

**Explaining Policy Change in K-12 and Higher Education**  
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**Introduction**

Education reform in the United States in the last half-century has been overwhelmingly focused on K-12 education. Educators in primary and secondary schools have gone from a tradition of relative autonomy to the point where the impact of local, state and federal policy initiatives can be observed in most every classroom in most every public school in the country. In contrast, while higher education has undergone policy reforms, the impact of these reforms has not been nearly so far-reaching. Most college and university administrators and faculty exist still retain high levels of autonomy in their profession without much awareness of or engagement in state and federal policy, a situation which stands in stark contrast to school administrators and teachers.

Why would this be so? How could it be that while K-12 has seen wave after wave of reform efforts, higher education has been relatively unscathed? We point to a few key issues that set the groundwork for policy reform in higher education and K-12 education.

Our goal in this chapter is to highlight the key differences that we observe in the political sphere that have driven the differential development of policy for K-12 and higher education. We then offer theoretical accounts from multiple perspectives on how policy is developed in each of these two realms. We then utilize this comparison in order to describe what might need to occur in the political arena in

order for large-scale policy reforms to occur within higher education, as they have in K-12 education.

Our plan for this chapter is as follows: we begin by describing the impetus for reform in K-12 and higher education, showing the interests and motivations of major stakeholders in each field and how these have driven current policy. In this section we suggest that public pressure placed on politicians led directly to efforts first to reform the external operations of primary and secondary schools, such as finances, while continued dissatisfaction led to the current push for changes in what is taught, who teaches, and how content is taught. Higher education, by contrast, has been charged with responding to the changing nature of the workforce, with more and more workers needing at least some form of postsecondary education in order to be successful. In stark contrast to K-12, policy changes for higher education up until the recent moment have been concerned with increasing the size of the system or with increasing access to the system. Reforms intended to change the way the system operates have been virtually non-existent, up until now.

We next turn to theoretical explanations of changes in policy, first in K-12 education and next in higher education. We consider multiple different theories that might explain what has happened in the two fields, including Kingdon's agenda setting theory, advocacy coalition and regime change theories, and rational choice theory. Since public opinion has been shown to be a driver of policy change in other areas, we review trends in public opinion regarding how the public views K-12 education and higher education. The evidence we review shows that the public has long been more

critical of K-12 than higher education, and has only recently begun to question the value of a college education. Last, we conclude by discussing what the political science literature suggests might be the key changes in the external environment that would lead to major policy reform in higher education.

### **What drives policy change in K-12 Education?**

In broad terms, three change epochs in public policy influenced the development of K-12 policymaking in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: civil rights, concern for the handicapped, equitable financing of public services, and international economic competition. At the beginning of 1965 the influential concepts were civil rights, equity, and minorities. As of 2010, policy focus shifted to quality, productivity, and efficiency. The amount of new policies created after 1965 is impressive, but most of these policy reforms were not initiated by interest groups of educators.

The ideas, advocates, and first efforts for K-12 reform came from outside the K-12 formal school system. There was substantial resistance from professional educators, school boards, and other organized education interests. A major question of this chapter is why these powerful internal K-12 forces were overwhelmed by many external forces in K-12 , but not in postsecondary education.

The K-12 resistance was strong and deeply rooted in professional and bureaucratic ideas, values, organizational culture, and in personal belief systems of policymakers, politicians, and K-12 school officials. Even though the 1983 *Nation at Risk* report received widespread attention the reaction of K-12 lobbies was to

intensify the existing system by adding more school time and resources. During the 1980's K-12 educators contended that they taught the students, but the students did not learn. The entire system had scant connections to productivity or student outcomes.

As the pressure mounted in the 21st Century it included using student test scores for educator compensation and promotion. Most educators resisted this. They had never experienced a compensation system other than a civil service system using experience and college credits beyond the BA. Almost no incompetent teacher had ever been dismissed, and teachers unions were powerful in most states.

K-12 is now in an era where there are two main bottom lines: improving classroom instruction and increasing student achievement. K-12 policy has shifted from primary concern with adults, who are employees of school systems, to children's outcomes. These types of interventionist policy frameworks have not penetrated as deeply into postsecondary education. Moreover, ever since the 1980s K-12 education has used systemic standards based reform to implement a complicated set of policies that require school system practices that are vertically and horizontally aligned to student outcomes. Federal and state policies now influence not only what is taught in classrooms, but also how it is taught.

### **What drives policy change in higher education?**

The rapid increase in technological and knowledge-based industries since the middle part of the twentieth century changed American higher education's relationship with American society. First, the increased payoff to higher education meant that many more people attended college, shifting the system from a narrow

one to a mass system of higher education, now on its way to becoming a universal system of higher education. Second, the increased demand for technological advancement gave the federal government a strong incentive to utilize colleges and universities as a center for research and development (Goldin and Katz, 2008, 1999).

Higher education as an industry responded to both of these challenges well, providing much more access than previously and responding to government incentives by establishing the world's pre-eminent research universities. Public higher education in particular developed very rapidly during the time period from 1945-1980, with institutions being built and expanded by state government. Most state policymakers assumed during this time period that support for higher education's development would be sufficient to ensure that it would serve its societal role (Kerr, 2001, 1991). However, the challenges of this time period meant that many states put in place the first systems of governance of higher education, meant to coordinate the efforts of the states' systems of higher education and ensure that institutions were meeting some public needs (Glenny, 1959).

We are now in the middle of a third transition in public policy for higher education. States are no longer in a financial or a organizational sense able to maintain their roles as owner-operators of public higher education. Nor are states able to maintain historical financial or relationships with private institutions of higher education. State funding for higher education appears to be on a downward trend. The federal government finds itself in the same situation, unable in particular to keep up with the rapidly increasing costs of higher education. Instead,

policymakers find themselves in the paradoxical position of needing higher education more—due to the increased importance of a college degree—and being less able to directly control the systems of higher education in their state.

In the current moment, a need for high-quality higher education to satisfy workforce needs contends with rising frustration with increasing costs (and therefore prices) of higher education, which limit access and make efforts to provide student aid increasingly futile. These two converging trends are leading policymakers to question the internal operations of colleges and universities, including traditional modes of delivery and the organization and governance of institutions.

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In the next two sections, we describe theoretical accounts of how policy is made in K-12 and higher education. We evaluate the applicability of various theories drawn from the political science literature to the major policy changes we observe in K-12 and higher education. These accounts lead to our final two sections, in which we contrast how politics has driven major K-12 reform efforts with how politics *might* drive major higher education reform efforts.

