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Hiding in Plain Sight: The Potential of State-Level Governing Boards in Postsecondary Education Policy Agenda-Setting

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ABSTRACT

State-level governing boards (SLGBs) can play an essential regulatory role as intermediaries between the public, state-elected officials, and campus-level leadership. However, these boards have been understudied within higher education relative to their enormous potential to influence postsecondary institutions and state political dynamics via the ways they engage and leverage political discourse in the agenda setting process. To explore this latent function, the authors analyze strategic plans generated by SLGBs of 33 states to theorize how these entities leverage economic, public purpose, and accountability discourses in the policymaking process. The overarching questions were: 1) what are the dominant discourses in SLGB strategic plans and 2) to which audience are these plans directed? The authors build on the concepts of collaborative governance and the Policy Streams Model of Decentralization Agenda Setting to illuminate and contextualize dimensions of the potential for SLGBs to operate as important policy actors. The authors present a conceptual framework that can help scholars better understand how SLGBs and policy discourses interact to achieve institutional and state priorities. Implications for policymakers engaging in strategic planning are also included.

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Strategic plans; postsecondary education; policy; governance; mission

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a controversial proposal arose to consolidate the University of Missouri system president and University of Missouri chancellor positions into a dual-title role. Opponents believed this policy change could irreparably harm both the system and the flagship institution due to conflicts of interest and ethical tensions (MU for UM, n.d.). Often, it is institutional leaders or state politicians who receive credit or scorn for proposing and implementing policy decisions such as this that have far-reaching implications. However, higher education state-level governing boards (SLGBs[1]), like the Missouri Board of Curators, frequently wield decision-making authority or oversight on consequential policy proposals. SLGBs "regulate and hold

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universities accountable" to statewide priorities with the intent of "establishing state goals and objectives, evaluating the resources of all institutions, and recommending public policy priorities" (McGuinness, 1997, p. 12). Nevertheless, SLGBs are understudied relative to their potential influence over state and institutional political dynamics (Knott & Payne, 2004). In response, we analyzed how SLGBs engage with prevailing discourses within the agenda-setting stage of postsecondary policymaking (Hillman et al., 2015). We examined strategic plans[2] to better understand how SLGBs situate themselves in activities beyond their regulatory duties.

Kotler and Murphy (1981) defined strategic planning in higher education as "the process of developing and maintaining a strategic fit between the organization and its changing marketing opportunity" (p. 471). They emphasize that "organizational leaders … are the only ones who can modify organizations" (Kotler & Murphy, 1981, p. 470). However, this assertion of campus-level change undersells a latent role SLGBs play in shaping the policy agenda that can drive institutional change (Hillman et al., 2015). The utility of strategic plans in governance is disputed because critics have charged that these documents remain underutilized until the next update, having no impact on decisions or policy (Graham, 2018). However, many websites hosting strategic plans in our study contain framing statements similar to the Florida system's (n.d.) website:

> The changes to this updated Strategic Plan … demonstrate the Board's commitment to … strategic planning that truly helps steer the State University System in the direction of Florida's highest priorities. Every five years, the Board will review the Strategic Plan, assess the State University System's progress on the 32 goals in the Plan, and make adjustments … The Board's continued close attention to the accuracy and credibility of its Strategic Plan will focus the State University System to help Florida find solutions to the educational, economic, and societal challenges of the coming decades.

Whether acted upon or not, the aspirational tone inherent in the strategic planning genre constitutes potential fodder for the problem, solutions, or political streams, which are distinctively central to agenda setting (Kingdon, 2013; McLendon, 2003). Hence, we examine how SLGBs' strategic plans employ prevailing discourses to potentially inform agenda setting in postsecondary education policymaking. Our guiding questions were: 1) what are the dominant discourses in SLGB strategic plans and 2) to which audience are these plans directed?

Literature review

Many of the recent studies on governing boards are focused on campus-level boards (Barringer & Riffe, 2018; Commodore, 2018; Tierney & Rall, 2018). Given our interest in state-level political dynamics, we broadened our review

to map significant actors in postsecondary education policymaking and note their relationship to SLGBs. Then we review the concept of political intermediaries and make a case for understanding SLGBs as a unique type of intermediary in the agenda-setting process. Next, we summarize the significance of discourse in postsecondary education, drawing attention to prior research in higher education policy that has neglected the role of discourse *and* SLGBs in describing dimensions of policymaking. Our review amplified the need to devise a theory-informed framework that locates policy discourses, SLGBs strategic plans, and potential agenda-setting dimensions to better illuminate concealed policymaking dynamics.

Postsecondary education policy actors

Scholars reason that the contemporary policymaking landscape is informed by neoliberal shifts tied to state divestment from higher education (Li, 2017), evolving accountability schemes (Dougherty & Natow, 2019), and shifting political realities (Orphan et al., 2020). Ness et al.'s (2015) conceptual framing of state-level interest group activity draws attention to three overlapping dimensions that inform the policymaking process: 1) state political, social, economic, and demographic characteristics, 2) larger state interest group ecology, and 3) state higher education interest groups. Within the state higher education landscape, they categorize policy actors into "obvious" and "less-obvious" groupings based on entities that are "commonly identified in previous studies of higher education interest groups" (Ness et al., 2015, p. 161), listing SLGBs in the "Obvious Actor" group. Despite research that highlights governance structures in the policymaking process, the conclusions about what those structures mean for policymaking continue to be "a muddled picture overall" (Ness et al., 2015, p. 177). The lack of consensus on SLGBs' mediating effect in policymaking contrasts with the wealth of knowledge accumulated in other policy research strands.

For instance, researchers have outlined different ways state higher education executive officers influence policymaking and policy implementation (Lingenfelter, 2012; Tandberg et al., 2018). Other research investigates the relationship between policy actors such as legislatures, governors, lobbyists, and nongovernmental actors (Ness et al., 2015; Orphan et al., 2020). While other research has focused on dynamics within the policymaking process, such as the use of information (Ness, 2010), racial tensions (Baker, 2019), and state political ideology characteristics (Heck et al., 2012).

Commonplace across postsecondary education policy literature are attempts to explain or clarify an ever-evolving process. Likewise, we attempt to advance the conceptual understanding of SLGBs by focusing on how they are situated within "agenda setting" dynamics (Kingdon, 2013). This preliminary framing attunes us less to the mediating role of regulatory structures

on policy outcomes (Ness et al., 2015). However, in a complementary fashion, it does highlight additional avenues to explore how SLGBs enact their roles in a different stage of the policy process. It is necessary then, to conceptualize SLGBs in an "expanded" rather than a "traditional" way to address the full complexity of the policy-making process (Hillman et al., 2015, p. 2).

