The Anti-Egalitarian Mission to Destroy Public Education in America

by Jon E. Travis

Readers of Thought & Action likely will know that public higher education in the U.S. is a relatively recent development. Until 1860, only 21 state or municipal colleges existed in the country. The passage of the first Morrill Act (1862) initiated the necessary funding for building public colleges, and the advent of the Industrial Revolution shifted the focus of higher education to social service, which depends heavily on public institutions. Supporting the distinctive, democratic idea of public education was the notion that all American people should have equal access to their government. And yet, with very few exceptions, an elite group of white men dominated the leadership of this new public governance. In fact, only men of means could participate initially in the American political process. Women, as well as non-European immigrants, not to mention those who were not even regarded with the status of human beings (i.e., Indians and African slaves), were excluded entirely.

When these inequities began to change in the 20th century, due in part to the sweeping court-ordered integration following Brown v. Board of Education and the simultaneous expansion of public colleges and universities, all citizens began to gain access to educational achievement and, as a result, true access to the American power structure. The powerful elites took notice and were not always willing to share control over the political system. Over the years, their resistance to equal

---

Jon E. Travis is a professor of educational leadership at Texas A&M University-Commerce, where he is the senior faculty member in the Higher Education program, one of the five largest such programs in the country. He served as director of the Center for Community College Education from 1992 to 2005, and as assistant graduate dean in the Office of Graduate Studies and Research from 2005 to 2008. In 2003, he was awarded the university’s Paul W. Barrus Distinguished Faculty Award for Teaching. Appreciation is expressed to a departmental colleague, Joyce A. Scott, who assisted in editing an early draft of the manuscript.
SPECIAL FOCUS: THE VALUE OF AN OPEN DOOR

opportunity has continued despite numerous court decisions and significant legislation (e.g., the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964). And it has grown increasingly organized and well funded.

Identified here as the “anti-egalitarians,” individuals hostile to the tenets of American liberty, these oligarchs understand that by restricting educational access to the rich and white, by targeting public investment in higher education, and by attacking such democratic concepts as need-based aid, academic freedom, and shared governance, they can effectively restrict participation in the American governmental system. These are the people who seek to destroy public institutions of higher education. As incomprehensible as such an agenda may appear to those who support equality, respected researchers have been issuing similar warnings for more than 20 years. This article reemphasizes their warning of a very significant threat to public education in America and issues an urgent call to action for all educators and the public as well. Allowing anti-egalitarians to destroy public higher education in the U.S. would be a tragedy. Waiting for someone else to solve this problem would be a costly mistake.

The true motivation of the anti-egalitarians is to maintain a segregated society, even if this conviction often remains hidden from public view.

higher education. As incomprehensible as such an agenda may appear to those who support equality, respected researchers have been issuing similar warnings for more than 20 years. This article reemphasizes their warning of a very significant threat to public education in America and issues an urgent call to action for all educators and the public as well. Allowing anti-egalitarians to destroy public higher education in the U.S. would be a tragedy. Waiting for someone else to solve this problem would be a costly mistake.

THE RISK IS REAL

Although many political leaders in the country, even in the halls of Congress, may appear supportive of diversity, the true motivation of the anti-egalitarians is to maintain a segregated society, even if this conviction often remains hidden from public view. Some recent efforts to disenfranchise minorities in particular, plus the bulk of people living in lower socioeconomic conditions, reveal this truth. For example, the battle over the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, the health-care law passed by Congress in 2010, demonstrated how viciously the anti-egalitarians resist measures that can aid a significant portion of the nation’s citizens. Similarly, new demands for immigration “reform,” in some cases leading to draconian state action, have appeared just as the Hispanic population in several states approaches majority numbers. And the budget battle that raged in Congress throughout much of the 2011 legislative session included vindictive rhetoric from numerous lawmakers who claimed the federal government needs to reduce a national debt that they did not appear so eager to address in previous decades, as it swelled from three wars. Clearly, the anti-egalitarians would rather spend money on the military-industrial complex than support domestic programs for American citizens.
The anti-egalitarians have attacked equal opportunity in higher education as well. For more than 40 years, while the nation was apparently enjoying nondiscriminatory access to higher education, state and even federal officials continued to forestall desegregation in Tennessee, Mississippi, and other states. Furthermore, a negative political reaction to the student protests and civil rights demonstrations of the 1960s began with the election of President Nixon in 1968. The net effect of this reaction was a shift in emphasis from desegregation and equality of opportunity, regardless of wealth, to an era of alternative schools and vocational education for the poor.