### **Theoretical Explanations of Policymaking in K-12 Education**

There are several descriptive/analytical approaches to political developments in K-12, and a few that focus on theoretical constructs (McDonnell, 2010). These theoretical publications have some implications for predicting postsecondary future changes.

We begin by observing first that public opinion will play a key role in policy formation, as public demands for change need to be addressed by policymakers. Public concern about—and disapproval of K-12 education is much greater than concern about postsecondary education. For decades, the annual K-12 Gallup poll gives schools in a state or nation a C-, while a 2001 poll demonstrated that the public gives higher education a B/B+ (Gallup and Immerwahr, 2001)<sup>1</sup>. Without this aroused public, postsecondary education reforms did not attract much political momentum in the past 20 years. In contrast, public grades for K-12 were lowest just before President Bush proposed NCLB in 2001.

A crucial reason for a fundamental shift to enlarged state education control is the widespread loss of confidence in local K-12 educators and their communities. The federal government led in 1965 with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that embodied a view that local educators could not be trusted to improve education for low income and minority children. As state governance capacity improve education for handicapped children, English learners, and other special categories. Then the key instrument of local control—the property tax—began to diminish through equity and tax limitation assaults.

By 1983, the public and state policymakers believed that local communities could no longer adequately educate the typical student with no special needs. So systemic standards-based reform began by influencing what and how teachers taught. No Child Left Behind was the capstone of accountability pressure on local schools, and is administered through states. State policymakers now have the

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<sup>1</sup> For many years of polls see <http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/k0304pol.pdf>

instruments to connect the capitol to what goes on weekly inside local classrooms. At the time, forty states passed charter school laws to allow more parental choice, and create competition.

The loss of confidence in local education is palpable and well documented (Fusarelli and Cooper, 2009). It varies in form and intensity by state, but the trend is similar (McGuinn, 2006, pp 206-209). However, we must be careful not to view the aggregate impact of state policy growth as strictly a zero sum game whereby one level gains and another loses influence on policy and school administration. Rather, the result can be an increased volume of policy and control at all levels. For example, state academic standards policies can stimulate more curriculum activity at the district and principals' offices. State policies can be the local springboard for local authorities to devise new solutions.

### **Theoretical Concepts of K-12 Policy Change**

To explain policy change in K-12, several theoretical frameworks have been developed. While none of these can provide a complete account of the antecedents of policy change, there are several partial theories that have been prominent in the K-12 literature.

The first major framework is due to John Kingdon (1984), and is known as the converging policy stream model. According to Kingdon, policy emerges from the coupling of three independent process streams: problems, proposals, and politics. Policy entrepreneurs play a crucial role in bringing the three streams together, and promising a policy window opens it at particular time. For example, the Nation at



Risk report in 1985 came at a time of USA economic recession that was alleged to have been created by international education competition (Kingdon, 1995)..

Another widely used theory is the Punctuated Equilibrium Model. According to proponents of this model, policy change is incremental characterized as long periods of stability interrupted by changes to the system. Stability is maintained by policy monopolies and supported by policy ideas linked to core values. Changes occur when those opposed or excluded from policy monopolies redefine the dominant policy image, provide new understandings of policy problems, and new ways of thinking about solutions (Baumgartner and Jones, 2002).

Three factors common to theories of agenda setting and policy change are: 1) the content and appeal of an alternative policy, 2) structures that support current policy monopolies, and 3) interests supporting vs. those mobilizing to change the status quo.

#### Content and Appeal of Alternative Policies

There has been much more development of various “frames” with which to understand K-12 policy issues than there has been for postsecondary education. Rhetorical framing helps policy solutions resonate with widely accepted values, mobilizes support, and minimizes opposition. Successful framing embodies a theory that assumes a positive relationship between the policy and improved educational outcomes, is grounded in evidence, is universal and inclusive, and uses everyday language (Stone, 2011)

#### Structures that Support Current Policies

A major reason why policy ideas endure, become monopolies, and are resistant to change is because they are embedded within institutions. Path dependence, the process in which policy choices create institutional arrangements that make it costly to reverse or change them, has been used to explain how policies became embedded.

In determining how the institutional context of education policy is likely to affect change efforts, there are two relevant aspects. One is the fragmentation of education policy in the US. Multiple levels of government share authority over public education and are responsible for its funding, and power is fragmented among institutions within each level. This fragmentation has resulted in less-coherent policy, but has also increased access by having multiple entry points to the policy system. Multiple access points affect the framing of ideas (some ideas may be accepted in certain areas over others—courts, for example).

Another factor is the tension between state authority and localism. Although there has been a trend away from local control, its persistence (for instance, through electoral representation and property taxes) shapes public attitudes towards educational opportunity and influences the behavior of state legislatures. This has reinforced geographical inequalities by preserving local control over a significant proportion of education funding. Advantaged communities seek to maintain the status quo, even as state courts move towards more equitable redistribution of resources.

Interests

In determining the prospects for policy change, one needs to identify and mobilize groups who are dissatisfied with the status quo and are open to change. McDonnell suggests that there are four factors in assessing the interest environment for policies linking finance and student learning:

1. **A Crowded Environment:** The interest environment is dense and includes a wide range of stakeholders and groups.
2. **Variation in Stakeholder Views:** Note that positions by group can vary by state to state, depending on historical and political factors.
3. **Different Policy Arenas:** Types of groups differ as issues move from one arena to another (i.e. from courts to legislative arenas). Each arena has different norms and rules with respect to decision making. In legislative arenas, broad based coalitions and public opinion serve as factors.
4. **Importance of National Organizations:** Prominent national organizations transmit new ideas to state and local affiliates and communicate information about operational models.

### *Policy Windows and Policy Entrepreneurs*

In this section, we discuss the role that “policy entrepreneurs” have played in creating changes in K-12 policy. Policy entrepreneurs were first described as part of Kingdon’s work on the policy process. Kingdon describes the policymaking process as being similar in many ways to the garbage-can decision-making model proposed by March and Olsen (1972). In March and Olsen, problems, people and solutions combine at decision-making points in ways that are often unpredictable and poorly

understood. In Kingdon's theory of political decision-making, problems, policies and politics combine to form what he calls a policy window—an opportunity to make a major change in higher education policy.

The key to understanding why some problems make it the public agenda lies first in differentiating problems from underlying conditions. As Kingdon says “conditions become problems when we believe we can do something about them” (Kingdon, 1984, p.109). Problems can rise to the top of the public agenda in a number of ways, including changes in systematic indicators, focusing events, crises and even the personal experiences of policymakers.