Accordingly, we view SLGBs as embedded entities between other policy actors, as political intermediaries, rather than solely in terms of their structure, which often narrowly serves as a proxy for their regulatory function (Ness et al., 2015; Tandberg, 2010, 2013). For instance, SLGBs often regulate activities such as tuition-setting policies and academic programs. These activities have already been formalized into policies, actions, and relationships between SLGBs and other policy actors, constituting a normative view of SLGBs (Hillman et al., 2015). The purpose of expanding how SLGBs are conceptualized is to illuminate discourses that might allow SLGBs to enact intermediary roles within the various stages of policymaking.

Intermediary organizations

Much of the literature on intermediary organizations seeks to elaborate on principal-agent (PA) dynamics, where the principal is understood as a typical citizen with voting rights and the agent as an elected representative (Lane, 2006). The activities of intermediaries within typical PA relationships "can enable the principal better to choose its agents and then better monitor and control those agents' activities" (Issacharoff & Ortiz, 1999, p. 1629). In this sense, control is the principal's ability to leverage an intermediary to ensure alignment between the agent's activities and the principal's interests and outcomes.

Principals' most straight-forward control instrument is the ability to vote elected officials into and out of office. However, there are time and resource constraints that detract from a principal's ability to stay informed about whether agents are aligned with the principal's desires. Thus, additional mechanisms are necessary to carry out the oversight and influence of an agent. These mechanisms include vote tracking, legislative analysis, lobbying, financial contributions, and coalition building (Issacharoff & Ortiz, 1999).

A recent study of intermediaries in higher education that highlights some of the above mechanisms is Gándara et al.'s (2017) study, which explored the diffusion of performance-based funding. They focused on an advocacy organization as an intermediary during the agenda-setting and solutions proposal stage within a state. However, their findings suggest this intermediary's role was less observable in other stages of the policymaking process. The authors call for additional research that investigates intermediaries' work at numerous stages in the policymaking process.

SLGBs ≠ intermediaries

We suspect that few studies operationalize SLGBs as intermediaries in policymaking research because of conflicting insights about how the structure of SLGBs influences educational funding dynamics. For example, McLendon et al. (2009) found no relationship between consolidated governing boards and increased state funding. Whereas, Nicholson-Crotty and Meier (2003) suggest that "political forces affect higher education differently in states with coordinating boards than in states with consolidated governing boards" (p. 95). However, they were unable to determine how governing structures affect political influence. Additionally, Tandberg (2010, 2013) demonstrated a negative relationship between states with centralized governance structures and the resources and activity they allocated to higher education.

A different approach because of its qualitative focus is the series of papers from Bastedo's (2005, 2009) Massachusetts' SLGB case study. These papers illuminate how influential boards can be in policymaking when accounting for characteristics of "institutional entrepreneurs" (Bastedo, 2005, p. 554). The shared conclusion between these studies is that multiple dynamics inform how SLGBs operate. Yet, the studies affirm the difficulty of capturing these dynamics across multiple stages of the policymaking process. Accordingly, to enhance understanding of SLGBs, we move to augment existing theory on the potential role of SLGBs in agenda setting.

Reconceptualizing intermediaries

Few policy studies expansively conceptualize entities such as SLGBs within the PA dynamic because boards are typically depicted as more tightly coupled to elected officials than other policy actors (Dee, 2006; Tandberg, 2010, 2013). Issacharoff and Ortiz (1999) explicate that given competing demands in the policy environment, it is appropriate to broaden the PA framing to capture how different governmental bodies relate to each other. They argue that the same knowledge and resource constraints that exist for citizens and compel them to rely on unions or parties to mediate their political activity (Hershey, 2017), exist for elected officials who exert control over other governmental entities (i.e., SLGBs). So, unlike studies which depict SLGBs as potentially co-opted organizations (Tandberg, 2010, 2013), or narrowly operationalize their role in policymaking (McLendon et al., 2009; Ness et al., 2015) we view SLGBs as agentic intermediaries in postsecondary policy whose roles in agenda-setting are typically obfuscated by synergistic and competing activities of higher education agencies, policymakers, institutional lobbyists, and the general public (Nisar, 2015).

We situate SLGBs as intermediaries based on the claim that intermediaries: "operate independently of … two parties and provide distinct value beyond

that which the parties alone would be able to develop or to amass themselves" (Honig, 2004, p. 83). SLGBs are typically operationalized based on their regulatory functions over public institutions (McGuinness, 2016; Ness et al., 2015), illuminating their potential value to institutions. Regarding providing value to legislatures or the governor, Ness (2010) writes:

> Prior to the creation of statewide governance systems, campus leaders directly represented their interests to state legislatures and governors … Without an intermediary organization, for example, how could legislators determine … how to equitably appropriate funds across varying institution types … ? (p. 40)

Furthermore, Honig (2004) concludes that the actions of intermediaries are "context specific—contingent on given policy demands and policymakers' and implementers' capacity to meet those demands themselves" (p. 83). We interpret this conclusion to suggest that the intermediary organization designation should not be statically applied (i.e., SLGBs either are or are not intermediary organizations), but more fluidly adapted depending on the policymaking stage.

Within this reconsideration (see Figure 1), we view elected officials as principals, public postsecondary institutions as agents (Dee, 2006), and SLGBs as intermediaries. Yet, given the espoused and at times operationalized public purposes of higher education (Morphew & Hartley, 2006), SLGBs are also accountable to the broader public. By the broader public, we mean entities with interests in the state's success, such as citizens, the business community, and nonprofit organizations. We expand on this model in the study's theoretical framing but first explore the role of discourse in policymaking.

