

# **EXAMINING THE “AMENITIES ARMS RACE” IN HIGHER EDUCATION: SHIFTING FROM RHETORIC TO RESEARCH**

**Kevin McClure**

University of North Carolina - Wilmington

This article provides an analysis of published writing on amenities in higher education with the goal of bringing order to the voluminous information and helping to advance research. It examines over 40 articles and books to answer four interrelated questions: 1) How are amenities defined in the context of higher education? 2) How are amenities measured and what trends are discernible? 3) What are rationales and possible consequences of amenities? and 4) What questions remain unanswered and merit researchers' attention? Findings of the analysis provide a working definition of amenities in higher education and reveal significant shortcomings in our knowledge of the topic. These shortcomings make it difficult to substantiate claims that colleges and universities are engaged in an “amenities arms race” and identify numerous areas for future research.

Please direct inquiries about this manuscript to: Kevin McClure, [mclclurek@uncw.edu](mailto:mclclurek@uncw.edu)

Popular media articles on amenities in higher education take a common form. Emblazoned across the top of the articles are often provocative headlines. As one headline declares: "Prepare to Be Shocked (and Jealous!) at the Way College Students Live Today" (McCarthy, 2015). Many of the articles begin by describing a series of services and/or facilities, such as a roaming ice cream truck or 25-person hot tub (Hoeller, 2014; Jaeger, 2015). The authors subsequently hook readers with a shocking revelation: these amenities are not located on cruise ships or all-inclusive resorts, but rather campuses of U.S. colleges and universities. Almost invariably, the growth of amenities is attributed to the intense competition to attract students—a competition referred to as the "amenities arms race" (e.g., Blumenstyk, 2015; Jaeger, 2015; Selingo, 2013). Just as often, this competition is blamed for increasing college costs, which in turn drive up tuition and fees and exacerbate student loan debt (Jaeger, 2015; Newlon, 2014, Schwedel, 2014). Peppered throughout are salacious images like winding lazy rivers with ambient lighting and bikini-clad college women floating on inner tubes.

Over twenty popular media articles following this script have been published since 2012. This suggests that there is an audience willing to scroll through these articles, including prospective college students considering their options, concerned parents calculating tuition payments, and outraged observers asking if higher education has misplaced its priorities. However, the quantity of articles does not mean our understanding of amenities—their origins, manifestations, and consequences—has progressed over time. Upon close inspection, it becomes clear that many articles are artifacts of recycling more than original reporting. Similar examples of amenities at the same colleges and universities are mentioned *ad nauseum*. Little, if any, evidence is presented and virtually no research is cited to support claims, which makes it challenging to substantiate

widespread claims of an amenities arms race. In defense of journalists, research on amenities in higher education is scarce. For this reason, many of the articles reference a single study about the relationship between students' consumer preferences and demand for higher education (Jacob, McCall, & Stange, 2013). In short, writing on amenities in higher education, though abundant and often compelling, is more rhetorical than research-based.

The purpose of this article is to provide an analysis of published writing on amenities in higher education with the goal of bringing order to the voluminous information and helping to advance research. It examines over 40 articles and books to answer four interrelated questions:

- 1) How are amenities defined in the context of higher education?
- 2) How are amenities measured and what trends are discernible?
- 3) What are rationales and possible consequences of amenities? and
- 4) What questions remain unanswered and merit researchers' attention?

In addition to filling a void in research on amenities in higher education, there are several reasons why this article matters. First, there is a dearth of definitional clarity related to amenities that increases the likelihood of mismeasurement and misunderstanding. Second, there are unsubstantiated causal claims evident in published writing about effects attributable to amenities. At a time when some Americans doubt the benefits of higher education (Pew Research Center, 2017) and policymakers question or prohibit use of state funds for campus services and/or facilities (McClure, DeVita, & Ryder, 2017), it is essential to have accurate data and well-designed research. The incorporation of enhanced research into popular media articles on amenities could improve public understanding of and perceptions of higher education broadly and student affairs in particular. Indeed, many of the services and/or facilities labeled as "amenities" fall under student affairs, meaning student af-

fairs units are directly implicated in popular understandings of amenities. Lastly, amidst continued calls to hold higher education accountable and ensure affordability (Kelchen, 2018), better research on the relationship between amenities, college costs, and student success is critical. Although this article questions many of the assumptions circulating in published writing, it is not a defense of amenities in higher education. Rather, this article is designed to aid researchers through synthesizing information and provide a first step towards better research that ensures anecdotes do not drive decision-making.