Kingdon suggests that policies exist in what he describes as the “policy primordial soup” an arena consisting of think tanks, academics, and policy entrepreneurs, all of whom share ideas and form a variety of combinations of policy solutions. These solutions may or may not be connected to specific problems

Last, Kingdon posits that the politics of policymaking are governed by several different factors. First among these are changes in the national mood—when constituents change their minds about a problem, policymakers are likely to follow. Second, turnover in control of the government can create political opportunities for changes in policies. Last, the process of bargaining for policy change can change direction rapidly as more participants jump into the process (Kingdon, 1984).

Policy entrepreneurs are hypothesized by Kingdon to play a key role in the policy formation process. These individuals are committed to developing and implementing certain policies in a given realm. An example of policy entrepreneurs in the field of higher education are individuals who are committed to implementing

charter school reforms in states and districts. Policy entrepreneurs have become a part of the policy development landscape in K-12 education, while they are still relatively rare in higher education (Mintrom, 1997). Below, we describe the nature of these types of individuals and some of the keys to their success.

Keys to Policy Entrepreneurship include:

1. Creativity and Insight: Policy Entrepreneurs (PEs) should be able to recognize how proposing policies can change the nature of policy debates. They should also be able to frame proposals as appropriate solutions to a current problem.

2. Social Perceptiveness: PEs should spend time talking to people from a range of backgrounds in order to best frame a policy that appeals to others and understands certain social conditions.

3. Social and Political Dexterity: PEs are “inveterate networkers: that are able to interact in a variety of social and political settings. Doing so strengthens networks and leads to a better understanding of opponents’ views.

4. Persuasiveness: PEs should be able to argue persuasively across different groups.

5. Strategic Sense: PEs should be able to build coalitions and discern what type of collation will best support their pursuit of policy change.

6. Leadership by Example: PEs translate ideas into action, demonstrating their commitment and that their visions are believable and feasible (McDonnell, 2010, Mintrom, 2000)

We believe that the number and diversity of these policy entrepreneurs in K-12 education dwarfs that in higher education. This is yet another source of the differential development in policy between the two sectors, as entrepreneurs place much more external pressure on the political system in K-12 than in higher education.

#### Punctuated Equilibrium and Charter School Advocacy Coalitions

Charter schools have been one of the more important policy innovations to take place in K-12 education over the last two decades. The spread of charters fits the political science theory of “punctuated equilibrium” where a policy change takes place after a long period of control by a dominant coalition (e.g. traditional education interest groups). Charter schools were created initially by the state of Minnesota in 1991. After that, charters became a powerful new idea that spread across the country through advocacy by policy entrepreneurs who galvanized an interstate policy issue network (Mintrom, 2000; Kirst, Meister, Rowley, 1984). Forty states have passed charter laws enrolling over one million pupils in 3,600 schools. As charters spread across the nation, an opposing coalition and policy issue network form to restrict further charter expansion and impose more state and local regulations. There pro and con “advocacy coalition” engage in major policy disputes and minor skirmishes across the United States (Sabatier and Smith, 1993). At the national level charters are part of political competition between two competing

advocacy coalitions that want to expand or constrain school choice. Mintrom (2000) defines an advocacy coalition as:

“People from a variety of positions (e.g., elected and agency officials, interest group leaders, researchers) who share a particular belief system—i.e., a set of basic values, casual assumptions, and problem perceptions—and who show a nontrivial degree of coordinated activity over time”. **need page**

Charter supporters come from both political parties and comprise a new political center that encompasses organizations like Democrats for Education Reform. The right wants vouchers, a more radical market reform. Charter school opponents assert that charter expansion will undermine the public school system.

#### *Political Regime Change Theories*

Regime change can be an alternative theory to the short term perspectives used by both Kingdon and concept of punctuated equilibrium. A policy regime change unfolds over a long period of time, such as the evolution of federal policy from ESEA in 1965 to NCLB in 2002. A “policy regime” is the set of ideas, interests, and institutions that structures governmental activity in education and tends to be quite durable over time (McGuinn **YEAR**, p. 11). “Major change” in the policy regime is not fine tuning or incremental, but rather is a fundamental reshaping of ends and means such as the passage of NCLB and RTTT.

McGuinn contrasts policy regime change with the short bursts of rapid reform after a long period of hegemony by a regime with a policy monopoly. The rapid 10 year spread of charter schools from 1998 to 2008 might be an example of Kingdon’s theory of punctuated equilibrium: a particular regime’s long dominance is

reinforced by iron triangles, subgovernments, issue networks, and policy monopolies that restrict change to minor tinkering (Derthick, 1990). Punctuated equilibrium theories initially focused upon agenda setting rather than the overthrow of an entrenched policy regime.

Analysis of policy regime change relies upon historical analysis and the long term shifting of ideas, interests, and institutions (Orren, 1998). Policy regime theories can examine major change in the principles, norms, and decision structures that sociology features (Campbell, 2002).

McGuinn posits that policy regimes consist of three dimensions – a policy paradigm, a power alignment, and policymaking arrangement – that combine to produce a distinctive pattern of policymaking and policies.

“Power arrangements can take many different forms but center on the alignment of interest groups and governmental actors on the issue. A policy paradigm refers to how the particular issue is conceptualized—how problems, target populations, and solutions are defined by elites and the public. A policymaking arrangement is the institutional and procedural context for making decisions about an issue and the implementation process by which these decisions are carried out.” **Need year and page number**

Building on several political analyses in fields like regulatory change and immigration reform, McGuinn claims NCLB is the final blow to the old K-12 equity regime created in 1965 (Milkis, 1996, Tichenov, 2002). The 1965 educational interest groups that featured more money and education process change (teachers, civil rights) was not overthrown in a single decisive assault. It was undermined



gradually by a major shift in public opinion favoring accountability and pupil outcomes. The data system supporting K-12 reform is much more informative and transparent than data for postsecondary. Education emerged as one of the top issues in the nation during the 1990's and galvanized a new policy debate and result. The "equity regime" was replaced by an "accountability regime," and the old coalition was largely ignored during the passage of NCLB in 2002.

The transformation of K-12 education, however, should not be overstated. Schools still look very similar to 1965 with a teacher in a classroom using minimal technology. It is a course and class batch processing learning model relying on seat time for credit. Assessments in K-12 are overwhelmingly multiple choice, with minimal attention to creativity.

