



## The States and Public Higher Education Policy: Affordability, Access, and Accountability

reviewed by Mark Oromaner

At present, affordability, access, and accountability ((the AAAs) are among the central policy issues for higher education in general and for public higher education in particular. The impact of the AAAs at public institutions is the subject of this new publication. It should come as no surprise that these concepts are political terms, especially at public institutions. The political approach to an understanding of each of these concepts is all too briefly presented in the foreword by David W. Breneman, former college president and current university professor and dean of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia. For instance, tensions and contradictions often exist between affordability and access (support for middle- and upper-income families at the expense of low-income families) and between the interests of various actors (e.g., governors, presidents of colleges, boards of trustees). Breneman suggests that each of the As can be viewed as a “code word.”

The States and Public Higher Education Policy grew out of a 1998 conference sponsored by the Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education at the University of Michigan School of Education and co-sponsored by the State Higher Education Executive Officers. In his introduction, David E. Heller of the center states the following: “The contributors to this book address the issues of affordability, access, and accountability by going beyond the headlines to examine how public colleges and universities are affected by and are responding to the current societal pressures” (p.3). He promises the identification of “the key questions facing these institutions” and the suggestion of “some implications” for students, parents, campus leaders, faculty, and policy makers.

Although connections among the AAAs are clear, the nine chapters are equally divided among three sections headed by each of the As. In addition, there is a timely, insightful, and well-balanced conclusion, “Technology and the Future of Public Higher Education Policy,” in which Heller hypothesizes about the possible impact of technology on the AAAs. Although technology “holds great promise” and “is becoming ubiquitous in all aspects of university life,” Heller states that “few well-designed research studies are available on the use of technology across a broad range of institutions, types of classes, and types of students that would allow any generalization to a broader audience of institutions and services” (p. 247).

However, even in the absence of such research, planners should consider Heller’s summary of potential benefits of technology: overcoming geographic and temporal boundaries, reducing costs associated with delivering education and providing library services, improving the quality of education, and reducing barriers to entering the higher education

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marketplace. The following is perhaps his most important reminder for planners:

Before the ubiquity of technology, starting up a new college or university required a fairly substantial investment in people, buildings, and materials. Technology has helped eliminate these barriers and has opened the door to new providers in the higher education marketplace, many of them for-profit businesses. (p. 245)

The realities of the information age, coupled with the ideology of a democratic society, have led to increases in higher education enrollments in spite of increases in costs. Although four-fifths of undergraduates attend public institutions (four-year or community college), the issue of affordability for working-class and minority students is increasingly central to the issue of enrollment. The data in the affordability section (e.g., trends in income and cost data presented by Heller) support Breneman's observation that "affordability has now become a code word for policies that help middle- and upper-middle income families pay for higher education, as

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opposed to the more common definition, which refers to families at all income levels” (p. vii). From the perspective of pricing, Arthur M. Hauptman proposes that state financing should be more student oriented and less focused on the needs of institutions and that there must be greater coordination among policies concerning allocations to institutions, tuition, and student aid.

Finally, Michael Mumper makes the promising suggestion that “to understand why policymakers form the policies they do, we must understand how they construct the problem they are trying to solve” (p. 60). If the cause of rising costs is seen as a result of insufficient state support, the response may be to ensure the availability of sufficient funds. However, if rising costs are seen as a result of unaccountable institutional spending, the response may be greater accountability policies. This constructionist perspective echoes the well-known “Definition of the Situation” proposed by sociologist W.I. Thomas: “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.”

Access is the broadest and most politically charged of the AAAs. The term has been used to refer to at least financial, geographic, programmatic, academic, physical, and cultural/social accessibility. In reference to the political nature of the term, Breneman states that “access today entangles one in the complexities of affirmative action and the process of selective admission to undergraduate and professional programs at prestigious institutions” (p. vii). As with affordability, the focus is increasingly on the concerns of middle- and upper-middle-class families about how to pay for college.

Sylvia Hurtado and Heather Wathington Cade use the Hopwood case in Texas to examine the impact of the elimination of race-conscious decisions in admissions, programs, and scholarships. And Brian Pusser examines the impact of California’s Proposition 209, which prohibited preferential treatment on the basis of race and ethnicity among other characteristics. Although the recent occurrence of these events (mid-1990s) prohibits a long-term analysis of their impact, the Texas study gives some insight into faculty, staff, and student reactions, and the California study gives some insight into state policy making and the relationship between institutional autonomy and state governance.

Patrick M. Callan takes a broad political perspective and argues that if the nation is to reverse the growing inequality in access, federal and state policies must reflect the understanding that “if opportunity is broadly defined as the chance to participate fully in society, higher education has become the only road to opportunity for most Americans” (p. 85). The GI Bill and the establishment of land-grant colleges provide national historical models for the development of policies that expand access to higher education.

In his historical and current overview of the use of the term “accountability,” William Zumeta points out that, historically, state officials were “frequently perplexed” and “even intimidated” by academics and their claims of a special need for academic freedom and autonomy. However, currently “we seem to be witnessing the initial phases of a sharp, historically significant ramp-up in the degree of government involvement in academic matters” (p. 155). This tension between the state’s call for accountability and the institution’s call for autonomy is further explored in the other two chapters in the section. In addition, technical issues such as the selection, definition, and measurement of appropriate outcomes and the impact of performance funding initiatives are examined. Policy makers will do well to pay attention to the warning of Michael Nettles and John Cole that policies often have unintended and unforeseen consequences, e.g., accountability demands may undermine access and affordability goals.

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Collectively, these chapters succeed in raising the appropriate issues concerning the AAAs within the state four-year and university systems. Planners specifically interested in those systems are the most likely to find value in the entire volume. Those who are more interested in other sectors, i.e., community colleges or private institutions, are less likely to find the specifics to be of value. The chapter that is likely to have the widest appeal among all who are interested in higher education planning is Heller's conclusion, "Technology and the Future of Public Higher Education Policy."


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