Discourse's role in political Milieu

Schiffrin et al. (2001) suggest that the concept of discourse draws attention to: "(1) anything beyond the sentence, (2) language use, and (3) a broader range of social

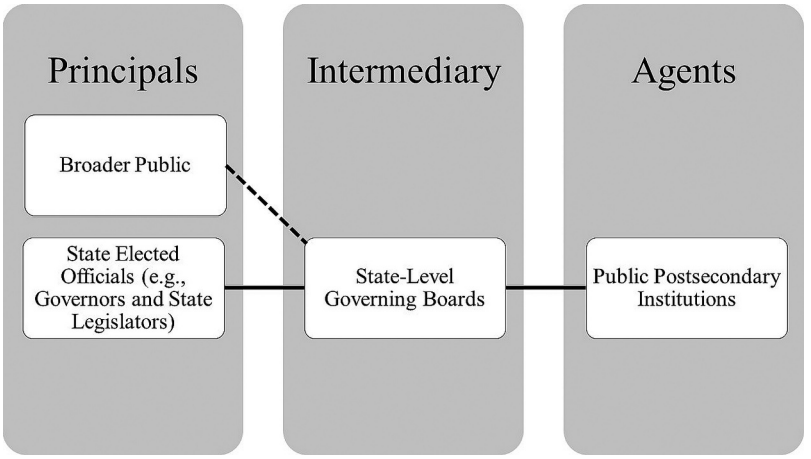

Figure 1. Reconceptualized Postsecondary Education Governance Principal-Agent Relationship.

practice that includes nonlinguistic and nonspecific instances of language" (p. 2). For example, Ayers' (2005) critical discourse analysis of community college mission statements revealed how leaders and politicians' pronouncements are "recontextualized" as an economic process rooted in neoliberal ideology. More specifically, political discourse analysis focuses on, "the reproduction of political power, power abuse or domination" (Van Dijk, 1997, p. 11). Ayers (2005) concludes that the community college evolution, and we would add any educational organization, is "both a semiotic endeavor and an ideological struggle between competing discourse regimes" (p. 549). When focused on agenda setting, which discourses are leveraged, for what purposes, and by whom is critical to understanding SLGBs involvement.

Especially relative to other publicly available documents, we contend that strategic plans have the potential to be far more influential than their symbolic purposes may initially suggest because of their ability to capture prevailing discourses, begin an accountability paper trail, and illuminate political priorities and strategies (Dooris et al., 2004). Tentatively interweaving the reconceptualization of intermediaries and the role of discourse, we advance a theoretical framework that leverages existing models to establish a more nuanced understanding of SLGBs.

Theoretical framework

In their review of the limitations of PA theory, Maggetti and Papadopoulos (2018) argue that scholars often overlook how regulatory agencies potentially insert themselves in the policymaking process over time through the development of a policy agenda. They highlight a corpus of studies showing that "independent regulators do not necessarily behave as a delegate of their principal" (p. 178). This argument, based on a longitudinal perspective of regulatory bodies, shows that "time helps agencies to expand their expertise and enhance their credibility, which in turn facilitates a 'mission creep' that may even exceed the large formal competencies that are delegated to them" (p. 179). Put plainly, PA theory historically highlights agents' lack of responsiveness to principals but does not fully capture expanded functions for intermediaries that possess some regulatory functions. To be clear, our contention here is that intermediaries may have expanded roles in policymaking, not that they do.

Our theoretical framework is designed to illuminate and contextualize this expanded possibility by responding to the hierarchal and narrow framing of PA theory relative to intermediaries by leveraging the concepts of collaborative governance and McLendon's (2003) Policy Streams Model of Decentralization Agenda Setting. Additionally, merging these frameworks reveals the potential role of discourses in agenda-setting.

Beginning broadly, the concept of collaborative governance (Emerson et al., 2012), from the field of public administration, helps distinguish how individual components and the larger whole operate in support or against any espoused aim. Collaborative governance is defined as a process and structures, "that engage people constructively across the boundaries of public agencies, levels of government, and/or the public, private and civic spheres in order to carry out a public purpose that could not otherwise be accomplished" (Emerson et al., 2012, p. 2).

When considering the multifaceted potential of how organizations use strategic plans, we needed a framework that could locate agenda-setting as much as examine particular policy outcomes. Emerson et al. (2012) layout the integrative Framework for Collaborative Governance (FCG) of which the "General System Context" and "Drivers of Collaboration" features are most relevant to provide a nuanced theoretical vantage point to understand SLGBs.

The "General System Context" refers to the "multilayered context of political, legal, socioeconomic, environmental, and other influences … [that create] opportunities and constraints and influences the general parameters [of the model]" (Emerson et al., 2012, p. 8). These influences are similar to work within higher education that has sought to identify external environment dynamics that inform the policymaking process (Ness et al., 2015) and campus-level realities, such as campus climate (Hurtado et al., 2012). What the General System Context theory describes as "influences," we conceptualize as prevailing discourses within the postsecondary education policy arena. Thus, we expect to see the manifestation of discourses captured and addressed in the SLGBs' strategic plans. The corresponding research question to help us investigate this proposition is: *what are the dominant education discourses in SLGB strategic plans?*

FCG also distinguishes broader macro influences from specific activities that drive collaboration. The framework identifies leadership, consequential incentives, interdependence, and uncertainty as the main "drivers" of governance collaboration (Emerson et al., 2012). Higher education literature corroborates these dynamics with studies that highlight effective collaboration driven by presidential leadership (LePeau et al., 2019) or performance initiatives (Gándara, 2020).

With these drivers of collaboration in mind, we situate strategic planning and the resulting documents as a process and platform to help set the postsecondary policy agenda. Specifically, playing the role of an expanded political intermediary requires SLGBs to:

(a) be responsive to leadership (e.g., the political rhetoric of legislatures or governors (Orphan et al., 2020)),
(b) determine and promote incentives sensitive to different constituents (e.g., the broader public versus institutions (Morphew & Hartley, 2006)),

(c) work collaboratively with interest groups and campus-level administrators (Ness et al., 2015), and
(d) help address what uncertainty means for the state and institutions (e.g., shifting labor demands (Kezar et al., 2019)).

Our second proposition is that issues addressed in SLGBs strategic plans are responsive to different constituents based on the "driver" (i.e., "a-d") that is most likely to spur collaboration of an agenda. Our second research question asks: *to which audience are these plans directed?*

Taken alone, the FCG is vulnerable to the normative assumption that policymaking is linear, outcomes are predictable, and relationships between policy actors are rational. Scholars like Nisar (2015) suggest that rational theories are less likely to account for unintended consequences in the policymaking process or capture nuanced "games" actors use to achieve their goals. Those games may not be aligned with other policy actors and as a result, "no actor is able to control the system" (Nisar, 2015, p. 300). Consequently, we draw insights from McLendon's (2003) theoretical model, which highlights the need for "Issue Opportunists" to be active when particular "Issue Windows" surface so that policymaking can proceed in a setting where each actor is engaged in its own set of relevant games (Nisar, 2015).

Focused initially on decentralization policy, we broaden the concept of Issue Opportunists to be any entity involved in policymaking concerned with coupling "solutions with problems of broader statewide scope and with propitious political developments" (McLendon, 2003, p. 506). Issue Opportunists are distinctive policy actors based on their ability to span "political," "problem," and "solution" streams during agenda-setting. With this expanded view, SLGBs may operate as Issue Opportunists, yet how SLGBs go about "coupling solutions with problems" in response to different stakeholders' concerns, remains underspecified.

