

New England Journal of Public Policy

Volume 20

Issue 1 *The War on Poverty: Unfinished Business*


Article 14

9-21-2004

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Recommended Citation

Woodbury, Robert L. (2004) "Higher Education and the Promise of Opportunity," *New England Journal of Public Policy*: Vol. 20: Iss. 1, Article 14.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol20/iss1/14>

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Higher Education and the Promise of Opportunity

Robert L. Woodbury

The article portrays the passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965 as a watershed event, much like the Morrill Land Grant Act and the G.I. Bill, in the history of opening higher education to a broader range of citizens. What had once been a largely private enterprise for the elite became an increasingly public commitment to make a college and university education accessible to anyone qualified to take advantage of the opportunity. In the last two decades, however, that promise has faded as costs have escalated, financial aid has become less available to the needy, federal and state support has lessened, universities and colleges have become more market oriented and economically segregated, and the barriers to equal access have become higher.

The year 1965 marked two important events, both in substance and symbol, in the commitment to broader access to higher education in the United States and in Massachusetts. At the federal level, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Higher Education Act, which sought to open post-high school education to more middle- and low-income students — a significant piece of Great Society legislation. In Massachusetts, Maurice Donahue, president of the Senate, following on the work of the Willis-Harrington Commission on Higher Education in the Commonwealth, led the legislative effort to expand opportunity generally in the state and create a new campus of the University of Massachusetts in Boston.

Before 1965, three great initiatives contributed to the expansion of higher education beyond the myriad of small, private colleges that mostly served the elite during the two centuries following the opening of Harvard College in 1636. Although normal schools began in Massachusetts before the Civil War, the first great act in expanding the mission and constituency for higher education came with the Morrill Act of 1862 during the presidency of Abraham Lincoln. The Morrill Act created a land grant university in every state in the

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nation and, coupled with the creation of normal schools to train teachers, opened up a great new vision of public higher education, in mission, access, and relationship to the economy. The second milestone was the passage of the G.I. Bill immediately after World War II, an act opposed by several prominent leaders of private higher education in Massachusetts, which made it possible for hundreds of thousands of returning servicemen to enroll in colleges and universities. The third significant transformation in access came with the enormous expansion of community colleges, as well as public university and state college campuses generally, in the decades after 1945 that provided an accessible and affordable home for pursuing higher education in communities across the country.

In Massachusetts, the context for these great developments was different from most of the rest of the nation. From the early seventeenth century and the founding of Harvard, private colleges not only emerged in various parts of the state but also came to dominate, in both impact and prestige, attempts to develop a vigorous public sector. Massachusetts did not ignore the growing pressures to respond to new populations who sought access to higher education, but the way in which the state responded to those pressures was quite different from patterns elsewhere in the country, particularly outside the northeast.

The Great Society did not suddenly open higher education to legions of poor people. Nor did elite colleges and universities in Massachusetts suddenly become havens for the dispossessed. But 1965 was a watershed year in the broadening of access to colleges and universities across the country.

The Higher Education Act of 1965, which President Johnson signed at his alma mater, Southwest Texas State University, contained many provisions dealing with institutional development, college libraries, targeted academic programs, and campus growth. But at the heart was Title Four, which provided funds for grants, loans, and work-study programs for needy college students. The subsequently named Pell Grants (named for Senator Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island) became the centerpiece of the Higher Education Act in the years that followed. Across the nation, this Act and the enrollment pressure from the general citizenry led to an enormous expansion of the public sector of higher education. By 1970, one of every four college students received financial aid under the HEA and 34 percent of college-age young people in the United States were enrolled in college. Only 15 percent of those of college age had attended in 1950.¹

Two developments in Massachusetts reflected the national trends. First, private colleges became more accessible to those who could now obtain both federal and state-based financial aid. And several private colleges in Massachusetts, such as Northeastern and Boston University, that were hardly known in 1950, transformed themselves into major campuses with huge enrollments of middle class and first generation students from the Greater Boston area.²

Second, as marked by the adoption of the Willis-Harrington recommendations by the Massachusetts Legislature, came a large expansion of the public sector where low tuition coupled with access to financial aid, opened doors to whole new constituencies of students. In the 1960s and 1970s, the University of Massachusetts Amherst added 1,500 additional students every year and the opening of the University of Massachusetts Boston brought a public university into the neighborhood of the private colleges and universities that dominated Greater Boston.

