A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF ONLINE ADVERTISEMENTS PROMOTING

ONLINE PROGRAMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Council of
Texas State University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
with a Major in Sociology
May 2017

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this document first and foremost to my loving mother who, though she will never have the ability to read this document is inherently included in every single thing I do, have ever done, and will ever do. To my dad who has always managed to make me feel special and cherished and to my husband who is somehow willing to continue that difficult task daily. To my big brother who has inspired me since birth. To my family and friends who have offered emotional, spiritual and sometimes actual physical support during my educational journey. And most of all, to my dear sweet Luna, Nova, and Vega, my moon and my stars, who inspire me each and every day.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

A rising number of students have turned towards seeking their degrees online in lieu of enrolling in the traditional brick and mortar college or university. Today online marketing is more visible than ever, and the prospective student population for higher education is increasingly attracted to online programs. The purpose of the present study is, therefore, to analyze the online marketing of online programs in higher education. This study is a descriptive analysis of the audiovisual messages that colleges and universities are sending about their online programs. I conducted a qualitative analysis of 98 online video advertisements developed and posted by 36 different institutions of higher education in the United States. I identified five specific themes in these advertisements: 1) For Busy Individuals Needing Time and Flexibility; 2) Achieving Dreams: Creating or Improving Career; 3) Going Back to School and 'Finishing' aka Graduation; 4) Reputable Institution and Faculty; and 5) Affordability. These findings are generally consistent with previous research that documented institutional branding in higher education and the packaging of education as a product. The advertisement theme of affordability is a unique finding of the present study, which extends earlier research that saw higher education focused on the marketing of its benefits. Hidden assumptions of higher education advertising themes are discussed. Also discussed are potential policy implications of the current findings.

I: INTRODUCTION

We learn the meaning of what is important in life and society through a variety of socializing agents including family, school, community and peers. Education is one of the first socializing agents people encounter, and thus aspects of higher education have been the focus of many sociological inquiries. In the United States, the desire and ability to continue one's education after the traditional 12-year primary school track may not always be an easy one to fulfill in the life course trajectory (Bozick and DeLuca 2005).

In a rapidly growing world of technology, higher education has evolved into something it never was before. A rising number of students have turned towards seeking their degrees online in lieu of enrolling in the traditional brick and mortar college or university. In 2011 over 6.7 million students were enrolled in a minimum of one online course, a drastic increase from the 1.6 million in 2002 (Allen and Seaman 2013). Today, because online marketing is more highly visible than ever and the student population for higher education is increasingly attracted to online programs, the marketing of higher education is an important topic to consider.

Previous studies have focused on the quality of online education (Marcum 2014), how to market online education (Blanco Ramirez and Palu-ay 2015), and the identification of prospective students as consumers (McMillan and Cheney 1996). Analyses of television commercials and other types of advertisements for multiple products (Goffman 1976) have also been performed to a great extent. Much of the literature on marketing and online education or the analysis of advertisements for institutions of higher education is from a business, marketing, journalism, higher

education, or psychological perspective. There is a significant lack of sociological research that has examined television commercials and video advertisements promoting online education. The purpose of this study is, therefore, to apply a sociological perspective to examine audiovisual advertisements promoting online higher education programs.

My objectives for this project are to select and view a variety of video advertisements specifically promoting online programs in higher education, and to analyze the content of the advertisements for purposes of exploring emerging themes. This study uses symbolic interactionism as a guiding theory since it allows for exploratory study, where the researcher is encouraged to describe his or her observations in detail without the requirement to hypothesize with certain expectations (Blumer 1969). Also, the interpretive process and resulting action from assigning meanings to external objects and encounters that arise as part of social interaction is inherent to the symbolic interaction perspective (Blumer 1969). For example, prospective students who view advertisements first define the stimulus, and assign meaning to them based on their prior experiences and their own interpretation of the symbols and messages that lie within advertisements. Only then do they make a decision about how to respond to the stimulus.

Through television commercials, online video advertisements, and other marketing campaigns, institutions of higher education that offer online educational programs are sending specific messages about their own programs in order to recruit students. These advertisements tend to portray the educational experience in a particular way to influence prospective students. Thus, it is important to determine what promises are being made by these advertisements. We would then be able to consider the

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implications and societal impact of these advertisements. What messages are present in current audiovisual advertisements from institutions of higher education in connection with the online educational experience? To address this question, this study performs a descriptive analysis of the audiovisual messages that colleges and universities are sending about their online academic programs and attempts to identify major themes in marketing campaigns that are targeted towards prospective students. The findings may contribute to the sociology of education.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

People are deviating from the traditional life course timeline for completing their college education by either delaying their enrollment in college right after high school, abandoning degrees that were started right after high school, or earning degrees or other credentials in alternate programs (Bozick and DeLuca 2005). To that end, the goal of online education and online degree programs is to increase the availability of education for all potential students. An online course or program is designated as one that offers 80 percent or more of its coursework in an online format (Allen and Seaman 2013). In the United States, traditional brick and mortar colleges and universities as well as online colleges and universities offer full degree programs that can be earned 100 percent online. Enrollment activity for institutions that offer online courses has increased over the years. In 2011 over 6.7 million students were enrolled in at least one online course, the equivalent of 32 percent of all students enrolled in higher education (Allen and Seaman 2013).

There is a lack of research that examines marketing for online education or online higher education from a sociological perspective. The following is an overview of literature in regards to traditional vs. online education, the business of marketing education, sociology and advertisements, and finally reasons why these topics should be converged to investigate advertisements for higher education through a sociological lens.

Traditional vs. Online Education

Offerings for online courses began in the 1990s as a distant relative to distance education with the innovation of the Internet (Berjerano 2008). Online programs differ

from traditional residential programs in that they involve computer-mediated interaction, are independent of a specific location, and are time-flexible. In 2014, after researching digital technology for the company Ithaka S+R, Deanna Marcum stated that institutions of higher learning, now equipped with more innovative technology and more online programs available, hoped to attract new revenue from students who are historically underserved in traditional university programs, such as those "who live far away from higher-education institutions…and students who can't afford extensive travel to and residence in physical campuses" (Marcum 2014:6). In addition to those who are not physically able to attend institutions of higher learning, students who enroll in online education programs include those who are employed, regardless of how many hours a week they work, parents who are married, single, or who otherwise need flexibility in every aspect of the learning process because of their multiple family responsibilities, and those who are older than traditional college students (Allen and Seaman 2013; Bejerano 2008 and Marcum 2014).

There have been debates on whether online education is of the same caliber as its traditional counterpart (Bejerano 2008; Burd and Selingo 2006; Lloyd, Byrne and McCoy 2012). From a faculty perspective, virtual instruction may be less effective; teaching online is thought to be supplementary to full time faculty assignments, and institutions claim that lack of resources makes training for facilitation of online courses difficult, particularly for older faculty (Allen and Seaman 2013; Lloyd, et al. 2012). In contrast, Larreamendy-Joerns and Leinhardt (2006) and Ubell (2016) assert that faculty are drawn to teaching online courses to add variety to their traditional teaching routines. Regardless

of format, a grade or credential earned through an online course of study equals a grade or credential earned in residence.

The potential of various technological outlets, tools, and/or applications for online programs has been researched as well, citing concerns for outdated technology and increasing faculty workloads (Allen and Seaman 2013; Lloyd et al. 2012; Marcum 2014; Selwyn 2014). "Policy makers are increasingly questioning the quality of education that colleges are providing" with their online programs (Burd and Selingo 2006:2), but Eom, Wen, and Ashill (2006) measured learner experiences and outcomes in university online education and reported that if targeted to specific learners, online education could prove to be a superior mode of instruction. Marcum (2014) performed a comparison between a standard university level course and one that was offered in hybrid format, where the majority of the coursework was done online save a one-hour a week required direct contact session with an instructor, and found no differences that were statistically significant regarding learning outcomes.

Students who have gone through online programs have mixed reviews. The online blog www.geteducated.com allows students to review their personal encounters with online programs by anonymously completing an online university review. One student shared sentiments that opposed the positive messages featured in the marketing campaign of their university:

> When I graduate this fall, I do so with a 42k student loan debt. This wouldn't bother me so much IF the education I received was taught by the engaging "industry experts" both schools advertised in their promotional materials. While I'm sure (for legal reasons only) the instructors are qualified to teach at the college level, evidently possessing a "desire" to help a student excel and succeed in academia is not a hiring criteria. In short, the majority of faculty I have been saddled with are collecting a pay check without regard to the quality of service being provided… I was billed $1,170 for a course in which I have completely taught myself.

Not all experiences are negative. There are also hundreds of positive reviews that endorse the excellence of certain online programs similar to the following:

> Received my BA in political Science and Government and currently enrolled in MAED program. Ashford has been a blessing in disguise. I was skeptical at first of how rigorous these programs would be online. I was pleasantly surprised and feel fortunate to be an Ashford University alumni. I will receive my Masters degree in August of 2016 and will start doctoral studies shortly after. I am 50 years old and you are never too old to learn, in fact learning should be a life long endeavor. Ashford University has help me realize my dreams and looking back I was fortunate to have found them and realized soon after the potential these degrees ensure. I have family member that run very successful technology companies and they view an online education just as successful as a brick and motor education. they in fact see more responsibility from the online learner and value their individual commitment at least equally as the conventional university learner. The future is bright for receiving a degree online and will become more of a mainstream alternative to getting a quality education.