### **Theoretical Explanations of Policymaking in Higher Education**

Analysts of the politics of higher education have not achieved consensus on the dominant pattern of policymaking for postsecondary education. There are several schools of thought regarding how the politics of higher education operate at the state and federal level. The first school of thought, characterized as the "politics of deference" holds that policymakers generally have a hands-off approach to policymaking for higher education, trusting institutions to make the best decisions. The second school of thought posits that higher education policymaking, particularly at the federal level, operates as a "subgovernment," with a tightly interconnected group of legislative staff, agency officials, and lobbyists making most of the policy decisions. Still another perspective suggests that partisan politics has become an increasingly important factor in driving policymaking for higher

education. Analysts operating from a rational choice perspective have suggested that understanding the distribution of income and possible alignments between the poor, the middle class, and the rich are the keys to understanding the politics of higher education policy. Public opinion, which generally favors higher education, may drive policymaking in this area. Similar to K-12 theories from the multiple streams, advocacy coalition, and regime change literatures can help to inform our perspectives of the antecedents of higher education policy.

### *Politics of Deference*

Many have characterized the political attitude toward higher education as being one of deference: higher education is funded to the best ability of policymakers, and more or less left alone. Compared with other areas of major state expenditure like K-12, transportation, corrections, institutions of higher education and their leaders are not subject to scrutiny or micro-management (Zumeta, 199x).

While few current analysts believe that this mode of exchange is still the dominant one between policymakers and higher education, it's worth noting that many higher education organizations and associations still use the level of complexity of higher education as a rationale for reducing government oversight and involvement in the affairs of institutions. Lobbyists for institutions of higher education tend to frame their arguments not in terms of the interests of institutions, but rather in the broad public interests, arguing that what is good for higher education will be good for the country. They also connect this rhetoric with the historical relationship of deference, arguing that higher education as an institution knows best how to handle its own affairs (Cook, 1998).

### *Higher Education as a "Subgovernment"*

Most of the literature on federal policy for higher education has characterized higher education as a "subgovernment", following the classic literature on policy "iron triangles" first described by Cater (1964) and Freeman (1965). For instance, in one of the early major studies of higher education policymaking at the federal level, Gladieux and Wolanin (1978) characterize the higher education subgovernment as being made up of three mutually reinforcing parts: the legislative subcommittees responsible for higher education; the bureaucracy responsible for implementing legislation, and the lobbying groups for higher education. The shape of policymaking taking place in this subgovernment is characterized by mutual reinforcement and lack of conflict. Parsons (1997) and Hannah (1996) reinforce this view of higher education policymaking as an insular subgovernment.

While there isn't broad consensus that higher education policymaking does occur in a subgovernment, it is certainly true that higher education is usually an issue of low public salience, with many policy decisions being highly technical and not visible or easily understood by the public. Such a structure could easily be an obstacle to implementing major reforms.

### *Partisanship and Higher Education Policy*

Higher education does not have a clear association with one political party or another. Higher education is not a clearly partisan issue like gun control or abortion. However, this surface appearance has masked two trends: first partisanship has characterized federal policymaking for higher education for some time. Second, at

the state level, partisanship does not appear to be nearly as important as other issues.

At the federal level, higher education has become an increasingly partisan issue. Both qualitative and quantitative studies have identified an important change, mostly occurring around the time of the Republican takeover of congress in 1994. Both sides support Pell Grants, which masks sharp disagreements over student loan policies; policies toward non-profits; and efforts to change the efficiency and cost structures of higher education.

Most researchers describing higher education policymaking in the 1970s and 1980s characterize this area as bipartisan. In Gladieux and Wolanin (1978), for example, the authors find that most of the policymakers on the Senate subcommittee were in general agreement about important goals for higher education. Later research also found a general sense of bipartisanship among legislators. Parsons (1997) cites a general sense of unity among legislators, legislative staff, and higher education lobbyists in Washington.

This bipartisan spirit changed after the Republican party took control of both houses of Congress in 1994. Parsons writes: “the new Republican leadership in Congress saw a limited role for Federal government and did not subscribe to the notion that education should be an instrument for federally directed social reform”(Parsons, 1997, p.220). In contrast, many leaders of higher education associations were lobbying for proposals associated with this type of social reform.

Doyle (2010b) investigates the role of partisan politics in federal policymaking for higher education by analyzing every roll call vote taken in the

Senate on higher education issues from 1965 to 2004. Using ideal point estimation, Doyle finds that higher education policymaking is a partisan issue, with generally little agreement between the liberal and conservative wings of the two parties.

Doyle also finds that there has been an increase in divisive votes, indicating a more partisan environment in recent years.

The evidence on the levels of partisanship at the state level is more mixed. Republican-led governments do appear to be more likely to adopt performance funding and similar programs, but there haven't been strong partisan effects found for policy adoption of things like merit aid or even governance reform. McLendon et al. (2006) investigate the conditions under which states are likely to adopt performance funding or performance budgeting programs. They find evidence that Republican control of the state legislature is associated with a higher likelihood of adopting new performance-funding policies. Doyle (2010a) finds that state governments that are controlled by more liberal representatives are more likely to provide higher levels of appropriations for higher education, a finding that is supported by McLendon et al in their 2009 article.

At this point, there isn't enough evidence to say whether partisan politics plays a large role in state policymaking for higher education. The two factors that are likely to affect this are the differing nature of parties across the states. For instance, Republicans in Maine are quite likely to have distinct policy views from Republicans in Texas. Second, the historical development of higher education in each state may have resulted in partisan identification with differing policy options. The one warning sign is that many analysts are suggesting an increasingly strong

alignment between national politics and local politics, with more uniform policy views within parties and hardening differences between the parties (Levendusky, 2009).

### *Rational Choice Theory and Higher Education Policy*

Another possible explanation for higher education policymaking comes from the rational choice literature. Higher education is unique in that it is a publicly subsidized service that is offered for a price. This is contrast with other services like public safety, transportation, or K-12 education. Such a structure means that everyone pays for higher education through their taxes, but not everyone can afford to get into higher education (Hansen and Weisbrod, 1969). Theorists have suggested that such a structure is driven by the desire of the middle and upper classes to effectively reserve this public good for themselves, and to price the poor out. If true, this would mean that higher education funding is driven by inequality: more inequality would lead to lower levels of funding for higher education (Fernandez and Rogerson, 2003, 1996, 1995; Bevia and Iturbe-Ormaetxe, 2002).

