April 2007

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Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.58188/1941-8043.1094
Available at: https://thekeep.eiu.edu/jcba/vol0/iss2/15

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RESTORING PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

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34th National Conference
National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining
In Higher Education and the Professions
Hunter College, the City University of New York
April 16, 2007

There is a certain irony in my being chosen to address this issue given that shortly after I left Canada for the United States, in June 2005, the Ontario Provincial government announced a 6.2 billion dollar increase in funding for post-secondary education and within a few months of my arriving in New Jersey the Governor announced a 25% cut in appropriations to the State colleges. Since I now stand before you as a kind of Joe Btfsplk of government funding, you might conclude that the restoration of public support for higher education in the United States could most readily be achieved by sending me back to Canada.

I arrived in New Jersey after more than 25 years in the Canadian university system utterly unencumbered by any insight into the workings of American higher education. Various well-meaning people have attempted to provide a foundation to my understanding by explaining the contextual realities of New Jersey state politics but almost two years later I find I am still rather bewildered – an example perhaps of the impervious confronting the incomprehensible.
So with that admission, and with apologies in advance for my naiveté, I would like to offer some observations. Some are impressionistic, derived from my limited time here, and some are based on my Canadian experience.

I have four main points to make:

1. In rallying support for public higher education, appeals to sentiment or idealism or nobility of purpose are ineffective, even damaging.

2. The public support that counts is, directly or indirectly, financial.

3. The best source of political leverage is parents of students and prospective students.

4. The jig is up: if we want a different “social contract” in support of public higher education, we must provide different consideration for that contract.

1. Appeals to sentiment

I believe in the value of a liberal education, defined as “education that enlarges and disciplines the mind irrespective of the particular business or profession one may follow”; in other words, education in how to think critically in order to analyze and solve
problems. In polite company, few would take issue with my valuation or with the notion that higher education’s ability to transform lives makes it intrinsically worthwhile. Yet there is little evidence that the American system of public education has historically supported that view. To begin with, “public education” has generally been understood as education required for all children by government and paid for by taxes. It is a term applied to K through 12 education but seldom to post-secondary education in colleges or universities.

Furthermore, the legislative high water marks of public higher education, the *Morrill Act* of 1862 and the *Serviceman’s Readjustment Act (or G.I. Bill)* of 1944, were decidedly practical in their goals. The land grant colleges and universities designated by the Morrill had as part of their ostensible mission the teaching of classical studies to provide a liberal education to the working class. However their more focused mission was to meet the growing demand for agricultural and technical courses to provide a practical education to those workers for whom higher education at Harvard, Yale or William and Mary was inaccessible. Similarly, the public purpose of the G.I. Bill, to enable servicemen to make the transition from military to civilian life after World War II, was buttressed by the very real fear that the economy would simply not be able to absorb so many workers at once.

Certainly, neither of these public legislative interventions was supported on the principle that a liberal education was intrinsically valuable because it would foster personal enlightenment. But nor was support premised on any view that higher education was essentially a “good thing”. Instead the support seems to have been mustered on the
grounds that investing in land grant colleges and, later on, the “readjustment” of World War II servicemen, simply made good economic sense. If we want to see a similar surge in public support for public higher education, I suggest that we need to provide a similar rationale.

Fortunately, there has emerged direct and reliable evidence of the value of a liberal education. In the 1990’s, however, the core subjects of liberal education, the humanities, the social sciences and the fine arts were on the wane. This was in large measure because of the push to make higher education responsive to the assumed needs of the market. In 2001, an article appeared in the Canadian Journal of Higher Education entitled “Against All Odds? The Enduring Value of Liberal Education in Universities, Professions, and the Labour Market”. Drawing from recent and previously unreported data, the article demonstrated that liberal education produces positive economic benefits for the individual graduate and that, to quote “policies designed to diminish the presence of liberal education in universities in favor of more supposedly market-worthy subjects are short-sighted”.

At about the same time, similar and very compelling evidence was being presented by the American economist Anthony Carnevale who was then Vice President for Public Leadership at the Education Testing Service. He was also formerly Chair of President Clinton’s National Commission for Employment Policy and the Senior Policy Analyst in the Office of the Secretary of Health and Human Services. At an American Youth Policy
Forum in July 2001, he identified reversals in three trends that will directly affect education and employment policy over the next two decades.

