

Higher Education Reform and the Increased Cost of Post-Secondary Education in the U.S.: A Review of Current Policy Plans and Policy Proposals

Arthur C. Evans, III
Athens Technical College, USA

Abstract: Within the last decade, there has been an ever-increasing attention on the need for higher education reform. Measures to mitigate the increased cost and different policy proposals have been introduced to increase the accountability and value. This paper examines current higher education policies and looks at some overarching ideas involved.

The U.S. has had many social, economic, and demographic changes, which have required that the federal government re-evaluate the structure of higher education. This re-evaluation also includes a re-examination of higher education funding and its connection with the federal government and individual state interest and needs (Bird, Foster, & Ganzglass, 2014; Campbell & Pence, 2004). These changes also require that any policy changes or reforms include the appropriate stakeholders and interest necessary for implementation. The policy goals must be clearly outlined before the development of the policy framework, and the proper involvement of different stakeholders at different points, along with an understanding of the level of involvement of these stakeholders during the policy process, is essential (Afdal, 2013; Bagin, Gallagher, & Moore, 2008). To increase options for higher education, states have considered the need for increased accreditation options for public and private institutions to meet their economic development education needs (Afdal, 2013; Bagin et al., 2008; Bird et al., 2014; Campbell & Pence, 2004). The federal government also has proposed measures to increase financial options for potential students that may not be able attend college due to the cost. Increased options for post-secondary education and more access to financial aid are major components in the federal government's effort to address the issues in the U.S. higher education system, and an examination into the latest policy under the Higher Education and Opportunity and Reform (HERO) Act is made below. In addition to this examination, an investigation into some of the issues facing higher education from some different perspectives is presented. Furthermore, some analysis is made into the goals, stakeholders, and interest that need to be incorporated into a higher education reform policy and the necessary steps to implement it and make it successful. Finally, some additional suggestions are made as to other components or processes that need to be included in the current higher education reform policy.

The Current Need for Higher Education Reform

The need for reforms within the higher education systems in U.S. has been voiced by many different sources with many different perspectives and viewpoints on how to tackle the issue (Burke & Butler, 2012; Center for Higher Education Reform, 2015; Office of Senator Michael S. Lee, 2015). Some of these viewpoints have been widely supported while other viewpoints have come from different perspectives on reforms necessary within higher education (Burke & Butler, 2012; Center for Higher Education Reform, 2015). One suggested viewpoint is that higher education should be re-structured as purely a public good accessible by any citizen, like the public library. Butin (2015) discusses this notion of higher education as a public good that not only equips students with a skill, but also provides them with the foundation to learn and

advance their skillsets. Some organizations focused on higher education reforms have identified core goals to guide the reforms (Center for Higher Education Reform, 2015). The American Enterprise Institute's Center for Higher Education (2015) has identified four core goals to guide initiatives: (a) increased options and guidance in selecting higher education institutions, (b) joint responsibility on the student and college to effectively play their part in a quality higher education transaction, (c) close and careful attention to the use of federal funding and financial aid for use where the most value is added, and (d) the investigation of the challenges that may inhibit advancement and creative thought within the higher education environment. This year, presidential candidates and congressional members also showed much interest in higher education reform. This includes the passing of the HERO Act sponsored by Senator Michael Lee and many other senators (Office of Senator Michael S. Lee, 2015). This act addresses problems such as higher education access, funding for students, and accreditation options that states could use to approve different types of higher education programs. Each of these different views offer answers to different problems and some of these are discussed below. Also, these problems are investigated as they relate to their impact on higher education reform.

Tuition at public and private higher education institutions has substantially increased and in most cases doubled ((Southern Regional Education Board, 2013). Cost for public higher education increased by over 130% from 1981 to 2012 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). For some families, if they were to have to pay out of pocket, this increase translated into over 149% of their income being used for just one child's education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013; Southern Regional Education Board, 2013). These continuous increases in tuition could deter potential students and their families from post-secondary education altogether.

The Need for More Higher Education Accreditation Options

Most higher education institutions in the U.S. voluntarily submit to accreditation standards. Dickeson (2009) highlighted the need for reform with the voluntary approach to accreditation that higher education schools now have. One example is the need for certain degree programs in areas such as law and engineering to be accredited by some recognized body, which provides a standardization of the core competencies that must be covered in the coursework and instruction that students would receive. Some of the specialized accreditations are not focused as much on student knowledge and matriculation after completing the programs as much as they are on the faculty-student make-up and terminal degrees of faculty members (Dickeson, 2009). Birch, Cottrell and Miller (2010) found that proper accreditation supports the quality and rigor necessary for undergraduate and graduate programs. Dickeson's definition proposal for accreditation also helps support the individual institutional goals that guide the engagement with the local community (Bagin et al., 2008; Borchardt, Green, Fitzgerald, Raymond, & Paton, 2014).

