Why Political Scientists Should Support Free Public Higher Education

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What's going on in the state of higher education should be of utmost concern to political scientists. In the midst of a sluggish economy, most states are unable to balance their budgets while the federal government produces growing budget deficits due to a combination of increased defense spending and a tax cut that mostly benefits affluent Americans. Because the federal government has provided little relief to hemorrhaging state budgets and promotes privatization of our basic social services, state and local governments have been forced to cutback on education, health care, and social programs. Unfortunately, those most in need— the unemployed, the elderly, and students—bear the brunt of public sector budget crises. In the midst of this reallocation of public monies, we need to ask ourselves, "Is this scenario good for the country? Do we as political scientists and citizens think that the federal administration's priorities—bloated defense budgets, upward redistribution of income, and parsimonious social programs—are healthy for our democracy?"

We *have* the financial resources for public spending when there is the political will to commit those resources, as evidenced by the billions of dollars appropriated for relief to New York City, the airline industry bailout, and escalating defense spending. Privatization and deregulation have not brought us either the quality of services or the cost savings that were advertised. Rather than rejecting out of hand an increased role for the federal government, we need to determine how our society can best provide quality social services. The main question is whether the vast majority of people in the U.S. will benefit from the federal government providing the essential goods and services that promote freedom and security. One of those essential goods is education and, increasingly, higher education.

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Cutbacks, Rising Tuition and Privatization

Higher education is an area in which the effects of the recession are readily apparent, particularly in public college and university systems. As the federal administration chips away at the nation's social services system, state budgets are required to cover additional funding for social programs and education. As a result, state governments have been contributing from 36 to 45% of public colleges' total revenue (U.S. Department of Education 2002). However, as almost every state reels from the effects of recession and tax cuts, legislatures slash higher-education budgets—the largest discretionary item in most state budgets. Colleges respond with hefty tuition increases, reduced financial assistance, and new fees. These measures put an extra burden on the average family, whose net worth has declined over the last two years for the first time in half a century and who may be suffering from recent job loss. Increased tuition, coupled with inadequate financial aid, is a significant problem for millions of families since most undergraduate students (83%) attend public colleges (The College Board 2002a).

According to the College Board, over the last decade, public four-year average college tuition and fees increased 40% and private four-year tuition increased 33% (The College Board 2002a). Most recently, from 2001 to 2003, according to the National Center on Public Policy and Higher Education, tuition and fees at public four-year colleges and universities rose in every state, over 10% in 16 states. Community colleges—the safety net and gateway to advanced studies for many—also increased charges. Tuition and fees rose in all but two states, with 10 states mandating increases of more than 10%. Some community college officials in California estimate an enrollment decline of about 200,000 students

Editor's Note

"Hyde Park" sessions have been a regular part of APSA annual meetings since 1993, offering open discussions focusing on contemporary policy controversies. The first two sessions addressed humanitarian intervention in Bosnia and Somalia and gays in the military. This issue of *PS* introduces a Hyde Park section with an essay by Preston H. Smith and Sharon Szymanski on why political scientists should support free public higher education. The authors' case for removing financial constraints on access to higher education hopefully will invite responses from disapproving and approving readers. If you wish to comment on the Smith and Szymanski article, all or a representative sample of your comments will be published in a future issue of *PS*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096503003470 Published online by Cambridge University Press

due to fee (tuition) increases. As one California critic stated, "By the same logic, if we executed more prison inmates, we could reduce state spending on prisons" (National Center 2003).

Budget cuts and tuition increases also ripple throughout the academic community, resulting in more hiring freezes and early retirement among full-time faculty—a combination which increases the growth of poorly paid contingent instructors, overcrowded classrooms, and fewer courses. Also, the widespread effect of budget cuts on all state university systems and the concomitant increases in tuition drive some major universities to make their public institutions more private. The trend of selective public universities towards privatization is the response calculated by the Bush administration's agenda to privatize public services (including education) by depleting the Treasury through a huge tax cut for the wealthy and a massive military buildup. By moving towards tuition deregulation, public colleges violate their mandates to individuals and to society to provide a quality education to all who qualify. State schools have traditionally been the ladders to good jobs for students from working and middle class families. Soon, only the wealthiest will be able to afford the best public colleges and universities.