### Sources and Analysis

This article is based on analysis of 41 published articles and books. Twenty-three of the publications are popular media articles, which appeared in national media outlets like *Forbes* and the *Wall Street Journal*, higher education-industry newsarticles like *Inside Higher Ed* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and blogs and other online content produced by think-tanks and foundations like the *Brookings Institution* and the *Foundation for Economic Education*. The remaining 18 publications were books—most designed for a general audience—and journal articles, with the majority (14) of sources coming from books. Books tended to focus on higher education finance (e.g., Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), higher education reform (e.g., Hacker & Dreifus, 2011), or inequality in higher education (e.g., Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). It is worth noting that none of these books focuses on amenities, but rather mentions amenities in service of an argument about other issues, namely the need for reform in higher education.

In order to locate sources, I conducted a keyword search through Google Scholar and ProQuest using combinations of the following keywords: "amenity," "amenities," "college," "university," "higher education," and "luxury." Because there are likely sources I missed by virtue of my search strategy, this article is based on a comprehensive, though

not exhaustive, review of published writing on amenities in higher education. I utilized a matrix method of analyzing the sources to synthesize information and derive themes. Goldman and Schmalz (2004) described the matrix method as "a structure and practice of systematically reviewing the literature and a system for bringing order out of the chaos of too much information spread across too many sources" (p. 6). In light of the questions guiding the analysis, I used the following categories of information as columns in the matrix: amenities examples, evidence/measurement, explanations for amenities, associated effects, institutions mentioned, research or articles mentioned, language to describe amenities, and illustrative quotations. Each source was a row in the matrix, and I recorded relevant information from sources in cells corresponding to columns. In addition, I wrote a narrative synthesis that captured key themes, which are described in the sections below. The remainder of the article is structured around the four questions that guided the analysis of sources.

### What Are Amenities in Higher Education?

A brief scan of published articles and books reveals that there is no clear consensus around the definition of amenities in higher education, which leads to measurement issues and, ultimately, misunderstanding. Table 1 provides a synthesis of the amenities mentioned in books and articles analyzed for this article. Examples of amenities can largely be grouped into six categories: buildings, features within buildings, fee-based services, free services, food, and technology. Although a diversity of examples and meanings permeate published writing, there are a few themes that can be distilled to aid researchers.

Table 1. Examples of Amenities in Published Writing

<b>Buildings</b>	<b>Free Services</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recreation center</li> <li>• Stadium</li> <li>• Residence hall</li> <li>• Student Center</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Movie theater and snacks</li> <li>• Shuttle service</li> <li>• Dietician</li> <li>• Coffee</li> </ul>
<b>Features Within Buildings</b>	<b>Food</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multi-person hot tub</li> <li>• Lazy river</li> <li>• Rock-climbing wall</li> <li>• Walk-in closet</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Steakhouse</li> <li>• Major fast food restaurants</li> <li>• Roaming ice cream truck</li> <li>• Lobster dinner</li> </ul>
<b>Fee-Based Services</b>	<b>Technology</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Laundry/dry-cleaning</li> <li>• Art rental</li> <li>• Ice cream shop</li> <li>• Tanning bed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Biometric hand scanner</li> <li>• Plasma television</li> <li>• Online streaming services</li> <li>• WiFi in recreation center</li> </ul>

### Student Recreation, Leisure, and Entertainment

Many authors (e.g., Jaeger, 2015; Kreuter, 2014; Manning, 2012; Selingo, 2013) argued that amenities are designed for student recreation, leisure, and entertainment. For example, Kreuter (2014) noted in reaction to a new outdoor pool at the University of Texas at Austin:

It wasn't built primarily for exercise. It was a lounging pool, with serpentine borders, tons of deck chairs, shady palms, and a snack bar. It looked in every way like something that you might see at a fancy resort, minus the booze. The pool, built purely for the purposes of coeducational swimming and fraternizing, represents an investment that UT-Austin made into the social experiences of students, arguably a distance removed from the university's academic mission. (para. 1)

As this quote demonstrates, in the eyes of several authors, amenities have little connection to what is variously referred to as academics, learning, or education. For ex-

ample, Manning (2012) maintained: "The race to build the best amenities and facilities has distracted the attention of students, faculty, staff, and administrators alike from the fundamental purposes of higher education: the achievement of a high quality education" (p. 220). Most authors understood amenities as services and/or facilities that fulfill primarily non-academic purposes and sometimes viewed them as in conflict with the educational missions.

