

Hegemony within Higher Education: The Creation of an 'Ideal' Student¹

Abstract

This paper is an examination of how higher administration at Jesuit schools use hegemony to create an ideological definition of the 'ideal' student. I use rhetorical criticism as a means of explaining how students are characterized and defined based on Creighton University sanctioned webpages. The results provided two major ideological principles that influence Creighton's discussion of the overall student population, the privileging of numbers and the construction of a preferred student model. These ideological themes in combination with hegemonic principles promote the creation of an 'ideal' student that no individual is fully capable of attaining.

¹ I would like to thank Samantha Senda-Cook, Ph.D., and the anonymous reviewer for their helpful suggestions and guidance. Their contributions aided in the improvement and clarification of this manuscript.

Introduction

In academe, standardized tests and grade point averages (GPAs) are considered adequate measures for student capabilities (Astin, 1993). These scores create possibilities. They come with scholarship money, recognition, acceptance, and most importantly, success. Success can be associated with academic scores because those measures are the ones that determine placement and status within an educational institution (Astin, 1993). Those measures are also used to describe the overall student population.

When universities advertise current student populations, they emphasize those who are considered successful according to standardized scoring, GPA, and leadership capabilities. However, there are students left out of the conversation; individuals that do not perform well on standardized tests, have lower GPAs, or less leadership experience do not receive recognition for their efforts.

I argue that Creighton University uses hegemony to create an ideological definition of the 'ideal' student that fundamentally excludes certain students by privileging numbers and constructing a preferred student model. This exclusion affects all students within a university; it creates a boundary that places students either above or below the standard. This placement contributes to individual student identity by creating success standards; however, it also poses certain characteristics as more desirable.

This essay examines how university webpages create an 'ideal' student using hegemony and ideology. I have developed my argument in three sections. First, I position my study within current literature on ideology, hegemony, third persona, and university characterizations. Next, I provide context for my artifacts and propose two ideological methods used within these webpages that contribute to the creation of an 'ideal' student based on specific examples. Finally, I consider the implications these ideological methods have on current and future student populations.

Literature Review

The university is using hegemony within its website to promote the ideological characteristics of an 'ideal' student. The webpages themselves contain information about the current student population at Creighton University. These informative facts are used as exemplar models to represent the current student population, however, these facts are creating an 'Other' category of students because only specific characteristics are mentioned. The 'ideal' characteristics found on the webpages are both a representation of the University values and a characterization of what a Creighton student should embody.

Ideology

An ideology is a representation of culture (van Dijk, 1998; Foss, 2009; Mathis, 2007). As society formulates an evaluative belief, a system is used to interpret the social, economic, political or cultural interests of the whole to form an identity (van Dijk, 1998). Groups interpret certain aspects of the world and formulate norms; these norms rule what is seen as acceptable by society (Foss, 2009). Ideologies characterize cultural practices as a means of establishing right from wrong.

Ideologies are present within every facet of human existence. No matter where we go or with whom we interact, there will be an established idea of what one should be striving toward. An example of this is present in the United States is how the 'American Dream' dominates the ideology of success (Kirby & Buzzanell, 2014). The notions of meritocracy, hierarchy, and materiality are all working together to form the ideology of the American Dream as a means of producing ideal workers (Kirby & Buzzanell, 2014; Drago, 2007). We

are socialized into this ideology as children when parents become the primary example of success (Kirby & Buzzanell, 2014). Specifying ideology for the purposes of my argument makes me question the use of ideologies within universities. More specifically, I ask what the norms for student success are considered to be and how those norms affect the lives and identities of students. Hegemony provides an explanation as to how these norms are established and accepted within the student population.

Hegemony

Hegemony is often used to express how those in power hold considerable influence over the dominant interests (Harris & White, 2013). An ideology is a representation of societal beliefs and hegemony expresses how those with more social, political, or capital influence dominate the representation of societal beliefs. According to Foss, certain ideologies “are privileged over others in a culture and ideologies that present oppositional or alternative perspectives on the subjects to which they pertain are sometimes repressed” (2009 p. 210). This creates a dominant understanding of how to see the world, forming a cultural norm to dictate right from wrong (Foss, 2009). Hegemony makes this dominance of ideology appear natural (Foss, 2009). There are certain groups that will be favored because of this dominance, thus creating more power and dominance for the privileged (Foss, 2009).

