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The Neoliberalization of Higher Education: Paradoxing Students' Basic Needs at a Hispanic-Serving Institution

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Millions of college students in the United States lack access to adequate food, housing, and other basic human needs. These insecurities have only been exacerbated in recent decades by the country's neoliberal approach to higher education, with disproportionately negative consequences for historically underserved populations (e.g., racial/ethnic minorities, low-income students, and first-generation college students). For each of these reasons, this study explores the organizational paradoxes faced by students attending a public, 4-year Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) in southern California. Drawing upon 30 semi-structured interviews with undergraduates who self-identified as historically underserved, our three-stage conceptualization of data analysis revealed three specific paradoxes: (1) provision vs. dependence, (2) sympathy vs. distancing, and (3) bootstrapping vs. unattainability. We conclude with practical and theoretical implications for alleviating the repercussions of neoliberal policies on today's college students.

Keywords: neoliberalism, basic needs, organizational paradox, higher education, historically underserved

> *"And so, I don't go out a lot with, like, friends and stuff like that. I don't really have the money for it so much anymore just because I am focused on paying for the necessities."* – Samantha[1] (undergraduate student)

Despite being the world's eleventh richest country (International Monetary Fund, 2021), millions of college students in the United States lack access to the most basic necessities, such as adequate food and housing (Crutchfield and Maguire, 2018; Pennamon, 2018; Broton and Cady, 2020; Broton et al., 2020). A multi-institutional study of nearly 86,000 college students found 45% of respondents experienced food insecurity in the past 30 days—meaning they lacked consistent access to enough food for an active and healthy lifestyle (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). This same study found 56% of college students experienced housing insecurity in the past year, while a staggering 17% had experienced homelessness over the same time period (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). Each of these numbers appear to be even higher at public 2-year institutions, as 52% of California Community College students reported food insecurity, 60% reported housing insecurity, and 19% reported being homeless in the past 12 months (Jimenez, 2019).

[1] Pseudonym; all names have been changed to protect participants' identities in this study.

As concerning as these figures are, such food and housing insecurities allude to an increasingly complex reality of intersecting challenges. Research in the emerging field of basic needs insecurity has found students who face one type of insecurity are likely to face other intersecting needs as well (Haskett et al., 2020). Furthermore, historically underserved student populations, including racial/ethnic minorities, low-income students and first-generation college students, are disproportionately vulnerable to experiencing basic needs insecurities (Crutchfield and Maguire, 2018). Broton et al. (2020), for example, found that one in five students faced the severest form of food insecurity, which manifests as hunger and malnutrition, while approximately one in 10 of these same students faced homelessness (p. 2).

This intersecting complexity of basic needs insecurities has only been exacerbated by the United States' neoliberal approach to higher education (Giroux, 2015). Harvey (2007) defines neoliberalism as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (p. 2). Traditional markers of neoliberalism include privatization, deregulation, competitive choice, market security, laissez-faire economics, and minimal government intervention, each of which are rooted in Western-style liberalism (Phelan and Dawes, 2018).

Contrary to neoliberal assumptions that a competitive marketplace will solve all social ills (Risager, 2016), such policies have resulted in myriad individual and organizational paradoxes for today's college students (Winslow, 2015). Since the 1980s, decreased funding for higher education has created the expectation that students are solely responsible for enhancing their own well-being (Peck, 2015). Although Americans have long been told that a higher education degree will help them secure a higher-paying job, neoliberalization has also forced students to take on exorbitant student loan debts, with the average amount ballooning from $3,900/person in 1980 (EducationData.org, 2020) to over $32,000/person today (Song, 2021). Kapur (2016) explains the consequences of this neoliberal shift by writing:

> The higher costs of college tuitions relative to family incomes, student debt, and a generation that faces the prospect of a lower standard of living than its parents is a reflection of this political and economic shift toward neoliberalism. The university has a key role to play in this transformation as it is called upon to produce a new generation of workers for an economy characterized by precarity. As jobs have become increasingly temporary and ad hoc in the midst of declining social networks that would have met basic needs such as health, education, and housing, workers face an intensely competitive environment in which obsolescence and deskilling are everyday realities.

Consequently, college students today are met with a double paradox. Students first encounter an organizational paradox where the neoliberalization of higher education has expanded the role educational institutions play in terms of providing for students' basic needs (Smith and Lewis, 2011; Putnam et al., 2016). Nested within this organizational paradox, students then face individual paradoxes as irreconcilable tensions, making it increasingly difficult for them to pursue a college degree while simultaneously trying to fulfill their own basic needs (Harvey, 2007).

In light of rising basic needs insecurities, which have only been exacerbated by the United States neoliberalization of higher education, this study explores the paradoxes faced by historically underserved students attending a public, 4-year Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) in southern California. We focus on historically underserved students' experience because of the aforementioned disproportionate impact of basic needs insecurities upon underrepresented populations. This study also responds to previous calls for research to "provide a more holistic understanding of the educational barriers faced by historically underserved college students" (Jenkins et al., 2020, p. 9). We answer this call by sharing students' experiences of paradox, and the subsequent barriers they face within the United States' higher education system.

We begin this process, first, with a literature review on the neoliberalization of higher education and organizational paradox. Next, we outline our qualitative research methods, which included semi-structured interviews with 30 undergraduate students who self-identified as racial/ethnic minorities, low-income students, and/or first-generation college students. We then reveal three paradoxes that emerged from our analysis: (1) provision vs. dependence, (2) sympathy vs. distancing, and (3) bootstrapping vs. unattainability. We conclude with practical and theoretical implications.

