

THE POLITICS OF HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM

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Introduction

Kirst (2010) describes the evolution of policies in K-12 education that have “reached beyond the classroom door to alter what students are taught.” Not only has there been no such reform in higher education, but such changes seem even now to be unthinkable. Yet, to make major changes in higher education around the goals of progress, learning and completion, states and the nation as a whole may need to contemplate policies that would impact higher education in previously unheard-of ways. The purpose of this paper is to describe the political landscape for higher education and to discuss the implications of some major theories of policymaking for making major changes in higher education policy.

Why hasn't higher education policy ever moved to changes in who teaches, what is taught, and how institutions are run? What are the most critical differences between higher education and K-12 education in terms of politics and policymaking?

The first major difference is that higher education does not have a strong tradition of political control at any level: institutions of higher education, even public institutions, have long cultivated at least the appearance of being removed from political struggles. This attitude has been a double-edged sword for higher education—while higher education has benefited in some ways as being seen as a non-partisan issue, it has also foregone the advantages of being allied with a specific political

agenda that has connections with other policy areas (Thelin, 2004; Cook, 1998).

Second, K-12 education is funded primarily by a combination of state and local funds, with federal assistance. The funding of higher education is divided among three groups: students and families, state government, and the federal government. While funding for K-12 education has been used as the lever for implementing a host of accountability measures at the state and federal level, institutions of higher education have become increasingly insulated from accountability from each of its three primary stakeholders. As state funding has become a smaller share of overall funding for higher education, institutional leaders have argued that states should have a smaller say in the use of their funds. As federal funding has increased, particularly in terms of student financial aid, there has been no increase in oversight of institutions beyond ensuring that they meet some basic regulatory requirements. Last, higher education does not work as a standard market, so students and families do not have the power that consumers have in other more open markets (Bound and Turner, 2007). Most students go to an institution that is within 20 miles of their home, an institution that for many of them was their first and only choice.

Kirst (2010) describes a “widespread loss in confidence in local K-12 educators and their communities” (p. 13). Unlike K-12 education, higher education is still viewed quite favorably as a societal institution. People don’t generally want to *reform* higher education, they just want to make sure that they have *access* to higher education (Immerwahr, 2004). Public opinion surveys from the early 1990s to the present have shown a remarkable stability in this finding. There is no groundswell of public anger regarding the condition of higher education as there has been in the past regarding our schools (Immerwahr, 1999a). However, levels of concern about access to higher education have been and continue to be high. The public in general, and parents in particular, are worried about how to pay for the increasing costs of what they perceive to be a very valuable investment.

In addition to not being particularly concerned about the inner workings of higher

education, the public doesn't know much about higher education. There are also remarkably low levels of information about how higher education works. While a solid majority of the public understands the basics of public school finance, many people are surprised to learn that institutions of higher education do not operate entirely on the revenues generated from tuition. This lack of knowledge extends into other areas. The distinction between public and private colleges isn't always clear to many people, nor are many of the distinctions made between colleges on the basis of mission. This lack of knowledge indicates that highly specific policy proposals regarding higher education are likely to be met with some confusion (Immerwahr, 1999a).

The last major point to make about why higher education has not seen the kind of major policy changes that K-12 has seen is that at both the federal and state level, higher education does not have a politically active constituency that lobbies on its behalf. Kirst describes the rise of the teachers' unions and their ability to shape policy to affect K-12 education in ways that benefit classroom teachers. There is no counterpart to this groups in higher education. This is not to say there are not representatives of colleges and universities that lobby for these institutions at the state and federal level. Organizations such as the American Council on Education have been visible players in federal policy for decades. Higher education associations have generally been more effective in preventing legislation than in generating favorable legislation. Rather, there is no large group of individual voters who understand that their interests align tightly with that of institutions of higher education, a group that Lowi and others would refer to as a part of a coalition in pluralistic politics (Lowi, 1964).

Political and Economic Trends

I begin by surveying the broad political and economic trends that are currently affecting higher education at the state and federal level. I first provide an overview of the development of higher education policy through the 20th century. Next, I discuss several of the key finance trends.

Broad Trends

Historically, government oversight over higher education was limited to establishing public colleges and universities and appointing members of public boards to represent the interests of the public .

From the mid 19th century to the mid 20th century, government involvement in higher education was quite limited. States had an interest in ensuring that a sufficient supply of professionals would be available, while the federal government had a broad interest in encouraging research and technological development. During this long period of development, the tradition of autonomy of institutions of higher education, both public and private, was strengthened (Thelin, 2004).

The rapid increase in technological and knowledge-based industries since the middle part of the twentieth century changed American higher education's relationship with American society. First, the increased payoff to higher education meant that many more people attended college, shifting the system from a narrow one to a mass system of higher education, now on its way to becoming a universal system of higher education. Second, the increased demand for technological advancement gave the federal government a strong incentive to utilize colleges and universities as a center for research and development (Goldin and Katz, 2008, 1999).

Higher education as an industry responded to both of these challenges well, providing much more access than previously and responding to government incentives by establishing the world's pre-eminent research universities. Public higher education

in particular developed very rapidly during the time period from 1945-1980, with institutions being built and expanded by state government. Most state policymakers assumed during this time period that support for higher education's development would be sufficient to ensure that it would serve its societal role (Kerr, 2001, 1991). However, the challenges of this time period meant that many states put in place the first systems of governance of higher education, meant to coordinate the efforts of the states' systems of higher education and ensure that institutions were meeting some public needs (Glenny, 1959).

We are now in the middle of a third transition in public policy for higher education. States are no longer in a financial or an organizational sense able to maintain their roles as owner-operators of public higher education. Nor are states able to maintain historical financial or relationships with private institutions of higher education. The federal government finds itself in the same situation, unable in particular to keep up with the rapidly increasing costs of higher education. Instead, policymakers find themselves in the paradoxical position of *needing* higher education more—due to the increased importance of a college degree—and being able less able to directly *control* the systems of higher education in their state.

Key Finance Trends

The last twenty years have seen some unprecedented changes in higher education financing. Since 1980, tuition at public colleges and universities has increased by 140% in real terms (Baum and Ma, 2010). During the same time period, the share of institutional funding coming from state funds has decreased from 31% to 24%. The share of institutional funding coming from tuition and required fees has increased from 23% to 36%. Yet, states are spending about as much per student on an inflation adjusted basis as they were in the 1980s (Desrochers et al., 2010).