Merging these frameworks, Figure 2 demonstrates a provisional understanding of how SLGBs seek to engage in agenda setting as an intermediary. The "General System Context" presents numerous discourses for a higher education system to engage. With the understanding that Issue Windows come and go due to changing political and crisis-based trends, Issue Opportunists must have a range of tools at their disposal when the moment arises (McLendon, 2003). The strategic planning process allows SLGBs to identify, process, and bestow importance on discourses that guide board activity at appropriate times. Then, the strategic plan (as an artifact) can be leveraged with different audiences as evidence that SLGBs are responsive to that group's corresponding needs. Nevertheless, given SLGBs' intermediary roles, evidence of engaging different constituencies is a missing component in the field's understanding of the agenda-setting process. Together, the research questions allow us to explore

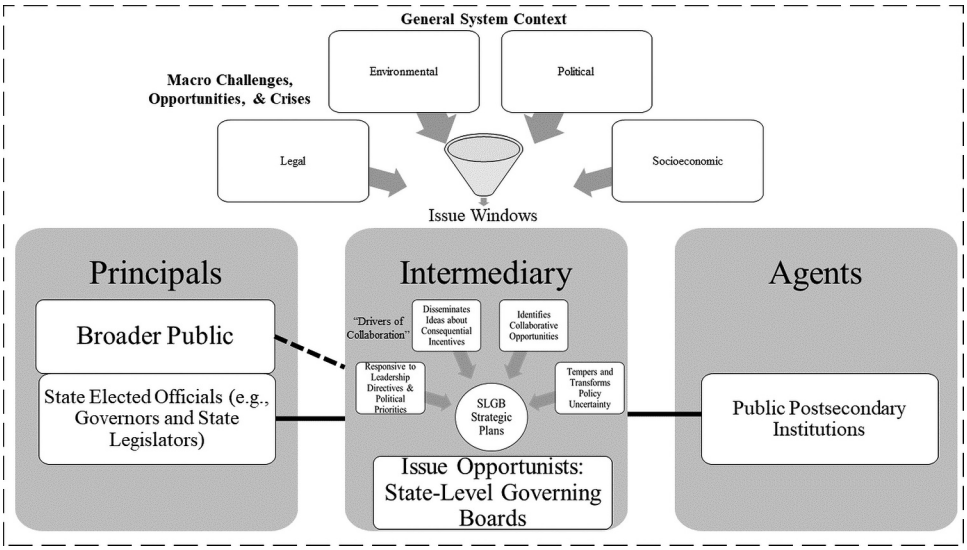

Figure 2. SLGBs Role in the Postsecondary Policymaking Process.

SLGBs' potential role in higher education policymaking and further detail their unique engagement as political intermediaries.

Research design

Political Discourse Analysis (PDA), is primarily concerned with the "reproduction of political power, power abuse, or domination" through discourse (Van Dijk, 1997, p. 13). That is, PDA seeks to unearth how political actors create, leverage, and respond to discourses that shape control mechanisms. Specifically, we explored an aspect of Fairclough and Fairclough's (2012) extension of PDA, which relies on the concept of "legitimation" as a particular form of discourse that invokes "publicly shared and publicly justifiable … codified, institutional systems of beliefs, values, and norms, in virtue of which the action proposed is considered legitimate" (p. 102). Put plainly, legitimation illuminates potential policy actions masked as beliefs, values, or norms that are rendered authentic by being publicly shared and justified. Based on our theoretical framework, the legitimizing discourses of SLGBs can both spur collaboration and harken Issue Windows. Therefore, the strategic planning process and resulting codified artifact are appropriate to investigate legitimizing discourses.

Data sources

Knott and Payne's (2004) study organized SLGBs into three tiers based on their regulatory power (i.e., high, moderate, minimal) over budget and program approval. Given that SLGBs with high regulatory power over time may play an

expanded intermediary role (Maggetti & Papadopoulos, 2018), we focus on the 33 high regulatory power states, as categorized by Knott and Payne (2004), which had publicly available strategic plans during 2018. Each state had one strategic plan or an updated report on a plan which was downloaded from the organization's website and uploaded into Dedoose qualitative analysis software.

As noted in our theoretical framework, both the multiple activity streams and the general system context attune us to the need to contextualize discourses that may influence agenda-setting. Thus, as a complementary data source and informed by the literature we reviewed, we compiled Race (Baker, 2019), Educational Attainment (Gándara et al., 2017), and Median Household Income (Hillman et al., 2015) measures from the 2016 American Community Survey Supplemental Estimates for each state (See Table 1). Also, we pulled from the National Conference of State Legislatures 2018 partisan composition report, which includes the governor's political party affiliation and the political party majority of the state legislative chambers to determine what party "controls" the state (Heck et al., 2012). While not exhaustive, the selection of these variables serves as example dynamics that policy actors may attempt to address and how they might prefer the discourses addressed.

Data analysis

Each team member was assigned, on average, seven strategic plans. Following Fairclough's (2010) process, as "typical readers," we engaged in a primary descriptive reading of the plans. Reading as a "typical reader" allowed each team member to become familiar with the overarching tone and format of the plans since each state has its own educational goals and espoused purposes. Furthermore, each member created codes to categorize the different content found in each plan.

Next, we discussed initial reactions and descriptive codes, which informed the development of a codebook with eight educational themes. The themes were identified by collapsing overlapping and similar descriptive codes into broader categories (e.g., equity discourses without metrics; state population diversity; unique needs of student populations; presentation and esthetics, state economic development; K-12 coordination; funding discourses; and state geography discourses). Using the codebook, we did a second, more nuanced read of the plans. This phase fleshed out emerging discourses in terms of scope and complexity. Each member was assigned, on average, four new strategic plans to help triangulate perspectives. Finally, in the analysis of the explanatory phase, we focused on searching for evidence of legitimatizing rhetoric within the educational discourses to flesh out the argumentative approach that SLGBs could act as expanded political intermediaries. We worked through successive rounds of dialogue to build consensus on what

Table 1. State characteristics and strategic plan details.