The Business of Marketing Education

The concept of marketing education includes the danger of identifying students as consumers and purchasers of goods, a model that distances "students from the complete educational process" and makes the institution of higher education responsible for supplying the actual "goods" (McMillan and Cheney 1996:13). Colleges and universities are in danger of being duplicitous when their function is to promote autonomous learning yet the promises of their advertisements speak of potential jobs and other societal benefits instead of the benefit of actual learning (Gibbs 2007). ITT Tech, a now defunct technical for-profit institution, poured many of its funds into television commercials in which recent graduates would provide enthusiastic endorsements about recession-proof jobs guaranteeing a quick payoff for the investment of education (Quereshi, Gross and Desai 2013). Some universities in the United Kingdom offer promotional items up front just

for applying to the institution such as bicycle vouchers, laptops, or travel passes, all of which Gibbs (2007) feared students valued more than higher education itself.

In *The Presentation of Self in Every Day Life*, Goffman stated "there is hardly a legitimate everyday vocation or relationship whose performers do not engage in concealed practices which are incompatible with fostered impressions" (Goffman 1959:64). Much like the individual presents oneself in a particular way to others, institutions of higher education try to control how they appear to the public for marketing purposes.   The construction of identity "happens at all levels of the university, ranging from individual students and lecturers to organizational units and the university as a whole" (Blanco Ramirez and Palu-ay 2015:144). A resounding message evident from former reviews of marketing for higher education is that the institutions being promoted are superior in excellence and diversity (Blanco Ramirez and Palu-ay 2015; Burd and Selingo 2006; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006; Johnson 2010). Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) reviewed global higher education marketing from a business management perspective and found that marketing trends from institutions of higher education were increasingly concerned with the appearance and reputation of the institution itself rather than the long-term benefits of education for people.

In contrast to the idea of marketing universities as superior institutions of higher education, the *Solutions for Our Future* was a humorous public marketing campaign showing what American society would look like without the support of higher education, i.e. a 911 call with no first responders available, a visit to an emergency room with no medical advances, and a need for express mail delivery without technological innovations (Johnson 2010). Stanford University also attempted humor in their *Hail, Stanford, Hail*

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initiative a year later in 2007 in which an authoritative narrator voices over scenes that are anything but serious, i.e. silly microwave tricks, a dated 1980s character playing the synthesizer and a cat chasing a laser being compared to innovations in energy, music, and technology (Johnson 2010). Both university campaigns took place during highly visible basketball broadcasts of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Johnson (2010) outlined that both the *Solutions for Our Future* campaign, originated in part from the American Council on Education, as well as the *Hail, Stanford, Hail* initiative identified that their goal was to highlight the important role that higher education plays in social well-being. Despite their humorous depictions of the educational experience, the purpose of humor in these advertisements is to trigger conversation about institutions of higher learning and their significant place in society (Johnson 2010).

Additional marketing techniques include creating a viewbook, defined by Merriam-Webster as a "promotional booklet with pictures that is published by a college or university and used especially for recruiting students" (2017), a practice many colleges and universities engage in. These promotional materials "offer images that symbolize institutional values and match product and organizational image with the needs of particular students" (Klassen 2001:20). Using institutions identified as such from the 1998 U.S. News and World Report, Klassen (2001) found that images and messages for lower ranking institutions were different than those for higher ranking institutions. For example, lower ranking institutions feature students more frequently in their viewbooks, indicating passive relationships with the organization whereas top ranking institutions feature faculty more frequently, indicating an active connection with the organization and an incentive for growth (Klassen 2001). Klassen's (2001) study also revealed that lower

ranked institutions highlighted the graduation ceremony as the pivotal moment indicating

success, while higher ranked institutions featured a variety of images of an evolving

college education with peers, professors, and other community events that emphasized

success. Moreover, Hartley and Morphew (2008) analyzed 48 university viewbooks

from the United States which contained the following themes: Institutional

context/campus features, Academics/faculty, Co-curricular opportunities, Admissions

and financial aid, Value of an education, and Purpose of higher education.

While exploring university branding and identity construction, Blanco Ramirez

(2016) performed a content analysis on over 100 images from posters, flyers and websites

from 16 different university campaigns. The author's findings indicate that the images of

universities promote convenience to busy individuals, primarily consisting of minorities,

including women of color, those who would like to advance in their careers or otherwise

become successful for social mobility, and those who want to complete their degrees

(Blanco Ramirez 2016). Since the posters and flyers sampled came from his experience

riding the subway, the author noted that the vast majority of passengers, the supposed

target audience, would not actually enroll in the institutions represented. Rather, the

importance of the university to "take a position" in the space sampled was the primary

goal (Blanco Ramirez 2016:202).

Saichaie and Morphew's analysis of 12 four-year college and university websites,

including those from the Big 10, Elite, Southern Colleges, and Public Regional

institutions, revealed not only ideal images of sports, residence life and campus

landscapes, but of students as well: "Across the sample, students were portrayed as

active, attractive, and welcoming. No instances of obese, overweight, or unhappy

students appeared…and other markers of social differentiation were poorly represented"
(Saichaie and Morphew 2014:519). Additionally, the authors identified several themes
within the sample including: Academics, Campus Aesthetics, Fine Arts, Intercollegiate
Athletics, Student Life, and Value (Saichaie and Morphew 2014:509).

Sociology, Advertisements, and Goffman

Aside from the research on the various aspects of education, it is important to
mention the research that pioneered widespread analysis of advertisements in the field of
sociology. One of the most well-known sociological critiques of advertisements was
performed by Erving Goffman and was published in 1976. Goffman's (1979) analysis
spawned the affirmation that advertisements in their most presentable and attractive form,
giving viewers the ideal image to assign to roles, situations, and their respective
environments. The hyper ritualization portrayed in advertisements may affect social roles,
social norms, and subsequently social exchanges. Goffman sampled 500 photo
advertisements featuring human subjects and analyzed them to understand the
construction of gender and gender roles in society. His research revealed several different
stereotypes for gender roles that indicated the idealized woman in society was portrayed
as more affectionate and less important than men, smaller than and subordinate to men,
and more withdrawn or reserved as compared to men (Goffman 1979).

Goffman's research inspired many others to follow his lead in studying
advertisements, investigating their content and effects using various methods. For
example, Kang (1997) revisited Goffman's famous study about gender relations in
popular magazines by using 252 samples of advertisements from 1979 and 252 more

from 1991 and found that little had changed in regards to the portrayal or depiction of women in advertisements, though there had been 20 years of other progressive advancements in society for women since Goffman's initial publication. Mager and Helgeson (2010) performed a content analysis on 3,212 advertisements featured within a 50-year period, 1950 to 2000. They found that although females were featured in objective role portrayals, so were men, suggesting social change is in fact taking place as evidenced in the advertisements reviewed (Mager and Helgeson 2010). If there is progress that can be measured in one aspect in the history of advertisements, the potential to begin an active history of research on advertisements for online higher education also exists.

Other research using content analysis has explored media and its various forms and messages as well. Isanki and Leszkowicz (2011) used a different type of analysis for their content analysis of magazine (catalogue) advertisements in the form of slide viewing. They wanted to see if it was "possible to look at something without actually noticing it" (Isanki and Leszkowicz 2011:85) and found that participants were able to recall important information from the advertisements such as the name of the company being advertised. In addition, they discovered that two thirds of their participants also paid attention to the elements of secondary importance, such as relations between people featured in the advertisements and/or what activities the subjects were engaged in. Participants viewed the advertisements as positive messages because everyone looked happy and was smiling, comparing what they viewed to real life. Isanki and Leszkowicz (2011) further noted:

> Slide viewers were likely to see photos as the representations of the
> scenes from everyday life, succumbing to the illusion that the catalogue is not a

marketing/advertising tool, but a guide…to daily life and…consumer dreams (p.98).

This recollection of specific details from brief exposure to a magazine gives insight to how much information we are able to decipher when given a simple visual stimulus. Commercials and video advertisements for colleges and universities appear frequently on television, on air, and online, sending messages daily to prospective students who receive and interpret them. It is plausible to imagine the influence of these persistent advertisements on viewers' ideas about higher education.

Gaps in the Literature

Education is a common focus for a large body of sociological research, including various aspects of it – effectiveness, barriers to, diversity of, the scholarship of, and several other facets of education. Advertisements also encompass information about our society that can be explored through a sociological lens. Though commercials, advertisements, and other marketing tools have been explored and dissected for various content including gender roles and the illusion of perfection, there is not a significant body of research, current or outdated, that directly focuses on advertisements for institutions of higher education, particularly for online programs of study. Higher education is not a product to market but a service (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006). As an employee and former student of a local community college, I believe that the marketing of higher education should be conceptualized from the perspective that education is based on relationships with people and their interpretation of what education is and what it could be rather than what financial benefits are in store for the institution. We may attempt to model our lives and selves after what are viewed in the images of an

advertisement, but must realize in reality we are saddled with the "dull footage" of life and may not be able to live up to the hyper-ritualization presented (Goffman 1979:84).

Modern day culture is saturated with different forms of media and is potentially influenced by its various contents. As argued by Kang (1997), "as a socializing agent, the visual imagery provided by the media can have a powerful impact on our attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors, since it can contribute meanings and associations entirely apart and of much greater significance" (p. 980). The goal of this current research project is, therefore, to discover what meanings, associations, and hidden assumptions about higher education are present within advertisements that promote online education. An exploratory content analysis of video advertisements for online education was necessary to assist in reviewing current messages institutions of higher education are conveying about online programs. Research on popular colleges and universities that actively promote online education with online advertisements is significant because the relationship between a student and his or her potential institution of higher education begins with that initial communication.