The factor that explains how all three of these trends can simultaneously occur is rising college costs. The overall cost of college is defined by the National Commis-

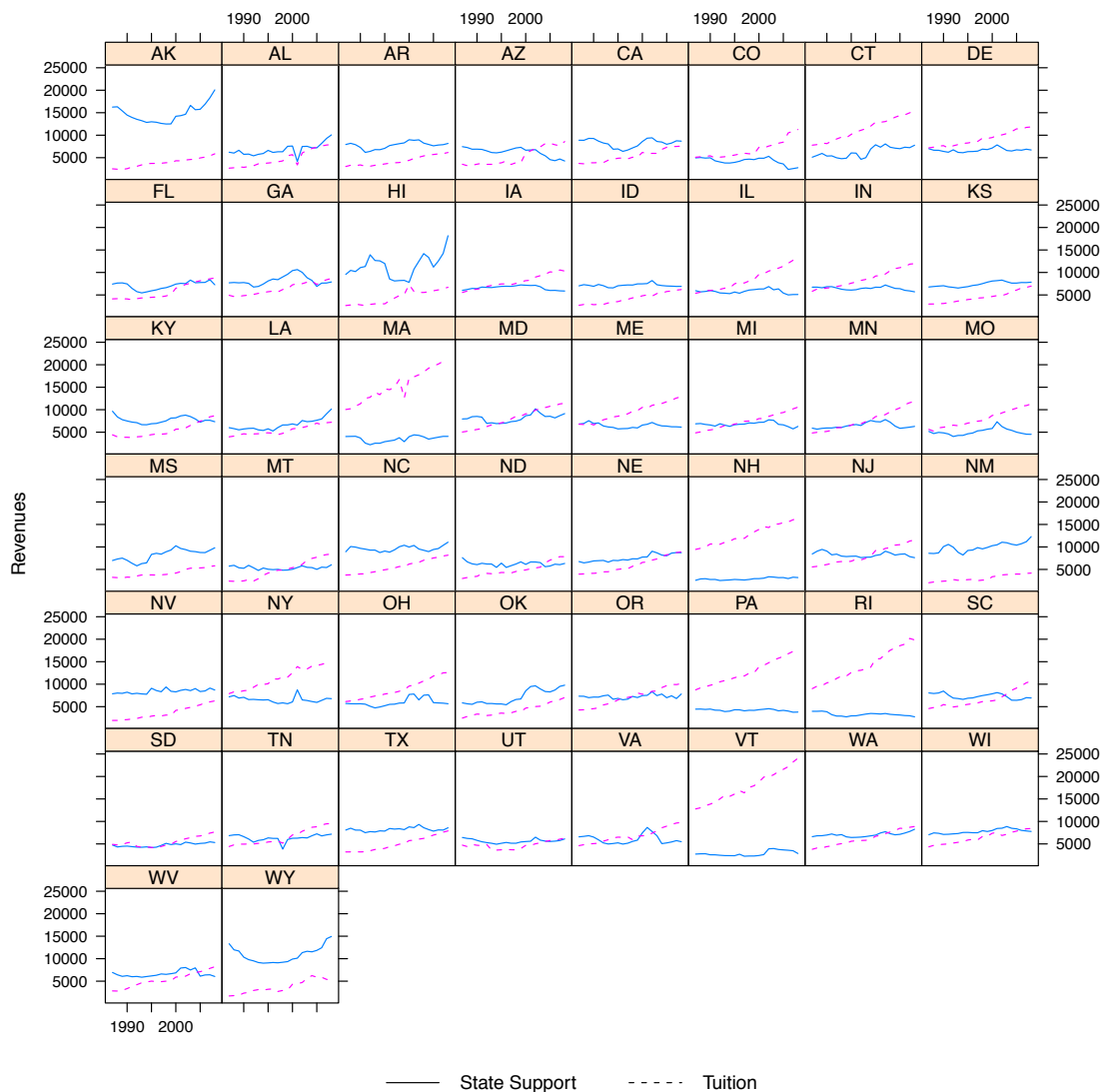
sion on College Costs as “the expenditures associated with delivering instruction, including physical plants and salaries” (Harvey et al., 1998) These costs have been increasing for all colleges. The increase in college costs has been faster than increases in almost any other broad index of prices, including health care prices (Baum and Ma, 2010). Until the most recent recession, there haven’t been dramatic cuts in funding for higher education in most states—states have continued spending about what they were historically, while colleges and universities have been collecting increasing revenue from every other available source, including tuition (Desrochers et al., 2010).

In 2008 the amount of revenue collected from tuition exceeded the amount collected from state sources at public institutions in 35 of the 50 states. Figure 1 shows the amount collected from tuition and state sources at public institutions in all 50 states for the time period 1987-2008. As can be seen in the figure, even in states with a history of generous funding of higher education like California or Washington, tuition revenues are now equal to or exceed state support for higher education. This trend likely accelerated during the last two years, as states have cut higher education budgets in response to the economic downturn.

The trend toward increasing college costs, along with an inability or unwillingness on the part of state policymakers to dramatically increase funds, will almost certainly continue to spark political protests and crises like those that occurred at the University of California in recent years (Friend, 2010).

Beyond these changes, there has been an increasing trend toward volatility in higher education funding. Harold Hovey, a former state budget officer and longtime analyst of state fiscal policy, describes higher education as the “balance wheel” of state finance. Hovey notes first that all states tend to have pro-cyclical finance policies, since every state save one is constitutionally required to balance its budget. That means that business cycles affect state budgets more strongly than the federal government, which tends to counter business cycles with deficit spending.

Figure 1: Revenues from State Sources and From Tuition, 1987-2008



Note: All figures are in inflation adjusted 2008 dollars. Figure based on author's tabulations of data from Delta Cost Project (Desrochers et al., 2010).

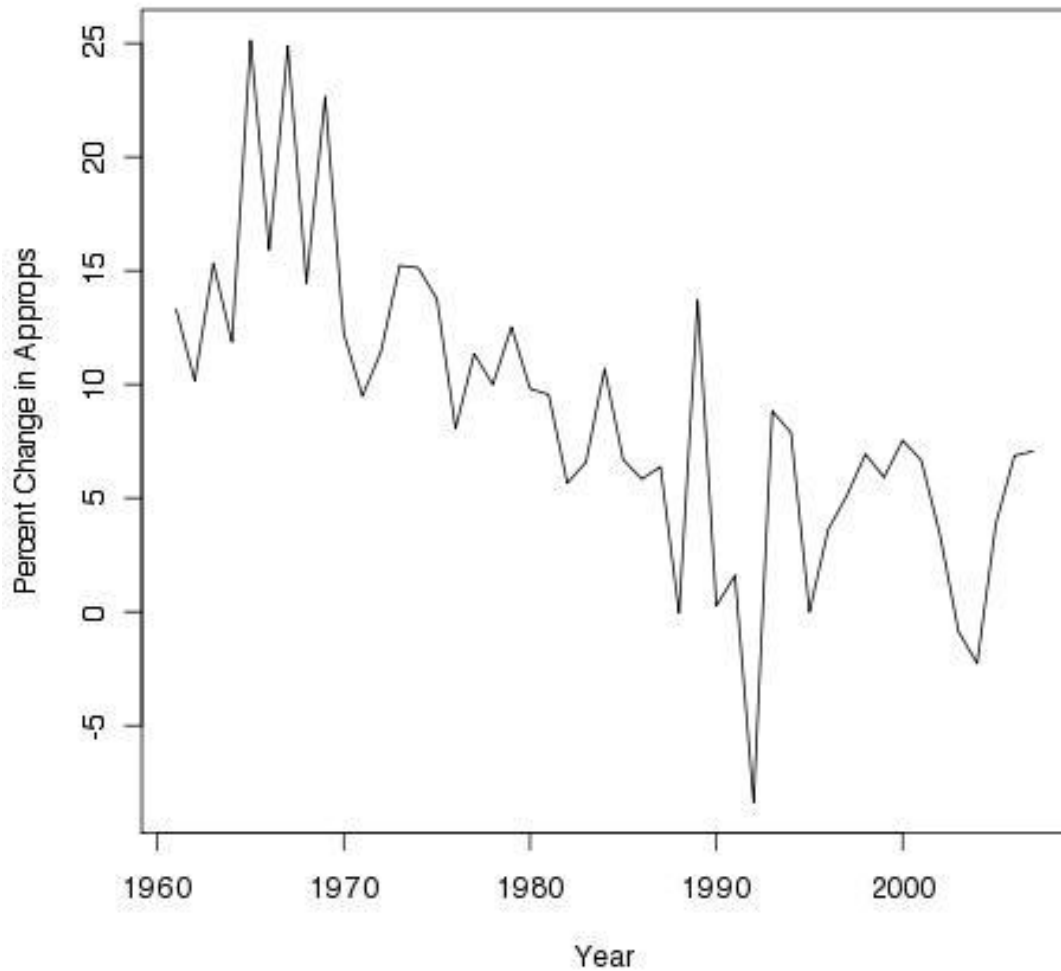
This budget cycle affects higher education much more strongly than other areas of state spending, such as K-12 or corrections. This happens because higher education has its own alternative revenue stream in the form of tuition. Hovey notes that when state budgets are bad, state policymakers cut higher education more than other budget categories. They do this because higher education can make up for these cuts with tuition increases. When state budgets are good, state policymakers give higher education bigger increases than other budget categories, because higher education is politically popular and not aligned with a specific party or ideological perspective (Hovey, 1999). An analysis based on funding and state spending in all fifty states over the time period confirms Hovey’s hypothesis (Delaney and Doyle, 2007). A separate analysis covering a much longer time period finds that this “balance wheel” model of funding only applies to patterns in funding from the 1990s forward ().