This study offers significant insight for scholars and practitioners alike. Numerous studies have examined the lack of basic needs among children (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020), families (Mammen et al., 2009; Bruening et al., 2017), communities (Bruce et al., 2017), and older adults (Goldberg and Mawn, 2015). Only in recent years, however, have researchers and policymakers turned their attention to the communicative implications of basic needs insecurity on individuals during their time in institutions of higher education (Schraedley et al., 2020). Meanwhile, a growing number of university actors have also begun acknowledging the reality of basic needs insecurity on campuses (Gupton et al., 2018). Yet few studies have explored precisely how students experience the paradoxical complexity of basic needs, and even fewer studies have explored this complexity among racial/ethnic minorities, low-income students, and first-generation college students. Therefore, this study's results and analysis shed light on the United States' neoliberalization of higher education while simultaneously addressing the repercussions of those neoliberal policies on historically underserved populations.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Unequal and unjust challenges abound for today's college students ranging from intergenerational poverty to rising costs of higher education, decreased grant opportunities for low-income

college students to complex processes and eligibility factors for accessing state assistance (Alvis and Demment, 2017). Furthermore, these barriers partly explain the root causes of obstacles to social mobility in a neoliberal society. Stein (2019) writes, "higher education is largely viewed as a site in which modern promises (in particular, social mobility) can be fairly and efficiently distributed—a role that paradoxically becomes more cemented in a context in which available opportunities are increasingly scarce" (p. 204). The challenges students face have compounded in recent years, resulting in increased reliance on higher education institutions to meet or alleviate basic needs insecurity (Watson et al., 2017). Ironically, while more and more students rely on institutional support, a growing number of these same students express skepticism of "the university's commitment to adequately and effectively address student basic needs" (Watson et al., 2017, p. 136). This skepticism of higher education—and its disproportionate impact on historically underserved college students—can be more clearly understood through the lenses of (1) educational neoliberalization and (2) organizational paradox. The present section discusses each of these theoretical frameworks in more detail.

Educational Neoliberalization

One of the earliest known references to *neoliberalism* comes from Armstrong (1884), who characterized "neo-liberals" as desiring and promoting increased economic intervention from the state; however, his definition stands in stark opposition to how this term is used today (Birch, 2017). Today, neoliberalism can be characterized as "a project of potentiality organizing economic and social process activity for the accumulation of capital," where the competitive marketplace is seen as a way to resolve social issues (Hunt, 2016, p. 381). This ideology has evolved over time to refer to a collection of specific policies and economic trends. During President Ronald Reagan's first term in office, for example, he moved to limit—or even eliminate—the US Department of Education (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). In its place, Reagan's neoliberal administration promoted educational reform through market-driven strategies of deregulation, privatization, high-stakes test-based evaluations, and weakened teacher tenure and seniority rights, among other things (Peck, 2015, p. 589). In subsequent decades, the United States' higher education system became plagued by an ever-declining revenue stream from municipal, state, and federal governments.

Neoliberal proponents emphasize individualism over collectivism, governmental restraint over governmental intervention, and personal wealth over communal welfare (Steger and Roy, 2010). Scholars have written at length about how these neoliberal ideals infiltrate and become reified through the ongoing interactions of churches, governments, and businesses, as well as by individuals and their family members (ex., Larner, 2000; Salter and Phelan, 2017; Gill and Kanai, 2018; De Souza, 2019). Vocabularies consistent with market practices, for instance, now overlay a multitude of diverse institutions and social interactions, where everyone is seen as a *customer* or *client* who should have an unlimited *choice* of individual *entrepreneurs* that they support through *purchases* and *consumption*. Concerningly, the effects of neoliberalism are especially apparent within the United States' higher education sector, where policymakers seek to "commodify and privatize universities by asserting economic efficiency, high productivity, anti-unionism, the extraction of value from both students and instructors, and pursue a 'divide and conquer' strategy against any kind of collective resistance by the powerful means of meritocratic ideology" (Briziarelli and Flores, 2018, p. 114).

Since the 1980s, educational neoliberalization has eroded distinctions between the non-profit and for-profit sectors of higher education and corporate America (Heller, 2016). For college/university employees, this erosion has resulted in decreased raises, fewer staff, and the expanded commodification of intellectual property—while administrative salaries, athletic spending, and campus beautification projects have continued to escalate (Cloud, 2018). For college and university students, the erosion between education and profit has resulted in decreased preparedness (Butrymowicz, 2017), escalated debt (Song, 2021), and—of particular interest to this study—increased basic needs insecurity (Nazmi et al., 2019).

The consequences of neoliberalism on higher education have become even more salient in the wake of recent events: 4 years of neoliberal policies from the Trump administration, followed by the ongoing COVID-19 health pandemic. Reminiscent of the Reagan administration's fiscal assault on education nearly 40 years prior, the Trump administration proposed substantial budget cuts to the US Department of Education each year he was in office (Kreighbaum, 2018). If approved, those cuts would have eliminated subsidized student loans, removed public serve loan forgiveness, slashed federal work-study programs, frozen Pell Grant[2] valuations, pillaged the Pell Grant surplus, and altered the loan repayment safety net (Bombardieri et al., 2018; Whistle, 2020). As yet another example, the Republican controlled House of Representatives even sought to tax tuition rebates as if they were personal income—a neoliberal pursuit that would have raised each student's annual tax bill by thousands of dollars (Rousseau, 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted neoliberalism's effect on the United States' higher education system, while also placing additional hardship on its students. A longitudinal study by the University of Southern California's (2020) Dornsife Center for Economic and Social Research found that 23% of college students increased their family care responsibilities due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 23% changed their employment status, and 28% increased their desire to remain close to home. This same study found the pandemic's collateral damage disproportionately affected historically underserved populations. Hispanic, Latinx, and low-income households are nearly four times (4x) as likely to say COVID-19 affected their re-enrollment decision, as compared to their white and upper-middle-class counterparts. Asian and Hispanic/Latinx students are also eight times (8x) as likely to take fewer classes due to COVID-19, thus slowing their time-to-graduation rates and delaying their entry into the job market (see also Polikoff et al., 2020). Each of these occurrences highlight the precarious effects of neoliberalism upon higher education, as well as the need

[2]A Pell Grant is an award given by the federal US government to assist undergraduates from low-income households.

for researchers to examine this new type of precarity more deeply—particularly the paradoxes beleaguering historically underrepresented college students.