III: METHODOLOGY

Sociological content analysis can be conducted both quantitatively as well as qualitatively. I chose to use techniques from a qualitative perspective. Though there were many aspects to be 'counted' such as basic demographics like age, sex, and race and/or ethnicity, instead these were noted since the focus of this research was to identify messages through analyzing the spoken content or narrative script of the advertisement while observing the context in which they are spoken. Rather than applying deductive reasoning for this project, an exploratory outlook was used since content analysis can either be exploratory, descriptive, or an attempt to explain a particular phenomenon (Babbie 2008). Sociological content analysis that is exploratory in nature can be performed to examine social artifacts such as "books, magazines, web pages, poems, newspapers, songs, painting, speeches, letters, e-mail messages, bulletin board postings on the Internet, laws, and constitutions, as well as any component or collections thereof" (Babbie 2008:350) and is important when a researcher is breaking new ground on a topic and can give indispensable insight (Babbie 2008). The fluidity and adaptability of this research method is consistent with the symbolic interactionist concept of exploratory study (Blumer 1969).

Commercials are traditionally referenced when discussing on air advertisements such as those shown on television or radio, and advertisements are usually referenced when discussing printed media. For the purposes of this project the term advertisement refers to both commercials intended for television and online videos featuring commercials. The desired sample set originally included television commercials for

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online programs in higher education. In order to collect a significant sample, a variety of television commercials would need to be represented and those that are aired on television at random times of day and on a variety of networks could not easily be obtained in a timely manner. Today, models of the social world are not only found in person but can be relayed through online experiences, which is why I selected video advertisements found online that were representative of television commercials as the source of data for this study. The Internet is not only an invaluable tool for publicly available data sets but for multiple aspects of social research (Babbie 2008; Singleton and Straits 2010). There has been research that focuses on the quality of online education (Allen and Seaman 2013; Berjerano 2008; Burd and Selingo 2006; Lloyd, Byrne and McCoy 2012) and on advertising higher education from education and marketing perspectives (Hartley and Morphew 2008; Saichaie and Morphew 2014), but not much from a sociological perspective that concentrates on the messages being conveyed about online courses and online education programs.

My observations and data collection involved online evidence rather than actual human subjects. An application to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Texas State University was required since the desired result was generalizable knowledge from the subject matter. The IRB granted an exemption for this project due to lack of direct or indirect interaction with human subjects. All materials reviewed were anonymous from publicly available data that currently exists. My goal was not to define or create a new theory, but rather to provide insight into the mechanism of marketing and advertising and what institutions of higher education are saying about online education. The potential implications of what institutions of higher education promise in regards to the online

educational experience was examined by viewing online video advertisements. These social influences represent a better understanding of education and its attainability, the benefits of earning a credential in higher education, and the ease of fitting a school schedule into one's current lifestyle.

For this study, common themes found in online video advertisements for online education were researched, identified and analyzed as part of a content analysis. The unit of analysis was advertisements for online degree programs in higher education found strictly online. Google defines an *advertisement* as "a notice or announcement in a public medium promoting a product, service, or event" (2016). The current definition of *commercial* from the Merriam-Webster dictionary is "related to or used in the buying and selling of goods and services" (2016). For the use of this project, television commercials in the form of video advertisements for institutions of higher learning such as a college or university that can be viewed in online format via web browser or website such as youtube.com were utilized. The advertisement had to be for an online program of study that resulted in a degree earned, regardless of what type (i.e., Associate, Bachelor or Master).

I first used the search engine from Google Chrome. I employed the search terms "online university program", "online degree program", "online university", "online degree", and then from the results selected "videos". Many video results from the Google search engine directed me towards www.youtube.com where I employed the same type of search criteria directly from that site. Another website that was instrumental was www.ispot.tv where I was able to locate a sizeable number of relevant advertisements. From these two main websites, I was able to locate a variety of different

advertisements since after watching one video, the website suggests others that are similar in nature. In one instance, when an advertisement was located for an online program for a brick and mortar university, I went directly to that website to see if there were any other programs that had promotional advertisements from that school. I used four additional samples found on this institution's website that all discussed different programs. One active video link took me to www.vimeo.com. I collected data in this manner from December 2016 through January 2017.

After filtering through many videos that did not fit the criteria for this project, I was able to locate 44 videos through www.youtube.com, 57 advertisements with www.ispot.tv, 1 with www.vimeo.com, and the remaining 5 directly through websites of the institution of higher education. After locating appropriate samples, each were logged with its web link noted as well as length of advertisement and year in circulation.

The initial sample consisted of 106 advertisements from 37 different colleges and universities in the United States. After the advertisements were located, the institutions were logged and the link associated noted. They were then alphabetized in order to make an organizational reference and to ensure that no more than 10 advertisements per institution were being selected. The end result contained no more than 7 advertisements per college or university to ensure the sample did not contain an overwhelming amount of data from a single institution.

Eight advertisements were eliminated from the initial data collection. Three cases were eliminated because the advertisement did not specifically mention available online programs, two due to broken or expired links, two more due to duplicate sample, and one because it was a radio only video advertisement. This left a database of 98 online video

advertisements for analysis. As of the date of data collection, 36 institutions were represented, 14 of which were for profit and 22 not for profit. Each advertisement ranged from 30 seconds to 1 minute and 30 seconds, with only 2 that were longer at 2 minutes and 2 minutes and 30 seconds. Dates ranged from 2008 to 2017, spanning almost a decade though the vast majority of the advertisements in the sample were published after 2011. The summary of results for all institutions can be seen in Appendix A, while results from non-profit cases are shown in Appendix B and those from for-profit cases in Appendix C.

I watched each advertisement a total of three times in the span of one week. The first viewing was to ensure that my criteria had been met for the sample. During the second viewing of the commercial I transcribed each one of them, repeating sections if necessary to capture the full script, then replayed again to ensure accuracy in the transcription. Several advertisements featured no speaking whatsoever, featuring only images of various people presumably representing either prospective students, currently enrolled students, or former students. Narrators would create the scenario for the advertisement and illustrate themes with their given script, which I transcribed. During the third viewing I made general notes of the video context with people, places, things, scenery, animation, etc., which helped identify certain themes. I continued to read each transcript numerous times to identify concepts, using key words and phrases present. After performing focused coding and combining similar concepts, themes emerged that proved to be strong in content (Babbie 2008; Esterberg 2002). In the end, I identified five major themes: 1) For Busy Individuals Needing Time and Flexibility; 2) Achieving

Dreams: Creating or Improving Career; 3) Going Back to School and 'Finishing' aka

Graduation; 4) Reputable Institution and Faculty; and 5) Affordability.

This section will discuss the five themes that surfaced from my analysis of 98 online video advertisements (Table 1). Each theme appeared frequently and at times overlapped with other themes. A detailed description of each theme follows.

Table 1. Themes and Relevant Examples.	
Theme	**Example**
1) For Busy Individuals Needing Time and Flexibility	Mention of family Busy schedule Not enough time Need Flexibility Granting credit for former schooling/military/life experience Can work full time and raise kids Find time to study At your own pace
2) Achieving Dreams: Creating or Improving Career	Wanting a career, not a job Point A to point B Move to the next level Not just first degree, could be second or third You are the future Achieve your dreams A better life for you Make the world a better place
3) Going Back to School and 'Finishing' aka Graduation	To finish the degree I started Didn't take it seriously the first time More than just a piece of paper I did it Featured in cap and gown Diploma on wall, holding diploma
4) Reputable Institution and Faculty	Mention of quality of institution Mention of accreditation Number of years established, stated or visually presented Professors were great Staff was so nice Superior academics Stellar reputation
5) Affordability	Save money Affordable One flat fee Financial aid Within your budget Valuable Help reduce your tuition

First, the importance of time and flexibility was a primary message in many of the advertisements sampled. Although the promotional material emphasized that higher education was possible due to flexible scheduling and online availability, the promises being made suggest that completing an online degree program is easy. Second, achieving your dreams and creating or improving your career was a standout promise. Although these are possible with higher education, by no means are they guaranteed. Third, testimonials and other verbiage that described going back to school appear to encourage those who had previously attended college but never finished, with graduation being promised as the ultimate reward for returning to higher education. It is common knowledge, however that degree completion is the result of hard work and dedication in any program, regardless of program type or learning format. Fourth, providing history of the institution and mentioning the dedication of its faculty in the advertisements is to imply a quality education. Last, affordability of online programs emerged as a declaration from multiple institutions. This message may generate reasonable concern since the cost of higher education is on the rise, particularly with for-profit institutions (McMillan Cottom 2017). The identified messages frequently overlapped and in some instances all five themes were present in a single advertisement.

For Busy Individuals Needing Time and Flexibility

The significance of being a busy individual with lack of spare time was identified in over half of the samples. People are busy with their lives and need their institution of higher education to be flexible and available around the clock because of their multiple roles as adult learners including spouse, caregiver, and parent (Fairchild 2003). If the

advertisement specifically stated that time, or lack thereof, was important, or made mention of a busy schedule, busy mom, busy dad, busy with family, busy with work, needed flexibility, or any other kind of hectic lifestyle, the advertisement was given this coding. 59 of 98 advertisements (60 percent) referenced this as the most important consideration before beginning an online program of study. I observed scenes featuring working mothers and fathers, husbands and wives; working professionals who have jobs but not 'careers' as stated within the advertisement, and the professional individual who is seeking career advancement and needs a flexible program that suits her or his schedule. 41 of 59 (69 percent) of all institutions in this category specifically mentioned that finding the time to study was difficult due to busy schedules that might include work and family responsibilities.