State	Strategic Plan Title	Plan Duration	Race[a]	Educational Attainment[b]	Household Income	State Party Control[c]
AL	*Building Human Capital*	2018–2030	57.21%–73.37%	< 56.59%	$53,571–$62,518	Republican
AZ	*Impact Arizona*	Unspecified	< 57.21%	59.9%–63.7%	< $48,380	Republican
AR	*Closing the Gap 2020*	2015–2020	73.37%–81.32%	< 56.59%	$53,571–$62,518	Republican
CO	*Colorado Rises*	Unspecified	57.21%–73.37%	> 63.7%	>$62,518	Divided
CT	*BOR Mission, Vision, Goals*	Unspecified	57.21%–73.37%	59.9%–63.7%	< $48,380	Divided
FL	*2025 System Strategic Plan*	2016–2025	< 57.21%	56.59%–59.9%	$48,380–$53,571	Republican
GA	*Strategic Plan and Public Agenda*	2013–2018	< 57.21%	56.59%–59.9%	$48,380–$53,571	Republican
ID	*Board Mission and Strategic Plan*	2018–2023	> 81.32%	59.9%–63.7%	< $48,393	Republican
IL	*Illinois Public Agenda for College and Career Success*	Unspecified	57.21%–73.37%	59.9%–63.7%	$48,380–$53,571	Divided
IN	*Reaching higher, delivering value*	2016–2020	73.37%–81.32%	< 56.59%	$53,571–$62,518	Republican
IA	*Strategic Plan*	2016–2021	> 81.32%	59.9%–63.7%	< $48,380	Republican
KS	*Foresight*	2010–2020	73.37%–81.32%	59.9%–63.7%	< $48,401	Republican
KY	*Stronger by Degrees*	2016–2021	> 81.32%	< 56.59%	$53,571–$62,518	Republican
LA	*Strategic Plan*	2014–2019	57.21%–73.37%	< 56.59%	$53,571–$62,518	Republican
ME	*University of Maine Strategic Plan*	Unspecified	> 81.32%	56.59%–59.9%	$48,380–$53,571	Divided
MD	*The USM through 2020*	2010–2020	< 57.21%	> 63.7%	>$62,518	Divided
MA	*The Degree Gap*	Unspecified	73.37%–81.32%	> 63.7%	>$62,518	Divided
MN	*Educating for the Future*	Unspecified	> 81.32%	> 63.7%	$48,380–$53,571	Divided
MO	*Preparing Missourians to Succeed*	2015–2025	73.37%–81.32%	56.59%–59.9%	$48,380–$53,571	Republican
MT	*MUS Strategic Plan*	Unspecified	> 81.32%	59.9%–63.7%	< $48,403	Divided
NV	*Expanding by Careers*	Unspecified	< 57.21%	56.59%–59.9%	$48,380–$53,571	Divided
NC	*Higher Expectations*	2017–2022	57.21%–73.37%	59.9%–63.7%	< $48,411	Divided
ND	*Daring to be Great*	2017–2022	> 81.32%	> 63.7%	$53,571–$62,518	Republican
OR	*Strategic Plan*	2016–2020	73.37%–81.32%	> 63.7%	$48,380–$53,571	Democrat
RI	*Rhode Island's Strategic Plan for Public Education*	2015–2020	73.37%–81.32%	56.59%–59.9%	$48,380–$53,571	Democrat
SC	*Leveraging Higher Education*	Unspecified	57.21%–73.37%	56.59%–59.9%	$48,380–$53,571	Republican
SD	*South Dakota Board of Regents Strategic Plan*	2014–2020	> 81.32%	59.9%–63.7%	< $48,408	Republican
TN	*Tennessee Succeeds*	Unspecified	73.37%–81.32%	< 56.59%	$53,571–$62,518	Republican
UT	*A State of Opportunity*	2015–2025	73.37%–81.32%	> 63.7%	>$62,518	Republican
VT	*Strategic Planning*	Unspecified	> 81.32%	59.9%–63.7%	< $48,380	Divided
WV	*Leading the Way*	2013–2018	> 81.32%	< 56.59%	$53,571–$62,518	Republican
WI	*2020 FWD*	2016–2020	> 81.32%	56.59%–59.9%	$48,380–$53,571	Republican
WY	*Breaking Through*	2017–2022	> 81.32%	> 63.7%	>$62,518	Republican

[a]Race: Non-Hispanic White.
[b]Educational Attainment: Some College or More.
[c]State Control: "When the same party holds both legislative chambers and the governorship, that party has state control. When any of those three points of power is held by another party, state control is divided." Data from (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020).
Race, Educational Attainment, and Household Income Data are from the 2016 American Community Survey 1-year Supplemental Estimates.

served as clear and accessible representations of legitimizing rhetoric and reached agreement on three themes.

With our complementary data sources, we sorted states into natural breaks (Jenks & Caspall, 1971) in the data for race, educational attainment, and median income variables. After the discourse analysis, we looked for patterns within each theme that corresponded with relevant contextual measures captured in Table 1.

Reliability, validity, and limitations

To pursue reliability, no team member coded the same strategic plan twice. Instead, each team member coded a minimum of six strategic plans with each plan analyzed by at least two team members. Research team members differ along numerous social identities and experiences, including, but not limited to: race, gender, familiarity with postsecondary policy literature, formal career experience in postsecondary policymaking, and understandings of regional variations in higher education. The purpose of triangulating perspectives was to synergize insights that stem from each team member's unique positionality and increase the chances that different interpretations of the plans would be unearthed, discussed, and resolved (Tracy, 2010). We sought validity by matching research questions to a sound design that fully seeks to answer each proposed question. The research design synthesizes PDA with Fairclough's (2010) three dimensions of discourse analysis; by using the two in tandem, we pursued validity by creating a nuanced lens through which to view the strategic plans.

Lastly, there are three limitations to consider throughout this study's findings and implications. First, the analysis relies solely on various states' most recent public strategic planning documents. Some strategic plans are newer than others and might be more aligned with the current environment in higher education and society. Second, scholars have shown that state governance structures are fluid, particularly in the aftermath of a change in political party control (McLendon et al., 2007). Furthermore, this research approach makes it difficult to fully capture the state-specific political culture (Heck et al., 2012). While our study is less focused on SLGBs' governance structures, it is important to remember that these entities are always potentially in flux due to political realities that may inform how strategic plans are designed or used in less detectable ways (e.g., responding to COVID-19). Finally, we did not include the strategic plans of SLGBs that only govern two-year institutions for parsimony concerns related to discourses unique to this sector.

Findings

Three legitimizing discourses: economic, public purposes, and accountability arose from our analysis with state-specific nuances. For each theme, we describe the discourse first as a type of influence captured from the General System Context/Problem or Political Stream as an issue for the postsecondary system to engage. We then present additional excerpts that demonstrate various dimensions of how SLGBs seek to legitimize their intermediary role by engaging with the discourse to frame a particular opportunity window for subsequent action. We also highlight the four drivers of collaboration that undergird SLGBs' legitimation efforts. We include context-specific data within the findings narrative to provide additional depth when the discourse and the contextual variable provide helpful insight. Table 1 contains all of the contextual variables for each state and Table 2 contains a summary of the themes in the findings.