FIRST

The reversal of the education premium in the American economy

- 1950’s through 1970’s blue collar workers with a high school education were doing better relative to college-educated white collar workers.

- Number of college-educated workers was growing and the glut of well-educated baby Boomers resulted in increased competition for skilled jobs. This further reduced the education premium. Since 1980, however, the college wage premium has nearly doubled largely because of the added value of a college education in the new economy.

- His conclusion: In the knowledge economy, “education allocates earnings; work alone is not enough”

SECOND

- Second important trend reversal is declining growth rate of the American Labor force as Baby Boomers retire. 46 million college-educated baby boomers will retire between 2001 and 2020. He estimates that there will be a shortage of nine
million college-educated workers by 2020. This shortage will increase earnings differentials between educated and uneducated workers further raising the education premium.

- NOTE: social policies are not the solution to this problem. Raising the retirement age or providing access to childcare and transportation, if implemented without additional public support for higher education will simply increase the supply of less-skilled, non-college educated workers.

THIRD

- The shift from the relatively small Generation X (born between 1965 and 1981) to the much larger generation Y (born between 1982-1996). By the year 2015, Generation Y will bring almost 5 million additional 16 to 24 year olds into high school and college. Providing funds for the almost 2 million of these who will go on to college right after high school will require $20 Billion in public funds.

Dr. Carnavale is now with the National Center on Education and the Economy. At last year’s AACU conference in Washington, he presented the results of his study of Department of Labor data from the last 15 years. There are two features of his findings that are particularly noteworthy for our purposes.
First has to do with the skills that are most valued in the marketplace. He divides Skills, defined as the ability to perform tasks, into seven classifications:

- Problem solving and critical thinking skills
- Technology and computer skills
- Learning skills
- Leadership and management skills
- Effective Communication skills
- Service skills
- Mechanical skills

Mean earnings were highest for those whose education had provided them with critical thinking and effective communications skills.

Second is the fact that socio-economic status is tied ever closer to educational attainment. Among the socially and economically disadvantaged there is increasingly less likelihood that a higher education will be pursued. The evidence for this is particularly compelling in the case of young men.

In reality, no education is more practical than a liberal education. The ability to reason, to analyze problems imaginatively and to communicate intelligently is indispensable in a world where adaptation to constant change is necessary. The economic evidence is also irrefutable: those whose education has provided them with the ability to think critically and communicate effectively will earn the highest incomes. Gone forever are the days
when a high school graduate could earn high pay by working hard at an assembly line job in a manufacturing plant.

Our students, parents and legislators should be made to know this, especially since the rest of the world knows it. Consider for example, the rapidly growing economies of Brazil, Russia, India and China (the BRICs). All four countries are dramatically increasing investment in public higher education as a vital component of their economic strategy. The implications of that strategy were considered by a team of economists and planners at Goldman Sachs in a 2003 study called “Dreaming with BRICs: The Path to 2050”. The top six world economies today are the United States, Japan, China, Germany, Britain and France. The study concludes that in less than 40 years their combined economies will be smaller than the BRICs economies taken together.

These prospects are not pleasant to contemplate. Perhaps that is why lawmakers choose to avoid them. Notice that I said “avoid” and not “ignore”. Public utterances by lawmakers and public officials tend to acknowledge the virtues of public higher education and an educated citizenry. Indeed they like to do so as it marks them as enlightened rulers. But when it comes to appropriations, particularly in relation to K through 12 funding, they practice allocative avoidance. Forget sentiment, show me the money.

2. The public support that counts is, directly or indirectly, financial
Hand in hand with the recognition of the futility of sentimental appeals founded on the nobility of the higher education enterprise, is the recognition that public support is about money. Public money has poured in to the K through 12 system to provide specialized support services and counseling creating a set of needs and expectations that not only do not cease but arguably increase once students leave high school and enter college. Yet the same legislators (and parents) who engage in public hand wringing over how to get more resources for K through 12 are content to point at public colleges and demand to know 1) why tuition costs aren’t lower and 2) why retention and graduation rates aren’t higher.