Hegemony allows for selective understandings of the world; it asserts its meanings as “the real, natural ones” (Foss, 2009 p. 210). In order for these hegemonic ideologies to remain in place, they must be reinforced regularly through rhetorical strategies and practices (Foss, 2009). When applying this process to the educational system, I have found the faculty-student relationship is often examined as a means of determining student success and satisfaction; however, hegemony originates from a higher source and flows down through the ranks within a university. The faculty-student relationship is an example of the direct communication that occurs to determine individual student status, but these interactions are merely a result of multiple factors, one being hegemony.

Huang examined student perception of learning environments and found that the relationship between faculty and student was the environmental aspect most closely related to student academic aspirations (2012). This study suggests that faculty encouragement of student engagement in scholarly activities is directly related to students’ socialization into the role of scholar (Huang, 2012). As students interact with faculty, they are further influenced by the selective behaviors universities appreciate. Within these interactions, the faculty is considered more powerful than students, making university’s agenda dominant. Students are more likely to express academic aspirations if they believe that is required of them to succeed in higher education.

In another study completed by Cotten and Wilson on the relationship between student-faculty interactions, it was found that many students struggle with criticism offered by faculty (2006). The authors believed that this struggle was associated with the students’ misunderstanding of criticism within an educational institution (Cotten & Wilson, 2006). The authors suggest that criticism is a customary practice among faculty as a process of learning and discovery. While this may be true, I also find that within this study there is a hegemonic principle that flows down from university expectations for faculty onto the student population through grading procedures. Students reported feeling “belittled, even degraded, by faculty” making me question how the ideologies of the university cause students who do not fit the norm to feel isolated (Cotton & Wilson, 2006, p. 512). These isolated individuals exist within the third persona as they become a category that is not recognized as successful.

Third Persona

Before I delve into the third persona, I feel it would be appropriate to first provide some context into how third persona relates to university-sanctioned language. The first, second, and third persona are all relevant as language is used. However, I argue that the third persona is more relevant to the argument I am creating about ideology and hegemony within university language because it most accurately represents the population that is overlooked. The first persona refers to the rhetor, or the identity the speaker is presenting to the audience (Black, 1999). For the purposes of this paper, the first persona is referring to higher administration within a university. Language used to describe the student population is contributing to the reputation of the university; forming a university persona that includes 'ideal' student achievements. The second persona is the intended or implied audience (Black, 1999). The implied audience for most university websites is a potential or future student; the university is trying to create an identity that is appealing to future students by designing an image of the current student population. Both of these personas are influenced by the use of hegemony. Universities form an identity and reach out to potential students using webpages; however, it is important to remember the creation of a webpage is also an act of power. Universities control the content and language found on their webpages, forming the working definition of university values and student population.

Language is used in many contexts to discuss overall student population. Speeches are made at any major function, the university web site acts as an informational hub for facts, figures, and testimonials of university life, and everyday conversation contributes to the overall understanding of a university student. Within these outlets, the words and descriptions used focus on the 'ideal' characteristics of the student population. However, many students do not meet the model criteria when the overall student population is expressed. Those students, the ones not fitting into the 'ideal' mold, exist within the third persona because they are left out of the conversation.

When universities speak about student populations, often only students awarded high academic numbers are included in the conversation. During the discourse of speech, there are relevant persons absent from the conversation that is taking place (Turner & Ryden, 2000). Some students are excluded from the conversation based on ideological principals. This exclusion is referred to as the third persona (Wander, 1984). The objectification of an individual can be manifested through what is and what is not said (Wander, 1984). Being heard in public space is not afforded to all persons; the discourse about student populations can be seen as a public argument creating the communal identity of students (Turner & Ryden, 2000). This negation is yet another representation of ideology and hegemony within universities. When students are characterized in public discourse, a choice is made to prioritize 'ideal' characteristics. The prioritization of certain values is afforded to those in power.

