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Tim Gramling

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All-Out War: A Case Study in Media Coverage of For-Profit Higher Education

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Tim Gramling¹

Abstract

About 19 million students attend U.S. higher education institutions. Institutions with a for-profit tax status educate 2 million of these students. Since the election of President Barack Obama in November 2008, media portrayals of for-profits have seen violent swings among neutral, positive, and even intensely negative views. Two sets of forces have been at work behind the scenes. First is the U.S. government, including the U.S. Senate, the U.S. Department of Education, and the U.S. Government Accountability Office. Second are the for-profit institutions themselves. This case study explores how these forces drove dramatic media coverage shifts in the first two years of the Obama administration.

Keywords

higher education, for-profit, media coverage, U.S. Department of Education

Introduction

U.S. higher education institutions provide instruction for nearly 19 million students in a large variety of academic disciplines and degree levels.¹ Institutions with a for-profit tax status educate 2 million of these students.² Since the election of President Barack Obama in November 2008, media portrayals of for-profits have seen violent swings among neutral, positive, and even intensely negative views.

Kingdon (2003) explores how mass media influences agenda setting and public policy formation. He concludes that the primary role of the media is to facilitate information exchange among policy promoters, policy makers, and the public. He argues that this indirect approach is necessary because there is too much information and not enough mechanisms to prioritize it for policy analysis. Similarly, Bennett's study of media and public policy found that stories become news as media outlets personalize individual subjects outside their social contexts and fragment details from general patterns (Macaulay, Friedman, & Mertz, 2007). Although media coverage of U.S. higher education institutions has shown great variation, it predictably demonstrates a combination of Kingdon's information exchange with Bennett's personalization and fragmentation.

Although this media coverage has occurred in public view, two sets of forces have been at work behind the scenes. First is the U.S. government, including the U.S. Senate, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE), and the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO). Second is the for-profit institutions themselves. This case study explores one fundamental question: How did these forces drive dramatic media coverage shifts in the first 2 years of the Obama administration?

Method

The methodology for this case study was a two-phase, textual analysis of media coverage concerning for-profit higher education companies. The first phase built on a relevant query of the Lexus Nexus academic database, which returned 78 new stories from November 2008 through December 2010.³ The author coded each of these stories as positive, neutral, and negative. Figure 1 provides typical examples.

The second phase was a software text analysis using Tropes version 7.2.⁴ The Tropes program provides an objective mechanism to code content of news stories. Using electronic versions of news articles, which were grouped by category, Tropes determined the frequency of terms and the concentration of connections among the terms.⁵ The output was a series of graphs depicting the action orientation of terms on one axis and the concentration of connections among terms on the other.⁶ The author used this output to generate a summary of the key themes from each category of news articles.⁷

Because of data limitations within Tropes, the author eliminated some news articles from the text analysis. If the full set of articles in a category was too large, the author removed the shortest article and continued until the collection met Tropes limitations. Across all categories, the Tropes analysis covered 78.8% of the articles (weighted by word count), with a minimum of 71.0% and a maximum of 91.7%. This method sacrificed full article coverage to gain

¹Colorado Technical University Kansas City, North Kansas City, MO, USA

Corresponding Author:

Tim Gramling, Colorado Technical University Kansas City, 520 E 19th Ave., North Kansas City, MO 64106, USA
Email: tsgramling@post.harvard.edu

Code	Example 1 Headline	Example 2 Headline	Example 3 Headline
Positive	For-Profit Colleges Change Higher Education's Landscape	For-Profit Colleges Teach Lesson in Cost vs. Value	For-profit model serves students and faculty
Neutral	For-Profit Colleges Find New Market Niche	For-Profits Spend Heavily to Fend Off New Rule	For-profit colleges face new rules in Florida
Negative	For-profit colleges drawing low-income students haul in aid	For-profit t, for shame	For-profit college debt brings other burdens

