

Donald E. Heller (Ed.). *Condition of Access: Higher Education for Lower Income Students*. Westport, CT: American Council on Education and Praeger Publishers, 2002. 200 pp. Cloth: \$34.95. ISBN: 1-57356-517-2.

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In recent years, the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance has been engaged in a serious effort to bring the problem of college access for lower-income students to the attention of policymakers and opinion leaders. The most visible part of their work has been the publication of the reports *Access Denied* (2001) and *Empty Promises* (2002). In addition, however, the Advisory Committee commissioned several of the very best scholars in the field to write papers considering the most effective long-term strategy by which the federal government could improve access to higher education. These papers are assembled in *Condition of Access: Higher Education for Low Income Students*, edited by Donald Heller. While the book is presented as a complement to *Access Denied*, it is really a great deal more. These nine chapters represent the most complete accounts of our current understanding of the dynamics of college finance and enrollment behavior now available. While the book presents very little new data, its chapters do a masterful job of synthesizing the best research in an accessible and straightforward way.

The book is organized into four sections. Part 1 reviews the broad forces influencing college access. Part 2 focuses on the financial barriers to college. Here the analysis looks at the numerous federal, state, and institutional student aid programs. Part 3 examines nonfinancial barriers, including early intervention, remediation, and support programs. The book then concludes with an insightful look at the future direction of government efforts to advance the cause of college access.

The chapters examining student aid were written by Lawrence Gladieux, Donald Heller, Michael McPherson, and Morton Shapiro. In combination, they show how, over the last two decades, the principles on which the system of need-based financial aid was constructed have shifted. Insuring affordability for middle-income students has replaced access for low-income students as the primary policy objective. At the federal level, grants have been replaced by loans and tax credits. At the state level, need-based aid has been eroded by the growth of merit scholarships. Even institutions have increasingly turned to merit-based aid and to preferential packaging unrelated to financial need. The predictable result is that increased public (and private) spending on higher education has actually reduced access to college for lower income students.

The chapters on early intervention and remediation programs are written by Laura Perna, Watson Scott Swail, Jamie Merisotis, and David Breneman. They review the government and non-governmental initiatives designed to increase the academic and social preparation that lower-income students bring to college. While evidence of the effectiveness of any particular program is often sketchy, these chapters make clear that, on balance, programs like these are an essential element in a successful effort to equalize educational opportunity.

The strength of the book is its ability to move beyond the stale debate over whether increasing access is best done by removing financial barriers for low income students or by improving the level of precollege preparation available to those students. The book's authors correctly identify this as a false choice. Heller, in particular, clearly illustrates that public policy must do both. To be successful, students certainly must have the necessary academic skills and the social support. But as the price moves beyond their reach, students will be shut out of college even if they are fully prepared to succeed.

One of the book's most stimulating chapters, by Anthony Carnevale and Richard Fry, analyzes the demographic changes which are poised to change the face of college students in the next decade. They show how these factors are likely to produce more college students, increased number of Hispanic students, more nontraditional students, and students who are, on balance, better prepared for college than those of any previous generation.

Given the substantial and growing barriers now limiting college access, what are policymakers to do? The authors argue that the first step must be to rebuild need-based student aid, especially the federal

Pell Grant program. As one author describes it, the system of higher education funding "does not need fixing, it needs funding" (p. 156). There is certainly nothing really new about this recommendation. Scholars and analysts, including the authors in this book, have been saying it for years. The result may thus seem all too familiar. One of the book's authors, Clayton Spencer, even acknowledges that some will see this particular policy recommendation as "both uninspired and uninspiring" (p. 155). Still, the book presents compelling evidence that we already know what needs to be done to improve college access. It is simply a matter of fully supporting existing programs that target aid to the most disadvantaged.

The book contains only one troubling omission. The rapid public college tuition inflation of the last decade is barely mentioned. Yet, it is clear that each year the problems addressed in the book are made substantially worse by rising public college prices. As a result, spending on need-based aid must increase as fast as tuition inflation, simply to maintain the present level of purchasing power. But the book treats rising college prices as if they were uncontrollable factors. However, recent actions by the federal government have contributed significantly to the fiscal problems now faced by the states. The states have, in turn, passed the budgetary problems on to their public colleges. As long as these intergovernmental financial problems remain unsolved, access to public colleges will be in peril regardless of what happens to funding for student aid or early intervention programs.

This concern notwithstanding, *Condition of Access* is a really wonderful book. It provides a much-needed review of the growing number of studies of student enrollment behavior and chronicle of the rapid changes in public policies to encourage college-going. Those who want a quick introduction to these matters, as well as those who follow these issues closely, will find no more valuable resource than this book.

References

- Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (2001) *Access Denied: Restoring the Nation's Commitment to Equal Educational Opportunity*. Washington DC: Author.
- Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (2002) *Empty Promises: The Myth of College Access in America*. Washington DC: Author.