The City University of New York (CUNY) provides not only an example of the general social benefits that result from the removal of financial constraint from access to higher education, but also the devastation that resulted once those constraints were inserted and tightened in recent years. Since 60% of CUNY students are in families with incomes under $30,000, the tuition increases will undoubtedly end college careers, and the opportunity for more secure, and rewarding jobs and lives for many (Ahevelyn 2003; Arenson 2003a; Glanville 2003; Arenson 2003b). Reporting on the devastating effects of rising tuition, the Congressional Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance reports that by the end of this decade as many as 4.4 million college-qualified high school graduates will be unable to enroll in a four-year college, and 2 million will not go to college at all because they can't afford it (Advisory Committee 2002).

Inadequate Financial Aid

Although there seems to be a lot of it ($90 billion), financial aid has changed its stripes and is inadequate. Increasingly, college attendance for all except the wealthy has become contingent on qualification for interest-carrying student loans. Three decades ago, a financial aid system—the backbone being Pell Grants—guaranteed access to public colleges for primarily low- and moderate-income students. Millions of Americans earned college degrees as a result. In 1975, the maximum Pell grant covered 84% of costs at a four-year public college. Now, the grant covers only 42% of costs at four-year public colleges and only 16% of costs at four-year private colleges (The College Board 2002b).

In general, loan-based financial aid and a tax code that favors the most privileged have replaced grant-based financial aid. Such a shift devastates lower income families. Yet it highlights the effects of rising tuition costs on all income levels, particularly higher income families who use their greater political clout to secure aid programs beneficial to their needs. A decade ago, 50% of student aid was in the form of grants and 47% was in the form of loans (2% was work aid). Today, grants are down to 39% of total aid, loans have increased to 54% and tax credits are 6% (work aid is 1%) (The College Board 2002b). In 1992, Washington decided to further help out the wealthier by making unsubsidized loans available to all students, changing the definition of need, and increasing the loan limits for subsidized loans. Now unsubsidized loans, although the most expensive, account for over half of all federal loan monies and are increasingly popular since they do not require documented financial need.

Similar to unsubsidized loans in that they are not need based, tax credits and tax deductions shift a proportion of total federal aid monies away from lower-income students. Tax credits and deductions cannot be used by students from families with incomes too low to pay taxes. Families who owe little taxes will have the value of their tax credit reduced so that it doesn't exceed what they owe in taxes. And any grant, such as a Pell, may reduce or even eliminate a family's tuition tax credit.

Further heightening the reliance on interest-bearing loans to pay for college is the recent bureaucratic change in the federal needs formula which determines how much of a family's income is really discretionary and therefore fair game for covering college costs. The formula decreases the amount of state and local taxes that families can deduct, thereby increasing the amount of money the government says families have to pay for college. A report by the Congressional Research Service states that the new financial formula will reduce Pell Grants by $270 million, disqualify 84,000 students from receiving any Pell grants, and reduce the amount of Pell grants for hundreds of thousands more students. It will also affect all state and university awards and grants (Winter 2003).

Students at Risk

Skyrocketing tuition and reliance on interest-carrying loans force some students to forego college altogether, while others drop out or delay graduation because they sacrifice the time for their studies in order to work. An inadequate financial system that forces students to work long hours affects grades, choice of courses, grant awards, and their chances for graduating. Fifty-three percent of low-income freshman who work more than 35 hours per week drop out and do not receive a degree. Contrast this with low-income freshman who work fewer hours; of those who work one to 14 hours per week, only 20% do not receive a degree (Advisory Committee 2001).

Loan Debt

As a result of an increasing reliance on loans, the majority of students (64%) graduate with an average debt of almost $17,000, up significantly from $8,200 in 1989 (King and Bannon 2002). Loan burdens have increased for graduates at all levels of income, at both public and private institutions. Although lower income students have a greater total debt burden, the largest percentage increase in indebtedness is among higher income students (Boushey 2003). Faced with repaying huge loans, students often reconsider their career plans. Our society suffers if students abandon lower-paying occupations in teaching, social services, and health care in order to seek courses of study that lead to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096503003470 Published online by Cambridge University Press

higher income jobs that speed loan repayment.