Organizational Paradox

A paradox is the persistent contradiction between interdependent elements (Schad et al., 2016, p. 10). Lewis (2000) defines the notion of paradox as "contradictory yet interrelated elements—elements that seems logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously" (p. 760). Such irresolvable contradictions are a normal part of daily life. Indeed, the management of paradox can be seen as the inevitable result of living in a social world (Smith et al., 2017). In this study, we examine how students communicatively made sense of the complex paradoxes they experienced through their communicative descriptions.

While paradox as an explanatory construct has roots dating back to ancient philosophers, academic interest in *organizational paradox*—both as communicative experience and theoretical lens—emerged in the 1980s (Schad et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2017). Organizational paradox theory highlights the nature and management of competing demands for organizations and for people who organize (Carmine and Smith, 2021). Over subsequent decades, scholars have used organizational paradox to explore the dialectical tensions between control and autonomy (Sundaramurthy and Lewis, 2003), stability and change (Graetz and Smith, 2008), competition and collaboration (Smith et al., 2017), exploitation and exploration (Smith and Tushman, 2005; Lavie et al., 2010), to name but a few organizational paradoxes previously studied. Importantly, organizational paradoxes may not be resolvable, rather, scholars examine how paradoxes are managed in everchanging circumstances.

One framework scholars have used to explain individuals' attempts to manage organizational paradox is through the lens of *vicious* and *virtuous cycles*. Both vicious and virtuous cycles consist of event chains that augment themselves via positive or self-reinforcing feedback loops; however, vicious cycles have detrimental consequences for an organization and/or its members. Lewis (2000) writes: "As actors seek to resolve paradoxical tensions, they may become trapped within reinforcing cycles that perpetuate and exacerbate the tension" (Lewis, 2000, p. 763). When actors face uncomfortable organizational tensions, for instance, they might respond defensively to achieve short-term comfort. Yet ironically, this response only serves to heighten the tension, thus, reinforcing counterproductive thinking and behavior over the long-term (Lewis and Smith, 2014). Individuals caught in such a vicious cycle will continue to spiral downward when they persistently favor one side of the paradoxical tension over another (Huq et al., 2017). This pull from the neglected pole will continue to intensify until organizational members are eventually forced to confront underlying conflict (Pradies et al., 2020).

Virtuous cycles, on the other hand, occur when organizational actors accept the inherent contradictions and competing demands of paradoxical situations. Unlike vicious cycles, which ensnare organizational members in a destructive feedback loop, virtuous cycles can enable positive organizational change. Sundaramurthy and Lewis (2003), for example, found that external interventions in an organizational paradox could trigger both learning and innovation. Although we do not focus on virtuous cycles in this study, it is worth noting that Pradies et al. (2020) have described how organizational members move from one cycle to another, breaking vicious cycles and engaging in cycle reversal.

In this study, we utilize the lens of vicious cycles to interpret individuals' experience of persistent and irresolvable contradictions within a university environment (Lewis and Smith, 2014). This lens helps us address several gaps in current literature. Poole and Van de Ven (1989), Lewis and Smith (2014), and Schad et al. (2016) have urged additional scholars to utilize the ubiquity of paradox as a metatheoretical tool, which we do here by investigating the complexities of paradox as experienced by individuals within the neoliberal university. Additionally, previous scholars have not addressed the experiential indignity of vicious paradoxical cycles, which reinforce the status quo without creating room for disrupting organizational dynamics or a shift toward virtuous cycles (Schad et al., 2016). We seek to accomplish this by sharing the voices of individual students entrenched in vicious cycles. Finally, within the field of basic needs insecurity, no research to date has explored its complexity among historically underrepresented college students. Consequently, this study is guided by the following research question:

RQ1: What paradox(es) do historically underserved students experience within the neoliberal university?

METHODOLOGY

In order to explore the organizational paradoxes faced by historically underserved college students, this study engaged 30 undergraduates who self-identified as racial/ethnic minorities, low-income students, and/or first-generation college students. The present section further describes our specific (1) research context, (2) research participants, (3) interview process, and (4) data analysis.

Research Context

The context for this research study was a 4-year public university located in southern California, which is also designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). At the time of the study, the university's student demographic enrollment was 50% Hispanic/Latinx, 29% White, 5% Asian, and 2% African American. Meanwhile, nearly half (49%) of university's students were Pell Grant recipients, and over one third (35%) were first-generation college students (blind cite). With such a uniquely diverse student body population, this university's environment offered a particularly appropriate context to study the basic needs of historically underserved students. The exempt study received ethics approval number is IO5476 from the Institutional Review Board.