Figure 2 shows the percent change since the previous year in state appropriations to higher education for the time period 1960-2008. As the figure shows, higher education funding has become increasingly volatile. All of the large year-to-year cuts in higher education have occurred in the last twenty years.

The result of this ‘boom and bust’ cycle has been chaos for institutions of higher education. Institutions are either seeking to recover from recessions, or are attempting to deal with unexpected cuts to their budgets. The lack of ability to plan meaningfully for even the short-term future has been an under-reported yet critical side-effect of the ongoing problems with higher education funding.

In the next few years it is extremely unlikely that higher education will receive large funding increases in any state. Even in a sustained economic recovery, there are large demands on states from other sources, and many of the largest states face deep structural deficits that will require either large tax hikes or painful cuts in many others (Boyd, 2009). Given this context, leaders in higher education should plan on current levels of state support being a best case scenario. Policy changes that require large amounts of new state money are not likely to succeed.

Figure 2: Percent Change Since Previous Year in State Appropriations for Higher Education, 1960-2008



Dominant Patterns of Policymaking in Higher Education

Analysts of the politics of higher education have not achieved consensus on the dominant pattern of policymaking in this area. There are several schools of thought regarding how the politics of higher education operate at the state and federal level. The first school of thought, characterized as the “politics of deference” holds that

policymakers generally have a hands-off approach to policymaking for higher education, trusting institutions to make the best decisions. The second school of thought posits that higher education policymaking, particularly at the federal level, operates as a “subgovernment,” with a tightly interconnected group of legislative staff, agency officials, and lobbyists making most of the policy decisions. Still another perspective suggests that partisan politics has become an increasingly important factor in driving policymaking for higher education. Last, analysts operating from a rational choice perspective have suggested that understanding the distribution of income and possible alignments between the poor, the middle class, and the rich are the keys to understanding the politics of higher education policy.

Politics of Deference

Many have characterized the political attitude toward higher education as being one of deference: higher education is funded to the best ability of policymakers, and more or less left alone. Compared with other areas of major state expenditure like K-12, transportation, corrections, institutions of higher education and their leaders are not subject to scrutiny or micro-management. As Zumeta (2001), discussing the history of higher education policy, states:

Elected officials and those who worked for them were frequently perplexed and even intimidated by the “learned men” of academe and their doings and by their claims of a special need for autonomy and academic freedom. Thus, the officers of the state were often deferential.

While few current analysts believe that this mode of exchange is still the dominant one between policymakers and higher education, it’s worth noting that many higher education organizations and associations still use the level of complexity of higher education as a rationale for reducing government oversight and involvement in the affairs of institutions. Lobbyists for institutions of higher education tend to

frame their arguments not in terms of the interests of institutions, but rather in the broad public interests, arguing that what is good for higher education will be good for the country. They also connect this rhetoric with the historical relationship of deference, arguing that higher education as an institution knows best how to handle its own affairs (Cook, 1998). For major changes in higher education to occur, policymakers need to put aside any such deference and ask some hard questions about how institutions operate and what could change to better accomplish societal goals.

Higher Education as a "Subgovernment"

Most of the literature on federal policy for higher education has characterized higher education as a "subgovernment", following the classic literature on policy "iron triangles" first described by Cater (1964) and Freeman (1965). For instance, in one of the early major studies of higher education policymaking at the federal level, Gladieux and Wolanin (1978) characterize the higher education subgovernment as being made up of three mutually reinforcing parts: the legislative subcommittees responsible for higher education; the bureaucracy responsible for implementing legislation, and the lobbying groups for higher education. The shape of policymaking taking place in this subgovernment is characterized by mutual reinforcement and lack of conflict.

Nearly twenty years later, Parsons (1997) finds continuing support for the idea of higher education as a subgovernment. In his review of policymaking for higher education at the federal level in the 1990's Parsons concludes that in general, the process for making policy has been characterized by high levels of consensus coupled with low levels of visibility.

Similarly, Hannah (1996) finds in her study of the reauthorization of the higher education act in 1992 that "by any standard, however, the higher education network in Washington is closely knit, fully qualifying ... as an 'incest group' " (Hannah, 1996, p. 513). Hannah suggests that the 1992 reauthorization process was timid

and incremental because of the configuration of the federal policymaking process. Again, the fragmentation of decision-making into a specialized subgovernment led to a policy process that was incremental and consensus oriented.

While there isn't broad consensus that higher education policymaking does occur in a subgovernment, it is certainly true that higher education is usually an issue of low public salience, with many policy decisions being highly technical and not visible or easily understood by the public. Such a structure could easily be an obstacle to implementing major reforms.

Partisanship and Higher Education Policy

Higher education does not have a clear association with one political party or another. Higher education is not a clearly partisan issue like gun control or abortion. However, this surface appearance has masked two trends: first partisanship has characterized federal policymaking for higher education for some time. Second, at the state level, partisanship does not appear to be nearly as important as other issues.

At the federal level, higher education has become an increasingly partisan issue. Both qualitative and quantitative studies have identified an important change, mostly occurring around the time of the Republican takeover of congress in 1994. Both sides support Pell Grants, which masks sharp disagreements over student loan policies; policies toward non-profits; and efforts to change the efficiency and cost structures of higher education.

While some authors have suggested that the policy agenda for higher education has been more or less in line with what has been called the "liberal agenda" (Finn, 1980), most of the authors writing on higher education policymaking at the federal level find that the higher education associations were not generally associated with a particular political party.

In Gladieux and Wolanin (1978), for example, the authors find that most of the policymakers on the Senate subcommittee were in general agreement about

important goals for higher education: Discussing the agreement between Prouty and Pell, they note “there was a tacit convergence of philosophy between the conservative Vermont senator and the liberal Democrat from Rhode Island.” A general sense of bipartisan agreement pervades the description of the process for writing this landmark legislation within the Senate.

