

Rich Man, Poor Man

Aiding Students, Buying Students: Financial Aid in America

by Rupert Wilkinson

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REVIEWED BY: SARA GOLDRICK-RAB

Among the most highly contentious debates in contemporary higher education is the question of the role and purpose of student financial aid. If college does indeed cost too much, then how should schools go about discounting the price for their students? Should aid be based on need or merit? Should the purpose of institutional aid be to create a more equitable distribution of students in an entering class, or a more elite one?

These questions are currently on the minds of practitioners, policymakers, and indeed federal legislators, as reforms in higher education brew in Washington. Thus, Rupert Wilkinson's new book, *Aiding Students, Buying Students: Financial Aid in America*, could not have been published at a more apropos time. Thankfully, Wilkinson, a British historian, has the potential to contribute a great deal of sense and sensibility to our American discussion.

Wilkinson disabuses us of the notion that our modern ideas and troubles with regard to student aid are in any way "new." As he aptly puts it, "All student aid embodies choices, and many of the choices go back a long time" (11). The focus in this book is on three aspects of the history of financial aid: motivations for spending, conflict between aid and other college programs, and interactions between mission and market purposes. The author notes that social justice has

Sara Goldrick-Rab is an assistant professor of Educational Policy Studies and Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is also a faculty affiliate of the Wisconsin Center for the Advancement of Postsecondary Education and the Institute for Research on Poverty. Her research examines socioeconomic inequalities in students' postsecondary transitions, with a particular focus on the equity implications of student mobility.

never been the sole or even primary motivation for granting institutional aid; instead, the granting of aid has been used in some cases as a marketing tool to promote the university. Wilkinson shows that need-based aid has long competed with merit aid, which has been around since the 19th century. Indeed, the often-discussed idea of distributing aid based on “merit within need” has its origins in one of the first financial aid donations, made by Ann Radcliffe to Harvard College in 1643, when she stipulated that her money be used for the “yearly maintenance [of a] poor scholar” who is “pious” and “well deserving” (2). Finally, the author illustrates how over time the market has extended its influence as federal financial aid programs expanded—witness the recent growth of private loans, for example. Throughout the book, Wilkinson is attentive to the specifics of financial aid language, and the meanings behind the words, even including an appendix on terminology which contains commentary and subtleties, not mere description.

Rupert Wilkinson is a broad thinker and widely read scholar who—as a bit of an outsider—is quite comfortable thinking sociologically about the inequalities in our American higher education system. One of the important points he makes is that financial aid has long been used to preserve the privileges of the upper classes. He notes that the marriage of aid and admissions policies and practices creates conflicts between those wishing to focus on mission and those intent on promoting excellence. Ironically, a focus on mission has been used as a ‘market asset’—witness the intense media attention paid to Harvard, Princeton, and others following their recent pledge to forgo tuition charges for their poorest students. The book provides disturbing evidence of significant amounts of grant aid given to low-need students at elite universities; the roots of this trend, observable still in data from the present-day National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey, run deep.

The data for this study come from archival research at 41 colleges and interviews with 475 people from 129 institutions between 1990 and 2004. The majority of the colleges Wilkinson focused on were highly selective, elite four-year schools. Therein lies one limitation of his work—while he tries to situate the dilemmas and decisions of the elite schools in a broader context, his analysis is limited by his decision to set aside discussion of the use of aid in two-year colleges. It is difficult to paint a full picture of the history of inequities in student financial aid policy without accounting for the development of the community college system, with its open doors and lower prices. The broadening of the supply of places in higher education, the increased competition among institutions, and the use of the two-year system by both states and four-year schools to shuttle the poorest away from the pricier and more selective institutions are all strands of the broader story of aid which deserve mention.

In the end, Wilkinson comes down firmly on the side of using aid to help the neediest students, rather than devoting funds to buying the best students. All of his evidence clearly indicates this debate has a lengthy and contentious history—and that is a valuable lesson for those interested in how the future will look. 