Research Participants

Following IRB approval (#IO5476), we used purposeful sampling techniques to recruit student participants. Purposeful sampling

involves identifying and selecting individuals for their in-depth knowledge or insider status with a particular group or culture (Patton, 2002). To this end, we interviewed 30 undergraduate students who self-identified as historically underserved (e.g., racial/ethnic minorities, low-income students, and/or first-generation college students). In attempt to garner a diverse sampling of majors and grade levels, participants were recruited from disciplines across campus via course announcements. Students were supplied with an overview of the study, a copy of the IRB-approved informed consent form, and definitions for the terms "historically underserved" and "first-generation college student." Students were informed that participation was voluntary, personal information would be deidentified from the data, and involvement in the study would not affect their academic standing. Those who self-identified as belonging to a historically underserved group were given at least 1 week to indicate their interest in participating. From the 30 individuals we interviewed, 26 identified as racial/ethnic minorities, 22 identified as dependent on financial aid for college, 26 identified as first-generation college students, and 24 identified as more than one category (see **Table 1**). Twenty participants identified as female, and 10 participants identified as male. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 37 years old, with a mean of 22. The 30 participants came from a wide variety of disciplinary backgrounds, including 16 different majors. We interviewed five first-year students, four sophomores, nine juniors, and 12 seniors. All participant names in this study have been replaced with pseudonyms in order to protect their identities.

Interview Process

Our interview guide consisted of 20 questions in total: 5 questions on food insecurity, 5 questions on housing insecurity, 5 questions on textbook affordability, and 5 concluding/reflection questions. The interviews were semi-structured in nature, allowing opportunity for participants to direct the conversation as much as possible. Sample interview questions included: "Can you tell me about a time when you, or someone you know, could not access healthy food, or had to make a choice between food and another necessary expenditure?," "What has been your experience with housing as a college student?," and "What ideas or advice would you offer faculty and/or administrators who hope to improve the basic needs of historically underserved college students?" (For a complete copy of the semi-structured interview guide, please see the **Table 1**). Interviews lasted between 12 and 46 min, with a mean of 24 min. Each interview was recorded and later transcribed for analysis using the transcription service Temi.

Data Analysis

Each author analyzed the interview data using Morse (1994)'s three-stage conceptualization of data analysis: synthesizing, theorizing, and recontextualizing. For our first round of analysis, the study's first author allocated four interviews to each member of the research team with two overlapping interviews between each author. We began by individually codifying the interviews via color-coded or highlighted text, in search of potential themes. After several intensive readings through the four interviews we had each been assigned, we met to share and discuss emerging themes in the data. We first discussed emergent concepts and processes like, "navigating campus resources," "making accommodations," "lack of support," and "responsibility for burdens." These broader themes then informed the next round of coding. By being sensitized to these broader concepts that we all recognized in the data, we each read through four more interviews, clumping and recoding until a clear tree of large-order and small-order themes emerged from the data (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011).

The subsequent step in our three-stage process of analysis focused on theorizing, a procedure Morse (1994) describes as "the constant development and manipulation of malleable theoretical schemes until the 'best' theoretical scheme is developed" (p. 32). Noticing that the participants faced tension-filled challenges when trying to meet their basic needs, we employed the vicious cycles of paradox as a theoretical lens through which to view the remaining interviews and to guide further discussions about the data. To further validate our findings, we worked together to sensemake the preliminary data while also considering potential implications for research and practice. The final step of analysis consisted of recontextualizing our findings for the purpose of developing new ways of approaching basic needs insecurity in higher education.

RESULTS

In review, this study explored the vicious cycles of organizational paradox among historically underserved college students. Drawing upon 30 interviews with undergraduates who self-identified as racial/ethnic minorities, low-income students and/or first-generation colleges students, our analysis revealed the three distinct paradoxes of (1) provision vs. dependence, (2) sympathy vs. distancing, and (3) bootstrapping vs. unattainability.

Paradox #1: Provision vs. Dependence

The first paradox that emerged from this study was provision vs. dependence. In this theme, the university system was revealed to have created a vicious cycle that required students to react defensively in order to meet their needs (e.g., hunger, housing, and access to required course materials). On one side of the paradox, provision meant that students pointed to the benefits being provided for them by the university. Examples included working on-campus jobs, living in campus housing at reduced costs, or using the campus food pantry to access free meals. On the other side of the paradox, however, students saw a contradiction in being dependent upon the university for their basic needs. A majority of student participants noted this paradox of being paid by the same institution that barely provided them with enough funds for survival. Because the university's wages did not cover their cost of living, many students were compelled to seek a second or third source of employment. The resulting hunger pangs, additional workload, and long commute all took away from the students' ability to focus on completing their higher education degrees. One participant, Samantha, explained:

TABLE 1 | Demographic matrix of student participants.

	Racial/Ethnic minority	Financial aid dependent	First-generation college student	All 3 categories
Racial/Ethnic minority	27	22	24	–
Financial aid dependent	–	23	19	–
First-generation college student	–	–	26	–
All 3 categories	–	–	–	19

> I have used [the campus food pantry] once for a case where I did not have groceries, and I didn't have money to buy groceries. Say we get, you know, on campus we get paid once a month. So, um, you really have to budget and then it was, you know, say you cave in and do want to hang out with friends and then realize you don't have enough money for groceries… So I ended up getting like pasta just 'cause it makes a lot and it's easy and that would feed me for the week that I needed, and then I got paid the next week.

Despite her best efforts, Samantha was unable to stretch her monthly income from the university to cover living costs. In turn, she found herself dependent upon free groceries supplied by the university's food pantry. Although Samantha only mentions using the food pantry once, her situation highlights the provision-dependence paradox echoed by other participants. Furthermore, by blaming herself for the situation she found herself in (i.e., "caving" and wanting to hang out with friends), Samantha also alluded to a certain level of self-disciplining where she had come to accept the university's neoliberal condition of debt and financial hardship.