Later research also found a general sense of bipartisanship among legislators. Parsons (1997) cites a general sense of unity among legislators, legislative staff, and higher education lobbyists in Washington:

The common language, shared values, and shared history help create unity and reduce conflict within the policy arena. The exchanges, in articles, papers, and speeches between the policy actors helps identify and and work out disputes as well as helping develop the language of the arena. The circulation of personnel is a major factor in promoting cooperation and encouraging unity by giving participants shared multiple perspectives of the policy arena. (Parsons, 1997, p. 92)

This changed after the Republican party took control of both houses of Congress in 1994. Parsons writes: “the new Republican leadership in Congress saw a limited role for Federal government and did not subscribe to the notion that education should be an instrument for federally directed social reform” (Parsons, 1997, p.220). In contrast, many leaders of higher education associations were lobbying for proposals associated with this type of social reform.

Discussing the newly fraught relationship between Congress and the higher education associations in the mid 1990’s, Cook (1998) writes: “one issue after another, the higher education leaders found themselves opposed to Republican congressional proposals and allied with the Clinton administration” (Cook, 1998, p.190). Even though leaders of higher education associations insist on their neutrality and bipartisan approach, Republicans in Congress stated that the higher education community had not collaborated during the 104th Congress (Cook, 1998).

Given an overall history of bipartisanship and cooperation it seems unsurprising that one of the most divisive issues for higher education in recent years—the direct student loan program— itself began as a nonpartisan issue. As one of his primary initiatives upon taking office, President Clinton introduced the direct student loan program, which was designed to remove student loan authority from government-subsidized private lenders and instead run the entire student loan system using government operations.

This proposal met with stiff resistance, with both Democrats and Republicans fighting the original proposal (Parsons, 1997). A compromise on direct lending provided for limited implementation of the program.

After the Republican takeover in 1994, direct lending became a much more partisan issue. Republicans shifted their view of the program to take on a more ideological component, one in which the government was taking over a program that they thought could be more efficiently managed by private industry. Republican efforts to eliminate direct lending failed, although efforts to limit its size and scope were successful (Parsons, 1997). After 1994, voting on direct lending appeared to have taken place on a partisan basis, suggesting that this issue should stand out as particularly partisan(Parsons, 1997).

Doyle (2010b) investigates the role of partisan politics in federal policymaking for higher education by analyzing every roll call vote taken in the Senate on higher education issues from 1965 to 2004. Using ideal point estimation, Doyle finds that higher education policymaking is a partisan issue, with generally little agreement between the liberal and conservative wings of the two parties. Doyle also finds that there has been an increase in divisive votes, indicating a more partisan environment in recent years.

It's possible that the increasingly partisan nature of policymaking for higher education at the federal level is entirely the result of an increasingly partisan environment overall. The last few years have seen an astonishing increase in both strict

party-line votes and the willingness of the minority party in the Senate to use the filibuster to block legislation. Fiorina 2005 documents and describes the increasingly partisan environment at the federal level, which he says does not represent the broad consensus that can be found among the general public on most issues. Levendusky 2009 cites further evidence of an increasingly partisan group of elected officials at the federal level.

Certainly the recent debate regarding the shift to direct student loans was distinctly more partisan than debates regarding much of higher education policy in the past. This shift in policy involved ending federal guarantees and subsidies for banks to provide student loans and shifted the responsibility for providing and servicing student loans entirely onto the government. The savings from this shift were devoted primarily to increased Pell Grant funding and some funds for increasing college completion, particularly at community colleges. This change in policy, like many other changes during the most recent Congress, occurred without any Republican votes. Senator Lamar Alexander, R(TN) described the change in policy as “another Washington takeover”, while Democrats described it as ending a program that primarily benefited banks at the expense of students (Herszenhorn and Lewin, 2010).

The evidence on the levels of partisanship at the state level are more mixed. Republican-led governments do appear to be more likely to adopt performance funding and similar programs, but there haven’t been strong partisan effects found for policy adoption of things like merit aid or even governance reform.

McLendon et al. (2006) investigates the conditions under which states are likely to adopt performance funding or performance budgeting programs. They summarize their findings as follows:

States in which Republicans held a greater number of seats in the legislature and where campus governance was less centralized were more likely to adopt new performance-funding policies, whereas states in which Republicans held a fewer number of legislative seats and where higher-

education governance was more centralized were more likely to adopted performance-budgeting policies.

DoyleDoyle (2010a) finds that state governments that are controlled by more liberal representatives are more likely to provide higher levels of appropriations for higher education, a finding that is supported by McLendon et al in their 2009 article.

However, in other policy areas, the effect of legislative partisanship isn't so clear. Doyle (2006) finds no effect of partisan representation on the adoption of merit aid programs at the state level. Similarly, Doyle et al. (2010) do not find any effect of legislative partisanship on variation in the adoption of prepaid tuition or savings plans across the fifty states.

At this point, there isn't enough evidence to say whether partisan politics plays a large role in state policymaking for higher education. The two factors that are likely to affect this are the differing nature of parties across the states. For instance, Republicans in Maine are quite likely to have distinct policy views from Republicans in Texas. Second, the historical development of higher education in each state may have resulted in partisan identification with differing policy options. The one warning sign is that many analysts are suggesting an increasingly strong alignment between national politics and local politics, with more uniform policy views within parties and hardening differences between the parties (Levendusky, 2009).

Rational Choice Theory and Higher Education Policy

Another possible explanation for higher education policymaking comes from the rational choice literature. Higher education is unique in that it is a publicly subsidized service that is offered for a price. This is contrast with other services like public safety, transportation, or K-12 education. Such a structure means that everyone pays for higher education through their taxes, but not everyone can afford to get into higher education (Hansen and Weisbrod, 1969). Theorists have suggested that such a structure is driven by the desire of the middle and upper classes to effectively

reserve this public good for themselves, and to price the poor out. If true, this would mean that higher education funding is driven by inequality: more inequality would lead to lower levels of funding for higher education (Fernandez and Rogerson, 2003, 1996, 1995; Bevia and Iturbe-Ormaetxe, 2002).

Rational choice theorists start with a basic set of assumptions. They assume that individuals have preferences, that these preferences can be ordered, that preferences are transitive, and that people will choose the option closest to their preference every time (Downs, 1957). In applying rational choice theories to higher education, analysts further assume that preferences will be based on a cost-benefit ratio, comparing the outlay in taxes that each person pays to the benefit in terms of government subsidies that each person receives (Persson and Tabellini, 2000; Meltzer and Richard, 1981). In the classic model of the size of government developed by Meltzer and Richard (1981), the analysts describe the conditions under which a more or less redistributive government will be created. Their model suggests that generally richer people will favor less taxes, while poorer individuals will prefer much higher taxes. Tax policy, and therefore the size of the government, will be based on the income of the median voter. Their study implies that as suffrage increases, and the median voter's income moves farther away from the mean voter's income, taxes and the size of government will increase. This hypothesis is supported by the available evidence (Lott and Kenny, 1999).

Fernandez and Rogerson (1995) extend this line of inquiry to education funding. They suggest that education funding, and particularly higher education funding is unique in that it includes both government support in the form of subsidies and student or family payments in the form of tuition. This implies that the level of subsidies also rations the amount of the public good provided—people who cannot pay do not benefit. Even though the entire population is taxed to provide higher education, only those who are rich enough to afford it will go. Their model suggests that this dynamic will create coalitions between income groups. If upper and middle

income groups band together, levels of subsidies will be sufficient so that the better-off can afford to go, but not so low as to allow poorer people to attend. If lower and middle income groups band together, subsidies will be quite high, and prices will be low or close to 0. Doyle (2007) tests the Fernandez and Rogerson model in the context of state support for higher education and finds some evidence to support their hypothesis.