More specifically, within my sample of advertisements, DeVry, Kaplan University, National American University, and Strayer University provided reminders that previous credits were accepted as well as prior work experience, making it possible to "earn your degree faster, saving time and money." A testimonial for Concordia College and University featured a man in his 50's sitting in front of his workstation while he explained that he had been in his line of business for the last twenty years. He confirmed he knew "most of the material and the last thing I want is to sit in a classroom listening to a professor telling me things that I already know." In addition to previous college credits and prior work experience, Liberty University, National American University and Sam Houston State University mentioned their ability to provide credit for previous military experience. National American University provided a clear message about this in one of its advertisements while flashing images of attractive people in a

variety of different roles like mother, businessman, nurse, student, automotive technician, chef, business woman, firefighter, and woman in the military: "At National American University we accept credits earned at other colleges and grant credit for military training and other real world experience. The American way. Get the credit you deserve." A Liberty University advertisement had most of the actors using a laptop computer in their busy scenes of life as the narrator gently stated, "After all, we firmly believe that students should be able to fit study time around family, work, or military responsibilities."

American Intercontinental University featured a humorous depiction of their students as busy individuals using their tablets while performing mundane tasks like pouring coffee (actor missed the cup because she was using her tablet), cleaning debris from the house gutter (actor, at the top of the ladder, threw debris on his child's head at the bottom of the ladder because he was on his tablet studying), or taking your dog for a walk (actor used a ball gun to play with her dog in the park because she was too busy on her tablet to actually play with her dog). All the while the narrator assured "wherever you are you are able to access the courses you need" in one advertisement and in the other promised their institution and program "lets you turn any time of day into a study time of day".

Accelerated degree programs like those offered from Capella University, Grand Canyon University, Kaplan University, Mount Saint Mary College, Regent University, Southern New Hampshire University, University of Phoenix and WGU are intended to add "flexibility around job and other responsibilities." Among statements that flexibility was needed, many comments also made it appear as if higher education didn't require much difficulty. Brigham Young University Idaho insists they give students "a way to

clear obstacles…simple". The advertisement itself was simple in that it was fully animated with neutral colors and backgrounds. The animators included figures of individuals using their laptops to simulate students in online courses. One person from Minot State University who took their courses online wanted to make sure "school didn't consume all of my free time" as they featured him working on both a desktop as well as a laptop at his place of business. He later was shown speaking to an advisor and finally pictured playing with his two children alongside his wife. Indiana East University assures that a "busy mom can work toward a bachelor's degree from a top national university during softball practice" as the image featured just that, and an Ashford University student said her program "made it easy" because she "didn't have to get up early in the morning to go to school" to earn a degree online with the use of an application available by tablet, computer, and phone. Advertisements coded with this theme included assurances that colleges and universities were equipped with various resources and techniques to facilitate the student experience such as support from faculty, cutting edge technologies, and competency based curriculums.

Attention to concept of time in these advertisements is noteworthy because the desired outcome is to complete courses in the online programs when it is convenient for the student. If the intention of an online program is to be available to students who have other commitments like family and full time employment, then the advertisements are doing their inherent job of targeting their exact customer base. However, the implicit assumption of the advertisement is that education itself is easy because one is able to complete an entire program of study and an entire educational journey away from a traditional campus. One overarching, hidden message here is that people no longer need

to be physically present at a brick and mortar campus in order to navigate a path through the higher education system.

On an individual level, one might interpret these messages to indicate that completing online courses and programs is in fact "easy" because of the flexibility being offered and with promises that online courses to not require a lot of time. In the example from American Continental University, online coursework can be completed without having to dedicating 100% of your attention to it. The multitasking of today that involves a phone in one hand and divided attention elsewhere may not apply to higher education as coursework should be challenging and intellectually stimulating rather than providing students the opportunity to complete it without focus.

Achieving Dreams: Creating or Improving Career

Matching the percentage of advertisements as the first theme with 59 out of 98 samples (60 percent), achieving dreams seems possible if you enroll in an online program according to the samples collected. Whether through testimonials, stated by an announcer, or visually presented, achieving dreams was identified as one of the criteria for attending an online institution to complete a degree. This theme coincides with the "Value of an education" theme identified by Hartley and Morphew (2008) in university viewbooks with examples featuring successful alumni and images of students with the caption, "we'll help you reach your dreams" (p. 685). Numerous advertisements featured actual dream sequences that introduced messages such as fulfilling dreams, reaching your potential, or being anything you want to be. Prospective students including both men and women of various ethnicities and ages ranging from mid-twenties to mid-forties were featured daydreaming while riding the bus or train to work, at work, while at home with

family, reading in bed, walking on the street passing by window displays, and driving

their vehicles. Dream sequences stressed the difference a degree would make in the lives

of people featured, showing the possibility of careers in healthcare, in law, in business, or

even in running your own business. Being able to achieve the dream of getting a better

job, advancing in one's career, or possibly changing the world fit the criteria for this

particular theme which corresponds to Hartley and Morphew's (2008) purpose of higher

education theme.   The purpose of higher education in their 2008 study includes

preparing students for careers as well as other developmental stages in their lives (Hartley

and Morphew 2008:678).

Script and verbiage followed visual cues with schools Capella University and

Warner Pacific College. Capella University's narrator stated "you start at point A then

you work hard to get to the next level. It feels good when you reach point B but for you B

is not the end" while showing a young man going from cubicle to office then ultimately

leasing his own building for what is assumed as the beginning of his own business.

Warner Pacific College included a few themes in one advertisement but included dream

achievement:

> Are you ready for a fresh start? Are you looking for a competitive advantage to
> take your career to the next level? For over 25 years the adult degree program
> from Warner Pacific College has been serving students who are ready to earn
> their undergraduate or graduate degrees. Just one night a week or online, our
> programs are designed to fit your busy schedule…Visit our website today and
> find out how you can dream, achieve, flourish. With the Warner Pacific College
> adult degree program.

This advertisement featured adult learners, aged between 25 and 40, who seemed happy

to use their laptops while taking online courses.

Included with this theme for improving life and career, advertisements included change as an incentive, with institutions like Liberty University, Southern New Hampshire University and Villanova University reminding students it is their destiny to "make a difference" and others like American Public University, Regent University, and Villanova University that it's possible to "make the world a better place." Washington State University's advertisement highlighted a woman in her 30's taking a flight while explaining that her institution offered global research opportunities and gave chances to "change the world." Ashford University had a series of advertisements starring young children who either spoke about their parents or who visited their older selves asking "would it (enrollment) change you", assuring that "technology changes everything", and "sometimes things change."

Goodwin college highlighted the dedication it takes to go to school to achieve one's dreams as they showed a single mother and her children, doing her homework in the morning while commuting on the bus and at night after her children have gone to bed, a young man who does his schoolwork as he sits at home alone, a young teacher doing homework in a library after tutoring a child, and other still shots of students in their everyday lives:

> We believe everyone should have access to a quality education. We believe as students we should have the chance to succeed no matter where we've been or where we plan to go. We could move onto better careers and build better futures for ourselves and for our families. The journey isn't always easy but with the right support we can succeed with anything we put our minds to. Half the battle is taking that first step but each step after that gets a little bit easier. We come from diverse backgrounds united by a single purpose, improving our lives through education.

The hidden assumption of this marketing theme is that once students have completed their program of study, their lives are instantly transformed for the better. This means that there will be no period of time where they will remain unemployed, stagnant in their current job, living in their parent's house, and they will find immediate success, wealth, and happiness. Making a promise to fulfill a student's dreams by completing an online program of study is not that different from fulfilling one's dreams by completing a program of study in residence at a brick and mortar institution. Institutions of higher education "often say they are in the business of changing lives, and they do indeed, change lives" (Larreamendy-Joerns and Leinhardt 2006:595). If earning a degree does improve students' chances of realizing their dreams, there should be no lesser expectation if the program of study is completed online. Though students who complete higher education programs are traditionally more successful than those who don't, success is in no way guaranteed (Côté and Allahar 2011). The achievement of dreams is subjective, so further research is required for additional data and explanation.

Going Back to School and 'Finishing' aka Graduation

The traditional goal of attending an institution of higher education is to earn a credential, whether it be a degree or certificate which was mentioned in 50 of the 98 samples (51 percent). The indication of starting over, going back to school, or finishing the education you started and specifically mentioning graduation was found as an overall message of motivation to entice enrollment. McMillan Cottom (2017) affirms that, though not common, "in the United States it is possible to drop out of high school, later earn a diploma by taking the general equivalency degree (GED) exam, go to a

community college, transfer to a four-year college, and go on to high-status graduate and professional schools to earn a master's and even a doctoral degree" (p.141).

Hearing University of Maryland University College's affirmation that "going back to school for your bachelor's or master's degree can fit into your life" may be the slight nudge students need to hear in order to take action. One of Ashford University's advertisements featured a man speaking to a younger version of himself while sitting in a crowded bus depot, "I know, I know, I should go back and get my degree."   Another of its videos showed a woman riding a train while the younger version of herself reminds her, "you always wanted a business degree."