"The economy, stupid": A discourse of fostering state economic development

The most prevalent discourse across the strategic plans sought to demonstrate how the states' public postsecondary education system and other entities could enhance the state's fiscal realities. As an example, Florida's plan, in the context of a Republican-controlled state government, affirms:

> As Florida and the nation face economic competition . . . the State University System must prepare graduates to excel in the global society and marketplace. Individually and collectively, state universities must advance innovation — new technologies, new processes, new products, new ideas — in their local and state economies; help Florida's employers prosper . . . through knowledge transfer and a steady stream of qualified graduates and make community and business engagement an integral part of their institutional culture.

The drivers of collaboration for this discourse taps into concerns about uncertainty and the political priorities of elected officials who may be more attuned to business and market discourses. Moreover, by legitimizing this discourse, an Issue Window is framed that invites additional investment in postsecondary education, or else the state's economic realities may be constrained.

SLGBs legitimized this political discourse in three distinct ways, focusing on the need for an educated workforce, a desire to grow career and technical education specifically, and coordination between public and private sectors. In terms of general declarations about the contemporary necessity for an educated workforce as an economic imperative, Nevada's plan observes that the state will continue to experience a "skills gap" as a "growing percent of projected jobs will require a college degree or credential." Nevada ranked in the second-lowest grouping for both educational attainment and household income. Even states that ranked relatively

Table 2. Summary of findings.

Driver of Collaboration	State	Discourse	Excerpt	Audience
Responsive to Leadership	MO	Public/Private Benefits Beyond Economic Development	"Rely Less on Government" & "Promote Racial Understanding"	Elected Officials & Broader Public
Consequential Incentives	GA	Public/Private Benefits Beyond Economic Development	" … strong ties to the state's need for research and services in the knowledge economy."	Broader Public
Collaborative Opportunities	TN	Fostering State Economic Development	"[to align] each program of study to the labor codes identified by TNECD and TDLWD as high need in each of Tennessee's nine regions in the 2016 LEAP report."	Postsecondary Institutions & State Agencies
Transforms Policy Uncertainty	MA	Accountability, Assessment, & Metrics	"measure student learning across institutions and state lines."	Postsecondary Institutions

high in educational attainment and household income, like Colorado, shared similar sentiments:

> … Increasing the number of Coloradans with postsecondary education is crucial to our state's future economic vitality. The majority of jobs in Colorado already require some sort of postsecondary education; research suggests that by 2020, almost three-fourths of jobs will require some education beyond high school.

By legitimizing the priority of fostering economic prosperity through the workforce development lens, plans can temper and transform a context rife with uncertainty. Plans utilize the uncertainty about workforce growth to then push states to realize requisite gains in postsecondary outcomes. Arkansas' plan outlines:

> To meet employer needs and provide the workforce necessary to support future economic development, it is essential that we close this attainment gap …. through a coordinated emphasis on both increasing enrollments in strategic populations and improving completion rates of those who enroll.

Arkansas, one of the least diverse states in the sample, has lower educational attainment, but is on the higher end of household income. Specifying a focus on both "strategic populations" and completion is an example of bridging different streams to respond to external dynamics such as lagging attainment rates and disparate outcomes for targeted populations.

The second enactment of this discourse was that many states summoned the need to enhance offerings in Career & Technical Education (CTE) to meet future economic realities. The CTE discourse appeals to legislatures displeased with traditional four-year institutions' costs and a mixed record of job placement. Tennessee's plan, in the context of a Republican-controlled state government, dedicates an entire section to explaining the state's work in this area, highlighting, for instance, a multi-department collaboration between the:

> Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development (TNECD), the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development (TNLWD), and CTE content experts … [to align] each program of study to the labor codes identified by TNECD and TDLWD as high need in each of Tennessee's nine regions …

Including CTE action items widens the scope of institutions that are responsible for promoting states' economic futures. As noted in the theoretical framework, SLGBs' unique positioning allows them to see these "Collaborative Opportunities" to help states meet their goals in ways that might not be available to other entities within the policymaking environment.

The final discursive move to promote state economic interests was conveyed via rhetoric that emphasized the importance of aligning and improving coordination between private entities and postsecondary institutions. For example, Rhode Island calls for the SLGB to partner with institutions to "improve curriculum alignment and develop a general education core."

Indiana, a state that ranks in the lowest group for educational attainment, directly mentions employers in its plan, emphatically stating that employers:

> Must demonstrate their commitment to the workforce of the future by closely collaborating with higher education, offering more opportunities for high school and college students to gain relevant workplace experience, and encouraging their employees to complete postsecondary education and training.

Per the theoretical framework, legitimizing the relationship between private entities and public postsecondary institutions affords SLGBs the ability to "define incentives" of interest to different stakeholders. As an illustration, North Carolina's contextual measures range from having divided state government control, being relatively more racially diverse, on the higher end of the educational attainment measure, to being in the lowest group for household income. With all these potential issues to prioritize, the plan notes:

> We cannot tolerate gaps in opportunity that hold back so many of our young people — not when North Carolina needs a greater diversity of talent. We cannot afford to neglect adult learners, veterans, and part-time students who need more flexible choices — not when our economy is demanding new skills and more adaptable careers.

While specifically noting how non-traditional and minoritized learners and the economy benefit from strong partnerships, the unstated stakeholders are public postsecondary institutions. This omission of reiterating the context of where these beneficiaries are embedded is additional evidence that the primary audience for this discourse is the broader public and elected officials.

Reframing "purpose": A discourse of public/private benefits beyond economic development

The SLGBs legitimize the discourse of public/private benefits when they convey how postsecondary education seeks to contribute to positive outcomes for individuals and businesses that are quantifiable or discernable in more than economic terms. This is a necessary discourse for the strategic plans because of the tenuous relationship between proponents of higher education's public purposes (Morphew & Hartley, 2006) and the realities of how market-like forces influence higher education dynamics (Dougherty & Natow, 2019). Therefore, the plans signal a commitment to an array of outcomes associated with postsecondary education to best position institutions' work in ways that resonate with entities and motivate their contributions.