### Contributions to Community-Building and Student Learning

Despite the clear theme of authors viewing amenities as primarily non-academic, several authors argued that amenities are not anathema to learning. For example, Hoeller (2014) described a "personal dairy bar" as an amenity at one land-grant university. In reality, the university hosts a student-managed ice cream store, which sells items produced by students in agriculture academic programs. Moreover, some authors (e.g., Bonfiglio, 2004; Rullman, 2018) stress the ways in which services and/or fa-

ilities play an important role in promoting community, relational learning, and sense of belonging—all of which constitute building blocks of students' academic success. For example, Rullman (2008) drew upon his 30-year career in higher education practice to conclude: "campus buildings—classrooms, recreation centers, libraries, plazas, laboratories, counseling offices—matter for the total educational experience, and to neglect their need or their purpose means neglecting the people who use them" (para. 6). Some authors underscored that amenities serve purposes beyond recreation, leisure, and entertainment and can contribute to learning.

**Beyond Necessity and Norms**

Authors frequently tried to demonstrate the ways in which a service and/or facility was excessive or falls outside of some norm.

For example, a few authors specified how much a new recreation center cost to construct (e.g., Woodhouse, 2013), how many people could fit in a hot tub (e.g., Jaeger, 2015), or how many gallons of water a pool holds (e.g., Blumenstyk, 2015). Quantifying the cost or size of the amenity was often designed to communicate its grandiosity and gaudiness. As Figure 1 indicates, published writing attached a variety of descriptors to amenities, such as "luxurious," "lavish," and "unimaginable." The absence of any benchmark or point of comparison makes it difficult to conclude whether these services and/or facilities are beyond norms. The fact that a pool holds so many thousands of gallons is not meaningful data for most readers. Furthermore, quantification rarely includes any sense of an institution's size or a facility's usage rates. For example, Hacker and Dreifus (2011) noted in their book on

Figure 1. Descriptors Associated with Amenities in Published Writing



wasteful spending in higher education that a recreation center included 200 pieces of exercise equipment. At an institution educating thousands of students, 200 pieces of exercise may be appropriate to meet students' health needs. Nevertheless, a preponderance of authors described amenities as beyond what is needed or expected.

### **Distinct from the Past**

A final theme evident in published writing on amenities is that authors emphasized the newness of a service and/or facility, and how amenities differ from a more simplistic college campus of the past. Figure 1 shows that authors used terms like "state-of-the-art," "futuristic," and "cutting-edge" to describe amenities. Selingo (2013) provided a concise articulation of this theme:

As recently as the early 1990s...dorm rooms were as sterile as those in a hospital, a 193-square-foot box with white cinderblock walls that, in my case, I shared with two other guys....That was just before colleges began a decade-long amenities arms race to build more luxurious and outlandish facilities that had nothing to do with classroom education. (p. 30)

In the same vein, Schwedel (2014) claimed: "Back when your parents were in school, college campuses had a reputation for bad food and creaky twin-size mattresses" (para. 1). The implication, as Purdue University President Mitch Daniels expressed in an article, is that "if you haven't been on a college campus lately, you wouldn't recognize it" (Swartz, 2014, para. 8). It is difficult to ignore the underlying nostalgia for an idealized past that animates much published writing on amenities. Authors understood amenities as an innovation in practices—either welcomed as an improvement to college life and reason to be envious or something to be critiqued as a sign.

### **A Working Definition of Amenities**

Based on the themes presented above, I propose the following as a working defini-

tion. Amenities in higher education are services and/or facilities that:

- Promote college students' recreation, leisure, and entertainment
- Contribute to community, relationship-building, learning outside of the classroom
- Exceed what is necessary or what is considered "the norm"
- Represent an innovation or departure from past practice.