College and the Military

One of the results of the move towards privatization of public higher education is that military service may prove a prerequisite for lower- and middle-class students to afford college. As increasing numbers of lower- and middle-income families find it more difficult to pay for college, or are pushed out altogether, more students may agree to sign up with Uncle Sam because he promises to foot the bill for their education. However, for many the opportunities offered by Uncle Sam, "Join the Army and earn up to $50,000 for college," do not pan out (www.military.com and www.objector.org). Almost 66% of recruits never get any college funding from the military (although they have paid into the college fund), and those who do get far less than $50,000.

The Montgomery GI Bill and the Army College Fund or Navy Fund are complicated, multi-tiered programs that offer military benefits for college education after two–three years of active duty. To receive any education benefit an enlistee must contribute $100 per month for the first 12 months of their tour. Even if a recruit changes his or her mind about attending college, the monthly payment cannot be cancelled and the accumulated $1,200 cannot be refunded, ever. Benefits are conferred only to those who receive a fully honorable discharge— "general" discharges and those "under honorable conditions" mean no college benefits. To be eligible for the $50,000 benefit, enlistees must qualify for the Army or Navy College Fund by scoring in the top half of the military entry tests (achieved by only 1 in 20), and by enlisting in specific military occupations—typically unpopular jobs that have no transferable skills in the civilian job market. To receive the maximum amount, the military requires graduation with a four-year degree, achieved only by 15% of those who qualify. However, the majority of enlistees attends two-year schools and therefore can receive only a maximum of $7,788 (which includes their $1,200). Military persons desiring to use their significantly reduced college benefits face the same problems as other students and their families—ever increasing tuition and fees as well as the prospect of working additional hours in order to meet expenses.

A Social Right

Although paying for higher education is a great financial burden for most Americans, they recognize not only the economic necessity of a college degree in today's job market, but the benefits of education for improving the well-being of our society. In a recent survey, 96% of Americans said college was a good investment and in another survey respondents indicated that colleges are where our nation does its thinking and where students consider how to contribute to and answer questions about society and quality of life (Education Testing Service 2003; Immerwahr 1999). An astounding 87% of Americans believe that to be part of the American Dream, a "college education has become as important as a high school diploma used to be" (Immerwahr and Foleno 2000).

If higher education plays such an overwhelmingly significant role for individual and societal success, shouldn't society have an obligation to provide universal access to college as an essential social right? Shouldn't all who qualify, not just those who can afford it, be given the opportunity to participate fully in society through access to a college education? Why shouldn't access to higher education be available without tuition charges to everyone meeting admissions criteria, as a social right, at any public institution in the United States?

Federal guarantee of universal access to higher education is not entirely unprecedented in recent American history. The most dramatic approximation was the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, popularly known as the G.I. Bill, available to soldiers from the end of World War II to 1976. Unlike the current Montgomery G.I. Bill, which is a recruitment package, the sole purpose of the "old" G.I. Bill was to send veterans to post-secondary schools. In fact, the G.I. Bill was really the beginning of mass post-secondary education. The G.I. Bill paid for the college education of almost 8 million World War II veterans. The Bill provided for full tuition, fees, and family living stipends of up to $1,440 ($14,136 in 2001 dollars) (Kiester 1994). A 1988 report by a congressional subcommittee on education estimated that 40% of those who attended college under the Bill would not otherwise have done so; that by 1987 the college attendees paid additional taxes totaling almost $68 billion (in current year dollars) which more than paid for the entire program; and that they increased the nation's output of goods and services by $312 billion (in current year dollars) (Subcommittee on Education 1988). Overall, the program was heralded as one of the greatest pieces of social legislation.