As students are negotiating identity within the university, this discourse plays a role in determining how students understand their identity within the established ideology. When public figures exclude students who do not meet the numerical threshold characterized as 'ideal,' the public figures create an 'Other' category of students. The rhetoric of 'Othering' is a representative idea that suggests there are other categories not mentioned; there is a single voice or rhetor speaking that does not mention or allow other voices to be heard (Hafez, 1997). This concept further identifies the third persona within university language. There are other voices and perspectives that are not expressed in public discourse. These other perspectives are being suppressed while specific characteristics are exemplified.

University Characterizations

Exemplar Characterizations and the 'Ideal' Student

Some students are left out of the conversation just as some are used as 'ideal' standards. Individuals who hold exemplar characteristics can be tokenized as models that represent specific judgments about persons and groups (Smith & Zarate, 1992). These tokenized characteristics are used as models for future individuals (Smith & Zarate, 1992). Students that do not hold tokenized characteristics are often excluded from university dialogue.

As universities assign merit to certain students' success in academics, there is a form of tokenism taking place, posing specific characteristics as exemplar models of student success. These characteristics contribute to the student ideology while simultaneously using the third persona by speaking of only specific student accomplishments. For example, Harkness (2007) explored what it meant to be an 'ideal student.' The authors asked teachers from five western cultures to explain their perceptions of the 'ideal student' (Harkness, et al., 2007). In the United States, the term 'motivated' was used most (by 67% of the participants) to describe an exemplar student (Harkness, et al., 2007). Of the other four countries, 'motivated' was not deemed as important; 'social skills,' 'well-balanced,' and 'lively' were considered well above the need for motivation (Harkness, et al., 2007). This characterization of the 'ideal' student is similar to the understanding of an exemplar characterization. These words create the definition of an 'ideal' student formulating a model of expectations for what each student should aspire to convey. The exemplar characterization is contributing to the third persona and the exclusion of some students from being recognized.

The 'ideal' worker, or for my purposes, the 'ideal' student is a measuring standard used to reproduce the qualities associated with exceptional work (Kirby & Buzzanell, 2014; Brown, 1960). In order to understand how the 'ideal' student could be measured, Brown conducted a study by sending a letter to faculty asking for a list of students they felt should be nominated as "successful college performers" (1960). Along with the name of the nominated student, the author also asked for a reason as to why the student had been nominated. The author then set out to understand what differentiated the students nominated from those that were not nominated. After comparing the results, the author found that grade point average was the highest indicator of faculty nominations, but that other non-intellectual factors also contributed to the image of being seen as 'ideal'. This study contributes to the concept of hegemony and the privileging of academic numbers as measures for success. The superior is producing the 'ideal' standards or exemplar characteristics and imposing them upon students to determine success.

Religion and Universities

Religious universities specifically characterize themselves as exemplar models of educational institutions using religious marketing (McAlexander et al., 2014). As universities market and brand their institutions, they frame themselves as investments for past, present, and future students and employees (McAlexander et al., 2014). Jesuit institutions in particular use the Jesuit values as a means of framing and recruiting individuals (Kirby et al., 2006). While this may be an advantageous use of the Jesuit ideals, there is also a question of whether those values are used more in theory rather than in practice (Kirby et al., 2006). There are dialectical tensions that emerge as employees negotiate a relationship with an organization that claims ethical standing but does not always promote said ethical responsibilities (Kirby et al., 2006). Students at a Jesuit institution will also be influenced by

the Jesuit values just as the Creighton faculty were in the Kirby et al. article (2006). The exemplar characterization that a Jesuit institution promotes is also one that comes with tensions. The Jesuit characterizations are another element that will influence the university ideology of what a student should embody.