Goodwin College featured an individual's story in which he claimed "ten years ago I didn't take my education seriously", suggesting that his earlier attempt to education on a more traditional timeline was approached with less commitment. During his testimony, the advertisement showed the student first fishing by himself in front of a calm body of water, then flashed images of him working at Home Depot, with a proud smile on his face while providing assistance to one of his customers. He stated more than once that it "wasn't about the piece of paper, it was about finishing what I started over ten years ago." Similarly, Southern New Hampshire University's advertisement specifically mentioned graduation and a graduation ceremony. In each of the cases, sentiments conveyed matched the prior claim that a degree was more than "a piece of paper":

> Example 1 SNHU
> At Southern New Hampshire University, a degree is more than just a piece of paper. And it's more than a graduation ceremony. It's lifelong dreams fulfilled. Opportunities seized. And it's finally having access to the things you've always wanted. The perfect job. The ability to make a difference. A better life for your family. And a better life for you. Because a degree is the proof that when you put

your mind to it, the incredible happens. Find out where a degree will take you. At snhu.edu.

Example 2 SNHU
 At Southern New Hampshire University, we traveled across the country to celebrate the success of our online students who couldn't attend graduation (Narrator). *Thank you guys for giving me the chance again it's something that I worked for a long time* (Student being interviewed live). Because we believe student success is success worth celebrating. *Who did you get this degree for*? *I got it for me. I did it for my mom. I did it for you, bud* (kisses son). *Congratulations, Daddy*. Find your online graduate or undergraduate program today at snhu.edu.

Example 1 lists several benefits of completing an online degree program and also contains the message of dream achievement. The advertisement showed many images of many individuals such as an older woman doing homework in the evening on her laptop, a young man proudly posing with his degree and family, a ribbon cutting ceremony for an alumni, a casual business meeting for another alumni, a nurse practicing skills on a patient, and a young woman working with what appear to be low income students.   This advertisement indicated that earning your degree would grant you access to a perfect job, a better life, and the ability to make a difference in the world. The promise of "the incredible" happening is a strong one to make regardless of what type of degree is earned.

Example 2 focused on rewarding and recognizing the hard work of students. Since the students completed their respective programs online, the university traveled across the country to deliver degrees to the online graduates. When asked for whom they earned their degree, the responses varied from wanting to earn it for themselves, their parents, or their children. For the students in the advertisement, success was measured by their degree earned and its value seemed intrinsic.

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A Sam Houston State University's advertisement offered a heartfelt testimonial detailing the challenges one of its students experienced in her educational journey and the importance she placed on fulfilling her original intentions.

> Being a full time employee...I had two options – I could go back to school in a really nontraditional route and take one class at a time and with the number of classes I needed I'd be looking at probably another ten years of school just to complete my Bachelor's. So when I found out Sam offered a 100% online bachelor's degree I was all over it because it was something I could fit into my schedule and still be able to maintain my employment and maintain my life and not have to do a lot of travel back and forth. Honestly part of it is that for me the feeling is that you have to finish what you start and try to impart on my kids you are not going to always have a straightforward path…and at even my age I could go back and finish. I've had a lot of influences where my education is concerned. I promised my stepdad before he died that I would finish. And I'm finishing. It's taking a little longer but it's still happening.

According to William G. Bowen, who wrote about the cost disease of education, students who take additional time to earn degrees are costing institutions of higher education more money (2012), which may prompt messages like this that encourage degree completion.

Strayer University presented a scenario in which a current workplace supervisor informed an employee "the partners are looking for someone to lead the southeast team… you have your M.B.A., right?", accompanied by a dream sequence confirming that the employee had in fact gone through a timely online program in order to earn her degree. The supervisor recognized the employee's work history and status but made it clear that without a degree moving forward was not an option. What initially seemed to be an encouraging scene may be interpreted as one that was mildly threatening. A WGU advertisement was similar in stressing the necessity for a degree when considering advancement at work. This video featured a woman sitting up in bed on her computer

with her husband asleep next to her, speaking quietly to a character called Sage the night owl. She states, "You're right. I'm not going to get promoted without that degree".

Many of these advertisements recognize the desire for prospective students to increase job potential. Colleges and universities are believed to promote civic development in society, but these samples have captured the transition of expecting less from institutions of higher education, as evidenced by frequent mention of career training and economic productivity (Nickolai, Hoffman and Trautner 2012). When graduating from an institution of higher education the traditional next step is to become employed using the degree you have just earned, but McMillan and Cheney (1996) reported that after earning degrees in their college and university programs, students experience difficulties in locating jobs that are reflective of the education they have received.

Implicit assumptions of these messages that emphasize returning to school to graduate include the notion that without a higher education degree, people should not be satisfied with their lives. Claims of "finishing what I started" and that a degree is "more than just a piece of paper" indicate that value is attached to the educational experience itself and that self-satisfaction is paired with the socially constructed meaning students have given education. As in Saichaie and Morphew's (2014) research, none of the students featured in the advertisements appeared sad, dissatisfied or depressed. Earning a degree alone does not guarantee success, as mentioned previously, nor does it eliminate potential for depression, or improve quality of life. Through human agency people are able to control their path in life, whether it is to begin, return to, or complete their education.

Reputable Institution and Faculty

Consideration of the reputation of an institution and its faculty were present in 49 of 98 (50%) of the advertisements. Identifying the institution as a superior institution or complimenting the institution based on personal experience with it or its faculty was assigned this code. American Intercontinental University reported its courses were "taught by industry specialists" and Concordia College and University that you could "get a great education that is online." Indiana East University offers "one of the country's most delivered online programs," Regent University's online program is "highly regarded," and Western Governor's University is proud that Washington monthly identified it as "one of the most revolutionary institutions in higher education." Additionally, Kaplan University is a "nationally ranked online institution" and one of its students had the following to say:

> I grew up in Graham, NC, my parents both worked for the textile mills and had a fourth grade education. My mom always wanted me to get an education and when I graduated from high school it was my dream to go to college. I was overwhelmed then got a job then kept trying to come back to school. When Jenna left for boarding school I was 52. I didn't have a degree, there were no jobs. It didn't matter what kind of success I had, the requirements were to have a degree. Not only that I had to walk through the door competing with people half my age. And many of them had MBAs. What were the institutions, what was the cost, how were they respected? Kaplan had a degree in business with a specialty in HR. I took three finalists to my traditional education friends and asked them what the most respected online degree would be. If someone was coming into your office looking for a job. They felt that Kaplan had the best online delivery program that was out there, this was the most respected degree, people wouldn't question if you were competent with a Kaplan degree. Not finishing my degree is not something that is part of me anymore.

In the above testimonial, the prospective student detailed how much research she put into searching for a respectable institution, including a step where she asked the

opinion of her "traditional education" friends. Grand Canyon University is the "university that never sleeps" and wanted to highlight the positive qualities of the institution and the online learning experience:

> Earning your degree online doesn't have to be without the college experience. To find your purpose, it takes support from those around you. GCU's leadership offers over three decades of experience in delivering real world degree programs online. GCU's online class size averages less than seventeen students with full time faculty. Integrate your education with your faith and Christian world view. Welcome to the family. Find your purpose.

Many advertisements deliberately mentioned the institution's date of establishment as evidence of superior reputation. Others used graphics only to flash the university's logo accompanied by the date of establishment, assuming that element alone adds to its status. "Since 1931," in the case of DeVry University or for National American University, they affirmed they have "been helping students reach their educational goals for 75 years." Sam Houston State University included information that its online programs are "taught by full time on campus professors," that it has "classes small enough to provide personal attention, and a university legacy of more than 135 years." Strayer University mentioned the history of the institution in all of its advertisements, with a couple flashing the year of establishment "1892," and the others confirming it was "the university students have trusted for over 120 years."

Hartley and Morphew (2008) identified academics and faculty as an important theme present in university viewbooks, which included mentioning the low student to staff ratios (p.678). American Public University announced that employers wanted "to see that you have graduated from an accredited university". The University of Phoenix says the "average class size is only fourteen students" and their "faculty has on average over fifteen years of field experience." Ashford University, DeVry University, James

Madison University, Sam Houston State University, South University and Strayer University all highlighted the availability of staff and faculty who would either provide support "from day one" ("there's always a professor there for support"), are "very welcoming", "know you by name", or were known for "just being there" when needed. A few of Strayer University's campaigns featured success coaches who stated they were there to "major in you" on your journey in higher education. They promised to provide support in the form of schedule planning, degree planning, and financial planning. Steve Harvey, host of his own daytime talk show and of the Family Feud game show on television among other accomplishments, hosted several advertisements for Strayer University, adding a celebrity feature to the message. The video did not mention if he was an alumni of the college or just a spokesperson, but his words for the institution and its support of students were positive.

Faculty availability is important when taking courses which can be facilitated with technology that allows student/faculty interaction, more collaborative teaching, and and is more timely (Bowen 2012; Larreamendy-Joerns and Leinhardt 2006). Several claims were made that the courses offered online were structured to be nearly identical to their more traditional counterparts. If learning outcomes are equivalent as evidence has previously shown, online programs may be able to reflect the talents of the industry specialists as touted (Marcum 2014).