The G.I. Bill had a broad, lasting effect on our country. Not only did participants realize increased incomes and an enhanced quality of life, but society was repaid with thousands of engineers, scientists, doctors, nurses, and, overall, a more skilled workforce and educated public. These benefits were passed down through the generations, contributing to a huge expansion in college enrollment—21% between 1950 and 1960 and almost 167% between 1960 and 1970. This growth led to expanding existing colleges and building new ones, often in under-served urban and rural areas, thereby reaching new segments of the population. Such growth stimulated employment opportunities ranging from construction to faculty, staff, and support services. Overall, this expansion democratized and deepened the intellectual life and academic parameters of colleges and universities.

Free tuition at all public colleges and universities for those meeting admission criteria is economically feasible. *The Digest of Education Statistics 2002* by the National Center for Education Statistics reports that 1999–2000 (most recent data available) tuition and fees at all four-year and two-year degree-granting public educational institutions totaled just over $29 billion (U.S. Department of Education 2002). This is a relatively small sum, equivalent to 1.6% of the federal budget for that year. Even if increased access were to double the number of students attending colleges and double the annual tuition to $58 billion, that would still be a sum easily absorbable within current federal budgets. Such a commitment to higher education could be absorbed by restoring minimal tax justice—for example, simply closing corporate tax shelters recently passed by Congress would generate more than $170 billion over the next two years in lost corporate taxes (Citizens for Tax Justice); a portion of tax dollars supporting the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096503003470 Published online by Cambridge University Press

current military budget of $396 billion could be tapped as well as redirecting the most recent tax cut for the wealthy of $1.3 trillion over 10 years.

The Debs-Jones-Douglas Institute (www.djdinstitute.org), a non-profit educational organization associated with the Labor Party has initiated a grassroots campaign—already begun on campuses and in unions, community groups, and other organizations—to call for the federal government to make higher education accessible to all academically qualifying students by paying all tuition and fees for full-time students at all public, post-secondary institutions in the United States (access also should include adequate remedial support for borderline students and easy movement between community colleges and universities). We forget that a high school education was not always free and available to all except privileged white males. There was a time in our history when high school was recognized as essential for participation in our society and when people struggled for universal access. Today, people say that a college degree is as important as a high school education used to be.

Why Support It?

There are two main reasons why political scientists should support free higher education at public colleges and universities for those who qualify. First, more access to higher education will mean more participation in the United States political system. It has become a truism in political science literature that the more educated the citizens are the more they participate in the political system by voting, becoming active in a political party or interest group, contacting their representatives, etc. Of course, there is a debate among our profession about whether more participation is a good thing for the stability of the U.S. political system. Putting aside who benefits from this "stability," a democracy values more and better participation. Giving U.S. citizens more access to higher education will increase their interest and investment in governance. A better educated population will be able to assess more critically the policies of the U.S. government as well as discern more effective ways to influence those policies that ignore the needs of the vast majority of the population. It will mean that we as political scientists will have to refocus the purpose of our academic programs to produce more critical citizens in addition to adding to our professional ranks. Free public higher education at public colleges for those who qualify will produce more citizens who will demand and become skilled in the deliberative processes that enrich our democratic political system.

The second reason is more specific to the current climate on college and university campuses. State fiscal crises have starved public college and university budgets, causing overfull classrooms, permanently deferred maintenance on buildings and grounds, and administrative staffs struggling to preserve the learning environment. All of these factors produce a funereal atmosphere in many places. In addition to the severe depletion of morale, is the chilling effect that these austerity measures have on academic freedom. The more that public higher educational institutions have to rely on corporations for their funding of research and, increasingly, academic programs, the more influence, however subtle, will be felt on what and how we teach our subjects. But increasing privatization is not alone in challenging freedom of expression on college campuses. The surveillance of students and faculty by the Justice Department is having an enormous impact on our colleagues' willingness to teach unpopular ideas and subjects and to give dissenting views a full examination in the classroom. By expanding access to public colleges and universities to many older and young adults we will depend less on corporations and more on students who will come from more diverse backgrounds than we currently see on our campuses. Through free public higher education a new diverse constituency will take its place on our campuses and demand the opportunity to learn in an environment free of coercion from corporate sponsorships and political correctness issued from the Justice Department. The best guarantee of academic freedom is increasing citizen access, with their diverse views and needs, to our classrooms and laboratories.