I have provided background knowledge on both ideology and hegemony as a means of analyzing how higher administration uses hegemony to prescribe ‘ideal’ characteristics. The relationship between the two concepts is crucial toward understanding how those with power are directly influencing the norms of society. I have also explained the significance of the third persona for the purposes of understanding public dialogue. Inclusion in public speech is not merited to all persons and this further exemplifies the presence of hegemony as those with power determine who is included in public speech. Jesuit institutions use hegemony to promote both religion and exemplar characterizations to both formulate a university identity and impose an expected student identity. The university webpages are the physical representation of higher administration communication and therefore contain evidence of the university ideology and hegemonic influences. Now I will provide background information on the artifacts I will be examining.

Research Design

Data

Creighton University is a Jesuit institution that encompasses nine schools and colleges providing education to students “who want to contribute something meaningful to the world” (Creighton University, 2014). Creighton was founded in 1878 and is one of 28 Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States. There are more than 8,000 undergraduate, graduate, and professional students currently enrolled at the university.

The artifacts I will be analyzing are internet web pages from Creighton University’s website, these pages are titled as follows: About, Academics, Student Experience, Freshman Academic Profile, and Fast Facts. I have chosen these artifacts as a representation of higher administration communication because they are a common and accurate symbol of how Jesuit universities can inform potential students about current student life, while also creating an image of what the institution is looking for in a potential student. These sites provide specific qualities and characteristics of recognizable students. I have archived these webpages and used those archived versions during data analysis.

Data Analysis

I used the rhetorical method of ideological criticism to analyze my artifacts. I chose to use the ideological method because it offered an opportunity to delve into the underlying structure of my artifacts. This method provided a systematic process to determine how the ‘ideal’ student is depicted through higher administration communication at Jesuit schools.

Ideology and hegemony are present within most artifacts; however, I was interested in using them as an analysis tool because I believed the language within higher administration is persuading an audience to think about student success in a certain way. Ideological criticism allowed me to uncover that persuasion and explain how it influences current and future students.

Defining the 'Ideal' Student

After examining my artifact and coding for presented and suggested elements, I have found two major ideological principles that influence Creighton's discussion of the overall student population. The privileging of numbers and the construction of a preferred student model are the overarching themes present as Creighton summarizes current student populations to attract future or potential students.

Privileging Numbers

The privileging of numbers is a common occurrence within the field of academia. There is a lot of weight put upon one's ability to perform in a way that merits rank. The privileging of numbers is used throughout the artifacts I examined. It is not only applied to academic scores (GPA, ACT, and individual class ranking) but also to illustrate individual student characteristics (such as diversity, service, and leadership activities). The numerical percentage attached to individual activities is an act of university characterization. Rather than seeing the individual students as persons of interest, the percentage of completion is used as a fact to exemplify university appeal.

The privileging of numbers is used to describe high school rank, GPA, ACT scores, student background, geographic diversity, service, and leadership activities. These characteristics can be seen as exemplar characterizations that promote hegemonic ideals of what a potential student should embody. There is also an emphasis on religion within the university when service and percentage of Catholic students are mentioned. Specific amounts of completed service hours are provided on the About page, "471,000 community service hours" were "contributed last year by Creighton students." Similar to the concept of religious marketing, Creighton is using the service hours of its students as a means of advertising ethical values.

The Freshman Academic Profile webpage contains a large amount of percentages and numbers that act as a representation of the freshman class. The page begins with student's high school rank, high school GPA, and ACT scores. According to the webpage, "this year's freshman class is among the strongest and most diverse Creighton University has welcomed to campus" (Freshman Academic Profile). These numbers promote a specific kind of student, one who is ranked in the top percent of their high school class, attains a high GPA, and does well on standardized tests. These standards form an ideology of what each student should be striving toward.

The Freshman Academic Profile page also has a section titled "diversity" where specific items are listed: students of color (25%), first-generation college students (16%), Creighton legacies (26%), Catholic students (62%), and the gender ratio (39 male: 61 female). Following the diversity section, "geographic diversity" is promoted. The Academics page contributes to this idea, "come to the top Midwest university and join thousands of students from all backgrounds and faiths, from across town, across the country and across the world." The section gives percentages for how many miles freshman students travel to attend Creighton. The largest percentage (47%) is from more than 400 miles away. Only 33% of the freshman class is from less than 200 miles away. This section is attempting to manage diversity by determining what diverse qualities are worth mentioning and then reducing those qualities to a number value, making student diversity a category as opposed to individual traits.