The proclamation of superior reputation of colleges and universities can lead to assumptions that students will always be given the highest priority in their moments of need while enrolled in online programs. Though it is likely a notion most institutions and faculty would like to promote, there are most likely other administrative and/or research

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responsibilities that may require equal attention. Enrollment in and payment for online courses, whether through non-profit or for-profit institutions, does not purchase the undivided attention of faculty or staff of the institution. Expectations of receiving a quality education should include the reality that the socially constructed role of a student is challenging, especially when communicating with staff or busy faculty members who may not always be available when the non-traditional online student is.

Affordability

The mention of online programs and courses being affordable was identified as a theme. Even though it was mentioned in only 29 of 98 advertisements, a mere 30% of the sample, the cost of any higher education program is an important factor to consider before enrollment. Many prospective students who are interested in online programs and degrees move forward because it seems to be their only option for advancing in their careers and they are not concerned with the debt this education will incur. While working for a for-profit institution as an enrollment officer, McMillan Cottom (2017) realized that students enroll in higher education knowing they are not able to afford the cost of their degree or certificate programs and are therefore willing to take the maximum allotment of federal aid with the mindset that "education is an investment" (p.113).

Some colleges and universities claim to understand the importance of tuition in their advertisements. Western Governor's University's advertisements stated that its programs were "surprisingly affordable." When one prospective student was worried that a college education cost "too much money and there's not enough time" she was reassured that for this reason Western Governor's University has "reinvented education"

so she could "move through courses faster and graduate for half the cost." The promise

of graduating for half the cost of a college education is a large one to fulfill. A

determination of whether or not this is true is beyond the scope of this present study but

the message is strong enough to influence individuals to begin comparing costs and

seriously consider if online education fits into their budget that "gets pulled in all sorts of

directions," as stated by Concordia College and University. This advertisement from

Concordia College and University starred a man in his late 40's to early 50's, sitting at

one of the tables in his home, distributing money to every member of his household

including his wife and children.

Various comments were made about affordability such as "you can afford

this…affordable online program(s)" by University of Maryland University College, "our

financial tools help you make smart choices on how to pay for school" by University of

Phoenix, promoting the ability to take courses "for one flat fee" by Capella University.

For some institutions affordability went hand in hand with flexibility and respectability.

Part of the marketing strategy for multiple institutions of higher education included all

three categories of focus. Kaplan University sponsored the following advertisement:

> Remember that spark you had as a child? At Kaplan University, we can help you
> prepare for that career you always dreamed about and reward you for what you
> already know. We offer credit for prior college and work experience so you can
> earn your online degree faster, saving time and money. Call today for your
> personalized transfer credit evaluation to see how much credit you can receive.
> You still have that spark, there's never been a better time to rekindle it than now.
> America will need at least four million college graduates by 2020. We can help
> you become one of them. Kaplan University. A nationally ranked online
> institution.

Affordability is a message that is not actually socially constructed but the value of

education is. In the aforementioned examples, the advertisements did not mention the

value of education outright; rather the mention of value was monetary. Saving money and paying "one flat fee" was mentioned to give the impression that online higher education can fit within a prospective student's budget. This impression can be misleading since students who enroll in online courses are older than traditional students, have family obligations, and work full time (Allen and Seaman 2013; Bejerano 2008 and Marcum 2014). With all of these layers of responsibilities, something that is affordable does not include college tuition that costs thousands of dollars.

Non-Profit vs. For-Profit Institutions

For-profit institutions have been around since the early 1900's when they began as vocational or career training schools (Appel and Taylor 2015; Tierney 2011). In the 1970's, neoliberalism allowed for the birth of for-profit universities such as the University of Phoenix in the new free market (Beaver 2017). The Reagan administration in the 1980's and then technology improvements in the 1990's saw a huge increase in enrollments for for-profit institutions, which has not slowed down to date (Tierney 2011).

Many non-profit institutions offer online courses and almost half of those that do offer full programs of study (Berjerano 2008). For-profit institutions have greater availability of online courses and programs than private or public non-profit colleges and universities (Tierney 2011). Due to the nature of increasing concerns with for-profit insitutions and recent closures by the department of education, a closer look at these institutions seems timely. McMillan Cottom (2017) identified that for-profit colleges are the response to society's changing economy, driving people to seek more education and training due to technological changes and increased financial demands within the home.

If the demand for career training is present and necessary for many workforce participants, for-profit colleges is the answer for many (McMillan Cottom 2017). In the meantime federal student loan programs are funding countless students who enroll in for-profit institutions (McMillan Cottom 2017), and it is important to better understand how for-profit institutions may differ from their non-profit counterparts in terms of their marketing messages. In the United States, overall student loan debt is at an all-time high of $1 trillion and student loan default is positively correlated to for-profit institutions even when controlling for other factors (Goodell 2016). For this research, I included both non-profit and for-profit institutions while searching for and selecting advertisements for my sample, and carried out an additional layer of analysis to compare the two types of institutions.

There were various differences when comparing the availability of online video advertisements for non-profit and for-profit institutions. Non-profit organizations represented a greater number of institutions in the sample, 22 (61 percent) of the total number of 36, as indicated in Figure 1.
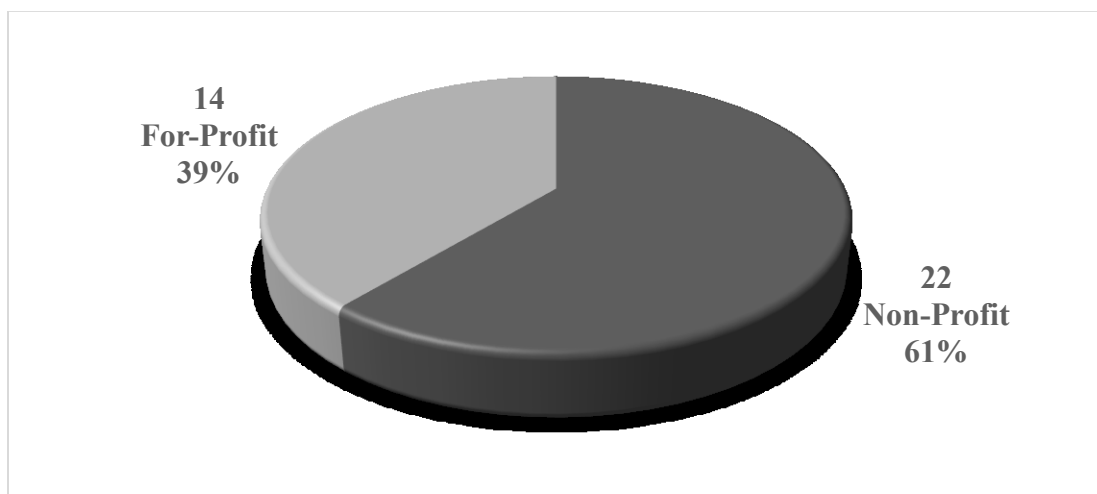

Figure 1. Types of Institutions Represented (N=36)

For-profit institutions accounted for 57 percent of the video advertisement sample (56 of

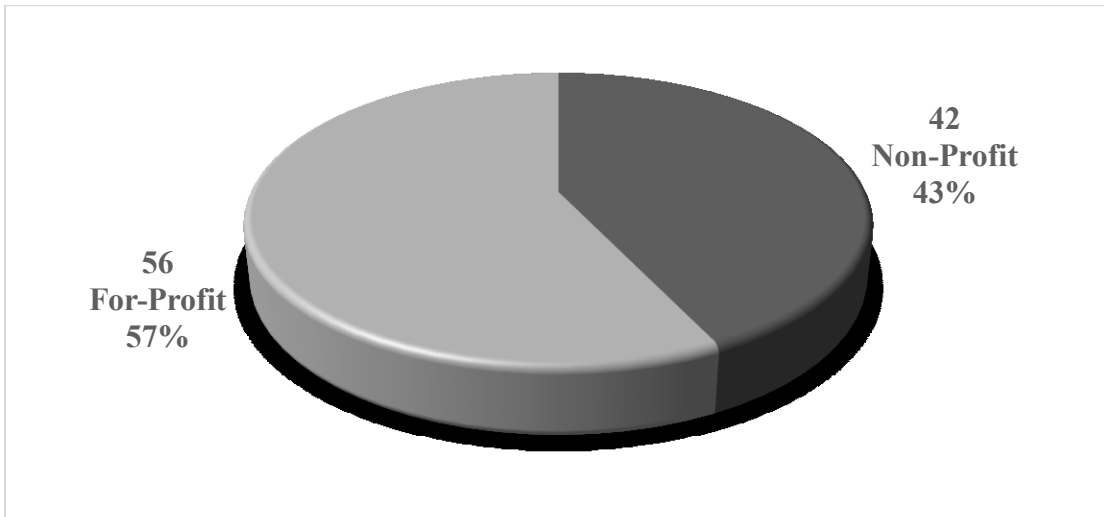98) as compared to 43 percent of the sample (42 of 98), as seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Non-Profit vs. For-Profit Representation in Sample (N=98).