Changing Public Opinion Trends

The political science literature strongly supports the idea that public policy follows public opinion in democracies (Wlezien, 2004). The public's values in a given policy area will determine the scope of action that policymakers are willing to undertake. The difference in public opinion between K-12 education and higher education is truly remarkable. This is one of the key contrasting points with K-12 education. Generally the public supports higher education. They think that a college degree means that someone has marketable skills. They think that colleges do a good job of educating students. They're not particularly concerned about the management of colleges. In short, there isn't a large amount of public pressure for internal reform (Immerwahr and Johnson, 2007; Immerwahr, 2004, 2000, 1999b).

Immerwahr (1999a) highlights the key differences in public opinion regarding K-12 education and higher education. First, the public knows more about K-12 education, and relatively little about higher education. Second, the public tend to view the quality of K-12 education as problematic, and higher education as being of very high quality. Third, the public generally understands that K-12 is paid for through tax dollars, while there does not appear to be broad public awareness that public colleges and universities also receive state support. Instead, most people think that higher education runs is funded by tuition (Immerwahr, 1999a).

One of the most important findings for the reform of higher education, particu-

larly in the area of college success, has to do with the public's perceptions regarding responsibilities for educational success. Immerwahr (1999a) reports that 75% of Americans say that almost all K-12 students can learn and succeed in school given enough help and attention. But for higher education, the story is quite different:

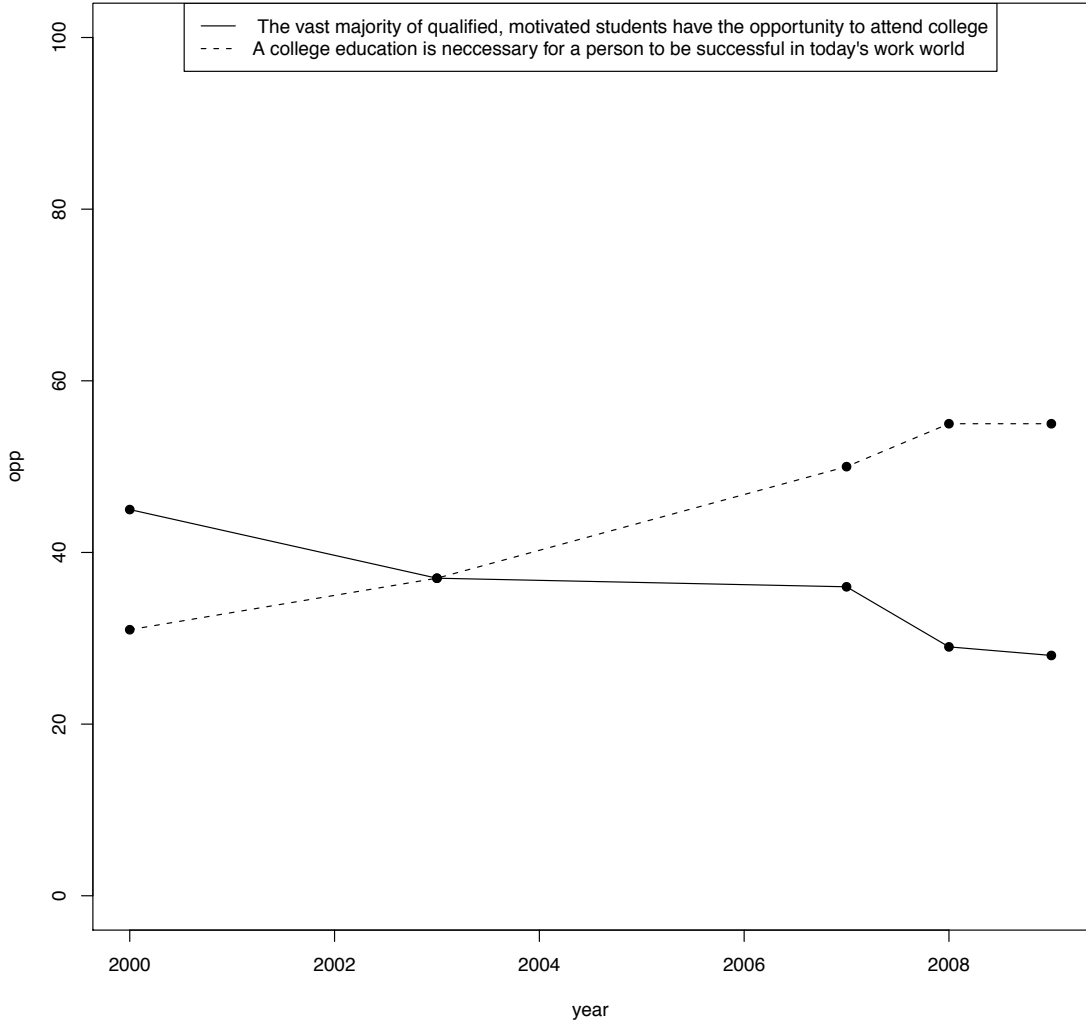
With virtual unanimity (91% to 7%) people think that the benefit of a college education depends on how much effort the student puts into it as opposed to the quality of the college the student is attending . . . when it comes to college, the public blames the problems on the consumer, rather than on the producer.

Figure 3 shows the two key colliding trends in public opinion regarding higher education. A declining proportion of the population believes that any qualified and motivated student can go to college, while an increasing proportion of the population believes that a college education is necessary to succeed. Of all of the broad trends surveyed in this paper, I believe that this is the one most likely to lead to a call for reform in higher education. As more and more people decide that college is necessary to get ahead and fewer think that college is within reach for those who should go, the likelihood of major action increases.

For many members of the public, concern about access is synonymous with concern about costs. The public is very worried about college costs. They think that costs are high enough that lots of qualified students can't go. Parents are very worried about the ability of their kids to go. And they don't feel that colleges are doing enough to keep costs down (Immerwahr and Johnson, 2007).

There are two key barriers to reform in higher education from the perspective of public opinion. First, most people think that students bear the burden for succeeding in higher education. When asked who is responsible if a student is not succeeding in K-12, a strong majority say that it is the school's and the teacher's responsibility. When asked who is responsible if a student is not succeeding in higher education,

Figure 3: Percent of Population Saying They Agree With Each Statement



Reproduced from Immerwhar, 2010.

an even larger majority say that it is the responsibility of the student (Immerwahr, 2004). Second, the public holds a relatively high opinion of the quality of colleges and universities.

Two things need to happen to change people's opinion of higher education: first they need to be informed about the sector's many failures. Essentially, they need to stop holding higher education in such high regard. This would help to provide support for policies that hold institutions accountable for their own failures in ensuring student success.

Second, the public needs to understand that high costs are a result of deliberate actions taken by institutions, not an inevitable feature of running a college. This would shift the concerns about higher education away from merely trying to figure out how to pay for it to wanting to ensure that colleges are being efficient.

Policy Windows for Higher Education

In this section, I discuss the factors that are most likely to create a “policy window” for changes in higher education policy. Policy windows were first described by John Kingdon. Kingdon describes the policymaking process as being similar in many ways to the garbage-can decision-making model proposed by March and Olsen. In March and Olsen, problems, people and solutions combine at decision-making points in ways that are often unpredictable and poorly understood. In Kingdon’s theory of political decision-making, problems, policies and politics combine to form what he calls a policy window—an opportunity to make a major change in higher education policy.

