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## Book Review: Privatization and the Public Good: Public Universities in the Balance

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## Book Review:

### Privatization and the Public Good: Public Universities in the Balance

By Amanda Rutherford

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In response to widespread declines in state allocations, institutions have increasingly turned to methods of revenue generation traditionally used in the private sector. Consequently, discussions of the privatization of American higher education have permeated academic scholarship and popular debates in the last several years. In *Privatization and the Public Good: Public Universities in the Balance*, Matthew Lambert extends the current discussion of privatization through an in-depth exploration of whether and how higher education should be considered a public good or a private benefit. More specifically, Lambert seeks to provide some understanding of whether changing relationships between the university and the state have an effect on the public good, defined in both objective economic terms and subjective perceptual terms.

#### Overview

The key argument presented by Lambert is that context and path dependency (i.e., the idea that decisions made today are highly influenced by decisions made in the past) matter. He suggests that current discussions of privatization focus solely on issues of finance and autonomy and ignore the history of states and their institutions, including the missions upon which institutions were originally founded. To support this argument, Lambert presents six foundations of privatization: state context, vision and focus, autonomy, finance, enrollment and access, and leadership. He presents these factors in a manner similar to Maslow's hierarchy, in which state context provides the largest foundation, and each subsequent level can be considered through a public or private lens. For example, autonomy in institutions with a public focus can be identified via strong state systems, legislative support, and curriculum and research that is more relevant to state needs, while those that have a private focus are characterized through loosely coordinated or weak state systems, legislative skepticism, and research needs that are less relevant to state needs.

After presenting this model of privatization, Lambert reviews notable developments in the history of higher education in the United States and discusses avenues in which state, national, and global shifts toward privatization have developed. He then walks through a body of economic literature to provide a rich discussion of how public and private goods are defined in a broad sense as well as how scholars have assessed the economic and social contributions of higher education. Lambert argues that education provides both private (individual) and public (societal) benefits, and that the latter are often underestimated and, subsequently, undervalued. With this basis of theoretical knowledge, Lambert then reflects upon a number of examples of institutions that have expanded privatization through contracts and partnerships. He claims that efforts to contract out services that reside on the perimeter of higher education are of little concern to constituent groups (i.e., alumni, students, policymakers) who care little about, for example, whether food services or bookstores operate directly through the university or through some third-party group. Instead, larger questions loom for how privatization might affect the core purpose of these institutions.

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The second portion of the text is devoted to discussing the changing relationships between flagship universities and state governance in three states: Virginia (University of Virginia), North Carolina (University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill), and California (University of California-Berkeley). Lambert provides a detailed analysis of an array of interviews with legislators and institutional leaders in each state, as well as with federal policymakers to provide a distinct picture of the development and current environment of education in each jurisdiction. The detail in these chapters exemplifies the richness of case-study research and highlights the differences in state contexts. These comparisons are interesting to consider, as California and North Carolina have been historically managed in a highly coordinated system with relatively high per-student funding, while Virginia has been at the forefront of granting more autonomy while providing lower levels of student funding. From these three cases, Lambert concludes that, while autonomy and finance are indeed critical components in the discussion of privatization, state history, and culture are the dominating factors in institutional-state relationships.

### Identifying Strengths and Weaknesses

The largest theme throughout the text is that privatization is a complex concept that expands beyond traditional discussions of finance to include issues of ownership, regulation, and politics. This idea has been presented in other literature but perhaps has not been applied so distinctively to the case of higher education. Lambert's theoretical model of privatization provides much food for thought on systematically expanding the notion of privatization in theory and practice. Yet, readers should also question what limitations remain and what assumptions must be made. For example, does Lambert arrange his tiers in the right order, or do the components overlap and have equal weight? Further, a simple illustration of where each case is placed on the model might not only help to visualize comparisons of these three states, but also might help to understand comparisons to the remaining 47 states.

Perhaps an equally important take-away from this book, underemphasized by the author, is the importance of politics and the policymaking process. Though not discussed in the book, readers should be cognizant of how concepts in this text connect to discussions of publicness, issue attention, and path dependency in other literatures, most prominently political science and public administration. Lambert frequently references the importance of politics and even discusses the ability of politics to outweigh discussions of economic and social benefits of education, but he often does not fully encompass politics in his theoretical discussion of the causal drivers and subsequent consequences of privatization. Instead, the role of politics seems to be interwoven throughout the six foundations. Political attention is finite, yet many different factors can increase or decrease the saliency of a given issue relatively quickly in today's digital age.

The role of politics overlaps with another consistent theme throughout the book: the lack of communication and abundance of misinformation that exists regarding higher education. Lambert calls for better communication in each chapter, but he does not provide concrete steps to fulfill this need. How should institutional leaders frame their arguments about the benefit of higher education? What is the best way to communicate this information to students and parents? Would methods to improve public perceptions about higher education differ according to state context, or would they look similar across all 50 states?

Next, while the book largely appears written for a broad audience, it will leave researchers wishing for more details on the methodology and data collection process. It is clear that Lambert invested much time and effort into conducting his interviews. However, the author reveals very little systematic information on how and why he chose to study his three states and does not divulge the details of his interviews, such as how many people were interviewed; the composition of representation of federal, state, and local interviews; or how individuals were selected for an interview. Further, while Lambert is somewhat less ambiguous about his decision to focus only on flagship institutions, he does not venture to consider how changing rela-

tionships may look similar or different for other research, regional, or two-year schools in each state. This type of discussion would help to boost the value of the book and would allow higher levels of comparison with future research on similar topics.

Finally, while Lambert sets up the purpose of the book to focus on the impact of privatization on higher education as a public good, he discusses few empirical consequences of privatization. Lambert does an exceptional job of discussing the relational changes between policymakers and institutional leaders, but he leaves open questions of whether these changing relationships and the trend towards privatization have had a measureable effect on institutional outcomes, either defined through economic and social contributions or defined through student performance indicators for which institutions are commonly held accountable. While it may be quite difficult to capture these quantitative changes, it would provide much more discussion for the debate surrounding the normative positive or negative meanings linked to the term privatization.

### **Contributions to Policymaking and Practice**

The overarching takeaway from Lambert's book is that there is no one-size-fits-all model for successful privatization in higher education. Instead, with 50 unique histories, each state may require slightly different strategies and models to achieve an appropriate balance between public and private forces. Readers will gain much insight from the in-depth interviews and will be left to consider how to improve discussions of the economic and social value of higher education. There is a dire need to reverse current levels of skepticism in order to improve support for public funding and to advance a common understanding of issues of quality, access, affordability, and accountability. If left unresolved, current skepticism among policymakers may only deteriorate further as competing policy issues—health care, immigration, international relations—demand even more attention.

In sum, Lambert provides a window into relationships between three states and their flagship institutions and illustrates quite convincingly that privatization is a complex issue to understand for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. He answers some questions, while raising others, such that policymakers and practitioners might be able to, first, understand the perspective of other stakeholder groups and, second, consider how best to build bridges to create a common understanding of the potential value of and current policy threats in higher education across the country.

### ***References***

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