An amenity in higher education need not have all four of these characteristics. However, this working definition, in tandem with examples included in Table 1, provide a starting point for defining and, therefore, better researching amenities.

### **How Are Amenities Measured?**

Most published writing suggests that amenities in higher education have been growing or increasing in prevalence (e.g., Jaeger, 2015; McCarthy, 2013; Woodhouse, 2013; Stripling, 2017). For example, Jaeger (2015) argued that "since the 1960s, when college budgets began to increase in response to the explosive growth of student enrollment, another expense [college amenities] emerged that appears to have little (if any) influence on students' academic performance" (para. 1). Kadamus (n.d.) echoed this view of growth in amenities, observing that "over the last twenty years many campuses have expanded their footprint in unexpected ways—adding water parks with lazy rivers, recreation centers with state-of-the-art fitness equipment and rock-climbing walls" (para. 1). These quotes illustrate the primary ways in which amenities are measured in published writing: institutional spending and construction (or a combination of the two, institutional spending on construction). There are problems with these approaches to measurement, making data-driven trends regarding amenities scarce. As a result, it is challenging to evaluate the prevalent claim that institutions are engaged in an amenities arms race.

### **Institutional Spending**

The first way in which amenities are measured in published writing is through institutional spending. Two studies utilized the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) to measure institutional spending on amenities, though they relied on different variables. Kirshstein and Kadamus (2012) examined whether spending on amenities like climbing walls was responsible for "climbing tuitions." Their research brief for the Delta Cost Project focused on institutional spending on operation and maintenance of facilities, and their analysis demonstrated that in 2010 institutions cut spending on this expense category (by 15% at private institutions and between 4 and 8% at public institutions). Spending on operation and maintenance of facilities includes costs related to utilities, security, equipment, and insurance (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017). Kirshstein and Kadamus's (2012) brief focused more explanations for increasing tuition than amenities; nevertheless, an IPEDS variable centering on operations and maintenance imperfectly captures institutional spending on amenities in higher education. It is difficult to argue that insuring a building and keeping the lights on are excessive or new services.

Although it was rare for articles to cite research, the most commonly referenced study was Jacob, McCall, and Stange's (2013) paper on the extent to which institutions respond to students' consumer preferences. To quantify colleges' provision of consumption amenities, the authors summed two IPEDS variables: spending on student services and spending on auxiliary services. Summary statistics showed that spending on these two variables increased at both public and private institutions between 1992 and 2004. The rate of growth in spending on amenities was greatest among private institutions at all selectivity levels, and there was generally an inverse relationship between selectivity and amenity-spending. The results of the anal-

ysis demonstrated that "there is significant preference heterogeneity across students; wealthy students are willing to pay more for consumption amenities while high-achieving students have a greater willingness-to-pay for academic quality" (p. 31). Jacob, McCall, and Stange concluded that institutions face differing incentives to provide amenities to students.

As was true with spending on operations and maintenance of facilities, spending on student services imperfectly captures institutional spending on amenities. This variable mainly refers to activities that contribute to students' emotional and physical well-being on campus. Spending on student services includes expenditures for admissions, extracurricular programming, student records management, and even health care in some cases (NCES, 2017). Although some of this spending is certainly for facilities and/or services that would meet the working definition of amenities, a significant share of it would not. Furthermore, conflating amenities and student services is problematic because it ignores the rich research tradition has confirmed that many areas of student services, including residence life and campus recreation, positively contribute to students' academic success (Kuh et al., 2005; Huesman et al., 2009; Forrester, 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Thus, the most frequently cited study in published writing likely mis-measures institutional spending on amenities.

### **Construction and Construction Spending**

The second way in which authors measure amenities in higher education is through reference to new buildings being constructed and how much institutions spend to build them. Several authors (e.g., McCluskey, 2017; Kadamus, n.d.) referenced data from a company called Sightlines, which tracks construction at 400 campuses across the country. For the past five years, Sightlines has produced a report on the state of facilities in higher education. The most recent