Rational choice theorists start with a basic set of assumptions. They assume that individuals have preferences, that these preferences can be ordered, that preferences are transitive, and that people will choose the option closest to their preference every time (Downs, 1957). In applying rational choice theories to higher education, analysts further assume that preferences will be based on a cost-benefit ratio, comparing the outlay in taxes that each person pays to the benefit in terms of government subsidies that each person receives (Persson and Tabellini, 2000; Meltzer and Richard, 1981). In the classic model of the size of government

developed by Meltzer and Richard (1981), the analysts describe the conditions under which a more or less redistributive government will be created. Their model suggests that generally richer people will favor less taxes, while poorer individuals will prefer much higher taxes. Tax policy, and therefore the size of the government, will be based on the income of the median voter. Their study implies that as suffrage increases, and the median voter's income moves farther away from the mean voter's income, taxes and the size of government will increase. This hypothesis is supported by the available evidence (Lott and Kenny, 1999).

Fernandez and Rogerson (1995) extend this line of inquiry to education funding. They suggest that education funding, and particularly higher education funding is unique in that it includes both government support in the form of subsidies and student or family payments in the form of tuition. This implies that the level of subsidies also rations the amount of the public good provided—people who cannot pay do not benefit. Even though the entire population is taxed to provide higher education, only those who are rich enough to afford it will go. Their model suggests that this dynamic will create coalitions between income groups. If upper and middle income groups band together, levels of subsidies will be sufficient so that the better-off can afford to go, but not so low as to allow poorer people to attend. If lower and middle income groups band together, subsidies will be quite high, and prices will be low or close to 0. Doyle (2007) tests the Fernandez and Rogerson model in the context of state support for higher education and finds some evidence to support their hypothesis.

*Changing Public Opinion Trends*

The political science literature strongly supports the idea that public policy follows public opinion in democracies (Wlezien, 2004). The public's values in a given policy area will determine the scope of action that policymakers are willing to undertake. As mentioned previously, the difference in public opinion between K-12 education and higher education is truly remarkable. This is one of the key contrasting points with K-12 education. Generally the public supports higher education. They think that a college degree means that someone has marketable skills. They think that colleges do a good job of educating students. They're not particularly concerned about the management of colleges. In short, there isn't a large amount of public pressure for internal reform (Immerwahr and Johnson, 2007; Immerwahr, 2004, 2000, 1999b).

Immerwahr (1999a) highlights the key differences in public opinion regarding K-12 education and higher education. First, the public knows more about K-12 education, and relatively little about higher education. Second, the public tend to view the quality of K-12 education as problematic, and higher education as being of very high quality. Third, the public generally understands that K-12 is paid for through tax dollars, while there does not appear to be broad public awareness that public colleges and universities also receive state support. Instead, most people think that higher education runs is funded by tuition (Immerwahr, 1999a).

One of the most important findings for the reform of higher education, particularly in the area of college success, has to do with the public's perceptions regarding responsibilities for educational success. Immerwahr (1999a) reports that 75% of Americans say that almost all K-12 students can learn and succeed in school

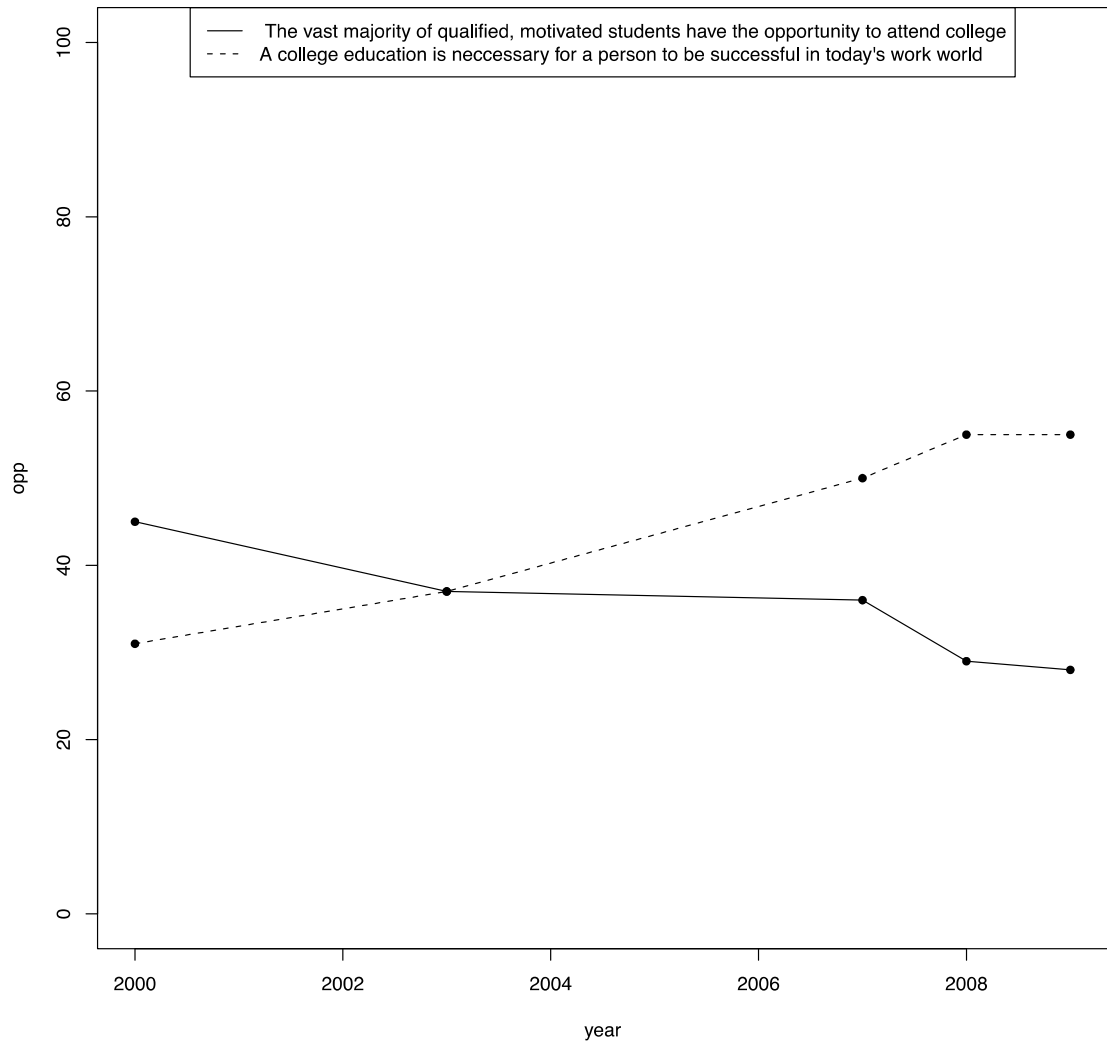


given enough help and attention. But for higher education, the story is quite different:

With virtual unanimity (91% to 7%) people think that the benefit of a college education depends on how much effort the student puts into it as opposed to the quality of the college the student is attending . . . when it comes to college, the public blames the problems on the consumer, rather than on the producer (Immerwahr, 1999 p. 10) .