The key to understanding why some problems make it the public agenda lies first in differentiating problems from underlying conditions. As Kingdon says “conditions become problems when we believe we can do something about them” (Kingdon, 1984, p.109). Problems can rise to the top of the public agenda in a number of ways, including changes in systematic indicators, focusing events, crises and even the personal experiences of policymakers.

Kingdon suggests that policies exist in what he describes as the “policy primordial soup” an arena consisting of think tanks, academics, and policy entrepreneurs, all of whom share ideas and form a variety of combinations of policy solutions. These solutions may or may not be connected to specific problems. For instance, support for student financial aid could be connected to the problem of increasing inequality of opportunity, but could also be connected to a problem of decreasing international

competitiveness of our workforce.

Last, Kingdon posits that the politics of policymaking are governed by several different factors. First among these are changes in the national mood—when constituents change their minds about a problem, policymakers are likely to follow. Second, turnover in control of the government can create political opportunities for changes in policies. Last, the process of bargaining for policy change can change direction rapidly as more participants jump into the process (Kingdon, 1984).

What could a policy window for higher education look like? We can look to the state-level example of the advent of merit-aid programs, or to the federal-level example of the recent switch to the direct-loan program. In each case, a different set of policies, politics and problems led to a fairly major change in policy.

In the case of direct lending, the problem had previously been defined as one of government control versus the free market. The direct lending program was characterized as a government takeover, while the subsidized loan program, run by banks, was characterized as a free-market alternative. Proponents of the direct-lending policy changed the problem definition to be one of governmental efficiency, essentially describing both programs as government run, with the direct lending program having the merit of being much cheaper to operate. In terms of policies, a key innovation in the effort to implement direct lending and eliminate subsidized lending was the effort to link the savings from elimination of subsidized lending with popular federal programs such as the Pell Grant. Last, the politics of the situation revolved around the turnover in administrations, and the Obama administration's ambitious domestic agenda in its first two years in office. All three of these factors—problems, policies, and politics—came together to form a policy window which allowed for the passage of the direct lending program.

In the case of merit-aid programs, conditions differed in many states. As Ness 2008 points out, in West Virginia and Tennessee the problem definition and policies were not connected in the way many might expect. Instead, in each state, policy

entrepreneurs sought to implement state-based gambling (a lottery in Tennessee, video poker and similar games in West Virginia). These policymakers connected this policy with a problem of college attendance, saying that the proceeds from gambling should be devoted to a scholarship for students who achieve a certain level of academic success. Ness quotes a policymaker saying “Whos going to be against providing college education to A/B students of middle-class families? I mean, no ones against that” (Ness, 2008). In each state, the politics differed slightly, but in many cases they revolved either around changes in party control or shifting coalitions within parties.

What’s notable about both of these cases is how little these major changes had to do with any of the problems that higher education as an organized interest would have defined for itself. The same thing could be said about the implementation of the HOPE tuition tax credit, which was likely more about changes in tax policy rather than higher education opportunity. All of these major policies for higher education came about with little input from higher education institutions.

I next turn to a list of possible problems, policies and solutions that may come together in the near-term to create policy windows for major changes in higher education policy. This not meant to be a predictive exercise so much as to illustrate some of the conditions that may combine to create an opportunity for major policy change.

Problems

There are multiple possible events or changes that might move the problem of access to and success in higher education to the top of the policymaking agenda. These could include:

- A state funding crisis leads to the denial of admission to large numbers of students, particularly students from middle and upper-income families that have traditionally gone to college. In Illinois, the deepening budget crisis

makes this outcome more likely every year. When this occurs, there is likely to be an of public anger.

- A lack of funding from the state level may not lead to denial of admission but rather to widespread cancellation of classes at public universities and colleges, meaning that many students are unable to graduate. The average time to graduation at bachelor's degree granting institutions increases from six years to seven or eight. This again could anger a broad swathe of middle and upper income voters.
- The generational gap in educational attainment widens. As the baby boomers retire, the lack of educational capital among the younger generation becomes alarmingly clear, and in many states rises to the level where it's considered a crisis. Pressure comes from the business community to "do something" about the lack of qualified candidates for jobs.
- The public could become aware of a drop in the quality of higher education. K-12 reform efforts have been driven primarily by public concern about the quality of education. Quality of higher education is a surprising "non-problem" Results of the 2003x National Assessment of Adult Literacy suggest that the quality of higher education is on the decline, but nobody seemed to notice.
- There are always the possibilities of more idiosyncratic occurrences, like a policymaker's family being poorly served by the system of higher education or a particular focusing incident on a given campus.

Policies

Kingdon describes the process of policy solutions being created in a "policy primordial soup." Out of this mix of possible policy solutions, some will become connected to problems during policy windows. The types of policies that have a chance of

being enacted are those that are technically feasible, acceptable to the public, and budgetarily workable.

What kinds of policies need to be fully fleshed out and in place for the moment when a “problem” comes into being? At this point, it’s easier to identify those policies that do not meet one of the three criteria. In addition to Kingdon’s criteria, I also discuss whether major policy changes are likely to come from inside or outside of higher education.

Technical Feasibility

We actually know relatively little about which kinds of broad public policies are likely to increase college completion. Several authors have found that an increase in tenure-line faculty is associated with higher completion rates. At the community college level, experiments by MDRC have found a positive effect of counseling interventions. The effect of financial aid on college completion is not well understood. One of the major efforts necessary to pursue reform is to understand the effects of broad policy changes and to disseminate this knowledge widely.

Acceptability

The major values that inform public policymaking differ tremendously between “insiders” and “outsiders”. Higher education administration and faculty value professional autonomy and consensus-driven decision-making processes, while the public is primarily concerned with ensuring access and keeping the price of higher education at a reasonable level. Policies that meet both of these requirements are likely to be quite rare.

Affordability

As mentioned previously, there is a very low probability of major new sources of money becoming available for higher education reform. Changes must occur within

the existing levels of resources

Internal or Externally Driven Reform

It's worth noting that large, successfully enacted policy innovations in higher education, like tax credits or merit-aid programs, have come from outside of the institutions. Higher education on its own has not generated broadly adopted policies for several decades. Even major changes such as the National Defense Education Act and the Higher Education Act were driven by concerns about national security and equality of opportunity, respectively. Clark Kerr, in his book *The Great Transformation* describes the "failure of intended internally originated academic structural changes" in the 1960s and 1970s, such as the development of new institutions like the University of California at Santa Cruz. He cites the intransigence of faculty as one possible cause for this failure. However, he also discusses the idea that large internally driven changes in the earlier history of higher education (i.e. land grant universities) were required by the needs of the nation, but that the changes in the 1960s could be handled, if imperfectly, by the existing system (Kerr, 1991). It is an open question whether the changes in the 21st century will require an entirely new structure for the delivery of postsecondary education, or whether existing organizational types will suffice.

Politics

The political stream in Kingdon's work describes the set of political events or changes in the public mood that may create a policy window. I list a few possible political changes that could create the opportunity for policy changes for higher education.

- Changes in the public mood: the public's lack of concern regarding the quality of higher education may not continue indefinitely. The public views higher education as increasingly necessary, yet also increasingly out of reach. This

trend could lead to more public dissatisfaction with higher education and a widespread desire to push for greater changes.