Figure 1. Examples of news story coding

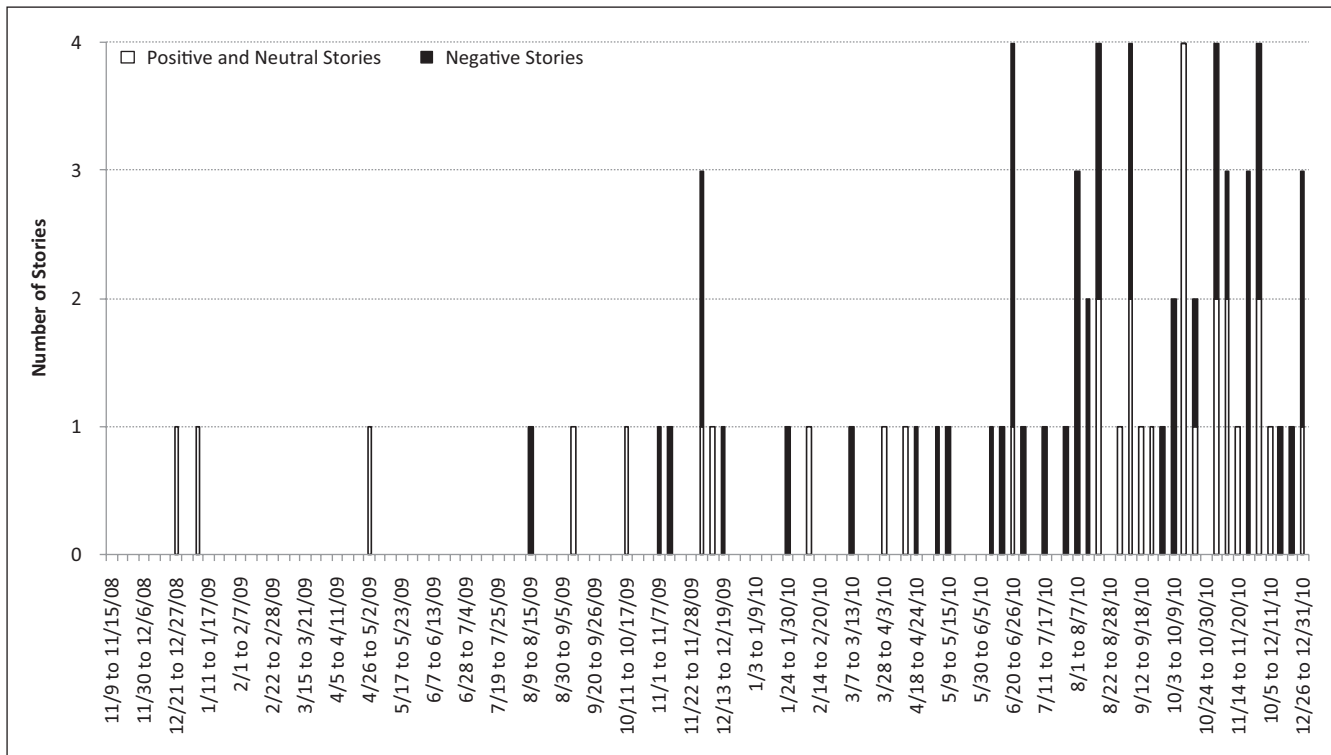


Figure 2. Weekly news coverage of for-profits from November 16, 2008, through December 31, 2010

(a) objective coding of news article contents and (b) consistent comparability of news article contents across categories and time.

Background

The election of Barack Obama in November 2008 promised to bring sweeping changes in American politics. In July 2009, President Obama placed a spotlight on higher education when he announced a national goal for America to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020 (American Council on Education, 2009). But higher education was not a popular topic in news coverage, hence, for-profits were not in the news very much. Figure 2 shows a very light frequency of stories about for-profits from early November 2008 through April 2010. But something

happened in May 2010 to capture the attention of news outlets across the United States. The frequency of stories increased to virtually constant coverage each week. The intensity of stories increased as well, with many weeks garnering mentions of for-profits on an almost daily basis. These developments raise the question of what happened. How did the topic of for-profits rise from virtually no coverage in November 2008 to nearly nonstop coverage by November 2010?

Calm Before the Storm

Figure 3 provides some perspective on what might be termed *calm before the storm*. This figure zooms in to the period from November 2009 through April 2010. For the most part, news coverage balanced negative with neutral-to-positive stories

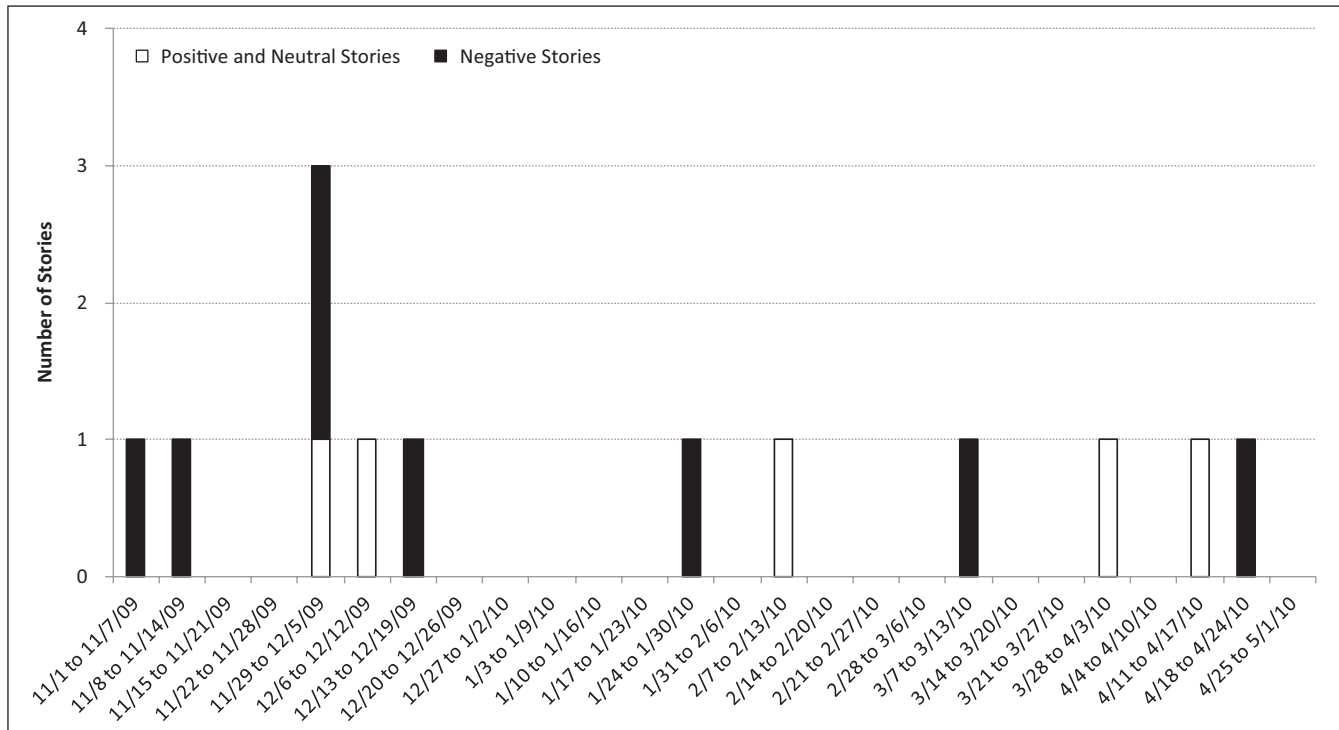


Figure 3. Weekly news coverage of for-profits from November 2009 through April 2010

throughout this period. There is one exception, which occurred just after Thanksgiving 2009. News writers in the compact city of Durham, NC, and the tiny town of Brattleboro, VT, agreed that a significant number of low-income students were using Pell Grant dollars to attend for-profits. However, a writer in Grand Rapids, MI, noted simply that for-profits were growing in their area. Perhaps it was the somewhat neutral tone in this article that stamped out widespread consensus. At any rate, negative messages about for-profits did not reverberate nationwide.