There is also another story that marked a commitment to greater equity and opportunity. That is the story of community action based in universities, as well as programs within universities, that attempted to respond to the challenges faced by low-income people in Massachusetts and across the country. These programs included affirmative action; Upward Bound; Title III of the Higher Ed Act, which provided support to underdeveloped institutions; and efforts by college students and college programs to reach out into the community. The University of Massachusetts Amherst was a particularly prominent example in the late 1960s and into the 1970s. A host of programs including the University Without Walls, the federally funded University Year for Action, the Trio programs, affirmative action, the Career Opportunities Program, the Urban Education Center, and many more reached out to less affluent communities and also sought to support non-traditional students on the campus. These developments were even more central to the University of Massachusetts Boston, which built its fundamental mission around educational opportunity for the less advantaged and gave shape to a vital part of this commitment in its College of Public and Community Service.

The other great development of the period was the rise of the “non-traditional” student in the mix of college enrollments. The stereotype of the college student as a full-time, residential, white and male, person of the 18–24 age bracket, steadily evaporated over the four decades after 1964. By 2004, the majority of college students were female, approximately a quarter came from minority ethnic and racial communities, and less than a quarter fit the traditional stereotype of a full-time, residential, student age 18 to 24.

The story of the last twenty-five years, however, has not been solely a story of steadily expanding access. Although the number of Americans pursuing higher education is greater than that in any other nation in the world, access for low- and middle-income people became increasingly problematic even though the demand for college graduates did not wane.

Several developments occurred that began to limit opportunities for those of limited means. First, the costs of higher education steadily increased, outpacing inflation by at least one percent a year, and resulted in tuition increases that were not matched by financial aid. Tuition levels among the most elite private colleges reached nearly \$40,000 by 2004. In the public sector, tuition charges began to rise dramatically in the 1990s as states faced huge increases

in Medicare and criminal justice costs that were often met by reducing commitments to public higher education.

Second, financial aid resources did not keep pace with the rapidly rising price tag. There was a marked shift away from financial aid in the form of grants and work-study to more and more loans and higher and higher personal debt. The average annual “unmet need” for college students rose to \$2500 for all students and to over \$3200 for low-income students.³

A third development, somewhat more subtle and less clear was the gradual inclusion of higher education into the corporate mainstream of American culture. The steadily increasing calls for universities to be “partners” with other sectors, particularly the private sector; the increasing press for “accountability” from public institutions; the pressure from state governments to join strategies for economic development; the decline in state allocations to public universities that led to increased private fund raising, all joined in making higher education part of a corporate partnership in the American scheme of things and less an independent and sometimes strident force in American life.

The fourth development and the most disturbing was the increasing segregation in higher education among institutions on the basis of family income. Elite colleges, in both the private and the public sector, increasingly became places for those of high family income; the less fortunate went to less endowed private colleges and inexpensive public community colleges. A study of the one hundred forty-six most competitive colleges indicated that only 3 percent came from families of “modest social and economic background” and 74 percent came from the top quarter of such families. Harvard College, the most prestigious of all, had only 6.8 percent of its incoming class even eligible for Pell Grants in 2001–02. These trends were only reinforced by college rating systems, such as that of *U.S. News & World Report*, that tended to favor the wealthy. Further, the increasing use of “tuition discounting” and “merit” awards eroded the pool of financial aid for those with financial need. Michael McPherson and Morton Shapiro argued in their *Student Aid Game* that financial aid was no longer seen as primarily a vehicle to increase opportunity, but as “a key strategic weapon both in recruiting students and in maximizing institutional revenues.”⁴