report showed that overall space growth continues in higher education, despite a plateau in enrollment, with greater growth at baccalaureate and master's institutions compared to research institutions. Drawing on Sightlines data, authors often mentioned that "about half of all college space today is for non-academic use" (McCluskey, 2017, para. 6). It is not clear how Sightlines defined non-academic space, and their data is only available to clients, making it largely inaccessible to researchers. Several authors (e.g., Jaeger, 2015; Newlon, 2014) mentioned in their writing on amenities how much higher education institutions have spent on construction projects, as reported by *College Planning & Management* magazine. The magazine, which discontinued its annual report on campus construction in 2015, found that institutional spending on construction doubled between 1995 and 2015, increasing from \$6 to \$12 billion. However, the reports did not disclose how many institutions were included in the data and did not disaggregate data by types of construction projects. Lastly, Woodhouse (2013) reported that the National Intramural and Recreation Sports Association calculated that there were at least 157 recreation projects in progress at 92 colleges representing \$1.7 billion in new construction and renovation. Similar to the previous two datasets, the NIRSA reports and underlying data are only available to members.

In the absence of easily-accessible data on campus construction, most authors turned to simply listing the cost of construction projects at various campuses. For example, Selingo (2013) listed in his description of amenities:

Gettysburg College spent \$27 million on a 55,000-square-foot recreational center with a bouldering area. Drexel University devoted \$45 million to an 84,000-square-foot recreation center. The University of Memphis paid \$50 million for a 169,000-square-foot campus center that houses a theater, food court, and twenty-four-hour computer

lab. And California State University at Northridge spent ten years planning a \$125 million performing arts center. (p. 31)

One of authors' favorite institutions to discuss is High Point University, and several published articles noted that this university has spent approximately \$700 million to refurbish and expand its campus (e.g., Matlack, 2012; Swartz, 2014). As was true with efforts to demonstrate that amenities are excessive, it is difficult to draw insights from the cost of construction projects due to the absence of any baseline for comparison. Taken together, the measurement of amenities rests on problematic assumptions, is based on inaccessible and/or flawed data, and often provides little comparative information about the phenomenon.

### **Defining and Questioning the "Amenities Arms Race"**

Most authors extend the argument that amenities are increasing and asserted that institutions have recently engaged in an "amenities arms race" (Blumenstyk, 2015; Hoeller, 2014; Jaeger, 2015; Jaschik, 2013; Leef, 2017; Manning, 2012; McCarthy, 2015; McCluskey, 2017; Newlon, 2014; Schwedel, 2014; Selingo, 2013). The amenities arms race is here defined as a competition to attract or satisfy students through increasing provision of services and/or facilities, with no clear end game or finish line (Robinson, 2017; McCarthy, 2015). Some authors (e.g., Winston, 2009) add the descriptor "competitive" to amenities, demonstrating the centrality of competition in explanations of amenities in higher education. Furthermore, several authors suggested that the amenities arms race is a new development in higher education, emerging within the last three decades (Selingo, 2013). This is partly evinced through frequent use of the phrase "building boom" (e.g., Blumenstyk, 2015; Bonfiglio, 2004). Given the measurement problems discussed above, there at least two reasons to critically examine the existence of an amenities arms race.



First, an underlying assumption of the amenities arms race is that there has been surge of amenities-based competition in higher education since the 1990s. However, the history of higher education teaches that institutions have long invested in their campuses with the sole aim of attracting and satisfying students. In his history of higher education, Labaree (2017) showed that, in the nineteenth century, "colleges were desperately looking for ways to attract students" (p. 49). Around the 1880s, institutions

invented most of the familiar elements of the twentieth-century American undergraduate college experience that made attending college attractive to so many students: fraternities and sororities, football, comfortable dormitories, and grassy campuses adorned with medieval quadrangles in a faux gothic style. (p. 49)

Brubacher and Rudy (2004) noted that prior to the Civil War, some institutional leaders believed that an institution "should spend the bulk of its available funds for university libraries, laboratories, observatories, and eminent professors, not for dormitory buildings" (p. 121). By war's end, several prominent institutions felt pressure from the "rash of off-campus building to attempt the construction of lavish dormitories on their own" (p. 122). In other words, there was discussion about and conflict over "luxury residence halls" as early as the late nineteenth century (p. 122). Attracting and satisfying students through amenities is an old strategy in higher education.