The Tropes text analysis provided similar findings. Profit was the most commonly used term in both negative and neutral-to-positive stories. Similarly, both featured education as a concentrated theme. Although negative stories placed concentrated emphasis on student loans, neutral-to-positive stories focused on the money for-profits spend to deliver education. Finally, negative stories often mentioned the percentage of low-income students who did not complete school. This theme was absent from neutral-to-positive stories, which instead positioned for-profits as providing a service to students.

All-Out War

All of this changed in May 2010. Figure 4 outlines three distinct phases of news coverage, which the author describes as *recriminations*, *resistance*, and *recalcitrance*. These phases suggest an all-out war in the press. On one side were the for-profits. On the other hand were the U.S. Senate, the USDE, and the GAO.

Recriminations

On May 6, 2010, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* published a lengthy, 2,100-word article titled “For-Profit Colleges Leave Many Students in Debt.” This article featured the story of a 21-year-old student at a Philadelphia for-profit who left school about halfway through her bachelor’s program. For her efforts, this student faced US\$100,000 in debt with a job at a delivery service that paid only US\$8 per hour—and no degree. The school had explained that she could expect to incur about US\$75,000 in debt during her studies. Still, she secured private loans that helped contribute to her debt. This article even provided the school’s point of view: It serves a challenging population of students who have struggled with college before, it walks through loans and debt as part of student orientations, and it has a number of support systems to help struggling students. Still, this article succinctly articulated the battle lines of what would become an all-out war as follows: “Advocates say the schools help low-income, less-prepared students fulfill their dreams. Critics contend they prey on low-performing students and load them with untenable debt” (Synder, 2010).

Although this article characterized advocates as helping low-income students, no news outlet would pick up on this theme for several months. The immediate aftermath of the *Inquirer* story was that news outlets in Dayton, Atlanta, and Kansas City repeated the critics’ perspective that for-profits were predators taking advantage of low-performing students. Kingdon’s (2003) information exchange appeared to be at work, raising awareness of this critical viewpoint.

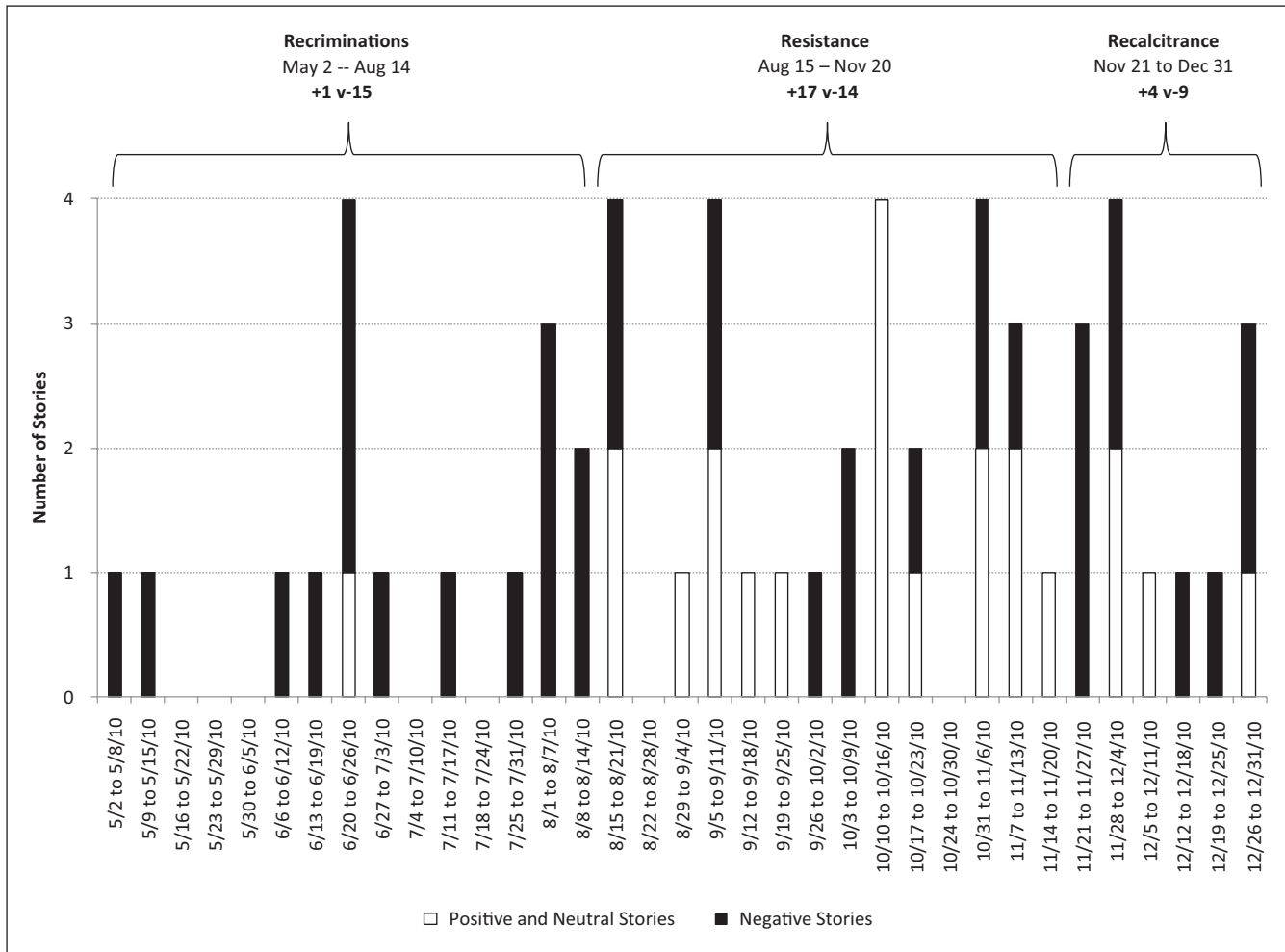


Figure 4. Weekly news coverage of for-profits from May 2010 through December 2010