Figure 1 shows the two key colliding trends in public opinion regarding higher education. A declining proportion of the population believes that any qualified and motivated student can go to college, while an increasing proportion of the population believes that a college education is necessary to succeed. Of all of the broad trends surveyed in this chapter, we believe that this is the one most likely to lead to a call for reform in higher education. As more and more people decide that college is necessary to get ahead and fewer think that college is within reach for those who should go, the likelihood of major action increases.

Figure 1: Percent of Population Saying They Agree With Each Statement



Reproduced from Immerwhar, 2010.

More recent data from the Pew Social Research Center (2011) details how public concerns about the internal operations of colleges and universities has grown. Similar to previous trends, only 22 percent of respondents in this survey agreed that most people can afford to pay for a college education. Different from the past, however the Pew researchers find a growing skepticism among the public

regarding the education that colleges and universities provide. Fifty seven percent of respondents to this survey said that colleges provide only a fair or a poor value for the money spent. However, the same survey finds that among college graduates, eighty six percent said that college has been a good value for them personally (Pew Social Research Center, 2011).

We also find the election currently underway to be a compelling window on the public's views of college costs. In the presidential election, both candidates have publicly committed their support for the Pell grant program, and the only areas of disagreement between the two major-party candidates are slight ones regarding the role of banks in student lending and the regulation of for-profit institutions. Neither of the presidential candidates nor any gubernatorial candidate has placed any emphasis on reforming the way higher education does business. This again contrasts with K-12 education, where reform has been a constant refrain among candidates in national and state elections. Our conclusion from this observation is that neither political party has found any kind of a groundswell of disaffection or anger at colleges among their constituents, leading them to de-emphasize higher education reform as part of their campaign narratives.

This inattention from political leaders is all the more surprising given the dramatic cuts for higher education that came about as state revenues plummeted after the great recession of 2008-09. Many close observers of higher education began to state that the business model for higher education may be broken, and that there was no way to sustain the current way of doing business (Carey, 2010). While

this could have been seen as an opening for changing public opinion and public policy for higher education, this has not occurred.

### *Policy Windows for Higher Education*

As described previously, Kingdon (1984) details how “policy windows” for policy change can open when problems, policies and politics come together. What could a policy window for higher education look like? We describe below a list of possible problems, policies and solutions that may come together in the near-term to create policy windows for major changes in higher education policy. This not meant to be a predictive exercise so much as to illustrate some of the conditions that may combine to create an opportunity for major policy change.

### Problems

There are multiple possible events or changes that might move the problem of access to and success in higher education to the top of the policymaking agenda.

These could include:

- A state funding crisis leads to the denial of admission to large numbers of students, particularly students from middle and upper-income families that have traditionally gone to college. In Illinois, the deepening budget crisis makes this outcome more likely every year. When this occurs, there is likely to be an of public anger.
- A lack of funding from the state level may not lead to denial of admission but rather to widespread cancellation of classes at public universities and colleges, meaning that many students are unable to graduate. The average time to graduation at bachelor’s degree granting

institutions increases from six years to seven or eight. This again could anger a broad swathe of middle and upper income voters.

- The generational gap in educational attainment widens. As the baby boomers retire, the lack of educational capital among the younger generation becomes alarmingly clear, and in many states rises to the level where it's considered a crisis. Pressure comes from the business community to "do something" about the lack of qualified candidates for jobs.

- The public could become aware of a drop in the quality of higher education. K-12 reform efforts have been driven primarily by public concern about the quality of education. Quality of higher education is a surprising "non-problem" Results of the 2003x National Assessment of Adult Literacy suggest that the quality of higher education is on the decline, but nobody seemed to notice.

- There are always the possibilities of more idiosyncratic occurrences, like a policymaker's family being poorly served by the system of higher education or a particular focusing incident on a given campus.

#### Policies

Kingdon describes the process of policy solutions being created in a "policy primordial soup." Out of this mix of possible policy solutions, some will become connected to problems during policy windows. The types of policies that have a chance of being enacted are those that are technically feasible, acceptable to the public, and budgetary workable.

What kinds of policies need to be fully fleshed out and in place for the moment when a “problem” comes into being? At this point, it’s easier to identify those policies that do not meet one of the three criteria. In addition to Kingdon’s criteria, we also discuss whether major policy changes are likely to come from inside or outside of higher education.

### Technical Feasibility

We actually know relatively little about which kinds of broad public policies are likely to increase college completion. Several authors have found that an increase in tenure-line faculty is associated with higher completion rates. At the community college level, experiments by MDRC have found a positive effect of counseling interventions. The effect of financial aid on college completion is not well understood. One of the major efforts necessary to pursue reform is to understand the effects of broad policy changes and to disseminate this knowledge widely.

### Acceptability

The major values that inform public policymaking differ tremendously between “insiders” and “outsiders”. Higher education administration and faculty value professional autonomy and consensus-driven decision-making processes, while the public is primarily concerned with ensuring access and keeping the price of higher education at a reasonable level. Policies that meet both of these requirements are likely to be quite rare.

### Affordability

As mentioned previously, there is a very low probability of major new sources of money becoming available for higher education reform. Changes must occur within the existing levels of resources

### Internal or Externally Driven Reform

It's worth noting that large, successfully enacted policy innovations in higher education, like tax credits or merit-aid programs, have come from outside of the institutions. Higher education on its own has not generated broadly adopted policies for several decades. Even major changes such as the National Defense Education Act and the Higher Education Act were driven by concerns about national security and equality of opportunity, respectively. Clark Kerr, in his book *The Great Transformation* describes the “failure of intended internally originated academic structural changes” in the 1960s and 1970s, such as the development of new institutions like the University of California at Santa Cruz. He cites the intransigence of faculty as one possible cause for this failure. However, he also discusses the idea that large internally driven changes in the earlier history of higher education (i.e. land grant universities) were required by the needs of the nation, but that the changes in the 1960s could be handled, if imperfectly, by the existing system (Kerr, 1991). It is an open question whether the changes in the 21st century will require an entirely new structure for the delivery of postsecondary education, or whether existing organizational types will suffice.

### *Politics*

The political stream in Kingdon's work describes the set of political events or changes in the public mood that may create a policy window. We list a few possible

political changes that could create the opportunity for policy changes for higher education.