Another participant, Daniel, was asked to make sense of why students struggle with homelessness. He replied, "The number one reason would be cost-of-living is outrageous compared to salaries offered to college students, amongst other bills, on top of living expenses." In his response, Daniel acknowledges the contradiction of struggling to earn enough money for class, while at the same time having few options to cover the expenses required to pay for those classes. A third student, Maria, noted the paradoxical relationship between being dependent on her university for healthy food while struggling to achieve the desired grades in her coursework:

> So I think like, even though you're not putting the money toward food, your education or your grades will reflect that, and in the end it's just like a double negative, I guess. Like you're not getting food, and your grades that you're putting all your money toward are not good either.

This choice between earning enough money or earning good grades creates a vicious cycle, which undermines students' academic success. Thus, Maria's experience of the paradox points to an irreconcilable situation where students work to put money toward their education in hopes of creating a better future for themselves and their families. However, the money spent on the education is not worthwhile if these students lack the time, energy, or cognitive ability to learn the concepts being taught in class as a result—a paradox that relates directly to our study's second theme of sympathy vs. distancing.

Paradox #2: Sympathy vs. Distancing

The second paradox of sympathy vs. distancing describes how participants sympathized with their peers who struggled to overcome basic needs insecurity, while simultaneously distancing from the experience of insecurity in their own lives. Several participants described an eagerness to help their colleagues by donating to the food pantry, giving someone a ride to campus, or letting a friend live in their home. A student named Nicole, for example, sympathetically described one of her friend's experience of housing insecurity. This friend could not afford to pay her share of the rent, so Nicole explains how her friend ended up living with various other friends until she was able to save enough money to move into the shared home:

> Um, so for a couple of days she was living out of a suitcase in her car because she had to work to, you know, make her money and she didn't have a place to stay. So, we offered as much as we could until we had our house available for her to like live in.

Despite their eagerness to help, these same participants were often quick to point out they were not experiencing any basic needs struggles of their own, thus, distancing themselves from those with whom they claimed to sympathize. Continuing Nicole's example from above, she distanced herself from the experience of homelessness by emphasizing that housing insecurity did not affect her:

> Um, it doesn't affect me personally. I'm thankful enough to have a roof over my head. But, … like you never know, like the person sitting next to you in class is working their ass off and they don't know where they're going to be sleeping the next night or what they're going to be doing the next day.

Another student, Maria, was asked to comment on how her peers might experience food insecurity. In response, she was quick to clarify she had never experienced food insecurity herself:

> Thankfully it doesn't relate to me, but for my colleagues I think that could be a really big factor in why people don't succeed in college and why it could take them way longer to succeed in college, which is sad because then they're in this situation longer and I think… most importantly, it puts a really big strain on their mental health.

Maria sympathizes by placing herself in the shoes of a student who might experience food insecurity, recognizing the critical link between being able to satisfy basic needs and achieving a higher education degree. Similarly, when asked about rising

course material costs, Lucy sympathized with the hardship of paying high textbook prices, while also going out of her way to distance herself from this hardship:

> I wish they were cheaper because even though I am able to afford them, [it] doesn't necessarily mean that I want to be spending $500 on books... And I think for other people who are not in the same financial status as me, it's way harder for them to even afford books, which puts you way behind [in] courses and classes and altogether just like [with] school.

Although this student was asked about her own experience with course materials, her response focused on the hardship of textbook costs for those who have less. By first taking special effort to establish her own financial status as being able to afford course materials, she then signifies a certain level of stigma, or an unfavorable communicative marking, toward those who cannot "even afford books." Lucy continued by telling the story of a fellow student who experienced homelessness:

> Oh my God. Actually, somebody who I had political science class with openly said it to the whole class. He was like, "No, I have been homeless for some of the time while I've been here." I had political science last semester and he was like, "I have no idea where, like, some nights I don't know where I'm going to live. I'm trying to get my sister to pay for my college or pay for housing…" And he said, if he's like, "Yeah, I've had to sleep in my car, all this stuff." And I was like, "What!?" But he openly said that to the whole class. So, I was like, that's very ballsy. Also, it's very obvious nobody asked any questions because that would be very invasive. But I think it was pretty crazy how he just said that.

Lucy sympathetically made sense of this experience by communicating shock ("What?!") and possibly even respect ("that's very ballsy"). Through these same utterances, however, Lucy also indicated surprise that her classmate would publicly divulge such circumstances, yet again revealing a certain level of stigma held toward those with whom she simultaneously sympathized. Lucy subsequently seemed to distance herself from the classmate's experience via silence, justifying any other potential reply as "very invasive."

Paradox #3: Bootstrapping vs. Unattainability

In addition to provision vs. dependence and sympathy vs. dissociation, participants also framed experiences with basic needs as a paradox between bootstrapping and unattainability. Bootstrapping refers to both a mindset and action. The phrase, "Pull yourself up by your bootstraps," is a prominent Western cultural adage conjuring visions of the self-made person who rises above the social class they were born into through sheer determination and hard work—like starting a billion-dollar business (ex., Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon) or becoming a brain surgeon after growing up in poverty (ex., Ben Carson, former head of US Housing and Urban Development). Western cultures idolize individuals who appear to move socially upwards without assistance; however, such upward mobility is assumed to be more commonplace than it actually is (Pew Economic Mobility Project, 2009).