Second, while it is possible that the amenities arms race is real, substantiating the claim necessitates better data and analysis. One way to provide evidence of the amenities arms race would be to demonstrate that investment in a clearly defined set of amenities has spiked over time. This would allow researchers to show that spending on amenities has significantly increased. A second method would be to compare spending on the same set of amenities among a group

of institutional peers, ideally in longitudinal fashion. Researchers could show that institutions invest in amenities in similar ways, spending more as their peers spend more. My search yielded no published writing that included or discussed such analyses, probably due to definitional and measurement issues. An additional complication is that researchers rarely know why institutions undertake construction projects—it could be to update aging facilities, increase capacity to accommodate enrollment growth, or a combination of reasons. Surveys or case studies could help to understand the goals driving construction projects, yet these analyses are also absent in published writing.

### **What Are the Rationales for Amenities?**

There are multiple explanations that authors offered for the perceived growth of amenities in higher education, which I have grouped into three themes: inter-institutional competition and student demand, institutional leadership and financial challenges, and the pursuit of prestige and performance. Echoing an argument throughout this article, these explanations are primarily based upon authors' opinions or observations.

### **Inter-institutional Competition and Student Demand**

The most prevalent explanation for amenities—and their growth—in higher education is that institutions are competing to attract students (Newlon, 2014; Swartz, 2014). For example, LeBar (2014) wrote that "many colleges are competing to provide the most lavish amenities to attract students" (para. 1) and Leef (2017) suggested that "recruiters can use stylish buildings and new playspaces to lure prospective students" (para. 3). Several authors referred to this as "keeping up with the Joneses" (Robinson, 2017, para. 5). What institutions seek, according to many authors, is not just students but also their money: "With competition for tuition money ramp-

ing up, colleges are looking for ways to set themselves apart and some have turned to investing in unimaginable campus experiences, from water parks to luxurious residence halls" (Yu & Effron, 2014, para. 1). Helping to justify the competition for students, Kadamus (n.d.) observed that "if a campus of any size has steady enrollment growth, or the campus has large numbers of students, then the costs of building amenities can be offset pretty effectively" (para. 18). Amenities, in this sense, are viewed as something of a necessary evil, part of the increasingly difficult game of recruiting students and bringing in tuition revenue.

A second rationale for amenities is that institutions are responding to what students today demand. For example, Newlon (2014) contended that students are accustomed to a much higher standard of living today than in the past, and Selingo (2013) declared:

this climbing-wall era coincided with the arrival of the millennials on campus, many of whom never had to share a bedroom with a sibling or a bathroom with their parents. Why should they have to do so when they go off to college? (p. 31)

An article by the Associated Press (2015) quoted a real estate developer as saying: "It's become a sort of standard of living that a significant percentage of the student population can afford, so the students come in expecting better accommodations" (para. 4). However, several authors argued that not all students are interested in amenities, so not all institutions are responsive to this demand-side pressure. Citing the study by Jacobs, McCall, and Stange (2013), published writing on amenities frequently claims that lower-performing and wealthier students demand amenities, whereas academically high-achieving students place a higher premium on instruction. Accordingly, less-selective institutions and institutions seeking to recruit higher-income students have greater incentive to invest in amenities. In sum, this rationale for amenities states that the institution that provides the best prod-

uct in response to students' consumer demands will win their tuition money.

A third explanation for amenities and their growth in higher education focuses on the desires and ambitions of institutional leaders. Several authors attribute the "building boom" on campuses to the notion that "college presidents and faculty love new buildings" (McCluskey, 2017, para. 4). In the words of Selingo (2013): "these extravagant facilities made college leaders as ecstatic as a toddler showing off a shiny new toy on Christmas" (p. 33). As follows, some authors peg amenities to institutional leaders' enthusiasm to build their way to prominence. Several articles (e.g., Kreuter, 2014; Manning, 2012; Robinson, 2017) also critique institutional leaders for viewing students as customers and cite amenities as manifestations of a corporate approach to university management. Reflecting on his institution's investment in amenities, Kreuter (2014) argued: "We are undeniably in an era where the governing model of education is one that conceives of students as customers" (para. 3). Thus, amenities are viewed as a product of institutional leaders' self-aggrandizement and the higher education equivalent of a "customer is always right" mindset.