3. The best source of political leverage is parents of students and prospective students

We in the academy don’t always make effective politicians. At my college, we this year reduced the standard teaching load of faculty from four courses a semester to three. I supported this change because I want faculty to be able to teach more rigorously while also having real time for research. But I also see the wonderment in the eyes of outsiders who learn that faculty now teach 9 hours a week instead of 12. Their bemusement suggests that this is not a helpful fulcrum on which to leverage the resources issue and that faculty, or administrators for that matter, are not the most effective apologists because they are believed to be too self-interested.
Nor frankly are our students the most effective lobbyists, at least not when it comes to appealing directly to legislators. This is not so much because they appear relatively privileged, which they are, but because they do not have much impact as voters.

The key to the success of the K through 12 funding lobby has been connecting its priorities to a large voting bloc. This is what happened in the Canadian Province of Ontario. Once the demographic curve bulged with baby boom echoers and Ontario’s universities could all point to the inability to expand capacity without more public funding, political momentum shifted rapidly. And those pounding the political drums were not faculty or administrators – they needed only to point to the demographic facts almost apologetically – but parents who all of a sudden realized that their own children were not guaranteed a place in college even if they otherwise qualified academically. That’s when it all happened.

4. The jig is up; if we want a different “social contract” in support of public higher education, we must provide different consideration for that contract

The Spellings Commission Report on the future of U.S. higher education has stimulated a great deal of debate since its release in September 2006. It is interesting that it should appear almost exactly one year after The Economist magazine concluded that the system of higher education in the United States was “the best in the world.” By contrast, the Commission proclaimed:
“Our yearlong examination of the challenges facing higher education has brought us to the uneasy conclusion that the sector’s past attainments have led our nation to unwarranted complacency about its future.”

The Commission identified six major areas of concern:

1. High schools do not see it as their responsibility to prepare all pupils for post secondary education.

2. Some do not enter the post secondary system because of inadequate information and rising costs.

3. Some who do enter the system waste time learning English and mathematics skills they should have learned in high school. And some do not graduate in part because post secondary institutions do not accept responsibility to see that those they let in actually succeed.

4. Even some who do earn degrees have not acquired the reading, writing and thinking skills that should be expected of graduates.

5. These problems disproportionately affect low income students and racial and ethnic minorities.
6. There is a “lack of clear, reliable information about the cost and quality of post secondary institutions, along with a remarkable absence of accountability mechanisms to ensure that colleges succeed in educating students.”

In sharp contrast to *The Economist*, the Spellings Commission describes American higher education as the equivalent of a “mature enterprise” in the business world: “increasingly risk-averse, at times self-satisfied, and unduly expensive.” Concern is expressed that the United States is now ranked 12th among major industrialized countries in higher education attainment.

These concerns have been recently buttressed in a report released on March 7, 2007 by the Lumina Foundation for Education. Drawing on data furnished by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the report concludes that the United States must increase the graduation rate by more than one-third each year or fall 16 million behind the number needed to compete economically by 2025. The Lumina Foundation speculates that in 2025 Canada will have about 55 percent of its working-age population holding at least a two year (or Associate) degree whereas the comparable number in the United States will be 46 percent.

Accountability was one of the central issues the Spellings Commission was asked to examine, the other three being access, affordability, and quality. The Commission found not only that there was inadequate transparency and accountability for
measuring institutional performance but also that such transparency and accountability are increasingly necessary for maintaining public trust in higher education. The primary deficiency noted by the Commission is that “Our complex, decentralized post secondary education system has no comprehensive strategy, particularly for undergraduate programs, to provide either adequate internal accountability systems or effective public information.” The question is, of course, who should devise and implement such a comprehensive strategy, a question made all the more poignant by The Economist’s view that the pre-eminent stature of American higher education was its absence of a “system” of higher education organized and controlled by governmental authority.

The Commission’s findings on transparency and accountability suggest that it believes a comprehensive strategy will develop as dictated by the workplace and particularly by students and their families. The findings are five in number:

1. The traditional approach to measuring institutional quality primarily through financial inputs and resources is inadequate whether with a single institution or across all of higher education.

2. Parents and students have no solid evidence across institutions of how much students learn.
3. The need for benchmark data on student access, retention, learning outcomes, educational costs and productivity extends to colleges and universities who can use the data “to stimulate innovation and continuous improvement.”

4. Government data on higher education need to include non-traditional students and focus more on outcomes such as time to degree.

5. The accreditation system needs to be transformed so that the focus is more on learning assessment than process review.