As if on cue, the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) held a hearing on June 24, 2010, titled “Emerging Risk? An Overview of the Federal Investment in For-Profit Education” (U.S. Senate, 2010a). This hearing sounded the usual critical theme of for-profits as predators, and it featured unflattering testimony from a representative from the USDE. This hearing triggered three negative news stories that same day. It also triggered the solitary neutral story during this entire period of recriminations. The same *New York Times* writer who wrote a sharply critical story on June 24, 2010, titled “Battle Lines Drawn Over For-Profit Colleges” wrote a shorter, neutral article that same day, explaining that “For-Profit Colleges Find New Market Niche.” The niche in this article is a memorandum of understanding with the California community college system. This agreement allowed students who could find an available course at the community college to take that same course online at a for-profit university. Though the article was neutral, the author noted that “[a]t the academic senate’s spring meeting, faculty members voted to urge the

chancellor to withdraw from the memorandum of understanding” (Lewin, 2010). The battle lines in this war had become very clear.

Similar recriminations continued from late June through early August 2010, with negative stories in Dayton and Tulsa. There was also a damaging article in the *Los Angeles Times* on July 25, 2010, titled “For-Profit Colleges May Be a Bust for Taxpayers.” As if building on this sentiment, the U.S. Senate HELP Committee arranged a follow-up hearing on August 4, 2010 (U.S. Senate, 2010b). The key note of this hearing was the publication of a GAO report titled “For-Profit Colleges: Undercover Testing Finds Colleges Encouraged Fraud and Engaged in Deceptive and Questionable Marketing Practices.” This report revealed videotapes from undercover investigators who visited 15 for-profits across the United States. In its written report, the GAO “found that 4 colleges encouraged fraudulent practices and that all 15 made deceptive or otherwise questionable statements to GAO’s undercover applicants.” (U.S. Senate, 2010b) But the videotapes were very damaging, leading the *New York Times* to declare

“For-Profit Colleges Mislead, Report Finds” and the *Christian Science Monitor* to exclaim “For-profit colleges hit with claims of fraud, aggressive recruiting”—both on the day of the hearing.

A Tropes analysis confirms the dynamic at work in this phase. For neutral-to-positive stories, college was the primary actor, and the most common expression was the memorandum of understanding with the California community college system. Conversely, negative stories featured company as the primary actor and mentioned the term *profit* most often. In addition, students choosing to attend for-profits appeared prominently in neutral-to-positive stories. But these stories ignored a theme that negative stories spotlighted—the impact of student loans.

Resistance

The August 4, 2010, U.S. Senate HELP Committee hearing appears to have been a last straw for the for-profit higher education industry. To this point, for-profits appeared stunned by the constant assaults and the one-sided portrayals of their schools and students in the press. As illustrated in Figure 4, the period of recriminations featured 15 negative stories about for-profits—the equivalent of one per week. In addition, even the one neutral story during this period said nothing about the advocate position in this war—that for-profits help low-income and less-prepared students. The tide was clearly about to change, as this war entered a period of resistance.

The first salvo came predictably from the *Washington Post*. This company owns Kaplan University, one of the nation’s largest for-profits. The *Washington Post* issued a news-oriented article on August 17, 2010, titled “For-Profit Higher-Education Providers Resist Regulatory Action.” As the *Post* entered the fray, for-profits generally understood the importance of sounding a note of opposition to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*’s May story. Though they did not find a sympathetic audience with the *Inquirer*, they were successful in placing a story in the cross-state rival *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* titled “For-Profit Schools Say Loan Data Doesn’t Tell Whole Story” in the Business section on August 17, 2010. The USDE gave some ground in the war by allowing an interview for this article:

“What we know is that there are many for-profit schools that are doing a great job of educating students, and we know there are some bad actors who have been perpetrating fraud and deceit,” said Justin Hamilton, an education department spokesman, in a telephone interview. (Staley & Hechinger, 2010)

It would seem that the *Philadelphia Inquirer* was exposed. In preparing its story, this news outlet stressed an individual’s sad story about student loan debt while omitting the full

context. This is what Bennett described as the media practice of personalization.

For-profits finally found their voice as an advocate for low-income, less-prepared students. They successfully earned neutral coverage from the *New York Times* national desk and even placed two positive editorials in this outlet. Perhaps more important, they saw positive news-desk coverage during this period from the *Denver Post*, the *Miami Herald*, the *Florida Times-Union* of Jacksonville, and the *USA Today*. In all, there were nine positive and eight neutral stories about for-profits in the period of resistance. Furthermore, although negative news remained constant at about one story per week, neutral-to-positive stories outnumbered negative ones for the first time. This trend continued until Thanksgiving 2010.

Tropes analysis confirms a dramatic shift in the content of neutral-to-positive and negative stories during this phase. Both mentioned profit most often. But neutral-to-positive stories sounded broad themes across for-profit locations nationwide, whereas negative stories centered on a single location. Specifically, neutral-to-positive stories mentioned political contributions to Democrats as the most prominent actor. The most highly concentrated topic in these stories was the USDE and its release of trial, 3-year cohort default rates. However, negative stories mentioned recruiting activities by a single Utah for-profit as the most prominent actor and also as the most highly concentrated topic. In addition, while negative stories emphasized money as the broadest unifying theme, neutral-to-positive stories stressed employment outcomes.