Post-Secondary Education and Economic Development

Most states organize their degree and certificate programs of some or many of their post-secondary institutions around their goals for economic development (Bird et al., 2014; Campbell & Pence, 2004). The structure and organization of the education system at the state level can greatly impact the types of businesses that are located in a region or state (Bird et al., 2014; Campbell & Pence, 2004). It is necessary that businesses have the required local talent to support their staffing needs; hence, many states have developed components within their traditional post-secondary framework to create certificate and skills based programs that focus on

students having the skillsets to find employment (Bird et al., 2014; Campbell & Pence, 2004; Glickman, n.d.). To be effective, any higher education reform policy will have to take this into account as many of the state leaders will require that the economic development interest be observed with the higher education policy framework (Office of Senator Michael S. Lee, 2015). The focus on economic development has such a priority in itself that policy makers have created additional legislation under the umbrella of workforce development to help support economic development (Bird et al., 2014; Campbell & Pence, 2004; Glickman, n.d.). Furthermore, to make any policy effective, some fundamental goals must be identified for higher education reform, which are discussed below.

Proposed Goals for Higher Education Reform Policy

Higher education reform itself must address some fundamental goals to meet the broad interest of the groups and entities involved. One of the first goals is improved access to higher education options (Center for Higher Education Reform, 2015). Many students may believe that many schools are out of their reach because of their families' socioeconomic standing and may settle for second or third school options even though the students may qualify for scholarships and other financial aid (Burke & Butler, 2012; Center for Higher Education Reform, 2015). In some cases, students could decide to completely bypass post-secondary education as an option all together because of ineffective advisement, limited knowledge on their financial options, or no knowledge of the different degree and certification options that are offered in non-traditional education formats (Burke & Butler, 2012). Within the area of improved advisement, students need to have advisement that considers not only the family situation of the student as it relates to their current socioeconomic level but also helps the student develop a plan for their future and understand how any amount or type of post-secondary education may fit within the student's long term goals (Burke & Butler, 2012; Center for Higher Education Reform, 2015).

Another goal is helping students clearly understand their responsibility during their time as college students and the level of attention necessary for them to receive an education that supports their goals (Burke & Butler, 2012; Center for Higher Education Reform, 2015; Dickeson, 2009). This also involves the student's ability to evaluate the post-secondary institutions and their prospective programs of study to understand if they could help the students meet their personal goals. Another area of student understanding is the cost of the programs versus the value that the degree provides (Burke & Butler, 2012). This includes having some means to judge the school programs based on the outputs versus just the inputs (Dickeson, 2009). Both public and private schools should be evaluated with a clear set of measures to provide the student a clear picture of the quality, rigor, and focus of each program.

The next goal is tied to the goal discussed in the above paragraph and involves correlating incentives through federal or state funding, as an example, to a school's performance (Burke & Butler, 2012; Dickeson, 2009). This performance would be centered on the student assessments, specifically a student's abilities and mastered skillsets before graduation. For certain programs, a final project or capstone can be utilized to judge the program's level of efficacy. Requirements and guidelines for these evaluations or measures should be covered within the accreditation metrics that a school must meet. Such measures would provide some level of standards for schools within a specific degree area and enable the schools to craft their own formats for educational programs to meet these measures. Through these measures also, program rigor and quality can be tied to some form of support to grow the current programs or start others. To properly address these goals, stakeholders required for a higher education reform

policy need to be understood.

Key Stakeholders Within Higher Education Reform

Every policy development includes identification of the stakeholders involved, the point and degree of their involvement, and their impact in the implementation phase. In a higher education reform policy, the first level of stakeholders that need to be involved after the federal level are the state leaders, which include the governor, along with state house and senate leadership (Center for Higher Education Reform, 2015; Burke, 2015; S. 649, 2015). The governor would act as the main agent of the policy and would select elected or non-elected members to handle the regional implementation of the policy. At the state level, the state university leadership (i.e., higher education system chancellor) would need to be involved to make sure the interest of the schools is addressed. Also, the lead state labor agent would also need to be involved during the early framing of the policy to represent the interest of the business with the state. As the policy is translated into regional formats, the governor or his appointed higher education bodies would be responsible for setting guidelines for stakeholders, which could include everyone from local elected leaders such as city and county council members, business and economic organization leaders, and also university or community college leadership. Many of these same stakeholders would be involved with policies implemented under the HERO Act passed in 2015, and this act is discussed below.

