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«Πρόσβαση στην Ανώτατη Εκπαίδευση.

Μελέτη των κοινωνικών, εκπαιδευτικών και θεσμικών διαστάσεων της ζήτησης τριτοβάθμιας εκπαίδευσης, των προβλημάτων και των πολιτικών ικανοποίησής της – μία Συγκριτική και εμπειρική προσέγγιση»

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Study of international experience regarding issues of access to higher education: the US case

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Overview of Access into the HE System

The US system of higher education (HE) has its roots in the private sector. From the beginning, tuition was charged and this perhaps explains, partly at least, why in the public eye tuition charges are to be expected not only at private but also at public institutions. Today, however, only ten percent of all HE institutions are private. State taxes subsidize a large portion of the expenses at public institutions and the federal government provides an array of scholarships and financial aid to students at both private and public universities and colleges. Generally speaking, one can distinguish today four different categories of HE institutions, each of which has been shaped by a particular series of historic events. These institutions provide the bulk of HE positions and are divided into (1) public and private research universities with undergraduate and graduate programs (offering masters and doctoral degrees), (2) public comprehensive universities (primarily offering undergraduate degrees), (3) private liberal arts colleges (mainly offering undergraduate degrees), and (4) public community colleges (offering diplomas and other undergraduate degrees).

The idea of research as an integral part of American HE was conceived in the early twentieth century and in many ways it reflects the German model of academic research and freedom. However, with the exception of universities that offer doctoral studies, the focus of most of the HE institutions today is on teaching, with research being only a modest part of their mission (Altbach, 2001). Research universities, public as well as private, include some of the most esteemed institutions in the world (e.g., the private Harvard and Yale and the public University of Wisconsin–Madison and the University of California–Berkeley). These are very selective establishments and demand for an admission into their programs is high. Private liberal arts colleges are the inheritors of the liberal tradition in the US. They offer four-year programs and maintain a commitment to high academic standards. They also include some of the most prestigious and competitive institutions of HE (e.g., Oberlin, Swarthmore, Knox). Community colleges and comprehensive universities are the least selective of all institutions with most community colleges having an open admissions policy. These entities educate large numbers of students and charge low tuition but overall they enjoy limited prestige.

Traditionally, access to HE in the US has been controlled by admission policies which vary from one institution to another. The institutional autonomy of HE in the selection of students has allowed universities and colleges the flexibility to organize departments/disciplines according to demand and set standards of admission at appropriate levels. This increases the likelihood of graduation from a program and the acquisition of desired professional competencies. In turn this has made the transition from HE into the work force much smoother. The typical admission criteria which colleges and universities use today include standardized test scores, the high school diploma, grades in college prep courses, transcripts from other educational institutions (if any), and the student application portfolio, which may include letters of recommendation, a statement of purpose, a curriculum vita, and the like (NACAC, 2012, page 34). Economics, that is the ability of students to pay for tuition and other fees, is also a relevant factor for access and over time

the federal and state government subsidies have alleviated or, in lean times, aggravated the economic burden.

Although vocational schools that prepared their students for skilled labor have not been unknown in the history of public education, the United States does not officially have a dual system of secondary education or a formal division between a vocational and general education curriculum at the secondary level. In all states there are only state curricular requirements that each school district must satisfy. Therefore, a diploma from any high school ostensibly carries the same weight when it comes to admission at a HE institution. However, in actuality not all high school diplomas are the same even when they are granted by the same school. For instance, high school students may be offered a variety of math or science classes to choose from in order to satisfy the specific curricular requirements in these areas. These more advanced classes are the so called “honors classes” and sometimes are offered by colleges. With proper guidance, the more academically capable students will choose these challenging classes and in return these choices will better prepare them to attend at selective colleges and receive scholarship.

Standardized test scores and grades in college preparation classes are among the most used criteria to screen out students at institutions and in programs where demand exceeds supply. As such, they are also instruments that highly selective, in particular private, institutions use to identify qualified students from low income families when a scholarship is available. (For a more complete explanation of admission criteria used by HE institutions, see the annual report of the National Association for College Admission Counseling, *State of College Admission 2012*, p. 34.) Among the many available standardized tests, the most popular include the SAT, the SAT Subject, the ACT, and the ACT Compass tests. The SAT and ACT tests are internationally recognized college admission exams that test knowledge in reading, writing, mathematics, and science. They are considered to be indicators not only of a student’s aptitude in these areas but also of his or her capability to pursue and complete university studies (see <https://sat.collegeboard.org/about-tests> and <http://www.act.org/products/k-12-act-test>). The SAT Subject test is a student-optional exam which is supposed to demonstrate a candidate’s readiness to study specific majors or programs in college (see <https://sat.collegeboard.org/about-tests/sat-subject-tests>). Finally, the ACT Compass test has been used by high school educators to place students in college-level courses (see <http://www.act.org/products/higher-education-act-compass/>).