- Changes in the public mood: the public's lack of concern regarding the quality of higher education may not continue indefinitely. The public views higher education as increasingly necessary, yet also increasingly out of reach. This trend could lead to more public dissatisfaction with higher education and a widespread desire to push for greater changes.
- Electoral windows: the election of a new governor is typically suggested as major window for state-level reform. Similarly, the election or re-election of a president, or a change in congressional control can create an opportunity for major policy changes.
- The same kinds of focusing events described in the section on problems can also drive political changes.
- Kingdon suggests that required decision-making points can also create policy windows. The reauthorization of the Higher Education Act could be one such decision-making opportunity.

### **Advocacy Coalitions and Higher Education Policy**

As mentioned previously in this chapter, the advocacy coalition framework suggests that policymaking typically takes place in a set of policy subsystems, which will remain stable in the absence of galvanizing external events. The advocacy coalition framework posits four basic understandings of policymaking in various arenas:



1. Understanding policy change requires long time spans, usually longer than ten years
2. Policy is typically made in most areas as the result of the operations of a subsystem of interrelated actors and organizations
3. These subsystems operate across levels of government.
4. Public policies can be thought of in much the same ways as belief systems: a set of ideas about what's important to do and how to do it.

According to the advocacy coalition framework, within a given policy subsystem, there are various coalitions that form among interested parties, typically rather small compared to the population as a whole. These parties argue about policy goals while sharing a common set of understandings about the "rules of the game." Conflict among coalitions is mediated as the result of the actions of policy brokers, who arrive at a final policy as a compromise (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993).

The ACF framework suggests that subsystems are relatively stable, and are unlikely to change much without the arrival of large external, system-level events that disrupt the subsystem (Weible and Sabatier, 2009; Weible et al., 2009; Sabatier, 1999; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993). For higher education, several advocacy coalitions exist: first, the standard institutional coalition comprised of the membership of groups like ACE. They argue for increased institutional funding. The second coalition is loosely composed of policy advocates and the public, who tend to argue for lower tuition and more financial aid. A third coalition includes for-profit organizations, who are typically more concerned with

loosening regulations. All groups share a set of common assumptions about the role of governments, institutions and so on.

A quite different set of understandings would involve fundamentally restructuring the role of government in higher education to stop funding enrollment and start funding completion. None of the existing groups even considers this as a policy option. Such a change would need to come from outside the current subsystem.

In Tennessee, the new performance funding system proposed by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission and enacted by the legislature promises to come much closer to funding on the basis of completion than any previously implemented funding policy.

### **Punctuated Equilibrium in Higher Education Policy**

Like the Advocacy Coalition Framework, the punctuated equilibrium approach suggests that policy arenas tend to end up forming into subsystems or monopolies, where one set of ideas about good policy end up holding sway. As Baumgartner and Jones say, “The policy system is stable because those participating share values” (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993, p. 18). Major changes in these subsystems occur generally when the area becomes one of general attention, rather than just an obscure “niche.” For example, the regulation of deep-water oil drilling was not a major concern for anyone but oil companies and regulators until the Macondo well blowout in the Gulf of Mexico.

When broad attention is placed on an issue, then rapid policy change is possible, and new monopolies, or equilibria, form. The picture that emerges from

this view is that policies will change very slowly over long periods of time, with rapid changes at the inflection points described above. Most of the time policy subsystems run the show—but when attention is reallocated, big changes occur.

Higher education does not generally create crises in the way that other areas of the economy, like energy or health, create crises. Attention needs to be reallocated to higher education in order to break up the current policy subsystem, but how? Successful tactics from previous policy entrepreneurs include using data and information to create the appearance of a crisis; using media-friendly events to bring attention to the issue; and forming issue networks that will continually attempt to reallocate attention in smaller venues, i.e. local and state governments.

### *Ideas, Interests and Institutions*

The advocacy coalition framework highlights the role of ideas, interests and institutions in the development of major changes in policy. Below we detail some examples of the role each might play in creating large-scale change in higher education policy.

#### Ideas

The kinds of ideas that successfully overtake policy regimes are simple, popular, and feasible. Simplicity aids tremendously in the communication of an idea. Witness the popularity of merit aid scholarships. These programs are very simple, which aids both in increasing support and in implementing the policy, as many students are aware of the requirements of these programs. Popularity depends on public opinion and the structure of the proposed policy. Technical feasibility is in many ways the easiest of the three criteria to meet for a given policy idea.

## Interests

Below we consider each of the possible interest groups that could be formed from the major stakeholders in higher education policy.

### Students

Students are often suggested as a natural constituency for higher education reform. Since the student protests of the 1960s, there have been essentially no broad higher education reforms that have taken place as a result of student organizing or political activity.

### Parents of College Students

The parents of college students or future college students are a more likely powerful coalition, but they have shown little interest in reform in the past. Instead, they are primarily concerned with access and affordability. To be a movement for reform, the connection between those priorities and the goals of progress, completion and learning must be made explicitly.

### Institutional Leaders

Institutional leaders have essentially no incentives to be at the forefront of broad-based changes. Presidents of institutions of higher education or system leaders have rarely taken a leading role in major policy changes in higher education in the last thirty years.

### State Policymakers

State policymakers are currently too pressed by massive state budget shortfalls to seriously consider major reform. To include this group, one would need

to make either a strong electoral connection or a strong economic development connection, along with the imperative of never wasting a crisis.

### Business Leaders

Business leaders are the most likely group to support and encourage the goals of progress, completion and learning. The link between economic development and a better skilled workforce is an obvious one for this group.

### Institutions

Last, currently existing institutions may play a key role in making changes in the existing policy regime. We highlight the role of several institutions in the policy realm of higher education: institutions of higher education; think tanks, foundations and NGOs; governmental agencies; and political action committees.

### Institutions of Higher Education

One of the much-noted paradoxes of reforming higher education is that institutions of higher education themselves are often the originators of reforms in other areas. Major changes in many areas of society have been instigated by those working within higher education. Yet institutions of higher education have rarely been at the forefront of pushing for major changes in higher education policy, for entirely understandable reasons.

### Think Tanks , Foundations and Other NGOs

Earlier in this chapter we describe the process of regime change in K-12 education, particularly the use of an “elite” strategy by conservative foundations to change the dominant discourse around education reform. The same strategy could be used to push for higher education reform. Foundations and external

organizations are already outside players in higher education reform movements. Their ability to leverage their ability to create real change depends on connections with both governmental agencies and possible constituencies such as the business community.

