

Where Has All the Money Gone?

Public Funding of Higher Education: Changing Contexts and New Rationales

edited by Edward P. St. John and Michael D. Parsons
BALTIMORE: THE JOHNS HOPKINS PRESS, 2005

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It is tempting to look back at the level of public funding for colleges and student financial aid in the 1970s and to fantasize about returning to those halcyon days. But things are fundamentally different now. The editors of this book—Edward St. John now at the University of Michigan and Michael Parsons at Florida International University, both professors of higher education—direct us on a path of reasonable, but not exuberant, optimism by providing new insights and approaches to the politics of funding higher education. The various chapters provide a fuller understanding of the political context in which we advocate for public funding for higher education. The book's strongest policy concern is student equity (i.e., opportunities for low-income and minority students).

During the 1960s and 1970s, higher education was widely accepted as a public good that promoted economic development and social equity. But, St. John and Parsons observe, that consensus was quite thin and supportable only because the federal pot of money was large. Times changed and higher education is now seen as just another special interest seeking a handout. How, then, can higher education achieve success within this new political reality, not to mention tough fiscal times?

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This brief review cannot adequately address the various topics that St. John and Parsons solicited from a set of top-notch scholars for this book. Therefore, I will only examine the chapters the editors themselves contributed.

St. John argues that higher education policy makers lack a coherent theoretical framework from which they can effectively operate. He also argues that policy analysts have focused too much on technical and rational issues, leaving the value and ethical questions to policy makers. Research is no longer used to guide policy choice, he notes, but rather to justify political choices made on other grounds. He highlights the notion that “the public interest” should guide research. Due to this absence of any overarching theory, St. John believes that university leadership views the world only as series of disconnected, reactive events. He proposes the pragmatic use of theory as a basis for better-informed policy choices.

St. John offers a general vision of how the higher education research community can work for new common ground. He suggests three elements in generating research that can inform policy makers:

1. recognize divergent claims about policies and outcome,
2. design studies that examines these divergent claims, and
3. provide information about basic rights, equity, and efficiency

According to Parsons, higher education has become more exclusionary in recent years, aligning itself primarily with corporate interests. A more effective approach, he argues, would be to become common lobbyists with other public interest groups—including civil rights groups, labor unions, state public interest research organizations and others involved in education and social justice—and expand the reach and the power of respective clienteles. He observes that conservatives have better understood discourse as a struggle for power with the winner getting to impose meaning. He advocates developing “meta narratives” and building a stronger consensus for public funding of higher education.

The book features chapters written by higher education scholars about higher ed fiscal policy at the federal and state level, institutional rationales, and new ways of understanding higher education. Readers have the opportunity to explore many topics related to student financial aid, the federal agenda on college desegregation, legal aspects of desegregation and diversity in state universities, the underlying rationales of the state budget process, official rationales for state budgets, and strategic enrollment management in a privatization context.

The book contributes to a better understanding of the higher education landscape and provides suggestions for addressing the problems we face. The heavy use of social science terminology requires the reader to be patient. 