A fourth explanation for amenities is that institutional leaders were responding to difficult financial challenges. In their theory of academic capitalism, Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) argued that, as a result of declining state support, public colleges and universities are "moving to serve more privileged student markets" and "increasingly emphasize consumption" (p. 280). Similarly, in an era of declining state support, Stripling (2017) explained that "leaders of cash-strapped institutions feel obliged to service the whims and desires of tuition-paying students" (para. 5). Robinson (2017) reiterated this view, observing that "university leaders feel financial pressure to cater more to the lowest common denominator" (para. 5). According to Kadamus (n.d.), some institutional leaders accepted

money from donors who are more interested in financing construction of a new building than helping to pay operating expenses. Because of minimal resources available for capital projects, many institutional leaders gladly accepted money from donors when it was available, not when it was needed.

### **The Pursuit of Prestige and Rankings**

A final rationale for amenities in higher education is that they form part of institutions' pursuit of prestige. Brewer, Gates, and Goldman (2001) demonstrated that there several prestige-generators in higher education: selectivity in admissions, sponsored research, and competitive sports teams. Eckel (2008) suggested that "institutions pursue strategies that make them more like prestigious institutions—highly selective admissions, externally-funded research, and flashy amenities, for the most part" (p. 187). Several authors maintained that amenities were not merely designed to attract students, but also to attract more *applicants* (Jaschik, 2013). In the words of Yu and Efron (2014): "some colleges—excluding elite schools like Princeton and Yale—attract more applicants when they invest in state-of-the-art facilities like pools and rec centers" (para. 2). More applicants, in turn, can lower an institution's acceptance rate, allowing them to appear more selective and perform better on rankings (Kadamus, n.d.). Newlon (2014) reported that, after investing hundreds of millions of dollars in construction projects, High Point University's acceptance rate dropped from 86 to 64%. Additionally, authors noted that institutions are not just trying to attract any students, but rather to "lure the best and brightest students" (Wotapka, 2012). One strategy that authors connected to recruiting more high-ability students was making campuses more residential and attractive as an "all inclusive compound from which students need never stray" (Stripling, 2017, para. 9). Thus, several authors suggest that institutions provide amenities to improve metrics like rankings (Associated Press,

2015; Kreuter, 2014; Prosack, 2016).

### **What Are the Consequences Attributed to Amenities?**

Published writing mentioned three main consequences attributed to amenities in higher education: individual and institutional financial problems, threats to accessibility and student success, and reduced public support. Although amenities are blamed for a number of problems in higher education, evidence confirming causal relationships is virtually non-existent.

### **Individual and Institutional Financial Problems**

By far the most common consequence attributed to amenities in articles and books is increasing tuition and fees, and concomitantly increasing student loan debt (Jaeger, 2015; Newlon, 2014; Schwedel, 2014; Wang, 2016; Yu & Efron, 2014). In fact, most published writing mentions that the growth in amenities is either happening at the same time as increasing tuition and student loan debt or is, according to some authors, exacerbating the trends. Newlon (2014) noted in her article that with student loan debt topping \$1.2 trillion and average tuition approaching \$41,000 a year, building a new recreation center on campus seems frivolous. In the same vein, LeBar (2014) claimed that "Student services are financed through student tuition and fees, driving up both. This forces students to subsidize amenities they don't use for other students, which increase tuition and fees and raises the levels of postgraduate debt" (para. 2). At least three articles suggested that amenities push up the cost of attendance, which in turn increases the amount of financial aid that students require (and taxpayers fund). This may happen, as Schwedel (2014) noted, because newer residence halls are more expensive for students. With few exceptions, published writing claimed that students and taxpayers are paying the price for amenities.

Another consequence frequently men-

tioned in published writing is that institutions are assuming increasing costs, which are placing colleges and universities in a risky financial situation. McCluskey (2017) noted that many campuses have more space to maintain and fewer students: "Greater capital costs, plus decreasing revenue, equals trouble" (para. 3). Although Swartz (2014) again pointed to High Point University as an example of an institution whose enrollment has increased, Woodhouse (2013) suggested that "with the exception of large public institutions, investments in pools and gyms generally don't have a positive effect on enrollment" (para. 16). Indeed, Kadamus indicated that many institutions undertook new construction projects in anticipation of sustained or increased enrollment. "At small private schools and less selective schools," wrote Kadamus, "the gamble is whether building more amenities will draw additional students (or at least stabilize enrollments). Some institutions may incur significant debt and not sustained enrollment growth" (para. 12). Such debt may make it harder in the future for them to borrow money for construction projects.

