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# The Tale of Two College Experiences: A Cluster Analysis of Obama's Argument for Higher Education Reform

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*During the third week of August 2013, President Barack Obama presented two policy speeches furthering his rationale for higher education reform. Stressing themes of institutional accountability, efficiency, and affordability, Obama sketched out a three point agenda aimed at making higher education a "better bargain" for America's struggling middle class. In this brief essay, I examine the rhetorical processes President Obama used to justify his argument for higher education reform through a cluster analysis of his Henninger High School address. The paper seeks to explore the general implications of word choice/style and language arrangement in political advocacy through a critical reading of his argument.*

During the third week of August 2013, President Barack Obama presented two televised policy speeches advancing his case for higher education reform. Underscoring themes of institutional accountability, efficiency, and affordability, Obama sketched out a three point agenda aimed at making higher education a "better bargain" for America's struggling middle class (Lewin, 2013; Mauriello, 2013; McMin, 2013). In this brief essay, I examine the rhetorical processes President Obama used to justify his argument for higher education reform through a cluster analysis of his Henninger High School address. The paper seeks to explore the general implications of word choice/style and language arrangement in political advocacy through a critical reading of his argument.

## Context of Speech

On August 22, 2013, President Obama delivered two policy speeches—one at the University of Buffalo in Amherst and a second at Henninger High School in Syracuse—outlining new initiatives directed at curtailing the rising costs of higher education. These speeches were part of a two day bus tour through upstate New York and Pennsylvania aimed at promoting his education plan to the nation (Lewin, 2013; UPI, 2013). In an interview conducted on August 23, 2013 on CNN's morning program, *New Day*, Obama synopsised his three point blueprint to anchor Chris Cuomo:

Number one, we want to create a new system of ratings for colleges so that parents and students know what schools graduate kids on time, are a good value for the money, lead to good jobs.... The second thing we want to do is work with colleges who are doing some really interesting things to figure out, how do you reduce costs?....And then the third thing we want to do is to build on something we've already done, which is to try to help students manage their debt (Obama, 2013b).

Obama's plan, projected to be implemented by 2018, is designed to tie the distribution of federal financial aid to an evaluation system for colleges and universities based on several performance measures—e.g., graduation rates, post-graduate earnings, and overall affordability (Fain, 2013; Hoyer & Bentz, 2013; McMinn, 2013).

Addressing an enthusiastic crowd of approximately 1,300 students, parents, and VIPs, President Obama began his remarks at Henninger High School around 6:25 Eastern standard time and concluded 25 minutes later. Roughly 10 minutes into the speech, Mr. Obama was interrupted momentarily by two pro-Bradley Manning protesters, but resumed as they were ushered out of the gymnasium (Lucas, 2013; Mulcahy, 2013). For this early evening event, President Obama abandoned his suit and tie in favor of a more business casual look.

At the time the speech was given, President Obama carried a 47% approval rating (Gallup, 2013c) with only 4% of Americans citing education as a "top" national problem (Gallup, 2013a). Interestingly, a Gallup poll taken in late May 2013, found one in four Americans strongly disagreeing with the notion that higher tuition rates at colleges/universities equated to a higher quality educational experience. The same poll also found job preparation/employment opportunities and tuition costs to play far more important roles in college selection than an institution's graduation rate (Gallup, 2013b).

### Method

Cluster criticism was utilized to evaluate the language/word choices President Obama exercised to bolster his argument for higher education reform. Cluster analysis is a form of rhetorical criticism that studies "the meanings that key symbols have for a rhetor [by]...charting the symbols that cluster around those key symbols in an artifact" (Foss, 2009, p. 65). Originally articulated by Kenneth Burke (1937) in his book, *Attitudes Toward History*, cluster criticism offers a descriptive investigation of the way key symbolic terms (e.g., concepts) are framed and communicated to specific publics. In doing so, the critic gains valuable insight into the way the rhetor defines his/her reality and interprets the subjects at hand (Berthold, 1976; Foss, 2009; Rueckert, 1963). Cluster analysis looks specifically at the interrelationships of symbolic meanings—what Burke termed "associational clusters"—to understand the general, integrated impression the rhetor is attempting to convey and/or reinforce toward a particular topic or theme (Berthold, 1976; Foss, 2009; Rueckert, 1963).

