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Book Review: *The Art and Science of Student Aid Administration in the 21st Century*

By Kathy Bialk

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Joseph A. Russo has been involved in financial aid administration as a practitioner, trainer, teacher, and mentor since 1965. *The Art and Science of Student Aid Administration in the 21st Century* (Russo, 2010) was written following his experience as a Visiting Fellow in 2006 at New College, Oxford University; it expands upon ideas and information presented in his publication, *Student Financial Aid: Lessons for UK from the US* (Russo, 2007). According to Russo, the goal of *Art and Science of Student Aid* “is to map out in simple terms the policies and procedures by which student financial aid has emerged in the United States and how it is administered today” (p. xviii). His intention is to inform, foster further thinking and analysis of public policy as it relates to higher education access and affordability, and inspire further research and debate.

Upon reading the title and brief description on the back cover of the book, I had a preconceived idea of its content. Because my perspective is derived from a practitioner’s point of view, I thought it would be more about what I already know and understand from my 27 years of financial aid experience working in different sectors of higher education. I expected the book to be about the day-to-day or functional work we do following laws, regulations, and policies helping students secure financial aid resources to access higher education. With the exception of a discussion about how financial need is determined and how financial aid packaging may be handled, Russo’s book does not explore the minutiae of student aid administration. Instead, it went far beyond what I expected. This publication is not only about financial aid administration but also about higher education financing. The author’s discussion takes a holistic approach to examining financial aid administration in the 21st century. It is an in-depth analysis of financial aid policies and higher education cost controls, pricing, performance, and accountability. It also points out the challenges of change, complexity, competition and college rankings, tuition discounting, and student debt.

The essence of Russo’s thesis is that financial aid administrators’ basic goals and mission should not focus solely on student aid but also on higher education in general. He states that America’s successful but uncoordinated and overlapping set of student financial aid programs are repeatedly questioned as to their value, how they are being administered, and who is receiving the financial benefits. In each chapter, Russo explores important topics, reviewing and highlighting the various aspects of policies and procedures involved in higher education financing. He begins with a historical survey and explains how higher education has evolved into a complex patchwork of opportunities. Russo discusses many of the successes, failures, and challenges of higher education financing. He points

out the major tenants, which include the fundamental principles and assumptions upon which early student aid policy was based.

The author devotes much attention to the topic of financial need. He explains in detail the methodologies used to measure a family's ability to pay, commonly referred to in the industry as the Expected Family Contribution (EFC). Russo, in a step-by-step discussion, compares the differences between two methodologies: federal (FM) and institutional (IM). FM is the standard formula by which all postsecondary institutions must use to determine federal student aid eligibility; it is also widely used by states to determine a student's state aid eligibility. Schools that use IM require students to complete the CSS/Financial Aid PROFILE® application, which collects more data than the U.S. Department of Education's form, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The FAFSA is the only application that may be used to determine students' federal student aid eligibility. Many readers could very well wonder why Russo dedicates significant space explaining IM when so few of Title IV participating postsecondary institutions require students to complete this application in addition to the FAFSA. Because I practiced financial aid administration prior to the existence of the FAFSA and FM, I understand the fundamental differences between FM and IM and have an appreciation for the point Russo offers in comparing the two methodologies. One of those fundamental differences of FM and Im is that "the tax system itself is filled with legal loopholes for reducing personal income tax liability" (p.12), which lowers Adjusted Gross Income, allowing some families to appear financially needy when in actuality they are not.

According to Russo, there are certain major dynamics that have greatly changed the manner in which higher education is financed and managed through tax credits and charitable contribution deductions. Student aid financing has been typically administered directly to the students in the form of financial aid awards. Less commonly known is that federal and state governments provide significant support for all not-for-profit educational institutions, including tax exemptions and charitable contribution deductions. In addition, for more than a decade, the government has been providing indirect support to pay for college costs through tax policy—giving tax credits and deductions to families for paying tuition, fees, and books. The cost of this is lost revenue to the government treasury, but the reduced tax liabilities benefit the vocal middle, and especially upper-middle, income families (pp. 48 – 51).

Russo points out that the financial aid profession has grown and changed immensely and so has the research and data on trends in student aid; effectiveness of one kind of program versus another, success rates of students from various backgrounds or those enrolled in certain kinds of institutions, and characteristics of student aid administrators. Moreover, some institutions study enrollment patterns of students as the basis for redirecting student aid resources in more strategic ways.

Russo is at his best when highlighting and discussing many of the successes, failures, and challenges of higher education financing, but I feel

he did not delve into the concept of professional judgment deeply enough. Though the act of professional judgment is an art—as Russo so aptly describes—he does not do enough to illustrate the complexity, the frequency, and variety of ways financial aid administrators practice that art. Despite this shortcoming, Russo’s book is an excellent resource with immense value. This publication helps put a number of student aid policy issues in context. It explains the differing views on financial aid matters, describes why they occur, and considers some of their subsequent consequences. In an effort to find a reasonable balance between the “good” and “the not always so good” U.S. models for providing higher education, the author’s discussion serves primarily to inspire further research and debate related to the difficult issues of affordability and the role of student aid, which abounds with conflicting and expensive policies, confusion, misunderstanding, and discouragement.

To be sure, Russo is a consummate financial aid professional who clearly understands the meaning of art and science:

The true artist is quite rational as well as imaginative and knows what he is doing; if he does not, his art suffers. The true scientist is quite imaginative as well as rational, and sometimes leaps to solutions where reason can follow only slowly; if he does not, his science suffers (Asimov, 1983)—

And he has clearly articulated that student aid in the 21st Century is both an art and a science. *The Art and Science of Student Aid* is a critical read for financial aid professionals: the book offers numerous stimulating and interesting questions that we should consider, help answer, and, should attempt to have greater influence on the direction of student aid policy. Indeed, Russo has strengthened and expanded my understanding that financial aid policy must be viewed holistically—not just in terms of student financial aid but in the overall context of higher education.

Financial aid administrators are not the only group who should read this publication, but also the senior administrators and presidents of postsecondary institutions.. With a greater appreciation of financial aid administrators culled from this book, college and university presidents and other members on the executive cabinet would less likely view financial aid professionals as “technocrats” but rather as “strategic thinkers” who are capable of contributing immensely to sensible and prudent student aid policy making at all levels: institutional, local, state, and federal. Most importantly, I concur with Russo’s assertion that student aid policy makers should insist on the review of sound research evaluation and see the actual impact of programs and practices before making decisions rather than reacting to the noises and responding to the distractions often accompanying the shorter view. Reading this book is a good start.

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