

Sandy Baum and Michael McPherson, *Can College Level the Playing Field? Higher Education in an Unequal Society* (Princeton University Press, 2022)

Book Excerpt

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September 26, 2023

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Key Directions for Policy Improvement (pp. 197-201)

Promoting Higher Completion Rates and Shorter Time to Degree at Institutions That Serve Disadvantaged Students

In chapter 6 we described some of the efforts that community colleges and other broad-access institutions are undertaking to increase student success. We cited evidence that programs that raise graduation rates cost more per enrolled student. But because they significantly increase the number of students who achieve their goal of graduating from college, they cost less per graduate. There is persuasive evidence that spending more on the education of these students (who currently receive less subsidy per student than more affluent undergraduates who attend more selective public universities) pays off in higher graduation rates.

These “broad-access” institutions play a critical role in our unequal society. They are important gateways not only to economic success but also to richer public and personal lives for their students. Beyond the social and economic benefits to individuals, these institutions and their graduates are vital both to the nation’s economic prosperity and to its cultural and human development. For all these reasons the inadequate funding of broad-access colleges is a major national problem. These institutions must have adequate resources and use them to serve their students well. Colleges—whether public, private, or for-profit—where most students fail to achieve their goals are doing more harm than good, both to their students and to the larger public that contributes to their support.

Reducing the per-student funding gaps between the selective public institutions that on the whole serve more affluent students and those that disproportionately serve first-generation students, low-income students, and students from underrepresented groups should be a national priority, in addition to being high on the agendas of all states. This need not be a zero-sum game, taking money away from more selective institutions and allocating it to broad-access colleges. Pursuing movement toward a more equal society is going to require greater investment in education at all levels; that is an effort that will have to be financed by some combination of higher taxes on those who can afford to pay and lower spending on lesser government priorities. There is no reason to think that the best place to get that money is diminished spending on public research universities, which perform many valuable economic and social roles.

It is important to remember that spending more on education is an investment that pays off in economic terms, as well as in broader social benefits, over the longer run. Government

investment in education, notably including the education of disadvantaged college students, has some significant similarities to investment in physical infrastructure like roads and highways.³⁷ In both kinds of investment, an intensive commitment at a certain point in time yields benefits that last for decades.

It is common to suppose that the best way to get an economic payoff from educational investments is to make the education narrowly vocational. There is good reason to think, though, that this is not the way things work in an advanced economy. Even in narrow, job security terms, learning how to do a particular technical job may be imprudent, simply because rapid changes in technology may quickly render the particular skills mastered obsolete. Education of lasting vocational value should include learning how to learn new things, how to cope with uncertainty, think independently, identify and solve problems, and communicate well.

These qualities are among the ones we would like to see in our nation's citizens, along with education on the basic institutions of our democracy, a need our recent national experience surely shows. Cultivation of these qualities should in our view be designed into the curriculum and instructional practice of both two-year and four-year institutions. It definitely should not be seen as a kind of education reserved for "elites." Ongoing work at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and elsewhere on how to increase the amount and the quality of effective discussion, including discussion of controversial political issues, provides insights into how to make progress in this area.³⁸

Financing long-run investments for programmatic support of community colleges and broad-access universities is a complicated issue, which we will not try to resolve here in detail. The idea of a federal program with matching requirements for participating states is gaining considerable attention, with a range of proposals in Congress and from past presidential candidates. This is a promising strategy but getting the details right is a challenge.³⁹ Policies must provide additional funding allowing institutions to innovate and to support students as well as incentives for institutions to find more effective strategies for using whatever resources are currently available. The federal government can provide additional resources, structure incentives, and disseminate information and guidance. But state governments hold the purse strings that have the most influence over the allocation of resources across public higher education institutions. This is why a partnership is essential.

There is wide variation across apparently similar colleges with similar student bodies in how successful they are in educating undergraduates. A federal-state partnership program should have a performance floor for institutional eligibility as well as significant incentives for improvement.

³⁷ Sophia Koropeckyj, Chris Lafakis, and Adam Ozimek, "The Economic Impact of Increasing College Completion." Research Paper. American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2017.

³⁸ See the website of the University of Wisconsin School of Education Discussion Project for more information.

³⁹ Sandy Baum and Michale McPherson, *Strengthening the Federal Role in the Federal-State Partnership for Funding Higher Education*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute, December 2020.

The federal matching effort we envision should direct resources toward broad-access public institutions and the students they serve. These investments should have the effect of reducing the gaps in per-student spending at more and less selective institutions. But, given the importance of well-designed educational investments in reducing inequality, this gap-closing should take the form of leveling up rather than leveling down.

The federal government needs to do more than simply count on individual administrators to follow the widely publicized examples of Georgia State, Florida State, CUNY ASAP, and others that have made impressive strides in student outcomes, as we recommended in the previous chapter. We need a funding program accompanied by a systematic national effort to disseminate information about best practices for supporting at-risk students and to provide strong incentives for institutions to implement these practices. Competitive grant programs, facilitated interactions, and well-designed rewards for successful implementation of support systems that work for students all have the potential to influence institutional priorities and practices.

Recommendations

We need to develop a well-designed federal-state partnership to create stronger incentives for states to fund higher education adequately and equitably. This will involve strategies for narrowing the gaps in the opportunities offered across states, as well as the gaps in per-student funding across institutions within states.