This study analyzed the discourses prevalent in two landmark, federally commissioned reports that sought to define the purposes of higher education. Taking a humanities-oriented lens and drawing on critical social theories, the poststructural critical discourse method, “What’s the Problem Represented to Be” (WPR) guided analysis of access and educational opportunity in higher education in the reports.

In the Truman Report, the discourse of a limited democracy discursively restricted full access and educational opportunity. In the Spellings Report, the discourses of the market and disadvantage led to a fuller notion of access and educational opportunity tied specifically to neoliberal aims. The analysis of discourses, silences, and effects uncovered that problematizations discursively produced the ‘capable’ graduate in service to protecting democracy in the Truman Report and the ‘aspirant’ graduate in service to market needs in the Spellings Report.

I offer a conceptual recommendation considering the capabilities theory grounded in equity as an alternative. Whereas both Reports led to the tension that democratic and
market aims are an ‘either/or’ problem for access and educational opportunity, I contend that through the conceptual recommendation of capabilities grounded in equity, a ‘both/and’ framing of access and educational opportunity problems could disrupt the stalled polarization of the aims. This alternative conceptual recommendation could generate policies and practices that promote equitable access and educational opportunity in higher education.