With this context in mind, we found students who thought they could make it on their own by pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, while simultaneously finding it unattainable to manage their own basic needs. Unattainability refers to the overwhelming feeling that students described when they could not manage their basic needs on their own. On the bootstrapping side of this paradox, students assumed they should be able to overcome hardship if only they worked hard enough, wanted an education enough, or were devoted enough to attaining their degree. Yet on the other hand, these same students pointed to the unfair and systemic hardships that made attaining a higher education seemingly impossible. One participant named Alessandra epitomized this paradox of bootstrapping vs. unattainability by recounting her inability to work enough hours to make ends meet:

> Now that I'm on my own, I feel like I struggle the most… But [where] there's a will, there's way. Yeah, you just got to do it. Yes, if I do [eat on campus], I try not to, um, cause it's pricey, but if I do, I'll probably, if I'm really trying, if I'm really, really broke, I'll probably do like a Cup of Noodles from the [university dining hall].

Alessandra points to bootstrapping logic when she says, "there's a will, there's a way" and "you just got to do it" in reference to providing meals for oneself. At the same time, Alessandra points out the fact that she could not afford healthy meals—food security was unattainable.

A second participant, Regina, pointed to the paradox of bootstrapping vs. unattainability by telling the story of a friend who struggled to work full-time while also engaged as a full-time college student:

> Um, I haven't experienced [housing insecurity], but I do have a friend who experienced it… She ended up dropping out of school because she didn't have a vehicle to go from off-campus to on-campus. And she, um, she just had so many other things to worry about, I guess... Can't really work full-time to have a place to live and go to school. At least that was her situation. So, I just remember she couldn't continue with her education.

Regina's friend found that engaging in bootstraps behavior made her education unattainable. As she pointed out in the interview, one cannot "really work full-time to have a place to live and go to school." Instead, her friend acknowledged that the competing burdens of work, coursework, housing, and reliable transportation were unsustainable to the point that she had could not continue pursuing a higher education degree.

Samantha also explained her experience with the vicious cycle of trying to fulfill the bootstraps myth:

> Um, and then so yeah, so I didn't want to have them [the participant's parents] pay for anything. I want to start, you know, being an adult. So, I've had to take a few hours- extra hours at the [campus gymnasium] my first semester where I really was, like, separated myself. I kind of overworked myself. I was working a

> full 20- which we can work. Uh, I told [my work supervisor] to up to 20 hours on campus. So, I did the 20 hours. I think at the time I was taking like almost 18 units, so it was a lot and intense. Um, and then since then, I've decided, um, to cut down on those hours. So, I kind of had to budget and figure out like how much I needed to make in order to pay for groceries and for gas. Um, instead of just like making as much as I could.

Once Samantha started college, she felt she had to engage in bootstrapping behavior to be perceived as an "adult." She tried to work the maximum number of hours allowed on campus while also taking an overloaded number of course units. This schedule eventually caused Samantha significant stress, however, as she describes the extra working hours as having taken away from her ability to succeed academically. Finally, Ariana described a similar paradoxical situation of bootstrapping v. unattainability by commenting:

> It's really incredibly hard to maintain a job and go to school full time like that. Like I tried, it didn't work. It affected my grades terribly. So it, it kind of leaves them in a situation where, you know, or am I going to jeopardize my grades or am I going to find a job and, you know, just do that full time. But some people have the dedication to just say, you know, screw it. I was sleeping in my car, you know, but I needed to keep my grades up.

In the end, each of these participants referred to their perceived inability to simply "pull themselves up by the bootstraps." Instead, they discovered—often painfully—that working to successfully fulfill their basic needs only hurt their ability to successfully fulfill their educational requirements. In the next section, we bring together these three experiential paradoxes to discuss implications for historically underserved students, the neoliberal university, and vicious paradox as metatheory.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we sought to answer the following research question: What paradox(es) do historically underserved students experience within the neoliberal university? To answer this question, we interviewed historically underserved students about their basic needs, including food security, housing security, and access to required course materials. In our analysis of these interviews, three paradoxes emerged that highlight the vicious cycle of basic needs challenges faced by students in today's neoliberal university: (1) the provision vs. dependency paradox, (2) the sympathy vs. distancing paradox, and (3) the bootstrapping vs. unattainability paradox. In this section, we address each of these three paradoxes in turn, analyzing them through the lens of vicious cycles that stymie students' ability to successfully move through institutions of higher education. By doing so, we offer practical implications for university actors, while also proposing theoretical insights for paradox theory and future paths for basic needs research.

Provision vs. Dependence

In this study's first paradox of provision vs. dependence, participants discussed the ways in which their basic needs were provided for by the university, including access to free food from the campus pantry, job opportunities, and on-campus housing. On the reverse side of this paradox, students also saw the contradiction of relying or being dependent upon the university, even while paying that university for their education. Because university stipends and financial aid did not provide enough funding to cover both their classes and their basic needs, many students had to take on second jobs, full-time positions, or resort to other extreme measures in order to stay enrolled in classes.

Within the United States' neoliberal system of higher education, the primary goal of the university is to function like a business where the accumulation of profit supersedes all other goals. When profit is materially and discursively, through language and text, placed ahead of the primary stakeholders' livelihood (a.k.a., students), those stakeholders are not the ones who benefit. In fact, students are the ones who end up suffering more than other university actors because of reinforced paradoxical cycles of regression and ambivalence (Lewis, 2000). These cycles paralyze any management or movement forward out of the paradox. We propose that university actors seek ways to help students break out of these vicious basic needs cycles, or else reverse the cycles to help lead to more virtuous outcomes for managing this paradox. In offering recommendations, we acknowledge that university actors may have to work within the confines of neoliberalism, even while advocating for upending unjust and inequitable systems (ex., free college for all, debt forgiveness).