The audience for this discourse includes nonprofits, community stakeholders, businesses concerned with social responsibility, and citizens that want to hold public institutions accountable to their public missions. Many plans had broad and audacious approaches to communicating a concern for this discourse that shows the SLGBs responsiveness to leadership directives and diverse

constituents' political priorities. To illustrate, Missouri is a Republican-controlled, predominantly white state dealing with the fallout of racial tensions due to the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown along with the aftermath of the Concerned Student 1950 demands. Missouri's strategic plan asserts:

> …The benefits of higher education extend far beyond meeting Missouri's workforce needs. College graduates make healthier lifestyle choices and lead longer lives. They are more motivated to vote and volunteer in their communities. They pay more taxes and rely less on government social programs. They are more likely to develop a greater appreciation for the arts and engage in activities that promote racial understanding.

Whereas, Kentucky, a state with contextual measures similar to Missouri, notes in its plan:

> Our postsecondary system will advance social, artistic, cultural, and environmental progress, because these endeavors increase happiness and well-being and make Kentucky an attractive place to live and work. Public service bolsters Kentucky's communities through support of schools, local government, hospitals, and other social and cultural organizations that contribute to better health and increased quality of life.

Considering benefits to the business community, many plans highlighted the utility of maximizing access to research dollars to assist multiple stakeholders' endeavors. As captured in our theoretical model, SLGBs' positioning as intermediaries helps them name collaborative opportunities. As seen in, Georgia's SLGB:

> Will work with partners to identify economic development needs, to enable research and innovation, and to provide a visible gateway to the vast assets of the system. Whether through business and industry relationships, education and training with military partnerships, internship activities, or other direct linkages of academic programs to career opportunities, the system and its campuses will strive for programmatic rigor and relevance as well as strong ties to the state's need for research and services in the knowledge economy.

Phrases such as "knowledge-based economy" or "entrepreneurial activity" were recurring discursive tools invoked as consequential incentives to express significant contributions postsecondary institutions could make to the broader public. Meaning that, SLGBs see the opportunity and solution of pairing institutions with the need to produce and create structures to support the knowledge economy or spur entrepreneurial activity (e.g., innovation hubs), actions that could produce benefits beyond economic output. Many plans articulated robust strategies to realize these outcomes that were more difficult to measure but still important to signal. Wisconsin's plan, which follows the legacy of the heralded Wisconsin Idea, had an entire goal focused on pushing the system to "create and manage a streamlined website to link university expertise to community needs" and the "Wisconsin Idea Summits," which are intended to identify state challenges and then "engage community, business, government, and non-profit leaders to galvanize interest, share expertise, and find solutions."

Absent from many of these visions of cultivating benefits beyond economic development were statements addressing how postsecondary institutions or SLGBs planned to operationalize these sentiments beyond research dollars and business community partnerships. One prominent counterexample that highlights this omission comes from Oregon's plan. Like the examples above, Oregon's SLGB emphasizes that "educational, cultural, and community-oriented programming . . . play a key role in enhancing the cultural and civic vitality of the state." The plan goes on to affirm that as the SLGB makes budget recommendations it will "acknowledge and bring attention to these important contributions" and concludes by listing some of the programs and institutes within different colleges and universities that the SLGB funds. This example not only shows how SLGBs legitimize discourses but also narrates their potential role in the policy-making process' other parts.

What is planned to be measured, may get done: A discourse of accountability and metrics

The final discourse prevalent in the SLGB strategic plans was a focus on accountability. The plans operationalized this discourse as specific metrics meant to track progress in certain areas over time. The aim of invoking the accountability process and outlining metrics was often tied to the need to legitimize an awareness of being answerable to different stakeholders. Furthermore, the accountability discourse helps SLGBs temper and transform areas of uncertainty about how postsecondary institutions intended to accomplish identified goals. However, the plans varied widely in the detail provided regarding the process of assessing outcomes and the amount of specificity provided for metrics. For instance, Maryland's plan reads, "the plan should be visionary, pointing toward desired long-term outcomes, but also prescriptive enough to help chart a short-term course of action that advances achievement under those outcomes. It must allow for mid plan assessment and correction."

The plan does not provide more direction on when the mid-plan assessment would occur and what measures would help demonstrate progress on either short or long-term outcomes. With greater detail, in response to the goal of increasing the number of people with "high-quality postsecondary credentials," Illinois' plan strategizes to "strengthen accountability through national assessments with publicly reported results." However, the national assessments are never specified and could range from federal census data to nationally benchmarked surveys.

Another accountability discourse example is when plans feature an assessment tool utilized for a particular purpose, such as Massachusetts' Multi-State Collaborative to Advance Learning Outcomes Assessment (MSC). The MSC's goal was to improve the SLGB's ability to "measure student learning across

institutions and state lines." The plan highlights the utility of the MSC in collaboration with faculty insight and the institutions' ability to better demonstrate and track the impact on students.

On the other end of the detail spectrum, Florida's plan conveys a range of performance indicators that contain definitions of excellence, specific metrics, and where the data will come from to inform the metrics. The rationale for the itemization is clarified when the plan highlights that the SLGB is taking on, "an expanded role in responding to Florida's critical needs" and as a result, the SLGB must "continue to actively monitor university academic planning and progress on accountability measures and performance outcomes in order to assess the System's efficiency and effectiveness."

Most states fell somewhere in-between Maryland and Florida, with many featuring specific efforts like Massachusetts' plan. Regardless of the level of detail, the primary audience for these discourses was either directly or indirectly stated as the individual that SLGBs would expect to achieve particular outcomes. However, the only way for SLGBs to signal that they are achieving what they communicated is to demonstrate their commitment to accountability and the metrics that help institutions realize their intended outcomes. Thus, this discourse tethers the SLGBs to both legislatures and the broader public, depending on the context.

Discussion

Summarized in Table 2, our findings describe legitimized discourses in SLGBs' strategic plans, identify different audiences addressed, and link them to different collaboration drivers. These findings illuminate the potential for SLGBs to be part of the agenda-setting process by virtue of being situated as intermediaries between different policy actors. The General System Context presents prevailing discourses to SLGBs as well as issues that the political and problem streams present from elected officials or campuses. To drive collaboration toward a particular agenda, SLGBs can legitimize certain discourses and have them available via strategic plans for when an Issue Window arises.

Our discussion centers on how our findings and framework augment existing literature on SLGBs and agenda-setting in postsecondary policymaking. First, the findings affirm the potential of the unique and more complex role of SLGBs as intermediaries in the policy process. Previous literature that acknowledges SLGBs tends to focus more on other policy actors' activities or the SLGB structure (Dee, 2006; McLendon, 2003; Ness et al., 2015; Tandberg, 2010, 2013). Specifically, our findings highlight the importance of not glossing over SLGBs because their policymaking activities are not easily operationalized, similar to Bastedo's (2005) conclusions. By taking seriously SLGB produced artifacts, we demonstrate that SLGBs potentially play a more

productive and nuanced role in legitimizing certain discourses and spanning streams of political activity and problems emanating from campuses to drive possible collaboration. The prospect of a more expansive role for SLGBs beyond their structure or regulatory power is one deserving of additional scrutiny and methodological sophistication considering the traditional way of operationalizing SLGBs.