The last section of the Freshman Academic Profile lists the service and leadership activities of the current freshman class. This list in its given order includes, service or church

organization member, varsity athletics, fine or performing arts, high school National Honors Society member, student government representative, leadership or service award, newspaper, library magazine, TV, radio, debate/mock trial/model UN, and multicultural or ethnic organization member. All of these categories encompass specific characteristics; leadership, academics, extracurricular activities, or faith based membership. The associated characteristics present a checklist of positive attributes for potential students to consider as a means of becoming the 'ideal' student that Creighton is searching for during the application process. This list is created by the university and the activities mentioned are of merit according to those in power. These desired activities are reinforced regularly to promote the hegemonic opinions of the university.

Constructing a Preferred Student Model

Privileging numbers is the first method used by Creighton to outline an 'ideal' student; the second method is the construction of a model student. The webpages use personal testimonials and a repetition of specific qualities to form the characteristics of the 'ideal' student. The qualities most used are leadership, academics, and service; however, these qualities are most used in reference to traditional students as opposed to non-traditional students who are not included in the generalization of 'ideal' students. The Student Experience page says, "you'll live, sleep, and eat, on campus or off, in an engaged, active community. As an adult, you likely have a full-time job, a family, or other responsibilities that deserve your attention." The traditional student is the being defined and recruited. Simultaneously, the university is trying to create an identity that is appealing to future students.

More importantly, as Creighton constructs a model student that would most accurately embody the Creighton values, it is also acting as an agent to form a student's identity. The university will mold each student into his or her best version and this is promoted as a means of bettering society. Josh Jones, a former athlete and journalism major, gave an example of identity formation, "the support I received at Creighton – both in the classroom and on the court – changed my life. The coaches and faculty truly helped me become who I am today" (Academics). This quote was chosen by the university to promote the university's ability to mold each student into who they are supposed to be based on their time at Creighton.

The word leadership is used many times within the artifacts I examined. It is one of the core ideas for why students should chose to attend Creighton University. Making a difference is something that every student at Creighton should be aspiring to produce because as it says online, "we're here to help you make a difference" (Student Experience). At Creighton, "...students learn to become leaders through service to others" and "...students come to Creighton each year to find their place in the world through lives of leadership and service" (About). For Creighton students, being a leader is vital toward understanding one's identity.

Academics are also an important factor in embodying the Creighton student. At Creighton, "it's easy for you to get the education that you have always wanted" (Student Experience). Taking this even further, the webpages suggests that 'ideal' students will ask specific questions, "our students ask, "what if?" and "what can we do to make the world a better place?"" (Academics). Students should strive to be both leaders and academically advanced.

Service is the third category I found to be most used when creating a mold for what students should aspire to become. This concept connects to Jesuit status as the university

proclaims, “we’re here to serve our community” (About). Students are constantly challenged to become leaders that serve their community and that is exemplified online as Creighton suggests, “more than 300 students participated in Spring or Fall break service trips” (Fast Facts). Students should be leaders that perform academically while also serving others.

On top of these three ‘ideal’ characteristics used when constructing the preferred student, there is a Jesuit based “be more” campaign that challenges students to keep going after all three qualities have been fulfilled (Student Experience). “It’s where you’ll challenge yourself and push yourself to do more and do better” (Student Experience). Overall, the webpages suggests students should strive for success in order to form the best versions of themselves. They do this by being and doing more in leadership, academics, and service.

Implications and Conclusions

The privileging of numbers and the construction of a model student are the two approaches Creighton University uses to create an ‘ideal’ student. A norm is created for students by the university and that norm is constructed and accepted through hegemony. Most students believe it is in his or her best interest to abide by the university mold that is established through language.