- Electoral windows: the election of a new governor is typically suggested as major window for state-level reform. Similarly, the election or re-election of a president, or a change in congressional control can create an opportunity for major policy changes.
- The same kinds of focusing events described in the section on problems can also drive political changes.
- Kingdon suggests that required decision-making points can also create policy windows. The reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in 2013 could be one such decision-making opportunity. However, if the past is any guide, reauthorization is unlikely to occur according to schedule.

Advocacy Coalitions and Higher Education Policy

The advocacy coalition framework suggests that policymaking typically takes place in a set of policy subsystems, which will remain stable in the absence of galvanizing external events. The advocacy coalition framework posits four basic understandings of policymaking in various arenas:

1. Understanding policy change requires long time spans, usually longer than ten years
2. Policy is typically made in most areas as the result of the operations of a subsystem of interrelated actors and organizations
3. These subsystems operate across levels of government.
4. Public policies can be thought of in much the same ways as belief systems: a set of ideas about what's important to do and how to do it.

According to the advocacy coalition framework, within a given policy subsystem, there are various coalitions that form among interested parties, typically rather small compared to the population as a whole. These parties argue about policy goals while sharing a common set of understandings about the “rules of the game.” Conflict among coalitions is mediated as the result of the actions of policy brokers, who arrive at a final policy as a compromise (Sabatire and Jenkins-Smith, 1993).

The ACF framework suggests that subsystems are relatively stable, and are unlikely to change much without the arrival of large external, system level events that disrupt the subsystem (Weible and Sabatier, 2009; Weible et al., 2009; Sabatier, 1999; Sabatire and Jenkins-Smith, 1993).

For higher education, several advocacy coalitions exist: first, the standard institutional coalition comprised of the membership of groups like ACE. They argue for increased institutional funding. The second coalition is loosely composed of policy advocates and the public, who tend to argue for lower tuition and more financial aid. A third coalition includes for-profit organizations, who are typically more concerned with loosening regulations. All groups share a set of common assumptions about the role of governments, institutions and so on.

A quite different set of understandings would involve fundamentally restructuring the role of government in higher education to stop funding enrollment and start funding completion. None of the existing groups even considers this as a policy option. Such a change would need to come from outside the current subsystem.

In Tennessee, the new performance funding system proposed by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission and enacted by the legislature promises to come much closer to funding on the basis of completion than any previously implemented funding policy.

Punctuated Equilibrium in Higher Education Policy

Like the Advocacy Coalition Framework, the punctuated equilibrium approach suggests that policy arenas tend to end up forming into subsystems or monopolies, where one set of ideas about good policy end up holding sway. As Baumgartner and Jones say, “The policy system is stable because those participating share values” (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993, p. 18). Major changes in these subsystems occur generally when the area becomes one of general attention, rather than just an obscure “niche.” For example, the regulation of deep-water oil drilling was not a major concern for anyone but oil companies and regulators until the Macondo well blowout in the gulf.

When broad attention is placed on an issue, then rapid policy change is possible, and new monopolies, or equilibria, form. The picture that emerges from this view is that policies will change very slowly over long periods of time, with rapid changes at the inflection points described above. Most of the time policy subsystems run the show—but when attention is reallocated, big changes occur.

Higher education does not generally create crises in the way that other areas of the economy, like energy or health, create crises. Attention needs to be reallocated to higher education in order to break up the current policy subsystem, but how? Successful tactics from previous policy entrepreneurs include using data and information to create the appearance of a crisis; using media-friendly events to bring attention to the issue; and forming issue networks that will continually attempt to reallocate attention in smaller venues, ie local and state governments.

Ideas, Interests and Institutions

Ideas

The kinds of ideas that successfully overtake policy regimes are simple, popular, and feasible. Simplicity aids tremendously in the communication of an idea. Witness the popularity of merit aid scholarships. These programs are very simple, which aids both in increasing support and in implementing the policy, as many students are aware of the requirements of these programs. Popularity depends on public opinion and the structure of the proposed policy. Technical feasibility is in many ways the easiest of the three criteria to meet for a given policy idea.

Interests

Below I consider each of the possible interest groups that could be formed from the major stakeholders in higher education policy.

Students

Students are often suggested as a natural constituency for higher education reform. Since the student protests of the 1960s, there have been essentially no broad higher education reforms that have taken place as a result of student organizing or political activity.

Parents of College Students

The parents of college students or future college students are a more likely powerful coalition, but they have shown little interest in reform in the past. Instead, they are primarily concerned with access and affordability. To be a movement for reform, the connection between those priorities and the goals of progress, completion and learning must be made explicitly.

Institutional Leaders

Institutional leaders have essentially no incentives to be at the forefront of broad-based changes. Presidents of institutions of higher education or system leaders have rarely taken a leading role in major policy changes in higher education in the last thirty years.

State Policymakers

State policymakers are currently too pressed by massive state budget shortfalls to seriously consider major reform. To include this group, one would need to make either a strong electoral connection or a strong economic development connection, along with the imperative of never wasting a crisis.

Business Leaders

Business leaders are the most likely group to support and encourage the goals of progress, completion and learning. The link between economic development and a better skilled workforce is an obvious one for this group.

Institutions

Institutions of Higher Education

One of the much-noted paradoxes of reforming higher education is that institutions of higher education themselves are often the originators of reforms in other areas. Major changes in many areas of society have been instigated by those working within higher education. Yet institutions of higher education have rarely been at the forefront of pushing for major changes in higher education policy, for entirely understandable reasons.

Think Tanks , Foundations and Other NGOs

Kirst describes the process of regime change in K-12 education, particularly the use of an “elite” strategy by conservative foundations to change the dominant discourse around education reform. The same strategy could be used to push for higher education reform. Foundations and external organizations are already outside players in higher education reform movements. Their ability to leverage their ability to create real change depends on connections with both governmental agencies and possible constituencies such as the business community.

Governmental Agencies

One of the largest shifts in policymaking over the last half century has been a movement away from effecting policy changes through strict regulation and toward the use of incentives and competition to accomplish societal goals. There will always be a need for specific regulations in some areas. Governments should use incentives and competition much more regularly to accomplish state goals. It’s notable the extent to which higher education has escaped this general trend, the most recent example being how small a role higher education policy changes played in either the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act and in Race to the Top. For such an approach to work, there needs to be a shift away from deference to institutions of higher education and more emphasis on the role of governmental agencies in setting the public agenda for higher education.

Political Action Committees

Beyond local or state-level organizations with tightly focused missions, I am not aware of any large political action committees that have worked on higher education reform issues. This stems in part from a reluctance from the higher education community to be seen as active political players, as opposed to purveyors of the public good. It seems unlikely that such an organizational structure could succeed,

but there's no evidence that I know of in either direction.

What would it take to make major change in higher education around the goals of progress, completion and learning?

In this last entirely speculative section, I discuss some of the possible changes that would need to take place to enact and implement major policy reforms around the goals of progress, completion and learning.

Increasing Public Awareness

As mentioned previously, there are two major obstacles to encouraging greater public concern and demands for action from policymakers. First, the public has few concerns about the quality of higher education. Second, the public places most of the blame for lack of progress in higher education on the student. There appears to be a need to communicate many of the problems of higher education, and to demonstrate that these issues are not exclusively the responsibility of students.

Greater transparency regarding how higher education works, and particularly the level of performance of higher education could generate more public demand for fundamental reforms in higher education. Efforts such as the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education's Measuring Up report cards have helped to shape the public agenda for higher education in many states. However, they have not (and were not designed to) generated a groundswell of public concern about higher education.