Second, by placing SLGBs as intermediaries within the PA relationship of elected officials, the broader public, and postsecondary institutions, we demonstrate the need for increased attention to the myriad ways SLGBs mediate the agenda-setting process relative to other policy actors. We highlight the competing and complementary stakeholders that SLGBs seek to address in their strategic plans, which is necessary within a policymaking ecosystem where coordination should not be presumed (Nisar, 2015).

Accordingly, Issacharoff and Ortiz (1999) are wary of intermediaries with shifting principals but note this sort of analysis is "unavoidable," when trying to understand the agency inherent in intermediaries' role (p. 1665). For instance, in brokering the pursuit of economic outcomes, SLGBs can articulate consequential incentives for all stakeholders and recognize areas for collaboration. Often CTE pursuits and strengthening baccalaureate outcomes are pitted as competing forces. Some SLGB strategic plans showcase "both/and" approaches to their audiences that individual interest groups or elected officials apprehensive about alienating certain groups may find challenging to champion.

Finally, the findings corroborate how our theoretical framework conceptualizes SLGBs as a type of Issue Opportunist and strategic plans as a mechanism to help SLGBs navigate complicated PA dynamics (Lane, 2006) and agenda-setting streams (McLendon, 2003). Similar to how previous research has captured the agency of nonprofits (Gándara et al., 2017) or interest groups (Ness et al., 2015) in postsecondary policymaking, focusing on SLGBs as Issue Opportunists reveals additional complexity to how they engage in the agenda-setting environment. This means that SLGBs should be understood in terms of the regulatory power they wield (Knott & Payne, 2004) and in terms of how they are coupled to their different constituents and what discourses undergird those dynamics.

Specifically, our framing details how SLGBs funnel macro challenges into Issue Windows and then drive collaboration to advance the agenda-setting process. As evidenced by the Accountability discourse, SLGBs are positioned at various junctures in the policymaking process and must continually translate outcomes and processes to other stakeholders. There are numerous plausible explanations for this behavior, but a rationale rooted in our revised conceptual framework begins to illuminate how SLGBs engage in this role as a potential lever to progress the agenda-setting process. Only in a few instances do the plans explicitly state how SLGBs intend to address policy formation or implementation, as was showcased in the example of Oregon's plan. This lack of clarity raises essential questions for the SLGBs' role in other stages of the policymaking process.

Implications for policymaking and future research

At a time when higher education leadership has been called to account for questionable ethics (Tierney & Rall, 2018), it is appropriate to scrutinize high-level decision-making bodies such as SLGBs. This is particularly important considering neoliberal tendencies that call for accountability, yet, either marginalize the concerns of relevant stakeholders not in the principal position or perpetuates social identity-based inequities (Dougherty & Natow, 2019). The traditional way the PA model is enacted assumes that SLGBs exert influence to act on specific policy goals as dictated to them by elected officials (Dee, 2006). Often, these policy goals are written in terms of outcomes. However, focusing on outcomes obscures parts of a complex and multilayered process (Gándara, 2020; Nisar, 2015), which our framework seeks to capture from SLGBs' vantage point. With this potentially more nuanced understanding of policymaking in mind, we offer suggestions to improve the process.

First, SLGBs must consider how policy conversations are initiated and structured. Our finding that there is much discourse regarding the intersection of private and public benefit identifies that conversations regarding the many benefits of policies are being broached. However, SLGBs could go a step further to ask how they, as political intermediaries, can shape this existing discourse to be equity-centered while discussing benefits beyond economic development, especially in light of enduring neoliberal concerns (Dougherty & Natow, 2019). SLGBs and those that interface with them need also consider how they are already shaping dominant discourse by ignoring certain prevailing influences in the general system context such as equity (Rall et al., 2018). To go a step further, SLGB's should consider how to operationalize the agenda setting process to achieve intended outcomes and clearly communicate their role in policy formulation and implementation, beyond accountability.

Regarding accountability, aspirational outcomes must be constructed with measures from the outset of potential policy windows that are nimble in addressing multiple stakeholders (Nisar, 2015). Boards who wish to do this equitably and dynamically should interrogate how these measures may need to differ across various state factions as well as various institutional types (Dougherty & Natow, 2019; Rall et al., 2020). Understanding the impact of how discourse is constructed and framed, what constituencies have a voice in those conversations, and how discourse impacts policy formulation and implementation will aid SLGBs in operating optimally as political intermediaries in the postsecondary sector. Additionally, enhancing transparency in the policymaking process affords SLGBs considerable latitude to be collaborative. Strategic plans allow the broader public to work with SLGBs to advance priorities that may diverge from elected officials or campus-level leaders to serve as unique policymaking lever to exact when necessary.

Based on the exploratory and proposition-based nature of this study, our theoretical framework also provides the foundation for a research agenda

focused on expanding knowledge of SLGBs as influential policy actors. A useful next step would be to explore the utility of strategic plans from the vantage point of different policy actors to determine how consequential, if at all, strategic plans are and in what policymaking stages they are employed. Additionally, a comparative case study approach employed to explore the process of moving from agenda setting to policy formulation and implementation in different states with an eye toward how different governance structures mediate policymaking would elucidate idiosyncrasies. A complementary focus on low regulatory SLGBs and a focus on two-year SLGBs is also warranted to flesh out the entire expanded view of SLGBs involvement in the policymaking ecosystem.

There is also important work to understand the relationship between SLGBs, governors (Lingenfelter, 2012), and state higher education officers (Tandberg et al., 2018). Additionally, more attention needs to be given to diversity and equity discourses both de facto and de jure in policymaking and how policy actors, such as SLGBs, respond to these issues (Rall et al., 2018, 2020). It is crucial to investigate alignment between words and action in strategic plans and in mission statements, memoranda of understanding, and legislation to grasp the full scope of how SLGBs impact policymaking.

Notes

1. Also referred to as "system-boards," "regents," or coordinating boards." We use SLGBs as an all-encompassing phrase to distinguish governing boards with delegated powers from the state legislature or governor. For a comprehensive overview of postsecondary governance structures, see (Fulton, 2019).
2. Strategic plans refer to publicly available documents that outline postsecondary education goals and prescribe recommendations, resources, and/or accountability measures. Also referred to as "Master Plans" or "Public/State Education Agendas"

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