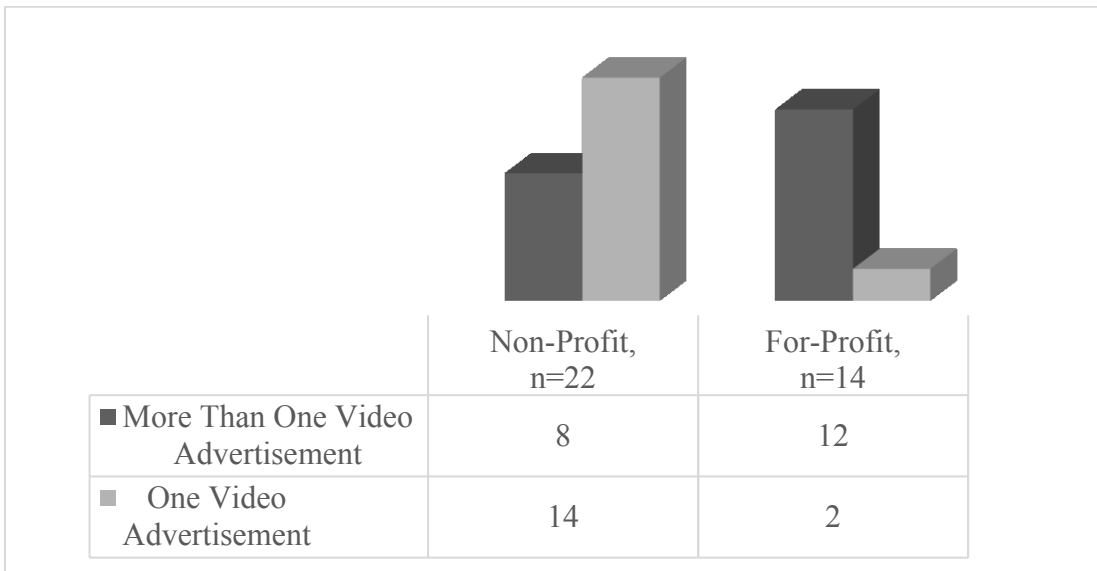|	Non-Profit, n=22	For-Profit, n=14
■ More Than One Video Advertisement	8	12
■ One Video Advertisement	14	2

Figure 3. Number of Advertisements Offered Per Institution Type.

For-profit institutions had a more extensive variety of online video advertisements

(Figure 3), with 12 of 14 institutions (86 percent) offering more than one video

advertisement online. Only 8 out of 22 (36 percent) of non-profit institutions had more

than one video advertisement sampled. These more aggressive marketing techniques

indicate more resources might be available for for-profit institutions to market themselves than their non-profit counterparts.

Though these slight differences were seen in representation and availability of video advertisements, the themes present in non-profit and for-profit cases were nearly identical (Figure 4), especially concerning the theme, "Achieving Dreams: Creating or Improving Career." The themes "For Busy Individuals Needing Time and Flexibility", "Going Back to School and 'Finishing' aka Graduation", and "Reputable Institution and Faculty" were seen approximately four to five percent more in for-profit advertisements. "Affordability" was seen in only two percent more of the non-profit advertisements. In the present study, there is no clear evidence that points to compelling differences in marketing themes between non-profit and for-profit institutions.
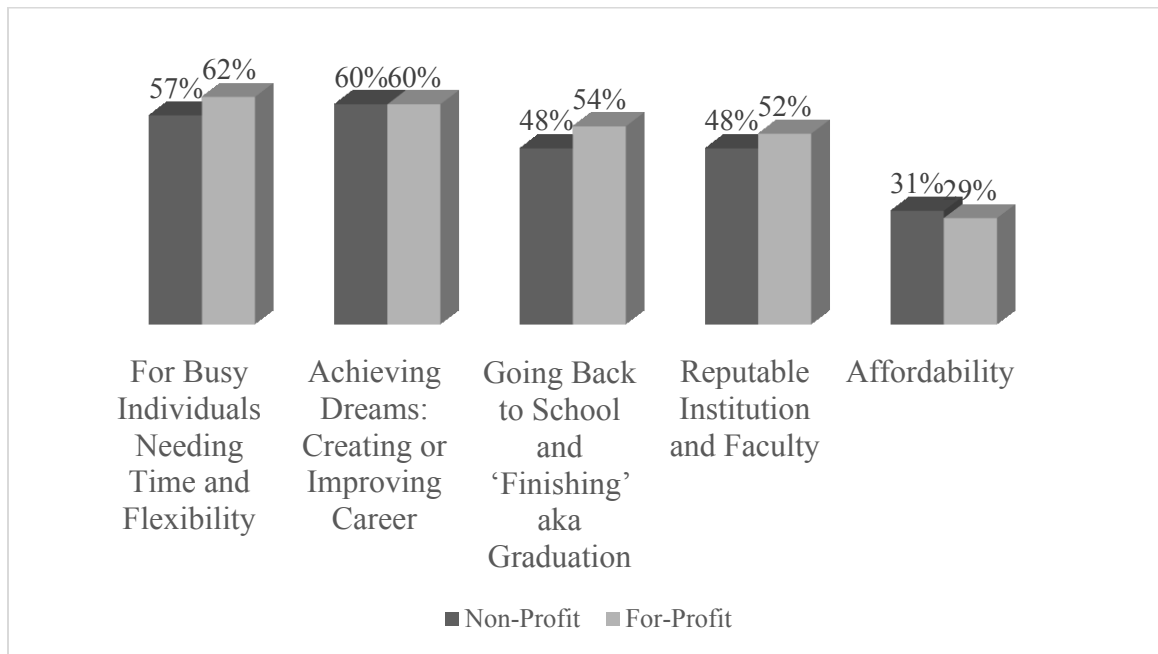

Figure 4. Comparison of Themes Present in Non-Profit and For-Profit Advertisements.

V: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The goal of this research was to examine advertisements for online programs in higher education to identify specific themes in their messages about the online educational experience. Online video advertisements were systematically selected, individually transcribed, coded and then collectively analyzed as part of the project. This qualitative analysis of 98 advertisements represented 36 institutions of higher education in the United States and identified five specific themes contained within them.

There are messages contained within video advertisements that duplicate television commercials aired, seen, and heard every day. Colleges and universities may increasingly count on the symbols, images, and messages from commercials, and are seemingly becoming more creative in their recruiting techniques. To increase enrollment, institutions of higher education are also now utilizing Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, YouTube and other similar social media and online outlets to remain visible and relevant (Blanco Ramirez and Palu-ay 2015; Hartley and Morphew 2008; Lipka 2009; Soder 2009). The process of someone hearing an advertisement on the radio, watching a commercial on television, or watching a video advertisement online represents a mediated social interaction where the actors include 1) colleges and universities who are communicating messages and 2) prospective students who will assign meanings to these messages. As described by Alperstein, "[a]dvertising messages are so malleable that informants twist and turn them—like improvisational jazz—to fit their needs" (1990:21).

Oddly reminiscent of infomercials from the 80's and 90's in which the host yelled at the consumer to try the latest household product or technological gadget, the current study finds that institutions of higher education are marketing themselves to prospective students with promises of flexibility, dream achievement, graduation, superior institution and faculty, and affordability. In some cases, all messages are present in a single advertisement, perhaps because adult students are capable of considering multiple factors concurrently and therefore able to interpret which is most important when comparing the decision to enroll to various other aspects in their lives (Stein and Wanstreet 2006). The main themes identified in this present study encompass the most obvious considerations for prospective students when selecting online programs of study.

Since all advertisements from the sample were promoted in a virtually identical manner, themes frequently overlapped and information was repeated. These findings largely coincide with Blanco Ramirez's study on the construction of institutional branding from a higher education perspective (2016). Blanco Ramirez's (2016) qualitative research revealed the most frequent messages in print advertisements for higher education included convenience, employment, and success as well as the pronouncement of superior reputation of institution and faculty. The present study also seems to validate the concept of packaging higher education as a product (Hartley and Morphew 2008; McMillan and Cheney 1996; Saichaie and Morphew 2014).

Advertisements do not necessarily mirror reality. In fact, part of the allure of advertisements is that they are idealized images of real life and are generally seen in a positive light as other sociological research has found (Isanki and Leszkowicz 2011). Advertisements do, however, contribute to society, and their messages could potentially

affect social norms, since perception may be what influences an individual to act in a given circumstance or in a particular stage in his or her life (Powers 2010). Perception, when interpreting an advertisement for higher education depending on the individual's analysis of material contained therein, may supersede reality. Goffman posits that governments and nonprofit organizations, much like commercial advertisers, use marketing ploys to convey their messages (1979). The potential influence of television commercials and online video advertisements for online colleges and universities is important when considering that more and more students are choosing online programs over traditional brick and mortar institutions (Allen and Seaman 2013).

On an individual level, when viewing an online advertisement, prospective students are watching what they think life is or should be (Goffman 1979). These negotiated meanings are socially constructed. Through communication, people use symbols and each individual interprets the other's meaning before deciding on his or her preferred response (Ritzer 2010). The prospective student's interpretation of an advertisement for online education may either reinforce what he or she has already decided as a course of action or help change his or her mind about their future.

On a societal level, if enough people are hearing the same messages, interpreting them, and subsequently responding to them in a similar manner, what will that do to society in the future and how will it transform how education is perceived? Should university programs be advertised as easy to complete even for the busiest and most non-traditional students and should institutions make promises that after graduation all dreams will come true? That depends on the current state of higher education and what is valued about education versus what is valued about training. Côté and Allahar (2011) have

identified that the corporatization of higher education has already lowered the scholarship of universities. Once considered to be comprised of communities of learners, even non-profit universities have slowly transformed into institutions that highly encourage vocational education, largely due to outside pressures and additional funding that target STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) programs, clearly with potential economic agendas in mind (Côté and Allahar 2011).