HE Reforms

During the decade of the 1960s and through the mid-1970s, the United States experienced an unprecedented growth of the HE system. Policy analysts call this period an era of “massification.” The expansion of HE and many of the policy reforms of this era were driven by economic development and demands for equality (Gumport et. al., 1997). Throughout this period, the meritocratic value of standardized testing and high school tracking was challenged on various grounds, including new scientific evidence about their low validity and demands for political and cultural equality. As a result, the HE admission criteria were attuned to the demand of educational opportunity for all, a question that since then remains central in American political life and debates about education and social justice. In

the social and political climate of this era, the question of equality of educational opportunity for equal opportunity in society lead to the development of national and state policies which aimed at improving high school graduation rates and access to post-secondary education institutions for women and the underprivileged. One among the most important reforms of this time was Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965. Title IV covers the administration of the United States federal student financial aid programs. A Title IV institution is one that has a written agreement with the U.S. Department of Education, which allows the institution to participate in federal student financial assistance programs. The law requires that eligible institutions meet certain standards on a continued basis. Accreditation by independent and/or government agencies is the most widely used and important mechanism to ensure compliance. Virtually, all post-secondary, degree granting, institutions (both private and public) in the US are Title IV eligible.

The era of “massification” was followed by an era of “maturation” which lasted until the early 1990s. During this period expansion of the system slowed down and some emphasis was added on diversity not only by increasing access for women and minorities but also for members of any group that was previously under-represented, including the non-traditional students (Gumport et. al., 12-18). The various enrollment and graduation rates of minorities, women, and the poor at post-secondary institutions continued to be closely monitored by the government and the public as indicators of how fair and democratic the entire public educational system was. In short, the lasting result of “massification” has been an ever increasing demand for HE, to which the state governments have responded with the expansion of programs in all existing post-secondary education institutions on the one hand and the creation of new institutions on the other. The “maturation” era was followed by reforms that still develop. This has been an era characterized by regression in governmental financial support for HE and increase in privatization either through greater expansion of the private sector and/or increased reliance on student fees at public institutions (Gumport et. al., 12-18).

In sum, institutions of HE in the US enjoy significant autonomy in the selection of students and organization of their programs. This autonomy has been attuned to such social needs as equality of educational opportunity for equal participation in society. Federal and state funds for HE have been used as leverages to influence the admission policies of both private and public institutions. Hence, over the years, legislation and government funding have had a significant effect on both the formation of admission criteria and access. Since the early 1990s state expenditures for HE started decreasing along with declines in federal financial aid to students. One among the negative consequences of these budget cuts has been the steep increase of HE cost to the students. High costs deter many academically able students from disadvantaged groups to apply at universities of their first choice. In turn, this has resulted in the development of a category of “elite” institutions with unwanted consequences in relation to issues of equal access.

Impact of reforms on access (to appease demand-supply)

To the question “how the post-WWII reforms have balanced demand with supply in the US tertiary education system” the answer is twofold: (1) with the creation and maintenance of

many “open door” post- secondary education institutions; and (2) with the autonomy of HE institutions to modify their admission policies and charge tuition. One should cautiously notice here that this balancing process mainly refers to access and not necessarily to every factor that may influence demand among youth. As Manski has pointed out, youth use particular mechanisms to form expectations about schooling and such mechanisms are more complex than quantitative calculations about their academic ability or future economic returns from choosing an institution (1993).

1. The “open door” institution and stratification in HE

According to the U.S Department of Education, of the 3.2 million high school completers in 2012, some 2.1 million, or 66 percent, enrolled in degree granting institutions of HE the following fall. During this year, 57 percent of private for profit, 18 percent of public, and 14 percent of private nonprofit 4-year institutions of HE had open admission policies. Of all 4-year institutions, public and private, 26 percent accepted three-quarters or more of their applicants, 34 percent accepted one-half to less than three-quarters of their applicants, and 14 percent accepted less than half of their applicants. The same period, 98 percent of public, 82 percent of private for-profit, and 52 percent of private nonprofit 2-year institutions had open access policy (NCES, 2014).

In terms of access, these statistics place the HE system of the United States among the most open in the world (OECD, pp 44, 338, 339). The success story is partly due to a dramatic expansion that started right after the end of WWII and still continues today. The dramatic increase of demand for HE after WWII started with the passing of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (P.L. 78-346, 58 Stat. 284m), known as the GI Bill. This law offered various types of federal financial support to returning veterans who wished to continue their education. The true intention of the Bill was to provide the veterans with time to adjust to civilian life, rather than achieve any educational results. In less than five years after its passing, the GI Bill helped to double the HE enrollment (Olson, 1974). Unexpectedly, the majority of those who used the benefits completed their studies and received degrees in areas of studies that included the prestigious fields of law, engineering and medicine. Few years later, under the social pressures of the Civil Rights and peace movements, demand for HE further increased. In response, state legislation facilitated the founding of new and the expansion of old HE institutions.