Recalcitrance

For-profits may have felt justified in taking a break from this war. President Obama characterized the November 2010 elections, in which Republicans took control of the House of Representatives and seriously eroded the Democratic majority in the Senate, as a “shellacking (MacNeil/Lehrer Productions, 2010).” The momentum of news coverage across the country had achieved a near equilibrium. But rather than conceding defeat, critics of for-profits appeared as determined as ever. The first signal of *recalcitrance* was a November 24, 2010, article in the *Pittsburgh Tribune Review* titled “For-Profit Schools Called Subprime Opportunity.” This was the most incendiary language used to date by either side of this war.

This language is also typical of what Bennett described as fragmentation. The *Pittsburgh Tribune Review* provided isolated facts about student lending outside their social context. By late 2010, the United States was in the throes of a challenging recession. It is widely understood that demand for higher education, especially among for-profits, tends to increase in a recession and decrease in a recovery.⁸ Yet the coverage in this article did not account for the industry’s countercyclical nature in its analysis.

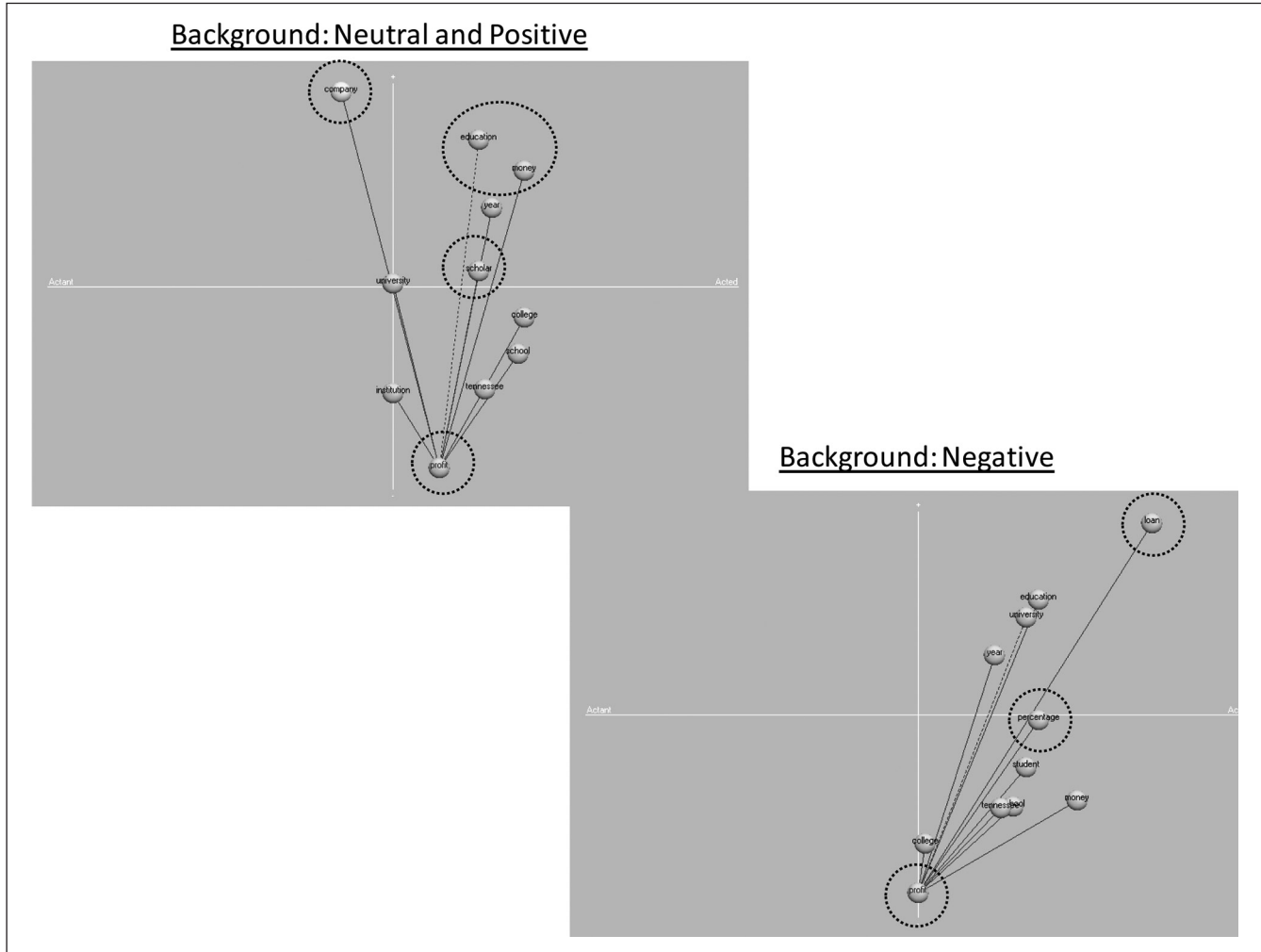


Figure 5. Tropes output of text analysis for the *Calm Before the Storm* period
 Note: Dashed circles are the author's, highlighting points of emphasis in this article.

This period just as easily could be called “the battle of Pittsburgh.” It is interesting that the *Philadelphia Inquirer* had been largely silent since the May 2010 story that started the war. This was no coincidence; by Thanksgiving 2010, the *Inquirer* was knee-deep in covering two city commission scandals. One was a Philadelphia Deputy City Commissioner who resigned after 27 years because of city charter violations (Brennan, 2010). The other was a Montgomery County so-called “breakfastgate” scandal, where commissioners apparently met illegally outside commission meetings (Roebuck, 2010). With Philadelphia outlets distracted, 5 of the 13 stories during this period came from Pittsburgh in either the *Tribune Review* or the *Post-Gazette*.