A complex relationship exists between those creating the language used to describe the student body and the existing student body. This relationship encompasses both hegemony and ideology; however, there is also a measure of dependence. High administration would not have authority without the existence of a student body; regardless, there is still power allowed to the administration that determines the success or failure of a student. Hegemony is a systemic idea that operates under a member’s willingness to participate within the beliefs of a system because it is in the participant’s best interest. This idea highlights the suppression that is taking place; members are so engrossed within the ideological norm that it seems natural and fulfilling to abide by those standards.

The numerical privileging of specific scores – such as one’s GPA and ACT score – draws a line dictating which students receive recognition for academic efforts. The importance of the third persona and ‘Othering’ is apparent within the webpages. Those students do not receive high enough grades or testing scores to be publicly recognized for their effort are reduced to the third persona and ‘Other’ categories of students left out of public speech.

Geographic diversity is another number that is privileged within the university webpages. The large percentage of students that have to travel more than 400 miles to attend Creighton is a statement of pride. However, that also implies something about the culture of Creighton. Being able to afford travel over 400 miles in order to attend a university implies a certain amount of privilege. Grades and high test scores are ever more accessible when high school students have resources. Geographic diversity is possible when high school students have the privilege of options. Service and leadership roles are attainable by those who have the time and resources to give freely. There are social class implications associated with the ‘ideal’ qualities Creighton deems worthwhile.

Creighton often emphasizes its ability to ‘give back’ to the community, but I see a separation between the community and the student body. The geographic location of Creighton University creates many volunteer options for students and because service is a part of what Creighton students should do, many complete service hours (over 471,000 hours were contributed last year). The community that Creighton resides within is used to promote service hours for students, but is not one that is often seen as producing future students. The social class living within the Creighton community most likely could not

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afford to attend the university. The ‘ideal’ student is one that completes service hours as opposed to a student who receives the service of others.

As students are characterized within university webpages, a model is created that is not always attainable for the entire student population. Leadership, academics, service, and the desire to ‘be more’ are what the traditional student should strive to achieve. Creighton creates this model based on its current student population as a means of recruiting potential students. The exemplar characterizations are used to create the ‘ideal’ Creighton student. It is also possible that no one, not even current students, embody the model that is portrayed on Creighton’s webpages. The individual student is excluded for the sake of a university identity. There are consequences for the entire student population as the ‘ideal’ student is formed and used as a measure of judgment. No one student is ever enough, he or she can always ‘be more’ in the eyes of the university. The identity of every student is based upon a concept that is not always attainable. Similar to the American Dream, ‘ideal’ student status is not always a personal achievement, but rather a societal possibility afforded to those living within specific social classes.

The purpose of this study was to shed light on the language used to describe the student body. This language both imposes an identity and creates expectations (or norms) for current and future students. These expectations are not attainable for all students. I hope this study provided a new perspective for those writing speeches in the administration at Jesuit universities. The language used to describe the student population is a powerful tool that can be both inclusive and exclusive. I wish to enable those in power to be thoughtful and aware of the power they hold when creating the text of a university. This text is defining language that influences the identities and expectations of students.

Contributions

Previous research on this topic treats hegemony within the student-faculty relationship. However, this research failed to examine how hegemony controls the student-faculty relationship. Based on the evidence adduced in this paper, I would add that rhetoric about students is contributing to hegemonic ideals and furthering the ideological definition of the ‘ideal’ student.

At the beginning of this essay, I asked how higher administration at Jesuit schools uses hegemony to create an ideological definition of the ‘ideal’ student. I found that the language used to describe the student population fundamentally excludes certain students from attaining ‘ideal’ status. The third persona is present; some students are left out of public speech. These students can be considered the ‘Other’ category that goes unrecognized. However, I would suggest there is a power indifference that shapes the understanding of the ‘ideal’ student and it creates a box that contains perfection. Said box is simply something all students look toward as the measure of success, but it is merely an image and not something any one individual is capable of completely achieving. Whether this image is ‘ideal’ or not, someone else holds the power to define what it means to be ‘ideal.’

Amy Guziec
Creighton University

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