Based on these findings, the Commission made six recommendations. Of these, the third recommendation focuses on accountability and is the most concrete.

“3. To meet the challenges of the 21st century, higher education must change from a system primarily based on reputation to one based on performance. We urge the creation of a robust culture of accountability and transparency throughout higher education. Every one of our goals, from improving access and affordability to enhancing quality and innovation, will be more easily achieved if higher education institutions embrace and implement serious accountability measures. We recommend the creation of a consumer-friendly information database on higher education with useful, reliable information on institutions, coupled with a search engine to enable students, parents, policymakers and others to weigh and
rank comparative institutional performance. The Commission recommends that the Department of Education create the database employing a strategy for the collection and use of data that should be designed to recognize the complexity of higher education, have the capacity to accommodate diverse consumer preferences through standard and customizable searches, and make it easy to obtain comparative information including cost, price, admissions data, college completion rates and, eventually, learning outcomes.\textsuperscript{xix}

One might well ask why such a database has not already been assembled by the Department of Education. Indeed, the most readily quoted guide is that produced by \textit{U.S. News and World Report}\textsuperscript{xii} even though it is regularly criticized for not providing valid and reliable information. Comparisons with \textit{McLeans} Magazine’s report on Canadian universities come readily to mind. The diversity and complexity of post secondary education makes creation of an acceptable and useful database a very daunting task indeed.

In addition to the proposed consumer-oriented database, and more and better information on the quality and cost of higher education, the Commission also calls for post secondary institutions to account for student learning by measuring and reporting meaningful student learning outcomes.\textsuperscript{xiii} In particular, accreditation agencies are exhorted to “make performance outcomes, including completion rates and student learning, the core of this assessment as a priority over inputs or processes.”\textsuperscript{xiv}
A. **Reaction to the Spellings Commission Report**

Predictably, reaction has been mixed. Virtually all commentators agree with the goal of measuring and reporting meaningful student learning outcomes but most express concern that the Commission report is unclear about what assessment should look like. As the president of Earlham College noted:

“This other than a few remarks about improving literacy, the report has little to say about what the goals of a college education should be. Surely we expect more than this. And in harping on the need to compare one institution with others, the Commission comes dangerously close to implying that a one-size-fits-all measure should be used. The diversity of our institutions’ measures and of our students calls for a diversity of measures – not some Washington-improved single test.”\(^{xv}\)

Similarly, the president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching argues that “even with apparently congruent missions, institutions must be free to select the modes of assessment that best fit their purposes and contexts, as long as they openly and honestly report and explain the results.”\(^{xvi}\) In a comment echoed by a number of college presidents with whom I have spoken, he warns that corruption of any assessment system is bound to occur if the outcomes can result in positive or negative consequences. When the financial stakes, in particular, are high, institutions will be unwilling to agree that they need to change; they will be much more likely to attempt to put a positive complexion on the results. So he cautions, “the most important uses of
assessment are not external; they are internal measurements of how well students are doing and how much better they could be doing.’’

I believe this is where we need to focus. There is no doubt that in a knowledge-based environment, post-secondary education is increasingly a pre-requisite to economic participation. In that respect, the case for restoring public support for public higher education has never been better. But until we can convincingly demonstrate how and what students are learning, we will continue to face skepticism and the danger that trust in, and therefore support for, public higher education will be not restored but eroded.

Endnotes


3. Supra, n. 1 at p. ix.

4. Ibid, p. x.

5. Ibid, p. xii.


8. Supra, n. 1 at p. 14


10. Supra, n. 1 at p. 15

11. Ibid., at p. 21

12. Ibid., at p. 22

14. Three prominent examples of student learning assessments are:
   
   (a) The Collegiate Learning Assessment
   
   Since 2002, 134 colleges have used the tool to evaluate students’ critical thinking, analytical reasoning and written communication skills.
   
   See www.cae.org/cla

   (b) The National Survey of Student Engagement
   
   Several million students have been surveyed using the tool (including students at Ontario’s universities) and the results show a reasonably comprehensive picture of the undergraduate student experience.
   
   See http://nsse.iub.edu

   (c) The National Forum on College-Level Learning
   
   This has been piloted in several states since 2002 and collects data on student learning using a number of assessment instruments already in place.
   
   See http://www.collegelevellearning.org

15. Supra, n. 1 at p. 25.


18. Ibid.