Actors within higher education must help students to escape the provision-dependency paradox by acknowledging its presence in the following ways. As an immediate response to the crisis of basic needs insecurity, university administrators and staff must first accept that a subset of their students depend upon the higher education system to meet their basic needs. Several students suggested that university actors needed to listen, acknowledge the difficulties students go through, and express more empathy for students with basic needs insecurities. For example, Maria said, "So I think people like faculty and students just need to be more understanding and, just because you're not dealing with something doesn't mean that like someone else is or isn't." Another student, Jorge, recommended listening: Just listen to their [students'] problems and make sure that you understand that they didn't choose this, they didn't want this, but it's what's given to them and they're working with what they have to show that. Finally, Chris, echoed the sentiments of Maria and Jorge when he suggested, "Maybe have like a workshop for professors—an empathy workshop—but like a workshop you're able to, I guess it gets down to learn how to empathize."

Second, to temporarily meet students' basic needs in emergencies, universities must adopt organizational flexibility, including continuing the provision of emergency grants or funding, accessible community gardens and pantries, and open education resources. Throughout our interviews, students expressed a desire for the university to continue providing resources that would alleviate students' immediate basic needs insecurities. When asked what recommendations she had for the university, Samantha recommended:

> Keep growing the food pantry and making that available to as many students as possible. I think I know, but not a lot of people know that housing actually has a program where if you need a place to say stay, they have emergency rooms that you can stay in for free.

When asked what recommendations they had to offer, Louie mentioned expanding the hours of the food pantry, and Daniel suggested putting the pantry in a more visible area or in several spaces across campus.

Third, universities should encourage more open communication about basic needs to destigmatize the status of such insecurities. In her recommendations, Eliza described the stigmatizing status of basic needs insecurity: "I think it's hard for kids to like come out and talk about this stuff because it is like very close with the heart and um, it's tough subject to talk about, especially just money. It was just really touchy subject for some people." Conversations about basic needs, at all levels, should be encouraged rather than relegated to marginal physical and discursive spaces on-campus. By making these conversations part of the organizational culture, basic needs stigma could be lessened. Students pressed for a communitarian approach to lessening stigma. For example, Louie suggested taking along another person to the food pantry to show them where it was located on campus. Bethany recommended the creation and promotion of a collaborative informational video:

> If you're a first-time student, this is what you should know or like have a video of a first time student like, a collaboration of a bunch of first-time students and then have them give their advice or like something like that. Because I know that would have been when I was applying here, I loved looking at the videos so I know I would have watched that, and it would have been good to know… [The pantry] needs to be way more advertised because I have no idea where the food pantry is.

Further, raising awareness of basic needs insecurity helps university members better understand the obstacles to basic needs security that we are up against. In other words, the presence of basic needs insecurity should serve as a warning to university actors across the United States and the world of rising student precarity. With widespread awareness of basic needs insecurity, we should also encourage a broader indignation with the systems and institutions accepting *any* level of basic need insecurity. Alessandra expressed frustration with the acceptance of struggle around basic needs insecurity, saying:

> I noticed it more and myself and some of my friends and then it's just kinda crazy how we've just kind of learned to live that way [struggling to access basic needs] and learned to push through it, which is, you know, isn't necessarily a weakness. We're learning to be adults and be responsible. But when you think about it, it's, you know, it should not be that way.

Fourth, universities could partner with third-party entities to address basic needs. One such example is Swipe Out Hunger, a non-profit organization which allows students with extra dining hall meal swipes to donate them to their peers. Ultimately, universities should be held responsible for helping students meet their basic needs by prioritizing students' livelihood over profit-driven food service providers, such as Compass or Aramark (Anderson, 2021; Marcus, 2021).

Sympathy vs. Distancing

In the paradox of sympathy vs. distancing, students spoke sympathetically about their peers during the interviews when recalling stories of those who struggled with basic needs. At other moments during the interviews, students even expressed empathy for their peers because they, too, had first-hand experience with the complex web of challenges that their peers faced in meeting basic needs. For example, participants were eager to help by donating to the campus food pantry, letting a friend live with them temporarily or giving a friend car rides to campus.

The sympathy vs. distancing paradox derives out of pervasive neoliberal ideology. In a neoliberal society, structures of government, higher education, and business rely upon the existence of a vast network of charities and narratives of hierarchical deservedness (De Souza, 2019) in order to explain and reify widening economic inequality (Piketty, 2020). Individuals in the United States consistently hear and subscribe to narratives of sympathy for those who have less; yet those same individuals typically view living in poverty as a stigmatized status. Therefore, individuals distance themselves from the lived experiences of those who manage the realities of poverty, which is often a complex matrix of discursive and material conditions that affect basic needs access (De Souza, 2019). Lewis (2000) discusses the importance of managing paradox to capture its "enlightening potential" (p. 763), in order to move beyond perceptual biases that become entrenched when we view the world through simplistic binaries.

To combat such binaries and vicious paradoxical cycles, we propose that actors with the most power in higher education—especially state legislators, trustees or regents, and university administrators, among others—should break dysfunctional communicative dynamics by first listening to students with basic needs insecurity. Pradies et al. (2020) have argued that breaking dysfunctional dynamics can occur in the following ways: (1) questioning persistent beliefs about the paradox, (2) revamping assumptions about one's role in the organization, and (3) giving free rein to emotions (p. 8). We add "listening" as a crucial first step to this model of shifting paradox dynamics. By starting Pradies et al.'s disruption process with listening, institutional actors will be better informed to root out dysfunction within higher education organizations.