### Governmental Agencies

One of the largest shifts in policymaking over the last half century has been a movement away from effecting policy changes through strict regulation and toward the use of incentives and competition to accomplish societal goals. There will always be a need for specific regulations in some areas. Governments should use incentives and competition much more regularly to accomplish state goals. It's notable the extent to which higher education has escaped this general trend, the most recent example being how small a role higher education policy changes played in either the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act and in Race to the Top. For such an approach to work, there needs to be a shift away from deference to institutions of higher education and more emphasis on the role of governmental agencies in setting the public agenda for higher education.

### Political Action Committees

Beyond local or state-level organizations with tightly focused missions, we are not aware of any large political action committees that have worked on higher education reform issues. This stems in part from a reluctance on the part of the higher education community to be seen as active political players, as opposed to purveyors of the public good. .

### **What Would it Take to Achieve Major Change in Higher Education Policymaking?**

Assuming there is validity to any of these theories, what would it take to bring “major change” to postsecondary education? For example, could a new policy regime feature student progress, learning, and completion?

As mentioned previously, there are two major obstacles to encouraging greater public concern and demands for action from policymakers. First, the public has few concerns about the quality of higher education. Second, the public places most of the blame for lack of progress in higher education on the student. There appears to be a need to communicate many of the problems of higher education, and to demonstrate that these issues are not exclusively the responsibility of students.

Greater transparency regarding how higher education works, and particularly the level of performance of higher education could generate more public demand for fundamental reforms in higher education. Efforts such as the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education’s Measuring Up report cards have helped to shape the public agenda for higher education in many states. However, they have not (and were not designed to) generated a groundswell of public concern about higher education.

For example, the public might be much more concerned about the quality of higher education if there were greater awareness of literacy levels and academic performance of individuals in colleges and universities. Literacy levels among college graduates are very low. Proficiency rates among the college-educated population have gone down, from 40 to 31% in prose literacy and from 37 to 25% in document literacy. Only in quantitative literacy have rates of proficiency held steady at 31% (Kutner et al., 2005). Similarly, the work of Arum and Roksa (2010) and

subsequent work by Pascarella (2011) have shown that learning gains among students in college as measured by tests of critical thinking are low. If given greater visibility, these results may be exactly the kind of information needed to encourage more public concern and a push for action on the part of policymakers.

Favorable public opinion regarding the performance of higher education would have to be changed before politicians or other groups would face intense public pressure for reform. One key lesson that we derive from the experience of policy reform in K-12 is the importance of building a media campaign designed to change public opinion, starting with “elite” audiences. Lenkowsky and Piereson (2007) who led conservative organizations provide a detailed analysis of the fifty year role and impact of conservative foundations. These foundations used an elite strategy. The principal targets were professionals, scholars, policymakers, journalists, and similar elites. The goal was to have these “elites” think differently about the problems and solutions for K-12 education. Traditional postsecondary policy and opinions focus on access for students, and is only beginning to change to student success through the supply side of state systems and institutions. There is some evidence that the elite opinion strategy helped cause the K-12 policy sea change that McGuinn chronicles in his 1965-2005 analysis for K-12 (Kirst and Wirt, 2009).

#### *Clarity on the Nature of the Problem*

Second, the higher education community needs to come to greater clarity on the nature of the problem or problems that face us in terms of educational progress, completion and learning. What evidence is there that these problems can be solved



with greater funding? With changes in curriculum? With changes in organizational structures? With changes in personnel? Although evidence is building, we know very little right now about both the nature of these problems and the kinds of interventions that would be most effective in increasing performance.

*Policy Solutions That Are Simple, Feasible and Popular*

Higher education is a complex field. It covers a huge diversity in institutional types, disciplinary specialties, geographies, and student characteristics. There are few one-size-fits-all solutions to the problems that face higher education. This reality must be balanced against another factor: as the complexity of a policy solution grows, public support is quite likely to decrease. The recent changes to health care provide a sobering lesson—a solid majority of the public supported the major individual initiatives in the health care bill when presented with them one by one. However, a majority of the public does not support health care reform overall. This is almost certainly due to the complexity of the policy that was finally passed by Congress. While some complexity is unavoidable, the kinds of policies that enjoy broad public support need to be as simple as possible.

The key obstacle to the feasibility of many proposed policy solutions is funding. It seems quite likely that at both the state and federal level there will not be large new sources of funding made available for the purpose of encouraging dramatic changes in higher education completion and learning. Instead, feasible policies must work within the strictures of current funding systems.

Last, the popularity of a proposal will depend on whether or not it concords with the key values that the public holds regarding higher education, as described by

Immerwahr and others. First, the public values opportunity—strong majorities of the public say that college should be available to any qualified and motivated student. Second, the public understands and values the place of higher education in American society—they think that colleges and universities give young people key skills they need to succeed. Last, the public values reciprocity—very few people favor policies which appear to be giveaways. Members of the public want students to work hard for the benefits they receive.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

In the beginning of this paper we detail the major drivers of reform in K-12 education, including the role of federal and state governments—driven by real electoral pressures--in pushing for changes in the internal operations of schools, including what students are taught, who teaches students, and how students are taught. We show how various theories of political change can account for this reform movement in primary and secondary education. However, as we survey the higher education landscape, we do not find that the same kinds of pressures exist. While the public is increasingly skeptical of the value of higher education, we do not see the kind of widespread public dissatisfaction that our various theories suggest might drive major policy changes. We also have not observed the kind of focusing events in higher education that might serve as the opening for a policy window. These factors, combined with the generally low salience of higher education as a policy issue, point us toward emphasizing the role of laying the groundwork for changes in public opinion as opposed to acting on public opinion at this point. We offer a few observations in conclusion.

- It is increasingly clear that we need to understand the technical feasibility of several proposed policy changes, such as performance funding or funding institutions based on course completion, when “scaled up.” Without this knowledge regarding technical feasibility, the other components of a political strategy cannot come together.
- Kerr, writing twenty years ago, described the failure of internally originated reforms in higher education. There’s little reason to think now that major changes are likely to come only from within higher education. Experience with reform in K-12 education reinforces this idea—the “first movers” in most K-12 reforms were not schools, school districts or educational professionals.
- The public has given higher education a “free pass.” Increased public awareness of higher education’s performance, coupled with anxiety about access and prices, may lead to serious demand for reform.
- Our sense is that currently, secondary school college readiness has more momentum than the postsecondary initiatives for college completion. However, if more high school students are deemed “college ready” and few students succeed in higher education, pressure for reform may grow.
- Any reform agenda must recognize the extremely limited fiscal landscape. There is no new money to be found for higher education.

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