

Book Review: The Three A's

By Michele Tepper

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

Edited by Donald E. Heller

Johns Hopkins University, 2001

271 pages, \$38

In the presidential election year just past, we heard a great deal about the importance of educational policy making at the federal level. Of course, the federal government has a crucial role to play in the educational system, and its role has grown during the Clinton administration; policies like tax deductions for educational expenses have made higher education more of a middle-class entitlement.

But most of the important policy decisions for public education are still made and implemented at the state level. This anthology, partly the product of a conference held at the University of Michigan's School of Education in 1998, analyzes how states make those decisions and how that process is shaped by three key issues university administrators grapple with: affordability, access, and accountability.

These three concerns tend to influence one another: Affordability is a major factor in determining access, and when accountability ties school funding to the attainment of performance benchmarks, it can affect the rate at which tuition rises. While concerns over two of these issues—the affordability of public universities and the accountability of public university employees to legislated standards—are relatively recent, legislators first addressed the third, access to higher education, as far back as the post-World War II GI Bill. Since then, its meaning has shifted; nowadays access is often used as a code word for diversity initiatives such as affirmative action.

These essays emphasize the importance of an oft-overlooked piece of recent history. For most Americans, the recession of the early 1990s is little more than a bad memory. Yet the authors remind us that the recession's effects on American colleges and universities were significant and long lasting. When state legislators slashed college budgets, tuition costs soared even as staff and services were cut. In addition, the recession coincided with a particularly heated cultural backlash against universities. With conservatives denouncing them as hotbeds of immorality, sedition, and racial tension, it was politically easier for legislators to cut school budgets and insist on new forms of accountability, and harder for administrators to defend their schools' positions and needs to the voting public. Meanwhile, however, the economic crisis made college degrees increasingly valuable, and enrollments continued to rise. Trying to do more with less, many administrators turned (whether voluntarily or under legislative mandate) to management methods developed in the business world, reshaping higher education in ways very familiar to readers of this magazine.

The anthology is divided into three main sections: In the section titled "Affordability," editor Donald E. Heller analyzes the contradiction of increasing prices and increasing enrollment in public colleges and universities. Michael Mumper's essay deconstructs the rhetoric of tuition-increase politicking, while Arthur Hauptman suggests ways to make schools more financially accountable to their states and their students. In "Access," Patrick M. Callan's chapter looks at how federal policy influenced policies implemented by the states, and how that interaction fell apart in the 1990s. Two other pieces in this section deal with one of the most important access issues currently facing policy makers: affirmative action. In the final section, "Accountability," one essay gives a historical account of how the governance structures of America's public higher education have developed, while another provides an insightful review of literature on how scholars have thought about those structures.

Within these sections, there are thought-provoking differences of opinion and method. Although the scope of interests and arguments alone is impressive, the most illuminating moments occur when the essays inform one another. For example, Hauptman's "Reforming the Ways in Which States Finance Higher Education" is placed after Mumper's "The Paradox of College Prices." While Hauptman contends that institutional fiscal irresponsibility is a contributing factor in tuition increases, Mumper brilliantly dissects the typical explanations of public-college tuition inflation (including institutional fiscal irresponsibility) and shows how all of them, while true, are insufficient. Most anthologies, of course, are built of related

material, but it's rare to find one made up of essays that have such useful things to say to one another, as well as to the reader.

Affordability, access, and accountability will continue to be hot-button issues as legislators at all levels address constituents' concerns about their children's future; inevitably, as a result, these legislators become more pro-actively involved in shaping public colleges' budgets, policies, and mandates. Any administrator who wants to gain a deeper understanding of these issues than can be gleaned from a presidential candidates' debate might do well to spend some time with these essays.

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