Meanwhile, a concerted effort to eliminate the gains of the civil rights movement and desegregation was initiated by a number of oddly named groups. The American Civil Rights Institute, a group founded by Ward Connerly, a former university regent, to oppose affirmative action, deftly managed the passage of Proposition 209 in California, a voter referendum that prohibited any semblance of preferential treatment for minorities in state government, including public colleges and universities. Meanwhile, the District of Columbia-based Center for Individual Rights has supported a number of lawsuits against institutions, but most famously the University of Michigan and its law school, to prevent admissions officers from considering race. Both the National Association of Scholars and the Center for Equal Opportunity, which identifies itself as the nation’s only conservative think tank devoted to issues of race, have coerced colleges to reveal their race-conscious admissions policies. With such information in hand, the Center for Equal Opportunity forces institutions to discontinue the policies, while the Center for Individual Rights has demonstrated its intent to file additional lawsuits. A few other groups, such as the Heritage Foundation and the Council for National Policy, clearly purport to create their own schools and universities and to further undercut equal opportunity in education.

Just in case too many American citizens somehow have seen through these efforts to limit educational achievement among minorities and the politically disenfranchised, factions of the anti-egalitarians have implemented another tactic to sway even a reasoning public. If people believe public colleges are failing, then perhaps they will more readily accept the efforts of the anti-egalitarians to shut them down. If people can be persuaded to believe that their public colleges and universities are failing in their task to educate, then perhaps they will accept more readily the efforts of the anti-egalitarians to shut down public institutions. Challenging the reputation of American higher education is no small task, however. With the advent of the American research university model and the
SPECIAL FOCUS: The Value of an Open Door

An untitled photograph taken on March 7, 1965, during the first march from Selma to Montgomery, by the photojournalist Bruce Davidson. Source: Magnum Photos.
THE ANTI-EGALITARIAN MISSION TO DESTROY PUBLIC EDUCATION IN AMERICA
The practice of assailing America’s revered institutions of higher learning “has grown into something of a cottage industry.”

Predictably, the attacks continue to spew out of publishing houses, as the following titles suggest: The Five-Year Party: How Colleges Have Given Up on Educating Your Child and What You Can Do About It and Higher Education? How Colleges Are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids—and What We Can Do About It. The worst critics of public higher education in America have included one of Terrell Bell’s successors, William J. Bennett, who has used his bully pulpit for exaggerated criticisms readily accepted by journalists. Although he may not have devised a catchy title like Closing of the American Mind or Killing the Spirit, Bennett’s tenure as Secretary of Education signaled the arrival of the anti-egal-
tarians as a permanent fixture in Washington’s halls of power.23

Furthermore, the critics of public higher education have acquired an audience.24 The initial predominant response to most of the critical reports about American public education has been acceptance—by both the general public and educators as well. That the public believes such attacks on education is not so surprising when one remembers similar hoaxes that attained a certain level of credibility (e.g., America was full of communists, according to Senator Joseph McCarthy; segregation no longer exists in public schools; global warming is a myth; the war in Vietnam was necessary to stop the spread of communism; and Iraq had weapons of mass destruction). Consequently, educators should not feel ashamed for having believed the exaggerated tales reporting that their institutions were failing the country.

As a result of the repeated critiques and the public’s complacent acceptance of them, public colleges and universities have been forced to address the attacks, which has interfered with their primary missions. Hence, real quality issues may develop. In essence, this is one goal of the anti-egalitarians. If these people cannot halt access to higher education, they can at least damage the institutions sufficiently to reduce the outcomes of minority and lower-income students. Of course, other students will suffer as well, but the anti-egalitarians no doubt regard their loss as collateral damage, a necessary result of war.

Public education faculty, staff, and administrators need to believe they are in a war with the anti-egalitarians.