There is little dispute today that most of the expansion of the HE system has occurred at the level of community colleges. Community colleges existed since the 19th century and many of those institutions were an extension of high schools. In other cases they were normal schools that prepared school teachers. In the first quarter of 20th century the number of community colleges multiplied, their social and educational role changed significantly, and their status increased from secondary to post-secondary education. In the 1960s, many new community colleges were founded and some of the already established expanded their programs and became 4-year comprehensive universities (for a thorough discussion of the historical roles of community colleges, see Cohen and Brawer, 2007; and Trani and Holsworth, 2010;). Today, one among the main roles of community colleges is to help as

many students as possible to earn credits and then transfer these credits to 4-year institutions. Another major role is to help the academically challenged either improve their skills or altogether drop the idea of transferring to a 4-year institution. Four year comprehensive universities offer a liberal arts curriculum. These functions are great contributors to the mechanisms of equalizing demand with supply.

Several studies of the HE system reveal that its expansion has resulted to a highly stratified system of post-secondary institutions. While this system may have improved access to postsecondary opportunities for women and African Americans, inequalities persist with respect to socioeconomic background (see Roksa et.al, 2007; Dowd, 2007; Zwick, 2007; Dowd et.al, 2008). More specifically, the statistical analyses of the transfer rates from 2-year to 4-year institutions clearly demonstrate that those who benefit the most from the community colleges are not the economically disadvantaged. For example, in her study Dowd found that among those who transferred to selective 4-year institutions only 7% belonged to lower socioeconomic status groups compared to 50% who came from affluent families. The disadvantaged were underrepresented even among those who transferred to less selective institutions. (2007, p. 411).

2. Tuition fees, scholarships, and admission policies at selective universities

A stratified system of HE institutions can hardly be regarded as open to all, even when two thirds of each annual cohort of high school graduates has access to some post-secondary education institution. This assertion is true in the case of US, especially if one takes into account the rising cost of education not only at selective and prestigious institutions but also at institutions with open admission policies. A simple comparison of tuition fees among different universities is telling about the issue. The undergraduate annual tuition fees at Harvard and other Ivy League institutions is in the vicinity of \$45,000, for both in-state and out-of-state students (see <http://www.harvard.edu/harvard-glance>). For the same or comparable programs, selective public institutions will charge a fraction of these fees. For example, University of Wisconsin – Madison and Indiana University – Bloomington, will charge around \$10,000 for in-state and \$25,000 for out-of-state tuition (see [https://registrar.wisc.edu/tuition & fees.htm](https://registrar.wisc.edu/tuition%20&%20fees.htm) and <https://bursar.indiana.edu/tuition-fees/>). A less prestigious public university will charge even less. For example, Indiana State University will charge \$8,200 and \$9,500 for in state and out of state respectively (<http://www.indstate.edu/tuition/fall2014-2015-undergraduate/index.htm>). In other words, tuition decreases with prestige.

To diversify their student populations, prestigious and highly selective institutions employ various techniques like offering economic incentives, broadening their admission criteria, and using market tactics in the recruitment of students. Harvard University, for example, advertises the following tuition rates: “During the 2012-2013 academic year, students from families with incomes below \$65,000, and with assets typical for that income level, will generally pay nothing toward the cost of attending Harvard College. Families with incomes between \$65,000 and \$150,000 will contribute from 0 to 10 percent of income, depending on individual circumstances. Significant financial aid also is available for families above those income ranges” (<http://www.harvard.edu/harvard-glance>). Economic incentives like

Harvard's are common in many Ivy League institutions and attract top students from every social stratum, including minority and other disadvantaged groups. Unfortunately, few public institutions, if any at all, are in a financial position to offer similar incentives to make their programs available to low income students. Since public universities comprise 90% of all 4-year institutions, this situation means that there are fewer available positions for qualified students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. In all, the current distribution of students among the different universities based on their ability resembles in many ways the tracking systems often seen among the different public schools (Cook and Frank, 1993).

Conclusions

Although the HE system of the US can be evaluated as rather successful in term of its overall capacity to balance demand with supply, this system remains highly stratified. The mass segment of the system consists of lower-status academic institutions and vocationally oriented programs. In general, this has allowed elite institutions to maintain academic focus and selectivity (Roksa et.al, 2007). In terms of access, research shows that this HE system has greatly benefitted minorities and female students. At the same time, it becomes evident that those who benefitted the most from the expansion of the system were the economically advantaged. In other words, the expansion did not have the same positive impact on access for the economically disadvantaged. The dispensing of federal and state funds to subsidize for the tuition and other expenses of students at both public and private institutions could alleviate some of these problems. Unfortunately, the current trends in both these areas move to a direction that is opposite to the recommended.

Suggestions for changing this state of affairs place great emphasis on two areas in need of improvements: First, 4-year universities, especially those without an open admission policy, should expand their programs and reform their admission policies with an eye on the needs of the economically disadvantaged (Zwick, 2007; Dowd et.al, 2008). Second, financial aid (in the form of government subsidies and/or scholarships) to the economically disadvantaged should be increased to offset the high and rising cost of education (Tilghman, 2007; Dowd et.al, 2008; Neault and Piland, 2014).

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