But if this was a battle, it was not hotly contested. Nearly two thirds of the stories during this period was negative, and four of the five Pittsburgh press stories were negative as

well. To be sure, the *New York Times* and the *USA Today* posted no stories about for-profits. In addition, perhaps most telling, there were no hearings, investigations, or public statements by the U.S. Senate, the USDE, or the GAO.

By this phase, the Tropes analysis reflects a clear dichotomy between neutral-to-positive and negative stories. Profit was the only commonality, as it was the most frequently used term across all stories. College was the primary actor in neutral-to-positive articles, whereas companies and profits held this position for negative stories. In addition, for the first time, the two categories had directly opposed portrayals of students and schools. Students received concentrated focus in neutral-to-positive articles, with schools connecting to a number of underlying concepts. The reverse was true in negative stories, where schools took center stage with students as the broadly connected notion.

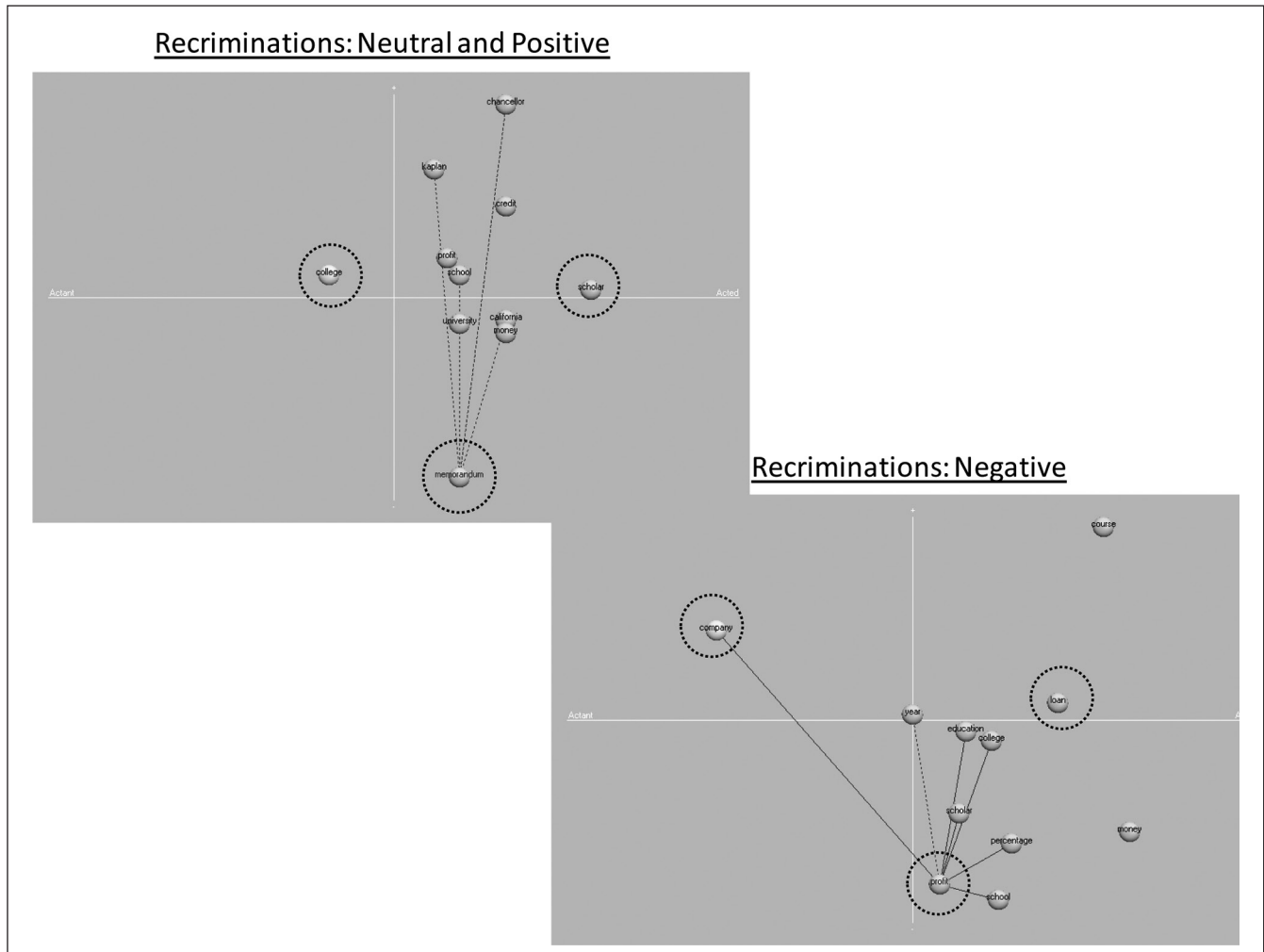


Figure 6. Tropes output of text analysis for the *recriminations* period
 Note: Dashed circles are the author's, highlighting points of emphasis in this article.

Retractions and Retreats

January 2011 saw renewed interest in for-profits. But this time, the war had taken a different turn with the publication of two pivotal articles. First was the *Village Voice* retraction of a negative article it published on January 5, 2011, titled "For-Profit Blues: The Explosion of For-Profit 'Proprietary' Colleges, Some NYC Teachers Charge, Is Leaving Too Many Low-Income Students Without Degrees—and With a Pile of Debt." The *Voice* confirmed that the writer fabricated his sources (Stoeffel, 2011). In one instance, he fabricated a student who supposedly left a for-profit college with a great deal of debt but without a degree. In a more troubling instance, he fabricated a GAO spokesperson who supposedly confirmed some of the details. This retraction undermined the GAO's position in this war and gave for-profits significant ammunition to raise questions about the motives of critical news coverage.