Key Components of the HERO Act

The HERO Act was first created as the Higher Education Act of 1965 to improve access to higher education by regulating the administration of federal student aid (Burke, 2015; S. 649, 2015). One key component of the original Higher Education Act was Title IV, where it specifically discussed student assistance through federal loan and grant programs, such as the Perkins loan program, Pell grant program, the Federal Family Education Loan Program, and the Federal Direct Loan Program (S. 649, 2015). Title IV focused also on the institutions' eligibility to receive federal funds and the accreditation requirements for the programs that federal aid can be used for. The HERO Act of 2015 focused specifically on amending Title IV to open the accreditation more for states to be able to accredit their own education programs and apply for alternative program approval (Burke, 2015). Under the HERO Act, post-secondary institutions, entities providing post-secondary courses, apprenticeships, including private, public, non-profit, for-profit post-secondary institutions, must provide programs or course work that can be used toward completion of a post-secondary degree, diploma, or certificate program.

Conclusion

The HERO Act (2015) has many of the components necessary to address the proposed goals mentioned above. Two additional components that should be added to a policy under the HERO Act framework are greater visibility of school success metrics and more focus on advisement for new post-secondary students. With greater visibility into graduation success rates, mastered skillsets of students for employment, and degree value in the employment area, students are provided for additional means to make informed decision when selecting a school to attend. Also, first generation college students, for example, would benefit greatly from having guidance and advisement of the general steps that are necessary for college access and degree attainment. Such adjustments would better fine tune the current HERO act policy to address the needs for reform within the higher education reform system in the U.S.

References

- Afdal, H. (2013). Policy making processes with respect to teacher education in Finland and Norway. *Higher Education*, 65(2), 167-180. doi:10.1007/s10734-012-9527-2
- Bagin, D., Gallagher, D., & Moore, E. (2008). *The school and community relations*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Bird, K., Foster, M. & Ganzglass, E. (2014). *New opportunities to improve economic and career success for low-income youth and adults: Key provisions of the workforce innovation and opportunity act (WIOA)*. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy. Retrieved from <http://www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/publication-1/KeyProvisionsofWIOA-Final.pdf>
- Birch, D. A., Cottrell, R. R., & Miller, M. E. (2010). Current status and future plans for undergraduate public/community health education program accreditation. *American Journal of Health Education*, 41(5), 301 – 307.
- Borchardt, M. P., Green, B. L., Fitzgerald, H. E., Raymond, M., & Paton, V. O. (2014). U.S. higher education regional accreditation commission standards and the centrality of engagement. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 18(3), 41 – 70.
- Burke, L. (2015, February 18). *What congress and states can do to reform education policy* (Issue Brief No. 4348). Washington DC: The Heritage Foundation. Retrieved from <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2015/02/what-congress-and-states-can-do-to-reform-education-policy>.
- Burke, L., & Butler, S. M. (2012, September 21). *Accreditation: Removing the barrier to higher education reform* (Issue Brief No. 2728). Washington DC: The Heritage Foundation. Retrieved from <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/09/accreditation-removing-the-barrier-to-higher-education-reform>
- Butin, D. (2015, November 11). The future of higher education? Ask the magic-8 ball!. *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dan-w-butin/the-future-of-higher-educ_1_b_8520690.html
- Campbell, D., & Pence, R. (2004). *Opportunity for leadership: Stakeholder assessments of state-level WIA implementation* (First Interim Report Evaluation of California's Workforce Development System). Davis: University of California. Retrieved from http://ucanr.edu/sites/UC_CCP/files/125933.pdf
- Center for Higher Education Reform. (2015). *A set of core principles will guide CHER's work*. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.aei.org/feature/cher/>
- Dickeson, C. (2009). *Recalibrating the accreditation-federal relationship*. Washington, DC: Council for Higher Education Accreditation. Retrieved from http://www.chea.org/pdf/2009_AC_Recalibrating_the_Accreditation-Federal_Relationship_Dickeson_wp.pdf
- Glickman, S. (n.d.). *Workforce Investment Act 101: A toolkit for elected officials*. Washington DC: National Association of Workforce Boards. Retrieved from <http://www.nawb.org/documents/Publications/WIA%20101%20with%20discussion%20sections.pdf>
- Higher Education Reform and Opportunity Act of 2015, S. 649, 114th Cong. (2015).
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2013). Tuition cost of colleges and universities. Washington DC: Author. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=76>

Office of Senator Michael S. Lee (2015, March 15). *Lee, DeSantis introduce bill to expand higher education opportunities*. Retrieved from <http://www.lee.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2015/3/lee-desantis-introduce-bill-to-expand-higher-education-opportunities>