitive measures to reduce bureaucratic waste, penalize poor test scores, and increase university efficiency. If this accountability hypothesis were accurate, funding cuts would result in streamlined, high-performing systems. However, analysis of state funding and four-year degree output reveals a direct correlation: reductions in funding correspond to decreased degree production. Florida, characterized by high negative rhetoric and minimal funding, produced a significantly low degree output. In contrast, New York resisted negative austerity framing, maintained its funding, and achieved the highest degree output in the cohort. These findings indicate that austerity did not enhance institutional efficiency but instead reduced system capacity and limited workforce output.

4. CONCLUSION

The 1980s represented a key pivot in the political economy of American higher education. It was the decade in which the post-war consensus on public education, viewed as a civic right and public good, began to fracture under pressure from new market-based ideologies. This capstone project has demonstrated that this fracture was signaled and accelerated by a specific, measurable shift in executive communication.

By measuring this shift using the Negative Metaphor Density Index (NMDI), this research provides empirical evidence that austerity rhetoric preceded actual divestment policies. The data indicate a measurable impact: a one-unit increase in NMDI corresponds to an estimated

decrease of \$0.49 (49 cents) per capita. For contemporary policy analysts, this finding underscores that defending public institutions necessitates more than presenting economic data; it also requires challenging the metaphors that shape public perception. When education is persistently framed as a “taxpayer burden,” funding is likely to decline. Preserving the concept of the “Public Good” depends on reclaiming the language of investment.

4.1 Implications for the Present

The relevance of this research spans far beyond the historical record of the 1980s. The rhetorical patterns identified in this study, framing education as a “taxpayer burden,” or a site of “ideological waste,” are strikingly similar to the political discourse surrounding higher education today. By studying the mechanics of the 1980s pivot, we gain a clearer perspective on contemporary policy debates. The data suggest that the current resurgence of negative rhetoric about education is not a new phenomenon but an echo of a strategy used decades ago.

4.2 Future Research

This project serves as a proof of concept for a wider historical analysis. Future research should expand the NMDI methodology to include all fifty states, creating a comprehensive map of rhetorical density across the nation. Ultimately, recognizing that we have “been here before” offers a measure of historical perspective; it demonstrates that public higher education has survived periods of intense rhetorical hostility, but it also warns that the consequences of that hostility are real, measurable, and enduring.

4.3 Final Thoughts

The findings of this project reveal the critical power of language in public policy. The massive divestment from higher education in the 1980s was a manufactured, ideological choice rather than a purely economic inevitability. By weaponizing the rhetoric of austerity to reframe

the student as a consumer and the university as a taxpayer burden, policymakers successfully engineered the political consent required to withdraw state support. This historical context provides a vital lesson for understanding the current landscape of higher education. The structural shift that created today's \$1.7 trillion student debt crisis did not begin in a budget spreadsheet. It began in the rhetoric.

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