A second pivotal article was the *Chicago Tribune's* January 10, 2011, article titled "For-Profit Colleges Fight Negative Federal Report: Coalition Sues Education Department Over Claims Industry Uses Deceptive Practices." The federal lawsuit alleges that the GAO has not responded to a Freedom of Information Act request concerning its August 2010 report. That report featured prominently in the recriminations stage mentioned above. This article is pivotal because it made national news of GAO revisions to its August 2010 report. This revision actually took place on November 30, 2010, but it went largely unnoticed by the press. The revisions suggest that the undercover investigation videos did not tell the whole story (Yerak, 2010). In a sense, the GAO had to retreat from its prior position. This marked the second story in less than 1 week that undermined the GAO and its damaging report on for-profits.

The first 2 weeks of 2011 saw for-profit critics forced into a retraction and a retreat. This dynamic has persisted through

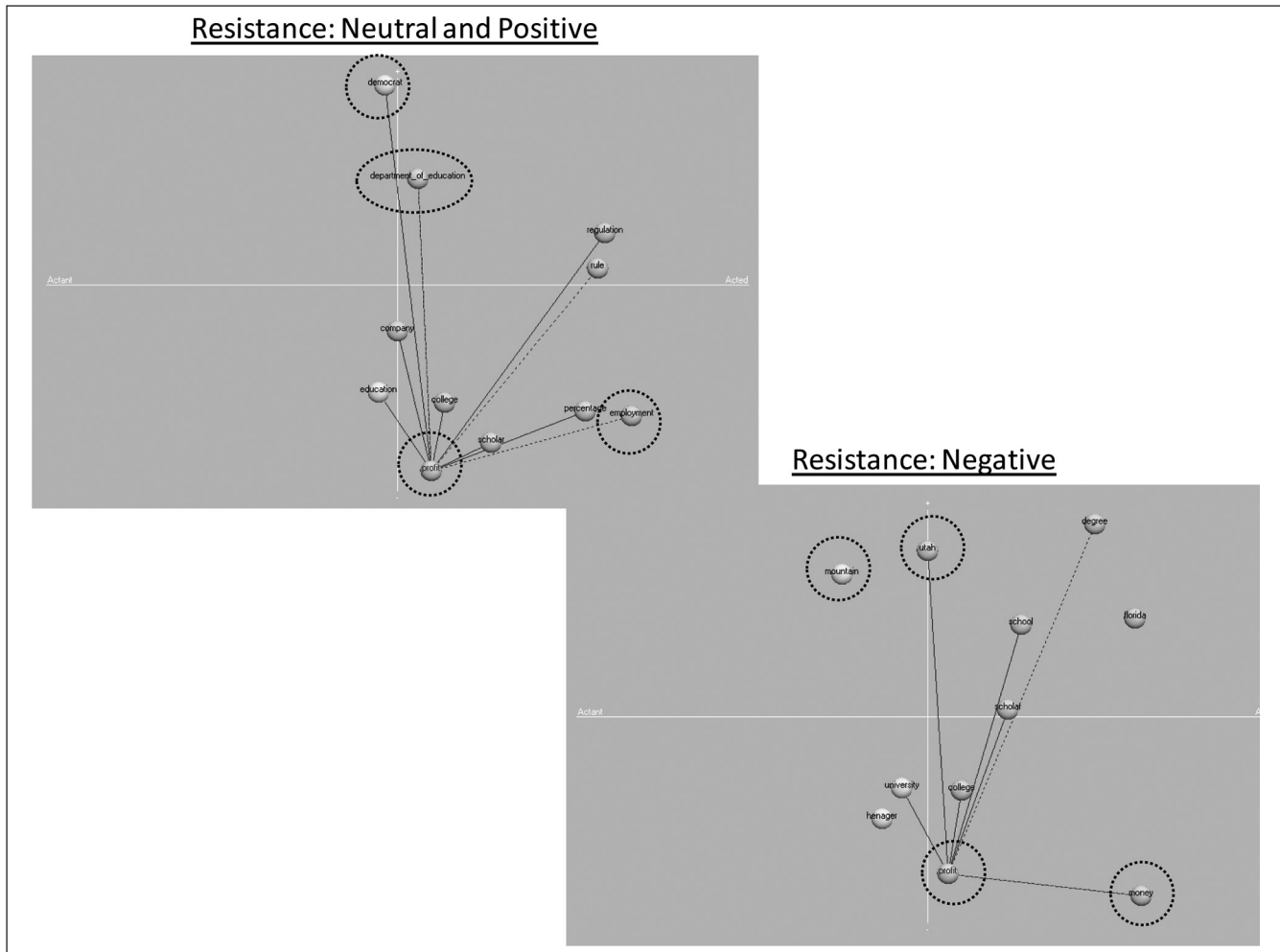


Figure 7. Tropes output of text analysis for the *resistance* period
 Note: Dashed circles are the author's, highlighting points of emphasis in this article.

April 2011, with for-profit critics defending their prior positions and proponents placing a large spotlight on every reversal. Still, no voices have emerged to suggest common ground between empowering lower-income and less-prepared students to pursue their dreams while also protecting low-performing students from predatory practices.

Conclusion

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* touched off an all-out war between for-profit institutions of higher education and U.S. government forces determined to control them. In a sense, this war is symptomatic of the great divide in the U.S. society between conservative and progressive thought. Conservatives are willing to give people a chance to succeed, though they seem less sympathetic to the plight of those who fail. In the language of this war, they support for-profits and their mission of providing a chance of success for

lower-income, less-prepared students. However, they lack suggestions for how to address the debt load borne by those who do not succeed.

However, progressives trust government nonprofit entities much more than private for-profits of any kind—including and especially higher education institutions. In the language of this war, they desire to protect low-performing students from for-profit predators at any and all costs. But they lack perspectives on enabling students to make their own choices about where and whether to pursue college education.

Neither side of this war has maintained the upper hand since it began in May 2010. It would seem that the war will continue as long as conservatives and progressives fail to find common ground that places decision making in the hands of students while establishing effective quality control of for-profits. This will give the news media plenty to cover, as it facilitates information exchange, on one hand, while it employs personalization and fragmentation, on the other.

