

Degrees of

The “right” to higher education

Ambivalence



By Lawrence R. Jacobs and Eric Ostermeier

Continuing one's education after high school has become an accepted part of American life. The public sees higher education as a ticket to better-paying jobs and a stronger economy. A supermajority (from

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two-thirds to over 90% in a series of surveys) expects Americans to receive higher education and is intently concerned that motivated and qualified students may not be able to pursue their education after high school due to high costs.

In an August 1997 CBS survey, 86% of the public agreed that every capable person has a right to receive an education through college, even if he or she cannot afford it. Echoing the findings of other surveys, Public Agenda found in 1999 that 87% strongly or somewhat agreed that college education has become as important as a high school diploma used to be, and 93% strongly

or somewhat agreed that the price of higher education should not keep qualified and motivated students from attending college.

The strong expectation that all qualified students have the opportunity to pursue higher education has made Americans sensitive to violations of this “right.” A large number of surveys during the 1990s found sizable majorities worried about costs. Eighty-one percent in a 1995 *Los Angeles Times* survey were very or somewhat concerned about having enough money to send their children to college.

In a series of Pew Research Center and Public Agenda polls from 1993 to 2000, majorities of between 53 and 77% were very or somewhat concerned about being unable to save enough money to put a child through college, and the majorities tended to get bigger over time. Eighty percent or more in 1993 and 1998 called student borrowing for college a very or somewhat serious problem, while 80% in Public Agenda's 1999 poll strongly or somewhat agreed that students have to borrow too much money to pay for their education.

An even more telling indication of concern emerged from a 1998 *Wall Street Journal* survey that asked respondents to identify from a list the items they worried were being priced beyond the income of the average family. The cost of a child's college education was the top-ranked worry (identified by 70%), followed far behind by the costs of a house (44%), secure retirement (36%), and a car (24%).

Faced with concrete and specific challenges to higher education access in the form of high tuition costs, Americans look to the government to assume responsibility for lowering the financial barrier.

A string of surveys during the 1990s found majorities of 51 to 60% in support of increasing government spending on financial aid or, more specifically, loans and grants to college students; about 10% opposed the spending, and the remainder favored keeping it the same. The one exception came just after the Republican landslide in the 1994 elections, when a Princeton Survey Research Associates poll for Times Mirror found that 43% favored keeping financial aid the same, and only 41% preferred increasing it.

In a more direct test, respondents were given a choice between the gov-

ernment or individuals taking responsibility for higher education. The results consistently showed majorities in favor of government responsibility throughout the 1990s.

Eighty-three percent in a 1993 Gallup/CNN/*USA Today* survey indicated that the government should assume a great deal or fair amount of responsibility, and Gallup polls in 1995 and 1996 also found substantial majorities taking this position. Similarly, 68% in a 1999 survey conducted by Hart and Teeter for the Council for Excellence in Government thought the government should play a major role in making college education affordable, as opposed to business, community organizations or other institutions; 18% favored a medium role, and only 11% preferred a minor role.

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The public's views are not, however, uniform and unequivocal. Despite a pragmatic acceptance of a government role to create equality of opportunity, Americans remain philosophically conservative, and ill at ease about the extent and costs of expanded government involvement in higher education.

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A differently worded question in a 1997 poll conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates for the Pew Research Center found a majority (though a bit smaller) still favoring a government role: asked to assign primary responsibility for ensuring that all Americans can afford to send their children to college, 54% said that national, state, and local governments should assume the burden, while 42% pointed to individuals, private industry, and, especially, community groups.

Support has been especially high for government assistance to low-income students. The National Opinion Re-

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Only 20% identified “ensuring that every American can afford to send their children to college” as a very high or high priority. By contrast, more than 70% singled out “conserving the country's natural resources,” “ensuring every American access to affordable

health care,” and “providing [a] decent standard of living for the elderly.”

Put simply, the affordability of higher education registers in the public’s mind as a national problem, but it is not a burning issue at this time. According to a plurality of respondents, the cost of higher education, though financially painful, does not actually prevent most students from attending college. A 1998 Public Agenda survey asked whether college was or was not an opportunity for qualified students in the respondent’s state. Forty-nine percent responded that the vast majority of people qualified to go to college had the opportunity to do so; 45% believed that many did not.

Using different question wording, a 1995 poll conducted by KRC Communications/Research for the Alliance to Save Student Aid actually found that a substantial majority of Americans did not perceive costs as blocking students; 71% strongly or somewhat agreed that a college education was affordable for most Americans.

This lingering conservatism also extends to reservations about the government making guarantees and offering what the public may perceive as “handouts” to the poor.

In the relatively recent past, the public has insisted that government assistance for low-income students not be targeted to the poor alone. The 1995 Alliance to Save Student Aid poll found 73% opposed (46% strongly) to a proposal to eliminate federal government grants and loans for the middle class and concentrate on helping the poor pay for college. When asked about implementing restrictions on federal benefits to cut the budget deficit and

promote economic growth, 62% in a 1992 Gallup survey opposed limiting federal college grants and loans to all but the poor.

The public also ties support for addressing the high cost of higher education to the initiative and skill of the individual student. The 1999 Public Agenda survey found that by a 52% to 39% margin, Americans preferred allocating financial aid to students who came from middle-class families and had outstanding academic abilities over those with average abilities from very poor families.

Ambivalence about the role of government is further evident in the way people pick and choose among proposals for financial assistance. A number of surveys during the 1990s found large majorities of about 80% in favor of a range of government efforts to help students pay for higher education, including student loans, tax reductions or credits for higher education costs, and writing off college costs in exchange for community service jobs (e.g., Bill Clinton’s Americorps).

But polls that asked respondents to choose among programs reported differences in public support. Public Agenda surveys in 1993, 1998, and 1999 found strongest support for work study opportunities (between 73 and 80%) and tax breaks (between 73 and 75%), but significantly less for stu-

dent loans (57%) and, especially, direct grant money to students (between 43 and 48%).

Americans have come to perceive higher education as a stepping stone to achieving the

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American Dream—the ideal of hard work and talent as the means to individual and national economic success. But willingness to take the necessary steps to make this dream a reality is complicated by discomfort about government intervention.

Attitudes toward higher education reflect a longstanding (and well-researched) pattern in public opinion. Americans’ enduring philosophical conservatism mingles with a pragmatic acceptance of a government role to address concrete and specific challenges, such as regulating the environment, providing income security in retirement, and other measures.

In higher education, the public supports the government assuming responsibility and committing funding to finance student tuition, even as it remains uneasy about an overextended government. ●