Unique contributions of this research includes the identification of the "affordability" theme. The concept of "affordability" is not often highlighted as a main theme in the literature pertaining to higher education marketing. Saichaie and Morphew (2014) found that the "value" of an institution could be identified when visiting college and university websites, but the value described was either mixed in with external rankings information or other indicators of institutional quality, associated with graduation and the benefits of earning a degree which related to improving human capital. What might be more substantial to note is that the theme of "affordability" was featured the least of all other themes, indicating that institutions of higher education and prospective students alike do not consider the actual cost of education to be a significant factor to contemplate when enrolling in college.

The pressure to sign for ill-advised loans and the resulting $1 trillion student loan debt are not only products of for-profit institutions but for all United States institutions of higher education combined (Goodell 2016), which does not match the message that college is affordable. Since the cost of education is still a monetary factor that people must consider whether for themselves, children and other family, or society at large, there should be more information when discussing the actual dollars that students spend on

higher education. The topic should be visually and symbolically present in all advertisements for higher education to further reinforce its importance until policy makers address the needs of current as well as prospective students. Greater disclosure must be sought for all institutions of higher education, particularly when it concerns financial obligations. Along with traditionally required standard reports that include values such as student enrollment and graduation rates, rates of successful employment or career advancement should be tracked if identified as the goal of enrollment in college. For public non-profit institutions, the concept of free college tuition could be considered, and for-profit institutions need to be more closely monitored for compliance or else face closure of the institution. Future studies may extend this study by focusing on the claim of the affordability of colleges and universities.

Another strength of this research was the comparison of online advertisements between non-profit and for-profit higher education institutions since no former research has done so. Findings from this study show unexpectedly no major differences in the kinds of marketing themes between non-profit and for-profit institutions except for the fact that for-profit institutions seem to produce more online advertisements. Does this mean for-profit institutions are mimicking marketing techniques of non-profit institutions, or is it quite the opposite where non-profit institutions have become more like for-profit institutions with the view of the student as a consumer (Cottom 2017)? Future studies are necessary to clarify similarities and differences between the two.

Online education programs may benefit students, faculty, and community if they can reduce educational inequality by helping non-traditional students and underserved populations successfully navigate through higher education and if the quality of

education is maintained (Larreamendy-Joerns and Leinhardt 2006:597). This research has identified themes in regards to what advertisement messages are being relayed about online courses from institutions of higher education. Additional sociological research is required to further supplement the current study by studying the extent to which online higher education programs fulfill the expectations and goals of non-traditional and underserved students and to help reduce educational disparity over time.

APPENDIX SECTION

Appendix A. All Institutions Sampled (N=36)			
Institution Name	**Founded**	**Number of Cases Sampled (N=98)**	**For Profit**
American Intercontinental University	1970	2	yes
American Public University	1991	2	yes
Amridge University	1967	1	
Arizona State University	1885	1	
Arkansas Tech University	1909	1	
Ashford University	1918	5	yes
BYU Idaho	1888	3	
Capella University	1993	7	yes
Colorado Technical University	1965	3	yes
Concordia College and University	1999	1	yes
DeVry	1931	5	yes
Full Sail University	1979	1	yes
Goodwin College	1999	2	
Grand Canyon University	1949	4	yes
Independence University	1891	1	
Indiana University East	1971	1	
James Madison University	1908	1	
Kaplan University	1937	6	yes
Liberty University	1971	2	
Linfield College	1858	1	
Minot State University	1913	1	
Mount Saint Mary College	1960	1	
National American University	1941	4	yes
National University	1971	2	
Pennsylvania State University	1855	4	
Regent University	1978	3	
Sam Houston State University	1879	5	
South University	1899	3	yes
Southern New Hampshire University	1932	3	
Strayer University	1892	6	yes
University of Maryland University College	1947	2	
University of Phoenix	1976	7	yes
Villanova University	1842	1	
Warner Pacific College	1937	1	
Washington State University	1890	1	
Western Governer's University (WGU)	1997	4	

Appendix B. Non-Profit Cases (n=42)		
Name of Institution	**Title of Video**	**Source**
Amridge University	100% Online	youtube.com
Arizona State University	Now Online	youtube.com
Arkansas Tech University	Accelerated Degree Program	youtube.com
BYU Idaho	*None Specified*	BYU.edu
BYU Idaho	KSL Conference Commercial	youtube.com
BYU Idaho	Pathway	youtube.com
Goodwin College	Gladys' Story	youtube.com
Goodwin College	Learn More	youtube.com
Independence University	Learn Online	ispot.tv
Indiana University East	Online Degree Completion Programs	youtube.com
James Madison University Online	Online Career & Professional Training	youtube.com
Liberty University	Path to Freedom	ispot.tv
Liberty University	Shine Brighter	youtube.com
Linfield College	Adult Degree Program	youtube.com
National University	Keeping More Kids in School	ispot.tv
National University	One Day	ispot.tv
Minot State University	University	youtube.com
Mount Saint Mary College	*None Specified*	youtube.com
Pennsylvania State University	Nathaniel	ispot.tv
Pennsylvania State University	Possibilities	ispot.tv
Pennsylvania State University	Soccer Mom	ispot.tv
Pennsylvania State University	Tom	ispot.tv
Regent University	Graduation	ispot.tv
Regent University	Programs	ispot.tv
Regent University	What Can You Do in Eight Weeks	ispot.tv
Sam Houston State University	*None Specified*	shsu.edu
Sam Houston State University	*None Specified*	shsu.edu
Sam Houston State University	*None Specified*	shsu.edu
Sam Houston State University	*None Specified*	shsu.edu
Sam Houston State University	Best Path Forward	ispot.tv
Southern New Hampshire University	Graduates	ispot.tv
Southern New Hampshire University	Graduate Degree Program	youtube.com
Southern New Hampshire University	Where Will Your Degree Take You	youtube.com
University of Maryland University College	Cyber Security	ispot.tv
University of Maryland University College	You Can	ispot.tv
Villanova University	MPA Degree Online	youtube.com
Warner Pacific College	College Adult Degree Program	youtube.com
Washington State University	Taking Flight Online Education	ispot.tv
WGU	Sage the Night Owl Break Room Commercial	youtube.com
WGU	Sage the Night Owl Commercial Air Quotes	youtube.com

Appendix B. Continued.		
Name of Institution	**Title of Video**	**Source**
WGU	Owl Commercial Just Listen to the Bird	youtube.com
WGU	University Of You	washington.wgu.edu

Appendix C. For-Profit Cases (n=56)		
Institution Name	**Title of Video**	**Source**
American Intercontinental University	Busy Schedule	Vimeo.com
American Intercontinental University	The Serious You	ispot.tv
American Public University	Committed To Your Future	youtube.com
American Public University	Ready When You Are	youtube.com
Ashford University	Lose Yourself	ispot.tv
Ashford University	School Comes To You	ispot.tv
Ashford University	Technology	ispot.tv
Ashford University	What It's Like To Go To School Online	youtube.com
Ashford University	You From The Past	ispot.tv
Capella University	A More Direct Path To Your BSN	ispot.tv
Capella University	Apply Your Professional Knowledge	ispot.tv
Capella University	Get An MBA That Fits Your Time	ispot.tv
Capella University	Instructor	ispot.tv
Capella University	The Next Level	ispot.tv
Capella University	University Flexpath	ispot.tv
Capella University	University Flexpath	ispot.tv
Colorado Technical University	Technical University	ispot.tv
Colorado Technical University	Don't Blend In	ispot.tv
Colorado Technical University	No Ordinary Student	ispot.tv
Concordia College and University	Accredited Online Degrees	youtube.com
DeVry University	Different On Purpose	ispot.tv
DeVry University	Finish Your Degree	youtube.com
DeVry University	Keller Grad School	ispot.tv
DeVry University	Prepared For Tomorrow	ispot.tv
DeVry University	Solving Problems	ispot.tv
Full Sail University	Your Campus Is Everywhere	youtube.com
Grand Canyon University	Christmas	youtube.com
Grand Canyon University	Univ That Never Sleeps	youtube.com
Grand Canyon University	Working Dad	ispot.tv
Grand Canyon University	Working Mom	ispot.tv
Kaplan University	MBA Degree	youtube.com
Kaplan University	A Different School Of Thought	ispot.tv
Kaplan University	Online Nursing Classes	youtube.com
Kaplan University	School Of Business	youtube.com
Kaplan University	Shine	ispot.tv
Kaplan University	Spark	ispot.tv
National American University	Coffee Break	youtube.com
National American University	College Education Is Changing	youtube.com
National American University	Get The Credit You Deserve	youtube.com
National American University	One Day	ispot.tv
South University	*None Specified*	youtube.com
South University	Nurse Practitioner	youtube.com
South University	Online Options	youtube.com
Strayer University	Begin Your Success Story	ispot.tv
Strayer University	Daughter	youtube.com
Strayer University	Lead	ispot.tv
Strayer University	Natalie	ispot.tv
Strayer University	We Major In You	ispot.tv
Strayer University	You're Ready	youtube.com
University of Phoenix	Hall Of Success	ispot.tv

Appendix C. Continued.		
Institution Name	**Title of Video**	**Source**
University of Phoenix	In The Midst Of Chaos	youtube.com
University of Phoenix	Many Reasons	ispot.tv
University of Phoenix	More Than Brains	youtube.com
University of Phoenix	Requirements	ispot.tv
University of Phoenix	Still I Rise	youtube.com
University of Phoenix	Subway	ispot.tv

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