### **Threats to Accessibility and Student Success**

A common argument in published writing is wealthy students, those most capable of paying tuition with minimal support, demand amenities. At the same time, articles suggest, in the words of Swartz (2014), that "construction comes at the expense of students from low-income backgrounds" (para. 8) and may make college less accessible. As Akers (2013) put it: "much of the discussion in higher education policy is focused on broadening access. With this as a backdrop, it is not surprising that spending on amenities at campuses generates negative feelings" (para. 3). For Selingo (2013), amenities encourage students to spend more time socializing than studying. The resultant party atmosphere comes at a cost: "students who can least afford college are most harmed by the partying that pulls down

grades—and tend to lack a post-graduation safety net" (p. 32). There is some research to support this, as Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) showed that lower-income students struggled academically at an institution that cultivated a "party pathway" for the benefit of more affluent, out-of-state students. In addition to disproportionately affecting lower-income students, authors claimed that amenities can hurt student learning and success. Jaeger (2015) succinctly captured this view: "decking out a college rec center with multi-million dollar waterparks and rock climbing walls does not correlate with greater scholastic performance" (para. 13). Although there is likely some truth in this argument, Jaeger does not cite any research showing the lack of a relationship.

### **Reduced Public Support**

Reduced public support is described as both a cause and consequence of amenities. In other words, institutions have responded to reduced state funding by providing amenities to attract more students. However, amenities have simultaneously led to what Woodhouse (2013) called "bad optics" (para. 8). Even if it is the case that amenities do not cause any of the issues described above, they attract negative attention from policymakers who are concerned about rising tuition rates. According to Stripling (2017): "Lazy rivers feed public perceptions that colleges make poor stewards of state dollars and that costs are skyrocketing because of frivolous indulgences" (para. 44). Akers (2013) suggested that while policymakers may be willing to subsidize higher education, "they don't want to subsidize a 'Cadillac' college degree" (para. 8). As a result, authors imply that amenities justify reduced public support for higher education.

### **What Questions Remain and Merit Attention?**

Thanks to the steady flow of new articles and books, there is an abundance of discussion about amenities among journalists, policymakers, scholars, and students

of higher education. Yet most of this discussion is, upon close inspection, devoid of substance. Most of what we know about amenities in higher education is based upon assumptions and anecdotes, and authors frequently re-use the same examples and arguments. To address this echo-effect, it is essential that the discussion around amenities shift from rhetoric to research. This article revealed significant shortcomings in our understanding of amenities, highlighting important areas that merit researchers' attention. First, researchers should continue to conceptualize and empirically define amenities to help accurately delimit the phenomenon of interest. Although I utilized published writing to offer a working definition, additional development is necessary to identify amenities and examine relationships and effects. Second, researchers should continue to work on creating variables that better quantify amenities-related activities on campuses. This may require working with survey administrators and statisticians with the federal government and/or collaborating with institutions or organizations to collect original data. Additionally, organizations that currently collect data on construction projects should come together to align their data collection efforts to provide more meaningful, publicly available data.

Better data that accurately captures amenities in higher education can help address several questions that, despite the claims of authors in published writing, have not been empirically examined. These questions include whether institutional spending on amenities is growing and whether this growth is problematic. Another question that requires empirical substantiation is whether amenities actually attract more applicants or help to retain students, and which applicants and students demand or benefit from amenities. An assumption throughout published writing on amenities is that if you build it, students will come. Based on this analysis, that assumption has yet to be systematically tested. The various effects attributed to amenities represent a largely

unmapped research frontier. Whether amenities exacerbate affordability issues in higher education and how amenities contribute to tuition growth and student loan debt are important questions that warrant further investigation. Not all of these areas need to be studied through quantitative methods. Indeed, case studies, ethnographies, and narrative-based approaches can shed light on the rationales and consequences of amenities in higher education, and how students navigate costs that accompany amenities. Answering many of these questions can help researchers determine if there is truly an amenities arms race. After shifting from rhetoric to research, we may find significant evidence to support the issues identified in published writing on amenities. At the same time, we may better understand the origins, manifestations, and consequences of amenities, and this enhanced understanding can be put to good use designing solutions in policy and practice.

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