Bootstrapping vs. Unattainability

In the final paradox, students described the individualized necessity for themselves and their peers to overcome incredible basic needs hardships. Students discursively drew upon the widespread "bootstraps" narrative by talking with the interviewer about the achievement of a higher education degree only if they could work hard enough, want it enough, and decided to devote themselves to meeting their basic needs. On the other hand, students explained that the basic needs hardships they faced were

unfair, systemic in nature, and seemingly unattainable. Specific examples included the inability to work enough hours to buy quality food in addition to an inability to balance work, life, and school. Subscribing to the bootstraps narrative served only to perpetuate the discourse that suffering alone is normal in the process of seeking a higher education degree. However, narratives can be changed.

Many know the saying, "Pull yourself up by your bootstraps" and perhaps think of the so-called self-made person accomplishing an incredible task seemingly on their own. The bootstraps narrative permeates individual, family, organizational, and national discourses in American culture. Individuals who move socially upwards, or who are talked about as doing so without assistance, are perceived as idols (Cloud, 1996). Yet the original meaning of pulling oneself up by bootstraps meant the opposite of what it means today—an impossible task:

> An 1834 publication ridiculed a claim to have built a perpetual-motion machine by saying that the inventor might next heave himself over a river "by the straps of his boots." An 1840 citation scoffs that something is "as gross an absurdity as he who attempts to raise himself over a fence by the straps of his boots. (Kristof, 2020)

While the original bootstraps metaphor paradied how foolish and impossible it was to "pull oneself up by one's bootstraps," today's college students often discuss bootstrapping as if it is a practice to aspire to—a way to urge themselves and others to work hard, but also to work alone.

This paradox is harmful because the bootstraps narrative further alienates individuals with basic needs insecurity at a time when they are particularly vulnerable. Vulnerability and alienation are part of the vicious cycle this paradox sustains in higher education. While listening is important an important first step toward breaking dysfunctional organizational cycles, creating counternarratives about college students' basic needs insecurity could facilitate alternative responses and embed virtuous dynamics in higher education institutions (Pradies et al., 2020, p. 8). We want to be clear that we are not arguing against hard work, self-determination, or the agency of students. Rather, we urge scholars and practitioners to shun any institutional complacency that connotates systemic and individual barriers as being indistinguishable from one another.

Based upon previous communication models from De Souza (2019) and Dutta (2008), we propose that university staff and administrative members engage in participatory discussion sessions with students who have struggled with basic needs insecurity. These sessions would serve several diverse purposes. First, students would have an opportunity to speak about their experiences with intersecting basic needs issues in such a way that their voices could be amplified across university sectors. Second, these sessions could serve as an entry point for creating deeper understanding of the unparalleled challenges college students face today. Third, participatory sessions may minimize social and self-stigmatization around basic needs insecurity, especially if discussions contribute to a stronger and more unified organizational identity. Engaging in participatory ways to create virtuous paradoxes might also include having administrators defer from their positions of power in order to meet students in the times and spaces where they already gather. Alternatively, university administrators could offer to pay students for the time they spend speaking about their experiences, attending conferences about basic needs, or offering ideas for communicative campaigns about basic needs insecurity on campus.

Pradies et al. (2020) have proposed that facilitating new responses to paradoxes can enable trustful relationships and foster emotional equanimity. Our findings expand upon these previous scholars' work by explaining the ways in which the paradoxes communicatively maintain indignities when and where students cannot meet basic needs. We urge future scholars to examine how virtuous paradoxical cycles build the emotional confidence of organizational actors in positions of precarity.

CONCLUSION

The neoliberalization of higher education occurs not only in the economics of tuition, housing and course materials costs, but also through organizational communication and personal interactions. Thus, this study's research context—a public, 4-year Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) in southern California—offered a unique opportunity to examine how historically underserved students made sense of their experiences with basic needs (in)security. While this case provided a glimpse into the barriers college students face, the context we examined may be quite different from other institutions of higher education. For example, private universities and 2-year institutions may have other mechanisms in place (or a lack thereof) for addressing basic needs insecurities. The same can be assumed for non-HSI campuses, as well as colleges and universities located beyond the United States. Nevertheless, this study's context still provides scholars and practitioners new information about how students experience organizational paradoxes at the individual level—particulary among racial/ethnic minorities, low-income students, and first-generation college students.

Neoliberal policies have an outsize effect on historically underserved students. We encourage future researchers to continue examining how students manage basic needs over time as universities adopt patchwork solutions to address widening inequities. Further, we would like to see examples of universities who have broken or reversed vicious paradoxical cycles by creating virtuous cycles via long-term commitments to students needs. Future researchers may consider conducting an analysis of institutional responses to students seeking financial aid or help alleviating basic needs. Our proposed recommendations for listening, participating in discussions, and moving toward participatory solutions should not be an invitation to further burden students with tasks on top of the needs they currently manage. Instead, those in positions of power should bear the onus of creating or empowering existing spaces for dialogue.

In sum, exploring paradox from an individual perspective answers previous calls from basic needs scholars to "provide a more holistic understanding of the educational barriers faced by historically underserved college students" (Jenkins et al., 2020, p. 9). Qualitative studies like this one also allows for participants to describe the complexity of their lived experiences. By sharing the participants' voices, we hope to dignify the difficult experience of managing basic needs while pursuing higher education—an issue that is particularly salient for today's college students who are trying to make their way in neoliberal colleges and university systems.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the full interviews gathered reveal personal information about the participants, the IRB has asked us not to share their information with others outside of the study. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to Megan Schraedley, mschraedle@wcupa.edu.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Institutional Review Board (IRB) of California State University Channel Islands. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

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