The complete transcript of President Obama's speech was retrieved from the White House website (Obama, 2013a). Following Foss' (2009) recommendations, this cluster analysis involved a three-stage qualitative process. First, I critically studied the text, identifying key terms and concepts utilized in the speech. Terms were selected on the basis of frequency and/or intensity of use. Frequency referred the number of instances the rhetor referenced the term or concept, whereas intensity implicated the significance, force, or principal importance of a term. After key terms were isolated, I moved to the second phase of cluster analysis, charting themes and issues that were regularly "clustered" around or associated with each term. Finally, an attempt was made to uncover the explicit and implicit meanings of similarly categorized themes, focusing on "patterns in the associations or linkages discovered in the charting of the clusters as a way of making visible the worldview constructed by the rhetor" (Foss, 2009, p. 67). Particular emphasis was placed on the unified impression a key term "gave off" through its semantic connections with other terms (e.g., labels, descriptors, characterizations).

It should be noted that in typical transcription style words were used to indicate such things as "applause," "audience," and "Obama" (indicating that Obama was speaking). These words, when used to simply indicate who was speaking or some type of visual response, were taken out of the cluster analysis.

### Findings

#### Cluster: Defending/Championing the Middle Class

While President Obama appeals to a number of conventional American values in his speech, it is his appeal to middle class achievement and success that forms the crux of his argument. Obama's 16 references to the "middle class," occurring principally in the beginning and end of his address, clustered with several like terms and phrases: "security," "work(ing) hard," "get into," "working harder and harder," "build on the cornerstones of," "chance to succeed," "jobs," "secure a better bargain for," "families succeed," "strengthen," "strong," and "fighting to join."

Using these descriptors, Obama paints a compelling portrait of a middle class still struggling against the destructive economic effects of the 2008 recession (e.g., unemployment, diminished wages, rising health care costs, growing inequality). Not only are Americans working harder to make ends meet, but they are also finding it more and more difficult to get ahead. This, according to Obama, flies in the face of the American dream, the belief that with hard work and diligent effort, anyone can improve upon their socioeconomic standing. "The idea used to be," he states, "that here in American anybody could make it. But part of that was because we put these ladders of opportunity for people. And, unfortunately, what's happened is it's gotten tougher for a lot of folks." To reward their hard work, Obama suggests that we must "create as many pathways as possible for people to succeed." One of these pathways—a means to social mobility, economic growth, and "key to a strong middle class" is higher education.

#### Cluster: The Cost of Higher Education

To bolster justification for his strategy, Obama presents, in dialectical terms, the exigency of the situation: "The fact is, college has never been more necessary, but it's also never been more expensive" [emphasis added]. From here, Obama uses specialized language to depict higher education; around the term "college," which was cited a sum of 28 times, clustered several negative terms and phrases that underscored the hefty price of this "pathway to success": "barrier and a burden," "families are making bigger and bigger sacrifices...to help kids afford," "soaring cost of," "harder and harder...to afford," "owing," "crushing debt," "price of going," "raising tuition," "crippling our self-reliance and dreams," "expensive," and "mountain of debt."

There are two significant implications of this cluster. First, as an extension of his middle class appeal, Mr. Obama notes that because many Americans simply cannot afford the college experience, they are marginalized from the socioeconomic opportunities it may offer. Obama stresses the point: "The unemployment rate for Americans with at least a college degree is about a third lower than the national average. The incomes of people with at least a college degree are more than twice what the incomes are of Americans who don't have a high school diploma." Second, for those that do attend college, they find themselves saddled with excessive debt and burdensome loan payments that further hamper their social mobility. While higher education may be a necessity, it is also an immense financial burden.

#### Cluster: The Value of Higher Education

Following the description of his plan, there was a marked change in tone, primarily reflecting a more optimistic impression of higher education/college. Words and phrases commonly used in conjunction with college or higher education included: "best ticket to upward mobility," "able to afford," "incentives," "better value," "keep costs down," "opportunity," "helping students," "graduating with manageable debt," "strong career potential," "deliver," "embrace/encouraging innovation," "great education without breaking the bank," "high quality," "manage," "afford" and "good investment."

Collectively, this cluster functions to stress the advantages of his proposal in addition to playing on the audience's needs for emotional and financial security. These themes interdependently reinforce Obama's initial premise, that if higher education were made more affordable and accessible, it would not only further middle class security, but also contribute to personal success; in other words, his argument comes full circle, as it is apparent that a reasonably priced, yet quality college experience holds the key to individual and societal advancement. By means of positive framing, Obama's proposal is enhanced through its' semantic association with higher education, which in turn is enhanced by its' relationship to middle class security. In essence, this cluster serves to pragmatically ground his support for middle class achievement by offering a plan that purportedly does just that.

#### Summary

In this short essay, I examined the rhetorical processes President Obama used to justify his argument for higher education reform through a cluster analysis of his Henninger High School address. Analysis uncovered three main clusters of meaning in his speech: defending/supporting the middle class, the cost of higher education, and the value of higher education. Implications of each theme were briefly discussed.

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