Conclusion

It is our duty as political scientists to protect academic freedom and to insure the broadest possible consideration of public policy alternatives. The terms of national political debate in recent years have reflected a pre-emptive rejection of a federal government's role in provision of basic goods and services in the U.S. It is time to re-examine this ill-considered narrowing of public policy options. If we use the democratic principles of freedom and equality as our guide posts, our positions should reflect what public policy would be if the country were governed in the interests of the vast majority of its citizens.

Free public higher education at public colleges and universities for those who qualify is a policy that appeals immediately to students, parents, university faculty and staff, and the organizations that represent them. It also has a natural and historic base in the labor movement, and not only among unions that represent workers in the education sector. Free public education was one of the two main demands of the earliest American unions, along with the shorter work week. Also, it is misleading to think that only the upper-middle class can benefit from higher education. Interest in educating oneself and one's children—for both reasons related to employment and reasons related to intellectual curiosity and self-fulfillment—is not by any means the exclusive property of the upper-middle class. It is condescending to think that other working people do not have similar aspirations and abilities. Indeed, an element of this issue's appeal is its broad resonance within the population; it has the potential to cut across the familiar lines of division by race, gender, age, inner-city, and suburb that has been successfully exploited and intensified over the past two decades.

Removal of financial constraint on access to higher education at public colleges and universities for those who qualify meets the test that it is in the interests of the vast majority of the people, and, thus, contributes to a redefinition of national public policy and an expansion of the foundations of American democracy. On that basis we should support it as political scientists and as citizens.

To learn more about the campaign and to sign a statement of support, visit the wab site at *www.freehighered.org.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096503003470 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096503003470 Published online by Cambridge University Press

AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION

APSA Minority Fellows Program

The APSA Minority Fellows Program, established in 1969 as an effort to increase the number of minority scholars in the discipline, has designated more than 300 fellows and contributed to the successful completion of doctoral political science programs for over 70 individuals. This year, the Association has refocused and increased its efforts to assist minority students in completing their doctorates by concentrating not only on the recruitment of minorities, but also on the retention of these groups within the profession.

The Minority Fellows Program designates six stipend minority fellows each year. Additional applicants who do not receive funds from the Association may also be recognized and recommended for admission and financial support to graduate political science programs across the country. Fellows with stipends receive a $4,000 fellowship that is disbursed in two $2,000 payments at the end of each academic year provided that the student is in good academic standing. Awards are based on students' undergraduate course work, GPA, extracurricular activities, and recommendations from faculty.

ELIGIBILITY

The APSA Minority Fellows Program is primarily designed for African American, Latino/a, and Native American students who are entering a doctoral program in political science for the first time. Applicants must be:

- Seniors in colleges or universities applying to a doctoral program in political science or students currently enrolled in a Master's program applying for doctoral study at another institution; and
- Citizens of the United States.

Applicants must also:

- Show strong academic achievement in prior political science and related courses;
- Demonstrate an interest in teaching and potential for research in political science; and
- Demonstrate financial need.

SELECTION

Awards will be announced at the end of November, and students will need to accept formally by December. Recipient profiles will appear in the April 2004 issue of *PS: Political Science & Politics*.

Highlights

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Six minority students entering political science doctoral programs are selected to receive $4,000.

Non-funded fellows are also recognized and recommended to graduate programs.

Applications are available online at www.apsanet.org/about/minority/fellows.cfm

Applications must be postmarked by October 10, 2003!

APPLICATION

Interested students should go to the Minority Fellows Program web page at ‹www.apsanet.org/about/minority/fellows.cfm› to download the application form. Applications must be postmarked to APSA by **October 10, 2003** and must include the following materials *in one packet*:

- A completed application form;
- Three letters of recommendation from academic sources;
- Official transcripts for all collegiate institutions attended; and
- A personal statement.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096503003470 Published online by Cambridge University Press