Public education faculty, staff, and administrators need to believe they are in a war with the anti-egalitarians, a war that will include unrelenting offensive action, not just in terms of constant criticism designed to thwart institutional efforts to succeed and to thrive, but also serious damage via the budget axe. In this respect, the Great Recession of the 21st century has provided the anti-egalitarians with a perfect storm, enabling a funding crisis that could easily cripple some colleges beyond repair.25 To avoid being pushed over the budget brink, many institutions will evolve into colleges that are more private than public, as some have already suggested.26

To be sure, the fiscal crisis facing public higher education is serious. As 35 states grappled with $82 billion of decreasing revenues in 2011, 18 newly elected governors and 20 conservative legislatures seemed eager to do the bidding of the anti-egalitarians by further slashing the funding for public education, reducing college funding at least $700 million in eight states alone.27 Unfortunately, declining revenues from states, as well as the federal government, have been battering
public colleges and universities for more than three decades.28 More recently, many states have reduced their higher education funding to a level that calls into question whether the institutions really can be regarded as public. Some examples are worth considering.

In 2004, only 10 percent of Virginia’s general fund appropriations was allocated to higher education, reducing the state’s support of the University of Virginia to eight percent and the College of William and Mary to 18 percent of their total budgets.29 Similarly, the state of Ohio contributed only 15 percent of Miami University’s annual budget, while the University of Colorado received just nine percent of its income from the state in 2004.30 Although the University of Michigan was receiving only seven percent of its revenue from the state in 2009, Michigan had removed one third of its funding back in the 1980s.31 Because of the decline in state funding, students at public research institutions in Colorado, Montana, New Hampshire, Oregon, and Vermont are paying more than 70 percent of their expenses, compared to an average of 56 percent of the costs paid by students at private research universities.32 This bleak economic picture is a harbinger of another serious threat facing public colleges and universities.

**Many states have reduced their higher education funding to a level that calls into question whether the institutions can really be regarded as public.**

**IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**

As a result of these challenges to their reputations and their fiscal survival, public institutions are changing, many to the extent that they more closely resemble private colleges. Furthermore, several states have sent a clear message that they are ready to shove public institutions of higher education along in this direction. In 2005, Virginia legislators passed the Restructured Higher Education Financial and Administrative Operations Act to free the University of Virginia, the College of William and Mary, and the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) from some state oversight, a move that Ohio is considering for its public colleges as well.33 Meanwhile, in 2009, lawmakers in Michigan and Colorado suggested that the flagship universities be removed from state budgets entirely, and in 2011, Governor Walker suggested that the flagship Madison campus of the University of Wisconsin be freed from the system.34 Such considerations are the result of serious strains on limited state budgets. For example, in 2011, Nevada experienced such a severe fiscal deficit that eliminating 200 percent of its entire 2010 allocation for public higher education would have been insufficient for the state to balance its budget.35 As more states recog-
No doubt, the anti-egalitarians are beginning to feel that they are succeeding in limiting access to higher education for all but the wealthy. Hence, now is not a time to be complacent in warning of the danger confronting the nation. The American public is characteristically slow in recognizing and responding to social crises, and the anti-egalitarians will not stop until they succeed. Consequently, the alarm must be sounded to alert everyone of the seriousness inherent in permanently damaging the nation’s most effective engine for social mobility and slamming the door of equal opportunity in the faces of the majority of Americans.

END NOTES


8. Olivas, 893-925; and Spring, 218.

SPECIAL FOCUS: THE VALUE OF AN OPEN DOOR

10. Spring, 313.
14. Ibid.
16. Cohen, 290; Lucas, Crisis in the Academy: Rethinking Higher Education in America, x.
19. Lucas, x; Schrecker, 80.
20. Lucas, x.
22. Gilley, Thinking About American Higher Education: The 1990s and Beyond, 43.
24. Berliner and Biddle, 8-9.
28. See, for example, Alexander, “Student Tuition and the Higher Education Marketplace: Policy Implications for Public Universities,” 79-93; Cohen, 390-398; Gambino, 121-125; Gilley, 47-53; Melton, 26-31; and Travis and Davis, 71-78.
30. Symonds, 97-100.
36. For example, only three percent of first-year students at the top 146 colleges represent the bottom socioeconomic quarter, and the capability of Pell Grants to cover student costs at four-year institutions dropped from 35 percent in 1980 to 23 percent in 2003. See Lyall and Sell, 9; Symonds, 98; Chace, 20; Newfield, A24.
WORKS CITED