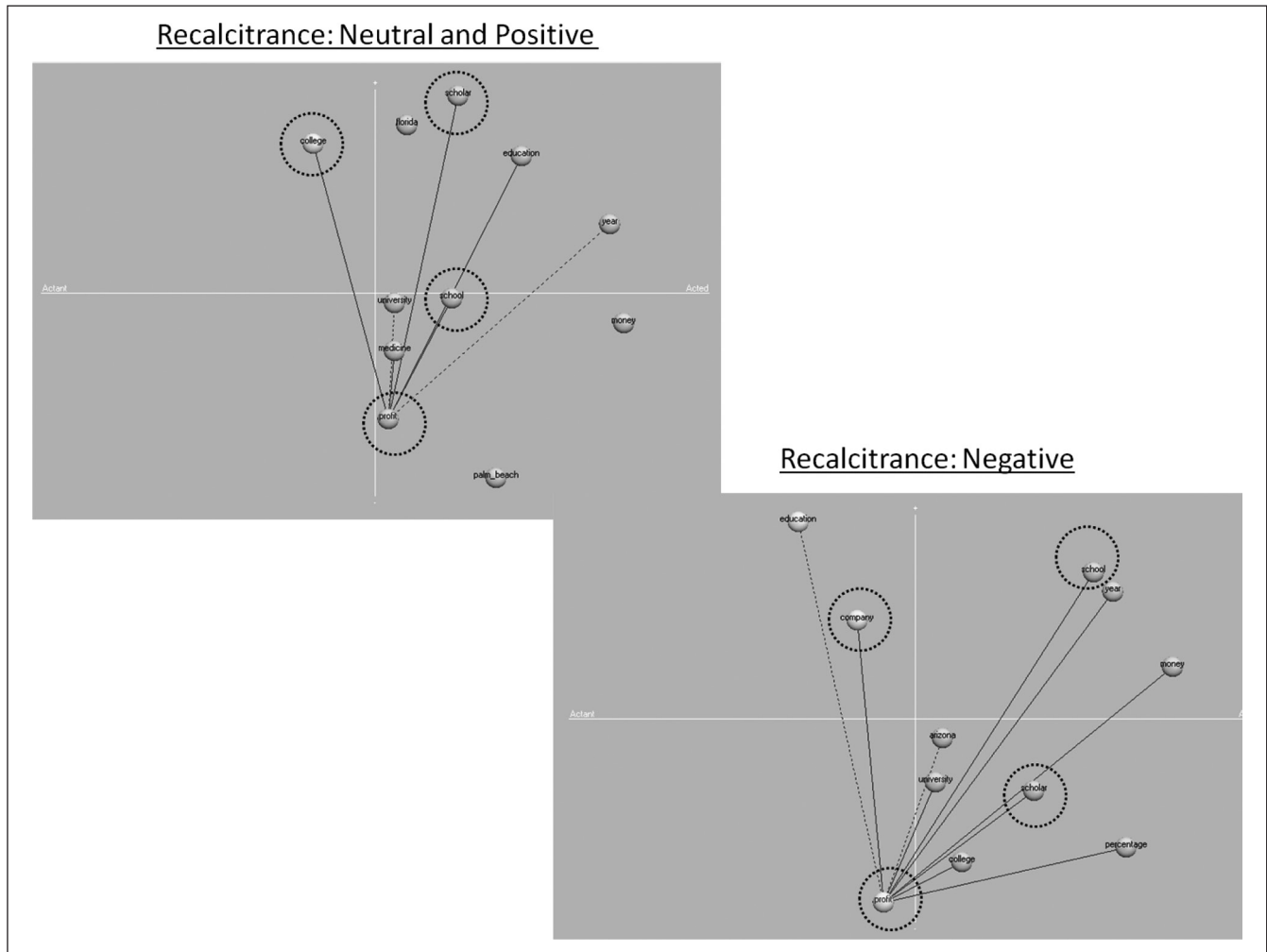


Figure 8. Tropes output of text analysis for the *recalcitrance* period
 Note: Dashed circles are the author's, highlighting points of emphasis in this article.

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Notes

1. Based on Fall 2009 data recorded in the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.
2. Based on Fall 2009 data recorded in the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.
3. Article list is the result of a Lexis Nexis Academic search for U.S. newspapers and wires with the search term (*for-profit* or "*for profit*") and college for dates between November 1, 2008, and December 31, 2010.

4. Tropes version 7.2 is distributed by Acetic–Semantic-Knowledge.
5. Within Tropes, terms with higher concentration have larger number of connections to a few other terms. Terms with a lower concentration have a smaller number of connections spread among a larger number of other terms.
6. A full description of Tropes algorithms for textual analysis is beyond the scope of this article. The Tropes reference manual and additional information is available at <http://www.semantic-knowledge.com/tropes.htm>.
7. Summaries are provided throughout this article. The Tropes output appears in Figures 5 through 8.
8. This became apparent with the dramatic rise in demand among for-profits in the 1990s and the equally dramatic drop in demand with the bursting of the dot-com bubble in the early 2000s. For example, the fiscal 2003 annual report of DeVry, Inc. mentions how declines in the technology sector of the economy drove double-digit declines in new technology student enrollments (DeVry, 2003). This was typical of the for-profit higher-education industry.

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Bio

Tim Gramling (MS, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and BA, Harvard University, tgramling@kc.coloradotech.edu) is the president of Colorado Technical University Kansas City, a for-profit university serving more than 900 students in the greater Kansas City area. He has spent 20 years in industry, with the last 7 years at for-profit higher education institutions. He serves as a consultant evaluator with the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association. He is also a student in the Doctorate of Law and Policy program at Northeastern University. His current research focuses on the impact of socioeconomic factors on graduation rates at for-profit higher education institutions.