
Book Reviews

Condition of Access: Higher Education for Lower Income Students edited by Donald E. Heller. ACE/Praeger Series on Higher Education. Westport, CT: Praeger Press, 2002. Cloth \$34.95. ISBN 1-57356-517-2.

EDWARD P. ST. JOHN, Indiana University

While it is unusual to refer to a new book as “historically important,” *Condition of Access: Higher Education for Lower Income Students* merits this distinction. To understand this claim, it is necessary to consider how this volume fits in the policy discourse on access. Indeed, it is necessary to take this step before summarizing the key points made in the volume.

The Condition of Access is comprised of essays written originally for the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, a Congressional panel, as background for their report *Access Denied*. When the Advisory Committee solicited these essays, the policy literature was dominated by official reports that focused on academic preparation as the explanation for the access gap for minority students (e.g., Choy, 2002; King, 1999; NCES, 1997a, b, 1998). This official literature consistently overlooked the direct effects of student aid while building a new rationale that argued for providing information to students about the steps they should take to prepare for college. During this unfortunate historical period (1980–2002), the official reports on academic preparation overlooked decades of economic research that found low-income students were responsive to tuition and student aid (Heller, 1997; Jackson & Weathersby, 1975; Leslie & Brinkman, 1988).

As a document comprised of essays written under federal contract, *Condition of Access* marks a change in the official literature on access. Heller’s volume, along with the reports by the Advisory Committee of Student Financial Assistance (2001, 2002), reinserts finances into the discourse on college access in a way that acknowledges the central role academic preparation plays in college access. The economics literature had focused on finances, but had not adequately dealt with the need for a balanced approach to access. This review uses the new standard of balance—an explicit focus on financial access for low-income, college-prepared students (Advisory Committee, 2002; St. John, 2002)—as the primary criterion for reviewing this important book.

The two essays in Part I set the stage, illuminating the problem. First, Fitzgerald and Delaney describe how financial barriers are preventing millions of prepared students from attending college, costing the federal government billions of dollars in future tax revenues. Then Lee documents the high levels of unmet need for low-income students and points out that the decline in need-based grants could be a cause for the gap.

The three essays in Part II probe the complexity of the problem. Heller’s chapter documents the new investment that states have made in merit grants and

raises concerns about increasing tuition. McPherson and Schapiro present their research on merit aid as the central focus of institutional aid. In the least effective chapter, Gladieux notes that the gap in enrollment has increased for low-income students, but overlooks how increases in inequality after 1980 coincided with the decline in federal need-based grants. He concludes that financial aid alone is “not enough” and ignores the inadequacy of student aid. Thus, Part II as a whole fails to make the direct link between the decline in federal need-based grants and the widening access gap after 1980. These authors were given a lob pitch—the set-up in part one—but failed to hit the home run. They clearly argue that need-based grants are important, but fail to critically examine the consequences of reductions in grants over the past two decades.

The two essays in Part III outline the need for outreach and support services for low-income students. These issues are important and, indeed, are necessary steps if we are to achieve greater equity once again. However, unless there is adequate need-based grant aid, encouragement can add to the ethos of discouragement that pervades children of the chronically poor in America.

The final two chapters speculate about the future. Carnevale and Fry review demographic trends and conclude that the equity challenge is getting greater. Finally, in the concluding essay, Spencer hits the home run. The new arguments about preparation can distract policymakers from the central issue: need-based grants are no longer adequate for college-qualified, low-income students. Further, she illuminates why these debates are critical:

- “First, preoccupation with K-12 concerns may place undue legislative and funding emphasis on teacher training, mentoring and academic preparation, and remediation, for example—areas directly and concretely linked to the quality of the K-12 education system.”
- “Second, the focus on student achievement may increase rather decrease the relative growth of merit-based aid.”
- “Third, the preoccupation with measuring outcomes may result in tying federal student aid to individual and institutional outcomes (such graduation rates), thus, for example, penalizing dropouts and the institutions that serve the most difficult populations, rather than directing resources to strengthen the pipeline on the front end.” (quotes from p. 168)

Let’s hope these points do not foretell the future. Not only must the higher education community contend with the consequences of decline in the purchasing power of federal grants, but we are confronted by a new challenge: the threat of excessive regulation without adequate funding. Will higher education follow the path pioneered by K-12 education, accepting excessive reporting without a federal commitment for funding? Or will the higher education community challenge the federal government to ensure financial access for low-income students who prepare for college?

References

- Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance. (2001). *Access denied: Restoring equal educational opportunity*. Washington, DC: Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance.

- Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance. (2002). *Empty promises: The myth of college access in America*. Washington, DC: Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance.
- Choy, S. P. (2002). *Access & persistence: Findings from 10 years of longitudinal research on students*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.
- Heller, D. (1997). Student price response in higher education: An update of Leslie and Brinkman. *Journal of Higher Education*, 68, 624-659.
- Jackson, G. A., & Weathersby, G. B. (1975). Individual demand for higher education. *Journal of Higher Education*, 46 (6), 623-52.
- King, J. E. (Ed.) 1999. *Financing a college education: How it works, how it is changing*. Phoenix, AZ: Orynx Press.
- Leslie, L. L., & Brinkman, P. T. (1988). *The economic value of higher education*. New York: Macmillan.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (1997a). *Access to higher postsecondary education for the 1992 high school graduates*, NCES 98-105. By Lutz Berkner & Lisa Chavez. Project Officer: C. Dennis Carroll. Washington, DC: NCES.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (1997b). *Confronting the odds: Students at risk and the pipeline to higher education*. NCES 98-094. By Laura J. Horn. Project officer: C. Dennis Carroll. Washington, DC: NCES.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (1998). *High school curriculum structure: Effects of course taking and achievement in mathematics for high school graduates—An examination of data from the National Longitudinal Study of 1988*. Working Paper No. 98-09, by Valerie E. Lee, David T. Burkam, Todd Chow-Hoy, Becky A. Smerdon, and Douglas Geverdt. Project Officer: Jeffrey Owings. Washington, DC: NCES.
- St. John, E. P. (2002). *The access challenge: Rethinking the causes of the new inequality*. Policy Issue Report # 2002-01. Bloomington, IN: Indiana Education Policy Center.
-

Higher Education Law: The Faculty by Steven G. Poskanzer.
Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002.
323 pp. Cloth \$49.50. ISBN 0-8018-6748-7.
Paper \$19.95. ISBN 0-8018-6749-5.

BENJAMIN BAEZ, Georgia State University

Given the pervasiveness of the law in our society, it is no surprise that books addressing legal issues in higher education have flourished. Many of us are familiar with William Kaplin and Barbara Lee's large treatise, *The Law of Higher Education* (Jossey-Bass, 1995), and with Michael Olivas' case book, *The Law and Higher Education* (Carolina Academic Press, 1997). Robert Hendrickson's *The College, Their Constituencies and the Courts* (Education Law Association, 1999) and Douglas Toma and Richard Palm's *The Academic Administrator and the Law* (ASHE-ERIC Monograph, 1999) are treatises like Kaplin and Lee's but on a considerably smaller scale. Poskanzer's *Higher Education Law: The Faculty* is also a treatise, but it focuses on the faculty with greater breadth and depth than the other books, and, consequently, it provides a narrower view of