For example, the public might be much more concerned about the quality of higher education if there were greater awareness of literacy levels. Literacy levels even among college graduates is very low. Table 1 shows the definitions of proficiency

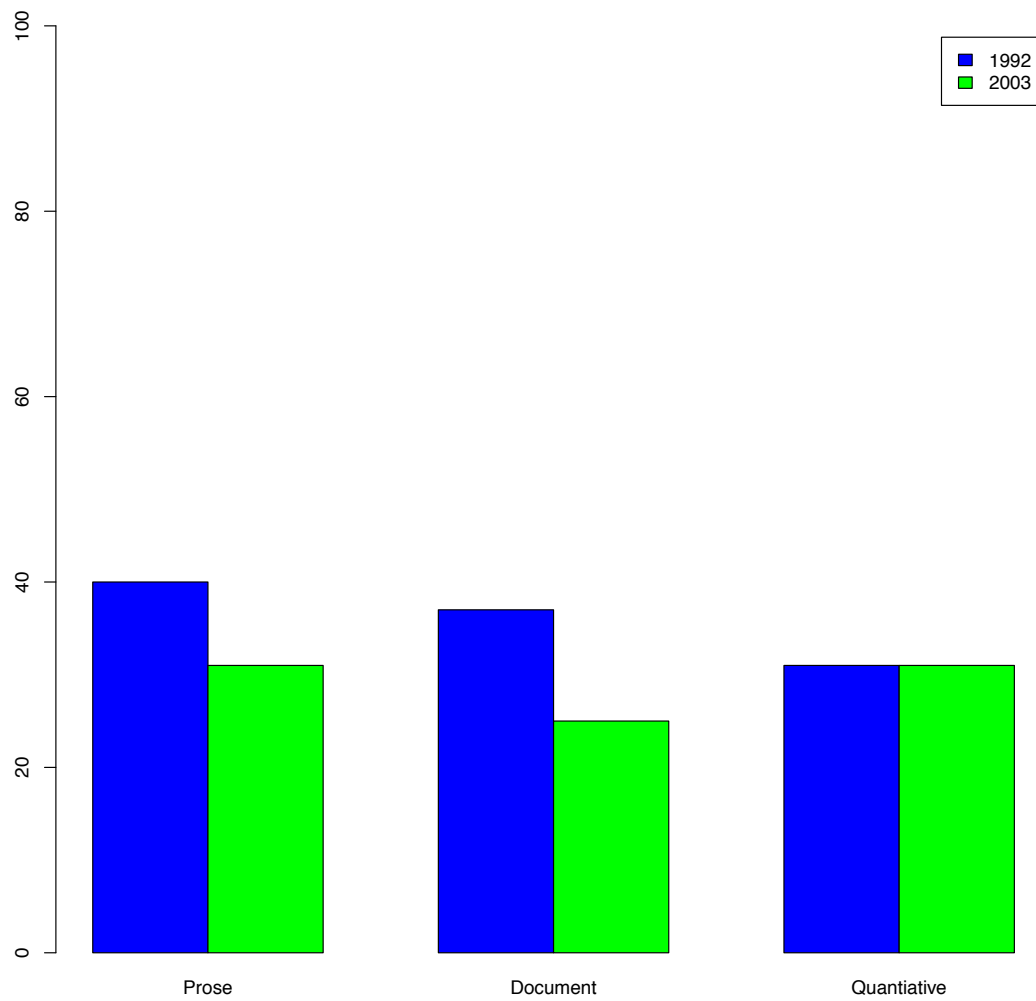
in each of three types of literacy tested in the National Assessment of Adult Literacy. Figure 4 shows the percent of the adult bachelor's degree holding population that scored proficient on each of three types of literacy. Although there isn't a one-to-one correspondence between literacy levels and education, the proficiency goals are generally the kinds of skills that are expected from college graduates. As the figure shows, in 2003, far less than a third of college graduates are proficient. In fact, proficiency rates among the college educated population have gone down, from 40 to 31% in prose literacy and from 37 to 25% in document literacy. Only in quantitative literacy have rates of proficiency held steady at 31% (Kutner et al., 2005). If given greater visibility, these results may be exactly the kind of information needed to encourage more public concern and a push for action on the part of policymakers. While low levels of literacy can not be causally linked to colleges alone, the postsecondary sector must be responsible for improving literacy rates in the population.

Table 1: Definitions of Proficiency for Each Type of Literacy

Area	Skill	Example
Prose	Reading lengthy, complex, abstract prose texts as well as synthesizing information and making complex inferences	Comparing viewpoints in two editorials
Document	Integrating, synthesizing, and analyzing multiple pieces of information located in complex document	Interpreting a table about blood pressure, age and physical activity
Quantitative	Locating more abstract quantitative information to solve multistep problems when the arithmetic operations are not easily inferred and the problems are more complex	Computing and comparing the cost per ounce of food items

Reproduced from Kutner et al. (2005), p. 3

Figure 4: Percent of Adults With Bachelor's Degree Demonstrating Proficiency, by Literacy Type and Year



Tabulated from Kutner et al. (2005), p. 3

Clarity on the “Problem”

Second, the higher education community needs to come to greater clarity on the nature of the problem or problems that face us in terms of educational progress, completion and learning. What evidence is there that these problems can be solved with greater funding? With changes in curriculum? With changes in organizational structures? With changes in personnel? Although evidence is building, we know very little right now about both the nature of these problems and the kinds of interventions that would be most effective in increasing performance.

Policy Solutions That Are Simple, Feasible and Popular

Higher education is a complex field. It covers a huge diversity in institutional types, disciplinary specialties, geographies, and student characteristics. There are few one-size-fits-all solutions to the problems that face higher education. This reality must be balanced against another factor: as the complexity of a policy solution grows, public support is quite likely to increase. The recent changes to health care provide a sobering lesson—a solid majority of the public supported the major individual initiatives in the health care bill when presented with them one by one. However, a majority of the public does not support health care reform overall. This is almost certainly due to the complexity of the policy that was finally passed by Congress. While some complexity is unavoidable, the kinds of policies that enjoy broad public support need to be as simple as possible.

The key obstacle to the feasibility of many proposed policy solutions is funding. It seems quite likely that at both the state and federal level there will not be large new sources of funding made available for the purpose of encouraging dramatic changes in higher education completion and learning. Instead, feasible policies must work within the strictures of current funding systems.

Last, the popularity of a proposal will depend on whether or not it concords

with the key values that the public holds regarding higher education, as described by Immerwahr and others. First, the public values opportunity—strong majorities of the public say that college should be available to any qualified and motivated student. Second, the public understands and values the place of higher education in American society—they think that colleges and universities give young people key skills they need to succeed. Last, the public values reciprocity—very few people favor policies which appear to be giveaways. Members of the public want students to work hard for the benefits they receive.

Concluding Thoughts

I offer a few observations in conclusion.

- It is increasingly clear that we need to understand the technical feasibility of several proposed policy changes, such as performance funding or funding institutions based on course completion, when “scaled up.” Without this knowledge regarding technical feasibility, the other components of a political strategy cannot come together.
- Kerr, writing twenty years ago, described the failure of internally originated reforms in higher education. There’s little reason to think now that major changes are likely to come only from within higher education.
- The public has given higher education a “free pass.” Increased public awareness of higher education’s performance, coupled with anxiety about access and prices, may lead to serious demand for reform.
- Any reform agenda must recognize the extremely limited fiscal landscape. There is no new money to be found for higher education.

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