So, how does one assess the role of higher education in expanding opportunity and access over the past forty years? At one level, this is a success story without parallel. Who would have imagined before the end of World War II, or even as late as 1960, that higher education would enroll 15 million students by 2000 and reach communities and constituencies that had enjoyed no such opportunity before. Who would have foreseen the expanded and critical role of the scores of private and public colleges and universities in the economy of Massachusetts that was the envy of the world? Who would have imagined that in 2004 a prestigious commission in the state of Maine would declare that it

was the state's "duty and responsibility" to grant a college education to all its citizens. In this sense, the cup was more than half full.⁵

But the cup was also half empty and the promise less sure. Higher education became increasingly segregated by class and family income in the last two decades of the period. The "new" and less advantaged college populations went to nearby community colleges and marginal private colleges; those with higher family incomes and from more traditional college-going classes went to the more elite institutions, both public and private, which continued to benefit from financial resources and subsidies far beyond those available to most institutions. And more and more citizens found the financial hurdles steadily more imposing as both state and federal governments reduced their commitments. As McPherson and Schapiro argued, "we see the larger forces at work right now in American higher education as forces that will tend to increase the gaps between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' among institutions and between the more and the less needy among college students."⁶

Forty years after the passage of Lyndon Johnson's great vision of making college affordable to any qualified student, George Miller, the senior Democratic member of the U.S. House Committee on Education and the Workforce, urged the Congress to "refocus our efforts to renew the Higher Education Act on the original purpose: making college affordable for low- and middle-income students." But the "forces" that McPherson and Schapiro identified seemed pervasive in a state and nation that seemed less attentive to matters of equal opportunity in 2004 than they had forty years before.⁷ ❀

Notes

1. Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 202.
2. For the story of higher education in Massachusetts after World War II, see Richard Freeland, *Academia's Golden Age: Universities in Massachusetts, 1945-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
3. These figures are for the state of Maine; Colleen Quint and Lisa Plimpton, "Investing in Higher Education is Economic Development," *Choices* 10, no. 7 (June 2004): 2.
4. Anthony Carnevale and Stephen J. Rose, "Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions," quoted in Peter Sacks, "Class Rules: The Fiction of Egalitarian Higher Education," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 25, 2003; Richard D. Kahlenberg, "Toward Affirmative Action for Economic Diversity," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 19, 2004; Robert L. Woodbury, "How to Make Your College No. 1 in U.S. News & World Report ... and Lose Your Integrity in the Process," *Connection* 17, no. 5 (Spring 2002): 18-20; Michael S. McPherson and Morton Owen Schapiro, *The Student Aid Game: Meeting Need and Rewarding Talent in American Higher Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 1.
5. See *Maine Compact for Higher Education*, Maine Development Foundation and Maine Community Foundation (May 2004).
6. McPherson and Schapiro, *The Student Aid Game*, 143.
7. George Miller, "An Important Tool to Pay Off College Debt," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 18, 2004.

I was born in St. Lucia, West Indies, immigrated to the United States in 1979, and have been a citizen for more than ten years. I am a single parent with three children: a twenty-one-year-old son now in the army, a thirteen-year-old daughter, and an eight-year-old son. I worked for Merrill Lynch in New York for fifteen years before moving to Worcester where I worked as a legal secretary until the law firm went out of business and I was laid off. So I went to the unemployment office to apply for benefits and to find out what was available.

I went to “school” at WCAC, learning new computer skills, interviewing for jobs, and writing a resume. I also learned about credit, budgeting, and other useful information. After I finished the course, I received help getting a job. I qualified for fuel assistance and I joined Worcester Community Connections, a parent empowerment program. There I learned about home ownership opportunities for families like mine and with help from WCAC staff, I applied to a community development corporation and was approved to buy a two-family home where I now live with my children.

Since 2001 I have been a representative of the WCAC board of directors. Many of the board members are business people and elected officials. They want to help people but don't know what it's like to go through problems in the community. I do, and so do the other low-income representatives on the board. We live in the neighborhoods, and can talk about what the needs are.

By volunteering and being a WCAC board member, I can help others like I was helped. Because of the services I once received at WCAC, I am self-sufficient and that makes me feel very proud.

Winifred Octave

Worcester Community Action Council

